

Chapter 18

“Ordinarily,” Proteus said, “visiting dignitaries would be received with more... fanfare.” Hasan and Cathérine looked at each other, then at Proteus, and then at the emptied boulevard around them. People of truly all shapes and sizes were looking at them as they rode an open-topped carriage slowly down the road. There was a band and everything.

“This isn’t fanfare?” Hasan asked, clearly uncomfortable with being displayed in public.

“Could be worse, Mister Prakoso,” Doctor Riel said. “They could have your face up on a banner somewhere.” Cathérine chuckled, but she was glad she had the two officers with her. She would’ve hated to do this on her own. She was getting more attention than she was comfortable with as it was. For a brief moment, she envied Clinton. Her First Officer would be on the ground and reporting on the less... staged parts of their visit. That was partially because she trusted him to give her a good overview of what the Core World was like on a day-to-day basis, but also because she had the distinct feeling that a parade like this would be murder on the poor guy’s nerves.

“Well...” Proteus said, and Cathérine could see Prakoso’s face fall, “if you’ll look behind you...” The alien waved a slender arm, and indeed, a ways behind them they could see a giant floating screen showing their faces on it.

“Great.” Hasan forced a smile on his face and gave a little wave. Several aliens in the gathered crowds returned the gesture with practiced precision. Just how long had Earth customs been observed, or even taught here?

“Hasan,” Cathérine said, “if you didn’t want to be famous, you probably shouldn’t have joined the most important expedition in human history.”

“I figured I’d leave that up to, you know, the important people,” he mumbled through gritted teeth.

“You *are* important people,” Proteus said, and Francesca Riel and Cathérine both suppressed another laugh at Hasan’s dismay. “If it is any consolation, as I said, if you had intended to truly come here to represent your species in a more official capacity, your arrival would be met with a lot more... sound and colour.”

There had been a lot of sound and colour to begin with. When they’d first landed, Cathérine had expected a degree of officious nonsense, sure, but she hadn’t really been *ready* for what being the first humans in an alien civilization would really entail. The Core World was a marvel of engineering, cultures, music, smells... no amount of video footage could prepare someone for that. But she felt she was holding her own quite well, all things considered. And the possibility of alien life had always *been* there. There had always been protocols for first contact. She just hadn’t expected the aliens to be so ready for them.

“So the intent is for this to still be a sort of tour, correct?” she asked. Proteus nodded, a little awkwardly. It was clear he knew what nodding was, but it didn’t seem to come very naturally to him.

“Yes,” he said. “You are, after all, explorers, diplomatically capable though you might be.” Cathérine couldn’t help but smile. Proteus’ capacity for subtlety was a delight. “My superiors are already in contact with your governments, and an official invite, I’m sure, has already been sent.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “You won’t have to sit through the meetings,” he said quietly. For the first time, Hasan seemed to relax a little, and laughed.

“Thank you, Proteus.” The alien, in turn, bowed his head graciously.

"We'll take in some of the sights," he said, "but I'm sorry to say it's all been very..."

"Curated," Francesca offered. Proteus simply smiled at her. A lot wasn't being said, of course, and Cathérine was trying to listen to the words that didn't come out of the alien's mouth as much as what did. If there were things they weren't showing, she had to wonder what those were. Were things being kept hidden? Was it a matter of national security, or one of pride? Maybe both? Did the Core World have dirty laundry it didn't want to air and, if so, would her crew run into any of it?

"Precisely. We wish to show you our best and brightest. Humanity sent us... well, *you*, and we wish to respond in kind," Proteus said. The implication that she and the rest of her crew had been sent out here with the intent of making some kind of statement made her uncomfortable, but she couldn't really deny it, either. Of course the Sollipsis wouldn't have been sent out with anyone less than the best in their field, but that didn't mean an element of optics hadn't been considered. Troubling but, again, not an unreasonable assumption.

The procession went down the boulevard at a frustratingly slow pace, but it did allow her to marvel at the Core World's fascinating architecture, its ever-present but always out-of-reach autumnal plant life, and, of course, the wide variety of alien species on display. Every once in a while, one of them would nudge another to draw their attention at something or other that stuck out to them, avoiding pointing directly so as to avoid causing offense.

Proteus pointed out a large dome-like structure at the end of the boulevard, which they *wouldn't* be visiting, but nevertheless was worth pointing out. Apparently, that's where future envoys would be sent to meet with other galactic governments. Not her circus, Cathérine thought, not her monkeys. And she was happier for it. But it really was a gorgeous structure, reminding her vaguely of old Byzantine architecture, although it did have a lot more landing pads than, say, the Hagia Sophia. It was also several magnitudes larger.

"Ambassador Proteus," Francesca asked, "how do people move around?" Proteus blinked at her a few times with his big grey eyes, seemed to take a moment to properly formulate an answer. "I sort of expected more... air-traffic," Doctor Riel added.

"Ah. While there are worlds where travel by individual aerial carriage is more common," he said, "it is kept to a minimum on the Core World. While your crew was taken around the city in those, such traffic would quickly become untenable. Every megalopolis here holds millions, if not billions of individuals. It would quickly become an unmanageable chaos, even for sophisticated computerized models. And a single mid-air collision could cause a great deal of damage on the streets below."

Cathérine nodded. That made sense, of course, but science fiction had conditioned her to expect a degree of small ships buzzing around overhead, skylanes full of flying cabs and trucks. The Core World's skies had been remarkably devoid of that kind of thing, being mostly the domain, it seemed, of the small flying creatures she'd spotted a few times. She wondered quietly if those were a kind of vermin or a sentient resident species of the planet.

"No," Proteus continued, "most travel is done through public transportation. There is an extensive underground network where most species commute where possible, with various different modes of transportation to account for different physiological needs."

Francesca had a few more technical questions, which Proteus answered to the best of his abilities. The planet seemed to be built with accessibility in mind, which Cathérine appreciated, although it was probably inevitable if there were that many species of such wildly different biological makeups. A gaseous life-form had different ways of traversing the environment than creatures that used wheeled vessels to move around.

"You seem to be in thought, Cathérine," Proteus asked after they rode through an arch. On the other side, the crowds hadn't thinned, but the actual literal fanfare had at least stopped. "What do you think so far?" Cathérine mulled that over in her head for a moment.

"I quite like it," she said. "It seems to be very..." She struggled to find the right word. "Egalitarian. From what I understand, with this many species, this many different approaches to living together in large spaces, you've done a terrific job."

"I feel you're not done," Proteus noted.

"*But*," Cathérine said with a smile, "I'd like to see a bit more of things that are less..."

"Staged?" Hasan offered.

"Festive. There's crowds gathered to watch the new species," Cathérine continued, "and that's all very well and understandable, but I'd like to see how all of them interact on a daily basis. What life here is like. What people do, how commerce happens on the individual level." She held up her hand, and in the crowd, several people clearly misunderstood it and waved back. "I understand that that isn't really a possibility, of course. I know you can't risk us getting hurt or anything of the like, but I would have still liked seeing things at a slightly more... personal level."

"Entirely fair," Proteus said. "Today is going to be mostly driving around, showing you things, and meeting with one or two dignitaries." There was another groan from Hasan. "But we've studied your dietary requirements and you're invited for both lunch and dinner at my residence. Tomorrow I'll see what I can do to get you somewhere a bit more... out of the way." Cathérine nodded gratefully.

"Thank you, Ambassador Proteus," Doctor Riel said. "I'm interested to sample the kind of cuisine you might think we'd enjoy." Proteus clasped his hands together, seemingly very excited all of a sudden.

"Well!" he said, "originally, when the galactic community was only just starting to come together, there was a lot of debate over this. After all, when one receives guests, it is important to make them as comfortable as possible, after all. Hospitality is something of a... near-universal concept. So how does one do that in a universe where some species do not even share a molecular structure?"

"An interesting conundrum indeed," Doctor Riel said, amused by his enthusiasm.

"Well, it isn't possible to present an alien guest with your own nutrition if there is no certainty of, say, poisoning, which would cause something of a diplomatic incident, obviously. But, conversely, presenting someone with a dish popular in their own culture could be considered, well, bland."

"So what did you end up going for?" Hasan asked.

"We do our due diligence, look up recipes of food from your species, and then try to replicate those with nutrition that approximates it best in atomic and molecular consistency."

"I'm curious," Cathérine asked. "What kind of recipes come up for us? Rice? Pasta?"

"Well," Proteus said, seemingly a little more nervous now, "while those are certainly the most common foodstuffs on your planet, we did want to be a little bit more experimental. I personally oversaw an attempt at..." He took a breath, a distinctly human and personable movement that was clearly more for their benefit than his. "Pizza," he concluded, holding on to the 'z' just a little longer than was necessary. Cathérine couldn't help but laugh, and it took them a moment to reassure Proteus that there was no offense. For a little while, they simply talked about food and food cultures, until Hasan's face suddenly grew a bit more serious.

"I did have one more question, Proteus," he said. "If you don't mind."

"Of course."

“Forgive me if this... impolite or offensive. There was mention of ‘locked off’ members of the Unity, and that us humans shouldn’t interact with them. Now, I’m not one to make accusations, and maybe this really is a matter of translation, but the phrasing implies some sort of... stratification. Could I ask you to elaborate?”

“Ah,” Proteus said solemnly. “It’s not a matter of great shame. Well, not for the Unity as a collective. It is simply not easy to describe those unfortunates without a deal of... tact.” Cathérine leaned forward, paying close attention. “You see, we are able to... change shape at will,” Proteus said, and his skin rippled gently to prove his point. “We are also connected to the Unity. Both of these physiological traits have evolved over millennia, and both organs that allow this are located within our nervous system.” He sighed. “It is possible to shift our shape into one whose nervous system does *not* have the capacity for one, or, indeed, both.”

Cathérine sat back for a moment and tried to wrap her head around the implications of this. “For a species with a collective mind, that would be...”

“Devastating,” Proteus said. “We do our best to care for those who have locked themselves off accidentally, but as of yet, attempts at surgically reintegrating them are as yet both experimental and ineffective. Someone who locks themselves out of the Unity can find their way back through a sort of... blueprint, which would take some time to explain, but someone who has lost agency over their form *and* their connection... there are a lot of ways we, as a culture, try to solve that problem, but so far, we’ve not found many. We try to give them comfort.”

“That’s... not what I expected,” Hasan said. “It sounds unpleasant.”

“There are some,” Proteus continued with another performative sigh, “who choose to disconnect themselves voluntarily. It is rare and something of a controversial subject and decision, but there are very few who give up their ability to change back on purpose. Contact with those of us who are locked off is discouraged simply because not many species know what exactly it is they are missing, and we try not to cause those already unfortunate any more discomfort.”

Cathérine Durand mulled all this over in her head, from Proteus’ almost apologetic tone to the implications of what he’d said. She wasn’t sure what to make of it, although she would like to speak to someone like that face-to-face at some point. How would it feel? She couldn’t help but wonder. Proteus had clearly already made up his mind.

“Thank you, Proteus,” she said. “I sincerely hope a solution is found for those that want and need it.”

“So do I, Captain,” Proteus said. “So do I.”

Chapter 19

“What do you mean, ‘they have pumps’!?” Andromeda almost shouted, like a kid in a candy store. Jackson couldn’t blame her, neither for her enthusiasm nor her befuddlement. It was a strange experience, to be one of the first human beings to set foot on an inhabited alien world and then find what was essentially a hole-in-the-wall shop that sold casualwear. Clinton, smiling a little wistfully in the doorway, stepped aside to let Andromeda barrel past him inside. Petra seemed embarrassed more than anything.

“Yes,” they said, “fascination with... human apparel and culture has been prevalent for some time.” In a display of what appeared to be convergent evolution, Petri didn’t seem to know what to do with their hands. “It’s considered to be a bit... offensive, although I try not to speak on behalf of others.”

“Human... culture?” Alex said, raising an eyebrow. “I’ve got to see this.” Jackson shrugged, went into the store too and was greeted with one of the most surreal experiences of his life. It was... well, a normal clothing store, but also very much not. It was like looking at a shop through a kaleidoscope. Sure, the other places they’d visited had also been built with the Core World’s large variety of resident species in mind, but those had been, well, alien.

The food place they’d been to had felt like what Jackson had *imagined* an alien world being like. Food of all kinds, including things he wouldn’t even have considered edible, giant creatures in floating tanks that seemed to eat in a way Jackson very deliberately tried *not* thinking about as ‘goldfish-like’, some sort of rock-crab-golem that appeared to be sipping on a very small brown dwarf star, and at least one alien was eating what he was sure was a bowl of sand.

By comparison, this place was downright bizarre because it seemed to be modeled to look like a normal vaguely-twenty-first-century store. Shirts on tables. Racks of clothes. But then there were also the tables on the ceiling, and the floating shirts the size of a door, or the shoes that were sold in sets of seven.

“Your eyes are gonna pop out if you keep staring like that,” Clinton said, hands in his pockets and looking vaguely... bored?

“Come on, Blake. You’re telling me this isn’t weird to you? Look!” Jackson picked up a pair of pants from the table. He only realized it was a pair of pants when he held it up. “It’s the size of a playing card!” That wasn’t even mentioning the fact that it had at least one pair of legs that seemed to be ethereal. To Jackson’s amazement, Clinton shrugged.

“Clothes is clothes,” Clinton said. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, this is fun and all, but this is just...” he waved vaguely around, “variations on a theme we’re all familiar with, right? It’s never been my thing. The whole *vibe* makes me uncomfortable, like I’m not supposed to be there. It’s the same thing here.”

“Yeah but...” Jackson shook his head. “Never mind.” He turned back to the store. Clinton could be infuriating, but this was something else. Jackson’s train of thought was interrupted by a passing employee who simply... didn’t acknowledge him. Wasn’t humans arriving like... a huge thing? Petri seemed to notice his confusion and joined him, the volume on their translator lowered to a whisper.

“This is not the first time they have seen someone like you enter their store, Officer Manderlay.” Jackson spun on his heels to look at Petri. “They think you are...” Petri froze as they, Jackson assumed, conferred with the Unity to find the right turn of phrase. It was taking a moment.

“Cosplayers?” Petri stared at him for a moment, then retrieved a small device from an unseen pocket and fiddled with it. After a moment, a little plume of gas escaped.

“Yes.” Petri said, and nodded resolutely.

“Are there many... uh...” Jackson awkwardly scratched the back of his head.

“Enough to sustain business like these,” Petri said. “Although there is also a sense of touristic value.” They picked up a shirt that, in big, bold vaguely latin-looking letters shouted gibberish at them. It looked word-like enough, but even with all the will in the world, Jackson couldn’t decipher it as anything but ‘sausage’. If he’d seen the shirt on earth, he’d probably have picked it up for the surrealism value alone, but everything here had these kinds of phrases on it. Besides, the one Petri was holding didn’t have a hole for a head. He tried not to pay too much attention to the shirts that had slurs on them.

“Do they just... put whatever on these shirts?” Jackson asked.

Petri looked around. “I would presume so. Appropriation of human culture is something of a debate. Many feel they are simply celebrating the youngest member to have joined the galactic community.” Petri’s translator made a small sighing noise. “It is possible, however, that copying the aesthetics of a culture without regard for its deeper meaning could cause harm.” They motioned at what seemed to be a bright-pink four-hooded hoodie that had what appeared to be an energy drink on it. The words on the printed can said ‘osteoporosis’.

“This is *wild*,” Alex said, looking at sneakers designed for digitigrade legs. “Look!” they said and bopped them together. “The heels light up!” Petri’s eyes grew a little wider. It was a small thing, and only because Jackson had been paying attention did he notice it, or the fact that they immediately seemed to try and appear disinterested.

“You like them, don’t you?” Jackson said with a smirk.

“I must admit,” Petri said reluctantly, “that I do have a weakness for your... footwear. It seems both snug and remarkably uncomfortable in the most fascinating way.” The way they nervously smoothed their clothes while they talked was incredibly endearing.

“Anything catch your fancy?” Jackson asked slyly.

“I... I couldn’t,” Petri stammered. “I will see if Andromeda requires my assistance!”

“Uh, before you do,” Jackson said, noticing the awkward segue, and decided not to make things worse. “If something were to catch *my* eye, how would I... pay for it?”

“Oh,” Petri said, grateful for the change in subject. “Well, because of overlapping currencies and differences in economic models, the Core World operates on a basic universal income credit system negotiated on a species-by-species basis by representatives of each member of the community. It has meant that trade to and from the Core world is, from what I have been told, a toxic miasma of regulations that I would not wish upon any species, but it seems to work out. Um.” They blinked a few times. “I apologize.”

“For what?”

“That was a lot of information, Officer Manderlay. I do not know if you wanted an answer like that or something more... concise.”

“Your answer was perfectly fine, Petri. And please,” Jackson said, and then breached all rules of galactic decorum by putting a reassuring hand on Petri’s upper arm. “Call me Jackson. Or Jack, I don’t care either way.” Petri responded by growing a bright shade of ultramarine and an extra pair of eyes. Their skin visibly rippled.

“I... I will, Officer Jackson,” they said quietly. “A-- anyway... I-- I-- I have been given a credit drive that will cover most small expenses you should wish to make.”

Jackson tried not to grimace at how uncomfortable he seemed to have made the alien, and nodded. “Thank you, Petri,” he said. “I’ll let you know if I see something.”

"Thank you," Petri said and escaped to find Andromeda, leaving Jackson a little stranded until he saw Alex prowling the rows and he went to join them.

"This place is wild," Alex said. "I can't believe one of the first things I've seen on an alien world is a..."

Jackson held up a strangely conical baseball cap. "A Doctor Who reference?"

Alex chuckled. "Yeah. Or what I *think* is supposed to be dracula?"

"Nosferatu, I think, though it's hard to tell with the tentacles."

"Oh, yeah! The extra mouths are what threw me off."

They both chuckled for a moment, walking through the store, pointing things out to each other. It was a strange experience, but a remarkably calming one. The past few weeks had been exhausting in a lot of ways. Not just their encounter in the Pax system, but the ensuing days of diplomacy and trying to cram several history-of-the-world's worth of politics, culture and biology into his head. By contrast, shopping for clothes designed with eldritch abominations in mind was more than a little relaxing.

"How are you holding up, Nguyen?" Jackson asked after a moment of silence, looking at a selection of what looked like inside-out bowties. Alex looked at him for a second, and then nodded, pursing their lips thoughtfully.

"It's been a lot, obviously. The fact that it's taken us so long to get here has helped, I think," they said. Jackson nodded. "There's been a lot of time to process things but it's like... Like the first time you step out of the airport in a different country, you know? Like, you read the booklet and the pamphlet or whatever, and you've seen the place in movies and documentaries, and then you're on the ground and none of it matters but like... a thousand."

"I know what you mean," Jackson said. "Pictures don't do it justice when you can feel your feet on the ground and can smell the air. It all stops being hypothetical."

"Exactly. Speaking of which... have you noticed... yknow... the air..."

"Yeah," Jackson said with a smirk. "It tastes..."

"I want to say 'purple'," Alex said. "Does that make sense?"

"With a hint of lime." Jackson knelt down to have a look at what was a pair of shoes with two holes for feet each, both perfect cubes.

"This is *weird*," Alex concluded. Jackson couldn't help but agree. This wasn't what he'd expected when visiting alien worlds and species. He'd expected more... jungles. Giant monsters that were easily recognizable as predation animals and weird plant life. Not... a day at the mall. Not that he minded, of course.

"It is," Jackson said. "But I think I'm honestly having a pretty good time. It helps having a good crew with me." He nudged Alex with his shoulder and got a shit-eating grin as a response.

"Agreed! But keep in mind that I am immune to your flattery, Jackson," Alex said with a grin and a cheeky wink. "I'm unflappable. I can not be flapped." Jackson laughed, causing the store owner's head to turn. Apparently the aliens dressing up as them didn't laugh.

"I'll try to remember that, Nguyen, but gosh darnit you're just such delightful company I can't contain myself."

"Eat it, Manderlay," Alex chuckled just as Andromeda and Petri joined them. Andy was holding a box under one arm. "Found something?"

"Yeah!" Andromeda said. "Apparently they genuinely have clothes that fit us too!"

"As stated previously, there are those who consider human culture to be something to be strived for," Petri noted, once again flushing a light blue with embarrassment. "There are Merillim who share in that sentiment, and who take accurate costuming quite seriously."

Andy and Alex chuckled, which seemed to worry Petri a bit. "I hope this does not cause offense."

"Not at all, Petri," Andromeda said. "It just... curious."

"You're gonna *have* to show off those shoes later," Alex said. "You can't be the first human being to buy footwear in space and not do a little twirl."

"Gosh, I've been looking at the skirts and there's some *cute* things in there. I just don't have enough spines to properly wear them," Andromeda said, happily. "Also!" She turned to Petri. "Thank you again for paying for this. You're sure it's not a problem."

Petri shook their head. "Not at all. Do report it to customs when you return to your ship. If someone from the core world were to accuse the new member of the community of smuggling it would be..."

"Hilarious?" Jackson offered.

"Bad form," Petri said, although Jackson did note a slight hint of amusement in the voice coming out of the translator.

"Where to now?" Alex asked.

"I had been considering showing you a local species sanctuary," Petri said, to Andromeda's delight. "There are several sub-sentient species that have artificial habitats on this planet. Several of them enjoy contact and have been deemed non-hazardous for contact with Humans."

"Do they enjoy pets?" Andromeda asked.

"Most species do, Petri said."

"Yessss."

"Hey," Alex said, looking around. "Where's Clinton?"