

First Contact

The golden rays of the westering sun soak into my fur, and I feel the warm sand under my palms erode as gentle waves lap at my paws.

«How long have I been standing here?» I wonder.

A whisper responds, «It doesn't matter. There is no before, no after. There is only now.»

«Where is this place again?» I think to myself.

«It doesn't matter. There is no elsewhere. There is only here.» says the voice again.

«Now what was my name again?» I ask myself.

«It doesn't matter. There is no one else to call you by name. There is only you, there has only ever been you, there will only ever be you, forever blissful in this little world of mine.»

A panic rises in my gut. «Shut up, damn it all! My name is Ringlight! I was hatched on Pilgrims' Rest to four... no, six sires and dams. Their names are... are...» I grasp futilely at distant memories, from another life... someone else's life.

«Are you alright?» another voice drags me out of the abyss. I snap my head around to face its source and am met with a snowy visage. I hastily glance behind me, following her paw prints back to a bonfire crackling in the sand just out of reach of the waves, the rising smoke partially obscuring a stand of trees further away.

She smells worried. «You were starting to dissociate again.»

«Dissociate?» I try to reorient my mind, focusing on her whiskers twitching with concern. «Who are you?» I ask, «You look familiar.»

«He started fading again, didn't he?» another yinrih, ruddy-pelted and black-eared, trots up to us from beside the fire.

«Come on, buddy, what's my name?» he presses.

«S-Steadfast Friend,» I mutter hesitantly.

«Good, and the big guy over there?» He points his muzzle at a massive male lounging in a tree behind the fire, his blue-gray fur blending with the smoke.

«Lodestar,» I say, a bit more confidently.

«And this scrawn-job next to you?» He says, playfully gesturing at the diminutive white-furred female who pulled me out of my haze.

«I can't help being the runt of my litter!» she retorts, but stops to await my answer.

«Iris.»

«What about ol' big-ears? What's her name?» He indicates another female walking along the beach toward the group. Her red pelage matches my interrogator's, but her ears aren't black like his.

«Sunshine.»

«Excellent, and where are we, really?» says the redpelt, tracing an arc with his muzzle indicating our surroundings.

I sit on my haunches and tug at my ear with a rear paw, trying to drag a long-forgotten memory out of the depths. «We're... We're on Sweetwater? wait... no!» I bark, causing Iris to jump. «This isn't real! We're not standing on a beach on Sweetwater. My body is floating in an amnion aboard a womb ship, hurtling through the interstellar void at relativistic speed. Every external stimulus entering my nervous system is the result of a simulacrum generated by a computer, all to prevent me from going mad from the lack of sensory input.»

«He's back!» my questioner barks toward the tree. Lodestar hops down and pads up to us. An odor of relief meets my nose ahead of his approach.

«We just finished singing vespers,» Iris says, tossing her muzzle behind her at the liturgical bonfire. «I could smell your panic. This is the second time today that you've started to dissociate. You should really be singing the liturgies with us. It helps keep your mind anchored in reality.»

«I wish I could, but-»

She interrupts. «If you can't pray, then just listen. Be present.» She pauses to choose her next words. «If we don't make contact you'll have another week of suspension, subjectively speaking, to go before we get back to Focus, and we've got to keep you with us.»

«When we don't make contact, you mean,» I think to myself, my pessimism getting the better of me.

She backs up to face the four of us. «We all hear the voice,» she says, «and we've all been trained on how to combat it. I have faith in every one of you. We've all passed the suspension screenings, yes even you, Ringlight. I never misrepresented you to my superiors.»

«Wait,» I look around. «There was someone else, right? He has black fur. Stormlight, where's Stormlight.»

«He went to check the ship's comms. We should be arriving... soon-ish,» says Sunshine. «Well, a few years realtime, anyway.» Just as she finishes, Stormlight's avatar coalesces into existence,

shuddering slightly as his time perception contracts to match our own.

Every muzzle in the group whips around to face him. The melange of emotion wafting off of him overpowers everything else, the smokey wood, warm sand, and salty sea spray are utterly eclipsed by the aroma of elation and trepidation.

«I- you- It's- OK, OK, OK,» he babbles, frantically lashing his tail in a «follow me» gesture. The beach flickers away like an extinguished flame. The warm yielding sand under my palms is replaced by what feels like cold metal. A neon purple grid stretches to infinity around us, embedded in an inky void. A teal-colored hue washes over Iris's candid pelt, emitted from an invisible light source overhead, turning the fur of the two redpelts to a muddy brown. Stormlight is barely visible, the black fur on his back highlighted with a turquoise sheen.

We've been ripped out of our contracted time perception into realtime, from a simulation of a golden beach on Sweetwater to the spartan realm of the *Dewfall's* operating system environment.

By now the rest of us have begun to stink of excitement as well. Stormlight wordlessly executes a command gesture with his tail, causing a sphere of coruscating white brilliancy to materialize before us, an output interface from the womb ship's realspace radio receiver.

At first only white noise meets our ears, the incorporeal light sphere flickering randomly to match the chaos fed through the ship's antenna array into the signal processor. The exact same scene has played out countless times over the millennia for an uncountable number of missionaries, and for every single one of them, nothing ever emerged from the noise but the random perturbations permeating the blind uncaring cosmos. And yet...

Something faint, barely discernible over the rushing static, begins tickling my ears. A pure tone, sounding jerky and random at first, materializes into a pounding cadence...

dah-di-dah-dit dah-dah-di-dah. Dah-di-dah-dit dah-dah-di-dah. Dah-di-dah-dit dah-dah-di-dah.

A SIGNAL!

Iris plunges the metal poker into the liturgical bonfire as Lodestar concludes the final hymn, and another vespers comes to a close. Ringlight is off by himself as usual, staring into the offering as Focus hangs low over the water. I wish he'd at least be with us during liturgy.

I guess he just doesn't have it in him anymore. Makes me ache a little inside. He used to be so devout. His faith was what kept the shadows at bay. Me and him, we both struggle with depression. I think that's why we got along so well as pups. I think he has it harder than me though. People get to know me and can see why I have a hole in my soul. All but two of my sires and dams dead, and the rest of my litter mates stillborn. «Of course YOU have a reason to be sad, but him? His childermoot and litter mates love him, and he doesn't want for anything. Why is he so glum all the time? Why doesn't he just cheer up?» They just don't get it...

I look over at Iris and give her a quick ear flick to let her know I'm popping out of the simulacrum to check the *Dewfall's* comms. I don't have to leave, strictly speaking, but our nervous systems are

slowed by a factor of 7600 while in sim. Decades go by back home while mere hours pass for us lounging on this ersatz beach on pseudo-Sweetwater. It's much easier to react to stuff in realtime.

Just before the sim melts away I catch a whiff of panic coming from Ringlight. Is he dissociating again? That'd be the second time today, well, subjectively speaking. That's why I wish he'd at least be with us for the liturgies. This is the whole reason the mission planners were so cagey about letting him come with us. Yeah he passed the suspension screenings, but you're not in sim for 250 years realtime for those. You're not exposed to the Voice for that long. If he can't pray, if he can't meditate, if he can't sing the liturgies, he's that much more vulnerable to the Voice. Iris swore up and down that she could keep him anchored. She's managed it so far, but it has to be exhausting to puppysit him like this. Void, it's exhausting for ME just watching.

Admittedly that's the other reason I duck out of the sim. The Voice isn't so strong in the operating system. Never goes away completely, but even Ringlight could brush it off out here. Of course hanging out in the OS environment for 250 years WILL drive you nuts, which is why the simulacrum exists in the first place. You need sensory input to stave off the insanity, but that sensory input is what causes the Voice.

The last thing I see is Iris bounding over to the waves where Ringlight is silently panicking, then my whole reality pops like a soap bubble. I fight a wave of nausea as the chemical cocktail my physical body is pickled in alters to return my time perception to normal. Part of me wishes we could just hang out here. There's something about the OS environment. Maybe it's the air, well, I'm calling it air, anyway. It's not hot, it's not cold, it's not too humid or too dry. It's just... there. I know it's because the amnion isn't stimulating my thermoreceptors, and I know I'd go bonkers eventually, but compared to that humid beach, it's a relief.

I gather myself after the queasiness passes. The neon magenta grid floor expands endlessly around me, receding into the black infinity. My whiskers and the wet part of my nose catch the cyan light streaming down from above. I always look up expecting to see a turquoise sun shining down on me, but there's nothing there but blackness. Sometimes I wonder why the OS looks like it does. Someone designed it like this. Why the grid? Why this specific color of lighting? Why do I like it so much? It's a particular aesthetic I can't put my paw on, but it scratches a very specific itch in my farspeaker brain.

I gesture with my tail to pull up the latest messages received through the ansible network. It's only been a few hours as far as my brain is concerned but years worth of missives from back home flood the featureless black around me.

«New High Hearthkeeper takes charge of the Eternal Hearth,» reads a headline from eleven years ago.

«Good riddance,» I grunt out loud to nobody. Whoever we got has to be better than that witch who tried to suppress the missionaries again. I still blame her for causing Ringlight to lapse. She was awfully chummy with the Partisans, too...

I catch myself fuming again. Why do I even look at the news? It's never anything good, and it's certainly not anything I can do anything about. Light willing we'll be among other sophonts soon

anyway and I can just forget about Focus.

Sophonts—that's right! How far along are we? I swish my tail, banishing the miserable headlines swarming around me like angry insects. We should have entered the star system by now. A star chart ripples into view, showing the *Dewfall's* course relative to our destination exoplanet. It's a little blue marble, the third planet out from its star, nestled perfectly in the habitable zone. Long range surveys from Focus detected a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere at perfect pressure. Gravity is a bit higher than on Yih, but nothing yinrih can't handle. Oh, and liquid water, absolutely everywhere. Nearly three quarters of the world's surface is covered in it.

We've crossed the orbit of the fourth planet. By the time I jump back in sim to tell the others about what I've found, we'll be in orbit around our destination. My tail twitches as I hesitate. Do I check the realspace radio? I feel that particular flavor of dread you get when you know you have to do something, but refuse to do it because you know you won't like what you find. One hundred millennia—that's how long we yinrih have been searching for intelligent life among the stars, bone not of our bone, flesh not of our flesh, but souls like unto our own. I feel like this is the moment of truth, but can't bring myself to patch in the radio.

I flop down onto the floor. The nice thing about being in the OS while everyone else is in sim is that I can dawdle as long as I want, and they'll just think I was gone for a fraction of a second. I could just stare out into the magenta horizon for however many months we've got to go before arriving. Of course, it only takes a few days to lose your mind out here, Voice not required. I could last longer if the others were with me, but the OS wasn't designed to be lived in.

I roll over onto my back and stare up into the invisible cyan sun, thumping my tail on the virtual floor. I'm doing everything I can to avoid that blasted radio. I've—We've all been dreading this day since we climbed into our amnions aboard the *Dewfall*. Deep down, we know we won't find anything. Nobody's ever found anything. None of our long range surveys, none of our missions have ever come across so much as a microbe. We've been howling into the cosmos all this time, searching for other minds like ours, but in the end we'll always be utterly alone.

We'll limp back to Focus, our Sires and dams gone and our litter mates and friends ancient and gray-muzzled. This 24-day vacation will have cost us five hundred years. Lacrimal fluid starts dripping from my lips, the red liquid vanishing into the black fur of my cheeks. I lost all but two of my parents and the rest of my litter before I even knew them. Now I've thrown away what time I had left with my surviving sire and dam.

Maybe Ringlight is right after all. Maybe it's all nonsense. Comforting and beautiful, but nonsense all the same. An illusory bulwark against the inevitable existential dread that comes with understanding our mortality and our insignificant place in the universe, the curse of sapience.

Welp, let's get this over with. I rise to my paws. I dig my claws into the unyielding digital ground and tense up as though preparing to be struck. Eyes scrunched closed, ears pinned back, head lowered, I hastily perform the tail gesture to summon the output interface for the radio.

The high pitched whistle of a heterodyne grates at my ears. «Just internal noise,» I think, but then the tone abruptly stops. Then it comes back again, then stops again. «Something's wrong with the

digital signal processor,» I growl aloud. The sound continues.

Slowly, a rhythm emerges, and I start tapping my left writing claw in time with the beat.

long, short, long, short, pause, long, long, short, long.

«It's a pattern...»

«NO!» I bark, «It's a SIGNAL!»

I jab my tail in the air. The pulsating white sphere representing the radio output unfurls into a spectrum waterfall. The signal I've been hearing flows down the display.

dash, dot, dash, dot, pause, dash, dash, dot, dash. I increase the frequency domain to survey more of the spectrum. Dozens of these narrow-bandwidth signals cascade down the waterfall on either side of the first.

I input more gestures, sliding the frequency oscillator hither and thither across the spectrum. Different types of signals flit across the display, none as narrow as that first beeping cadence. Signals of all types, amplitude, frequency, and phase modulated signals, both discrete and continuous. Some of these are surely modulated speech. I tune to a particularly strong AM signal, tail quivering in anticipation. What do these sophonts sound like?

☐☐Roráte caéli désuper, et núbes plúant jústum ☐☐

Singing... words? They can put words to a melody! Hisses, hushes, pops, trilling growls, loose and flowing sonorous sounds all caress my ears like a cool breeze on a hot day. There are more kinds of sounds in that one snatch of song than in every yinrih language combined. I have no idea what the words mean. It could be a drunken ballad for all I care. Right now it sounds as beautiful as a hymn to the Uncreated Light.

I drift into an ecstasy, my earlier doubts forgotten. I swim in a shimmering sea of invisible light dancing to the chorus of a hundred thousand inaudible voices. My mind floats in this alien noosphere for hours uncounted.

I come out of my reverie. How long have I been standing here? My paw pads ache and my joints are stiff. I notice my muzzle, chest, and forelegs are soaked in red tears, and a crimson puddle has collected around my forepaws. I stretch my legs and flex my digits, listening to another heavenly transmission from our new friends.

“AT THE TONE, THE TIME IS: TWELVE HOURS, THIRTY THREE MINUTES, COORDINATED UNIVERSAL TIME—” *BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP*

I heave a contented sigh. «Music to my ears...»

We stand in silent awe for a moment. Sunshine is quietly weeping as the beeping continues. It seems to strain against the noise, a lonely soul crying out for someone, anyone, to respond. *Dah di*

dah dit, dah dah di dah. dah di dah dit, dah dah di dah. dah di dah dit, dah dah di dah. Dah di dit, dit.

Stormlight flicks his tail, tuning the radio to a random frequency. For a moment the static resolves into an alien voice before fading back into the noise.

“They're eating the dogs, the people that came in. They're eating the cats-”

«Is that language? It's... beautiful,» Sunshine says between deep shuddering breaths. «I don't know what those words mean, but I'm sure it's profound.»

I walk up to Ringlight and thump him across his piebald back with my tail. «How are you holding up?»

He coughs. «What, Lodestar? If you're going to ask me what I believe in now that we've found other sophonts-»

«Actually I wanted to see how you're fairing after your near dissociation earlier. Stormlight popped back in sim and gave us the news before I could ask.»

«I'm alright.» He smells like he wants to say something else but swallows his words.

«You think you've been a burden,» I say. «And you're not wrong. Iris had to drag you back from the brink of total dissociation four times.»

«Five times,» he corrects.

«Five times,» I continue. «But You're our friend, and bearing each other's burdens is what friends are for.»

Iris taps her claws on the ground to get our attention. «Alright, everyone. Before we can land we need to introduce ourselves to our new friends, and before we can do that, we need to figure out how to communicate with them.» She turns to Stormlight. «What have you gleamed from their radio comms?»

«Most of the signals are coming from the planet's surface. Looking back through the receiver logs there were a pawful of faint sources scattered around the solar system, a few on their moon and the fourth planet, and some very faint transmissions from just outside the system. Everything beyond their planet's low orbit seems to be an uncrewed drone. Most of the signals are digital, but there's still plenty of analog traffic.»

Iris tugs at her ear. «And we know from the lack of biosignatures on any of the other planets that nothing has been terraformed.»

She turns to Steadfast Friend. «How about you, soldier?»

«Uh-uh, if you're going to talk to me like I'm still in the military you gotta use my call sign.»

«But it's *disgusting*.»

He narrows his eyes and pins his ears back. «I'm waiting, my dame.»

«P-uke Paws,» she nearly gags, «What do the visuals say?»

He chuckles and looks back at Ringlight. «I ever tell you how I got that name?»

«Yes yes yes.» Iris flicks her tail to shush him. «Please, just tell us what you're getting from the vid feeds.»

Puke Paws pulls up a vid screen floating in mid-air. With each flick of his tail the screen flips between the video sensors dotted around the *Dewfall's* exterior. «We're just past their moon.» An airless crater-pocked sphere appears onscreen.

«That's no moon,» Sunshine objects. «It's way to big to be a moon of a planet this size.»

«Well lucky them, I guess,» he flicks his ears back. «Lots of real estate once they get around to terraforming it.»

«I can't even imagine the tides,» says Sunshine.

Steadfast Friend flicks his tail again, and the image changes. «This is their largest artificial satellite.»

«It's all solar panels,» says Sunshine. «Solar panels bolted to a bunch of tubes.»

«But they're pressurized tubes,» says Steadfast Friend, «at least according to the sensors. That means they've got spacers. All in all I'd say they're about where we were... 95 thousand years ago.»

Iris turns back to Stormlight. «How do you think we should make ourselves known?»

the farspeaker begins pacing excitedly. «Lucky for you I know the history of our order.» He makes another tail gesture to bring up the radio again, tuned to a rhythmic beeping signal similar to the first one we heard. «Before we broke through Yih's atmosphere, when the research monks were first dipping their paws into unpowered flight, they quickly discovered that they needed a deeper understanding of the wind and weather.»

«What does this have to do with communicating with alien sophonts?» Sunshine asks, somewhat annoyed that Stormlight isn't getting to the point. Iris gives her a stern look and motions for Stormlight to continue.

Stormlight resumes his history lesson, positively stinking with joy that his obscure interests are proving useful. «In order to understand what the weather will be in the future, you need to get the big picture. It's not enough to know what the weather is around you, you need to know what's going on upwind, downwind, all over. But learning that a squall is headed your way is only useful

before the storm hits.

«The obvious solution in an era before satellites, that is, is to have every research monastery make a note of the weather conditions in their area at the same time and send the reports to a central location to be marked on a map. Well, at that time we couldn't send a message faster than it could be carried, so the monks set to work on solving the problem of transmitting information beyond line of sight in real time.

«There were some marginal successes with signal towers, where people would stand on top of tall structures and relay tail signals to one another, but that still required line of sight, and even though it was faster than carrying a letter, it still took hours to send a message a meaningful distance.

«Plenty of attempts had been made to use an electric current to carry a message, and some of them even worked, but every one of them proved too complex to build and maintain. Multiple wires, fault-prone receiving equipment, stuff like that. That's where Saint Redclaw came in, the founder of the farspeakers. What most people don't know about him was he wasn't even a monk. He was a groundskeeper working at a monastery who took an interest in some of their research.

«He tinkered with batteries and switches and wires in his free time. Sometimes he'd present his handywork to the monks, who would dismiss them as crude toys made by the idle paws of a simpleton. But the hearthkeeper knew better. She understood that the simplest solution is usually the best one, and encouraged Redclaw to continue. Eventually, he hit upon a setup that not only worked, but was practical and cheap to implement. A battery to induce a potential in a wire, a switch to make or break the circuit, and a sounder that clicked when a current was present, simple and easy.»

Sunshine interjects again. «If it was so easy to just use one wire and a switch than why didn't the monks try that first?»

«I'm glad you asked. All you can do with one wire is turn a signal on and off. Either a current is present or it isn't. The monks couldn't figure out how to turn that into information.» He taps the ground with a paw and a small lamp appears attached to a switch. He places his forepaw on the switch, turning the light on. «It's all in the rhythm,» he says as he starts tapping the switch in time with the radio signal. *dah di dah dit, dah dah di dah.* «Redclaw figured out that you could encode meaning in the cadence of the ons and offs of the switch.

«To the monks' credit, they took him more seriously after he presented his method of encoding meaning. They wasted no time erecting telegraph lines.» He reverently touches his belly to the ground. «The body of the noosphere was born.»

«And you think that's what that signal is?» I ask.

He tilts his muzzle up. «Yup. And listen to this.» He increases the volume of the radio. «Like I said, the signal is either on or off. I can pick up on two length distinctions: short,» he gives the switch a quick tap, and the light flashes briefly, «and long.» He presses the switch again, lingering for about half a heartbeat before releasing it again. «Just assign meanings to different patterns of shorts and longs, and you've got yourself a signaling system.» He continues tapping his paw in time with the

radio.

«But there's more,» he continues. «While you were in sim I spent hours listening to these signals. Notice how perfectly timed these segments are, with no variation or hesitation? They're probably artificially generated. But,» he flicks his tail a few times before landing on another signal. «Hear the difference?» At first it sounds the same as the last one, but I start to notice subtle imperfections in timing. «Much more sloppy, clearly produced by a person and not a machine.»

Iris's ears perk up. «So you think you can contact one of the sophonts operating this... thing... manually?»

«Yes, my dame,» he says, his scent growing more serious. «By now you've probably noticed that each of these exchanges begins with a set preamble.» He tunes to another signal, which repeats the now familiar cadence. *Dah di dah dit, dah dah di dah. Dah di dah dit, dah dah di dah. Dah di dit, dit-*

«So I figure I can spit that back at them.»

Iris smells incredulous. «I'm not sure that's going to work.»

«We're already in orbit,» says Stormlight. «I guarantee they'll find us sooner rather than later and come to their own conclusions about who we are. We need to show our belly first,» He rears up and pats himself on the abdomen as though greeting a stranger.

«Fine,» Iris sighs. «I don't have a better idea. I'll send the good news back to Focus as soon as you've made a successful exchange.»

Without hesitation, Stormlight flicks his tail. The lamp vanishes but the switch remains, now connected by a cable to the shimmering white sphere representing the ship's radio.

«Alright,» he takes a few deep breaths. His initial enthusiasm falters and I can smell him trying to work up the courage to begin. «paw goes down, carrier turns on, paw goes up, carrier turns off.» He starts tapping the switch, repeating the now familiar sequence *Dah di dah dit, dah dah di dah*. After each salvo of dits and dahs, he pauses to listen for a response.

After a few moments of alternating between sending and listening, a response emerges from the noise.

“QRZ? QRZ? DE K5BOBTX”

An odor of pure panic fills the space around Stormlight. He's jumped in the murky water and gotten bit for it. He just repeats the same sequence again.

“UR CALL?”

«Just keep him talking, and I'll locate the source of the signal,» says Puke Paws.

Stormlight repeats the refrain again, and the sophont responds with more impenetrable beeping.

“U NEW HAM? IF UR USING CW DECODER, NAME BOB BOB QTH ERICKSON, TX ERICKSON, TX RIG HR IC 705. CONGRATS ON GETTING UR LICENSE BUT PSE LEARN HOW TO MAKE CW QSO. GOD BLESS 73 DE K5BOBTX SK”

The sophont ends the exchange with two rapid beeps. Utterly defeated, Stormlight halfheartedly taps the switch with his paw, echoing the same two beeps back.

«What was that? You didn't understand a bit of that, did you?» Sunshine barks.

«I'd like to see you do better, big ears,» he growls back.

I place myself between the two of them. «Calm down. Are you two going to be bickering in front of our new friends?»

Iris interrupts. «I've sent the proclamation of good news back home. Lightray should be reading it about now.» She walks over to Sunshine.

«Gentle healer, we thy patients put our very lives in thy care as we are yeaned like new kits.» A caerulium aspergillum materializes in the coils of Iris's tail, and she sprinkles Sunshine's face with blessed milk. «Oh, before you go,» Iris looks at Stormlight. «May you not depart in anger.»

The two dip their heads apologetically. «Be safe,» says Stormlight. «We're counting on you to get us safely out of suspension after we land.»

Sunshine looks down at her forepaws. «I'm going to miss my fur.»

«May the Light illuminate your way, Sunshine.» Iris motions for her to get going, and Sunshine's avatar blinks out of existence.

I'm floating down the main axis, letting the air current push me along. I'm feeling every one of my four hundred years. My left knee crunches each time I grasp a paw cable to push myself forward. I've only got four limbs, and my rear paws have had to pull a lot more weight, literally, compared to someone with his tail intact. I count my blessings that nobody can see how gray my muzzle has become thanks to my white fur.

It's been 250 years since I last saw Iris and the other missionaries, but those lucky lickens haven't aged a day. I'm so old my pups have pups of their own.

As if on cue, a knot of sires and dams floats by, a gaggle of pups in their train. I notice one of my own sons amongst the adults. «Hi, son!» I chuff.

He breaks away from the group and floats over. Two small pups are clinging to his back. A little boy is peering over his sire's shoulder at me, Blissfully licking at a juice pouch. His sister is playfully repelling off of my son's back and reeling herself in again with her tail wrapped around his waist. «Hi, dad- oof!» his greeting is cut short as the girl kicks away from him and jerks to a halt as her

tail goes taught. «Kids,» He thumps them gently with his tail, «this is one of my sires. Say hello to Mr. Lightray.»

«Hello, mister.» The boy has decided that poking the red bubble of sugar water floating at the center of the pouch is far more fun than drinking it.

«Where's your tail?» the girl yips.

«Don't be rude,» her father hisses.

«It's OK, son. You were just as inquisitive when you were her age.

«When I was a little kit, I got sick and my tail started moving on its own. A healer had to chop it off so it wouldn't cause trouble.»

The girl's eyes widen and she curls her own tail tight against her back. «Papa,» she whines, «will that happen to me?»

«Don't worry, dear.

«Say, why don't you tell Mr. Lightray what you've been up to?» he says, trying to steer the conversation away from caudal amputation.

«I've been playing with a star lantern,» she mumbles.

«She's been playing liturgy at home with some of her toys,» he clarifies.

«A little hearthkeeper, are you?» She tilts her muzzle up but hides behind her father, squeezing her tail even tighter against her back trying not to catch my taillessness.

The boy has progressed from poking the pouch with his writing claw to clapping the pouch between his forepaws, letting little red beads of juice fly out for him to snap up with his jaws.

«She can't wait to become an acolyte, only six more years.» My son wraps his tail around hers to comfort her. «She'd love to know what you've been up to.

«Mr. Lightray is the *Dewfall's* mission controller.»

«For real?» She emerges from behind her father, her ears pinned back and her eyes wide with excitement.

«What's that like, Mr. Lightray?»

«Let's see—I make sure I can still talk to the folks aboard the *Dewfall*, and I keep the ship headed in the right direction. I make sure the missionaries are safe and snug in their amnions, and sometimes I have to tell one of them to pilot a micro mech and fix something that breaks.»

«Are they there yet?» asks the girl. «I hope they find other little ones.»

«So do I,» I say, wishing I could hope like her.

As we've been talking, the boy has steadily been slapping the juice pouch between his paws harder and harder. After one last almighty smack, a great blob of crimson stickiness flies out and slimes the white fur of my chest.

The boy smells embarrassed. «Sorry, mister,» he growls.

I laugh. «Don't worry about it, little guy. I'm not doing anything important today. Just drink your juice instead of playing with it next time.

My son looks down the axis. His childermoot has floated out of sight. «We'd better get going or we'll be late for liturgy.»

«Bye, Mr. Lightray,» the two pups bark in unison. My son kicks off from the paw cable he was clinging to and the three of them go flying down the axis toward the lighthouse.

I turn and enter a tiny room behind a security door. How far have the missionaries fallen since the second golden age. There was a time when entire buildings were dedicated to full-time control teams, and here I am, a single unpaid volunteer holed up in a converted maintenance closet. With the ansible in the corner I can stretch my front legs out to either side and touch the walls. The room doesn't even have a light source. I have to make due with the thermal glow of the ansible's heat sinks.

I turn to a small safe bolted to the wall. I scrawl a key pattern onto the ink pad with my writing claw. The safe takes about half a heartbeat to confirm the pattern, absorb the ink, and verify my ink's biosignature. A subtle haptic pulse informs me that the door is unlocked. I look inside. Yup, the tailstone is still there, where it's been for the last two hundred fifty years.

I open a small access door on the ansible. The link lights on the primary underlay tunnel interface card are blinking away. There's a hot spare card below it, waiting to take over should the primary go offline.

I pull a pair of HUD specs out of my wallet and rest them on my muzzle, then connect them to a magnetic port on the ansible with an interface cable. The underlay tunnel between the *Dewfall* and Wayfarers' haven is air-gapped. We learned our lesson after Lichlord Firefly's apostasy not to connect womb ships directly to the wider network.

I relax my body and float in the middle of the room as the ansible fetches the logs from the womb ship. I examine the various sacramentals tied to the wall: a thurible made of blue caerulium metal, with bells up and down the chain. Beside it are two clear packets containing briquettes of incense, one white and the other gray. The packet of gray incense has been opened; most of the briquettes are gone. The white incense remains untouched.

Part of my job as mission controller is to issue the proclamation of good news that we've found bone not of our bone and flesh not of our flesh. But that's not going to happen. In the hundred millennia we've been looking for life all we've found is barren rock after barren rock. If they do

make contact, I use the white incense. If not, I use the gray incense. Either way I'm not looking forward to swinging that thurible. You're supposed to wrap the chain around the tail, and elegantly sweep the tail back and forth as you move. That's not an option for me, so I have to make due with frantically kicking my hind leg.

The logs are loaded, and I start flicking through automated message after automated message. I've already seen the leasemind pegging some radio emissions it thinks aren't random, but that's hardly reliable. I have to wait for confirmation from Iris. I scroll past a few dozen more log entries until I get a notification that one of the *Dewfall's* crew has sent me a message. I sigh and grab a coal of gray incense from the bag and roll it around in my paw as I prepare to read it.

It's one of my earliest memories, from a time when one recall's not so much what is heard and smelled and seen on the outside, but what is felt on the inside. Comfort, love, and safety—that's what I felt as I buried my snout into the fluff between my sire's shoulders, feeling the slow expansion and contraction of his ribs as he breathes and the gentle rumbles of his voice as he voices the responses to the liturgy. My sire's musk surrounds me, along with the musty smell of old bones and the faintest whiff of ozone from the star hearth, the unique scent of the lighthouse, a smell that says «you may be infinitesimal in scale, but you are infinitely loved.»

But this contentment is not to last. I feel a sharp tug on my tail. I'm sharing my sire's back with one of my litter mates. She's jealous of my spot and seeks to usurp it. I wrinkle my muzzle at her. An angry hiss barely has time to escape my throat when my sire thumps us both with his tail. «You two behave,» he whispers. He curls his tail around my midsection and lifts me off of his back. «You two are getting too old to be on my back anyway.» My sister sticks her tongue out at me and claws her way up to where I was lying, then snuggles into my sire's fur. Her victory is fleeting. He likewise pries her off his back and places her a good tailslength away from me on his other side next to one of our other parents.

As a consolation prize my sire coils his tail around my own as I reach down with my paws to grasp the tail bar fixed to the bulkhead. Now bereft of my warm snuggle spot, I turn my attention to the ancient hearthkeeper floating near the sanctuary. She's giving a sermon, the exact contents of which I cannot recall, but something along the lines of «Again and again we ply the yawning gulf between stars, seeking bone not of our bone and flesh not of our flesh. Again and again we return as alone as when we left. Yet may we not become discouraged. The Uncreated Light has promised us that we share this dear little Creation with other little ones, and we need only be patient and keep looking.»

As the hearthkeeper speaks, I can make out the acolyte behind the sheer sanctuary veil, preparing the star hearth for exposition. Slowly, I become aware of something swelling up from beyond the curtain separating the nave of the lighthouse from the colony's main axis. A low rumble? A dull rumor? I don't know how to describe it. Perhaps my subconscious mind is picking up on some minute ripple in the air. The acolyte notices it almost as soon as I do. She looks up from whatever little rite she's performing. Her ears perk up and she scents the air, her whiskers twitching.

The smell hits us before the sound. Gossamer strands of white smoke creep through the curtain, accompanied by the spiced aroma of white incense blown in by the axial air current. Hushed

whispers flit back and forth among the members of our childermoot. Whispers grow to murmurs that spread throughout the rest of the congregation, and murmurs swell to excited yips and growls. The acolyte has slipped out from behind the sanctuary veil and is now staring at the entrance. The multitool she had used to adjust some parameter on the hearth floats away lazily, utterly forgotten.

The hearthkeeper, perhaps going a bit deaf and anosmic after seven centuries, is the last to catch on. She continues preaching as the acolyte approaches her and politely pokes the back of her ear, then gestures with her muzzle toward the entrance. By now the din from outside has crescendo to eclipse the congregation's chatter.

Just as the hearthkeeper collects herself and focuses on the entrance, the curtain is torn away from the clips holding it to the frame and a crowd spills into the back of the nave. There, at the head of the throng, is the same middle-aged white-furred tailless fellow we saw on our way to the liturgy, his chest stained as with martyr's blood. White smoke is billowing from a thurible tied around his rear leg, bouncing around wildly as he awkwardly kicks as though trying to dislodge a nipping forest flyer from his ankle. Somehow his voice manages to rise above the clamor.

To this day I have yet to hear anything like it. Nothing I can say can describe it adequately. Pure joy condensed into an utterance, that's the best I can do, but it's still not enough. His voice bursts out in rhythmic barks, each syllable a hammer blow to shatter the great heresy.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!

For we are alone no more!

We have found them at last!

Bone not of our bone!

Flesh not of our flesh!

Again, I say, Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!

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