Daniel G. Fitch - Murmuring Hinge

It was a smooth inter-species lunch meeting, until Xxatl leaned in with what I took to be an apologetic gesture, and said something that confused my translator. “I’m terribly sorry you had to be here when the...” Kzzt. Midway through the sentence, the translator jacked into my cochlear lace locked up. The burbling whirrs and rumbles coming from Xxatl’s sweating, gelatinous form should have been immediately echoed by prim, proper English. But the damned translator sat and spun, flagging a 96% lingual confusion, until finally it restarted: “I apologize that you happened to be present when the murmuring hinge happens.”

“Murmuring hinge?” I repeated out loud, trying to take another bite of salad. I glanced around to avoid meeting his stare; the restaurant was almost empty. A human woman I didn’t recognize sat on a stool in the window, watching the station traffic. The waiter child was slumped over underneath the screen listing the day’s specials. This was supposedly a relatively authentic Earth diner, recreated to make us Terran folk feel more comfortable. But I’ve never set foot on Earth. So the concept slid off my mind at a strange angle, more alien than Xxatl himself.

As I looked back to my new Betan liason, grumbling gases moved inside his body. I could see Xxatl’s... chest… move? I’m afraid to report that I hadn’t studied Betan biology much before the meeting, or, well… at all. So I subvocally started my lace searching for a reference on alien body plans. A reference on alien body plans, for idiots. (That’s me, the underinformed negotiator. I’m really good at my job.)

Meanwhile, the translator must have still been trying to connect to the diaspora, taking its sweet time. Xxatl gestured helpfully with several pseudopods. The tentacles twirled in front of his belly, and then pointed to the floor and ceiling at the same time, and then I realized (unable to hold back a grimace) that something really was happening in his… belly, I guess we’ll say. But the gesture reminded me more than anything of the ancient Earth disco dances I had stumbled upon when researching the ancient history this restaurant was miming.

I shook my head to clear it, taking a shaky breath as the translator kicked back in. “Belching... mumble of the... grocery delivery truck? Siren of the food... ambulance?” It sounded baffled. “Crud,” I said under my breath, as it just kept trying. “Spawn of... shouting child-insides?” it asked. I pushed my salad away, unable to separate it from the visible pulsing of Xxatl’s body, glowing now as it was with some kind of sweat or pus. “Death from jiggling mind eggs,” the translator piped in helpfully. I covered my mouth for a moment.

Ignoring the glitched translator, I said, “Murmuring hinge, what does that mean, Xxatl?” I did my best impersonation of his name’s clicking whirr, bowing my head in deference. “Are you going to be okay?” I pointed at Xxatl’s belly, making a classic ‘confused ape’ face. (There really hadn’t been anything in the cycle about this when I did my research last night. Why didn’t I prepare better? I swore to invest more heavily in xeno-research, next time. If I didn’t get summarily axed.)

Xxatl gleefully continued to whistle and whirr, ending in a series of abrupt clicks. “Oh yes, my friend. I have heard the Earth folk do not enjoy our… indigestion of creation.”

I cursed the translator under my breath, tapping my implant impotently.

Xxatl nodded his eyestalk. “It is a great honor for you to be here at the time of my... re-opening of the squirming life egg! This is quite auspicious indeed!” (The translator was starting to sound more confident now, which began to worry me.)

So I sat there, grinning stupidly, my face pallid and my stomach battling to stay calm, hoping against hope that our trade deal was still on after the... life egg... re-opened. I’m not particularly squeamish, but I must admit: I had a hard time looking directly at whatever was happening at the surface of Xxatl’s... skin. I was starting to fervently wish that Betans had adopted the simian fashion of wearing clothes to cover themselves.

With a rising chirp, Xxatl gestured to the waiter. “A large bowl, if you please,” he hooted, running a pseudopod lovingly over his stomach. It looked like someone stirring cottage cheese through a sheet of melting green plastic. Xxatl gave off a low, haunting murmur that sounded like a conversation around a corner in a dream.

Just as the waiter returned with the bowl, I realized the sound was not coming from Xxatl’s mouth, exactly. It was coming from his body, which rapidly became a mouth. His stomach split open like a smile, and a slurry of small green tadpoles with large eyes rolling in them fell into the bowl held in the outstretched waiter’s arms.

I blinked rapidly, trying consciously to see less accurately, gritting my teeth as Xxatl scooped one of the motile eyeballs onto a small plate. As it attempted to squirm away, he squished it into paste with the deft flick of a pseudopod and handed the plate to me in one motion, with a low hooting groan punctured with clicks and wheezes.

The translator spun in silence, as the waiter kid said “Congratulations!” He practically flung the churning bowl into Xxatl’s loving arms and ran to the restroom, leaving me there with no words.

“It is tradition among us that the deferent shall... eat of the soup of the triumphant birth!”

I took the plate from him and set it down carefully in front of me. I picked up a spoon and shut my eyes. I gritted my teeth and knew I needed to close the deal.