

Dining with Small Monsters
by S. Y. Affolee
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Part I: Aperitif

It was near the end of my late night shift when contestant number six managed to decapitate herself with the sonic toothbrush.

Instead of calling the emergency medical personnel first, the producer decided to call the director. It took a full ten minutes before the people in orange finally swarmed apartment six to take away what the two pieces of the body. The message stream on my eye screen exploded into a flurry of outrage, disbelief, and cynical snarking.

I needed a drink. Preferably something strong enough to knock me off my feet.

“Good God,” exclaimed my co-worker for the fifth time. Whatever his name, maybe Bob, had just started working on the set of *Extreme Living on New Caledonia*, the latest in a long line of holographic reality shows produced by the Galactic Broadcasting Corporation, last week.

I tapped a few commands on the control panel and squinted at the monitoring screens in front of us. The scenes switched rapidly between the different apartments where the rest of the contestants resided. They were either all in bed or just getting out of bed. So far, so good.

“You should have been here earlier this season,” I told Bob. “Contestant number two blew himself up when he attempted to fire up a grill for the cooking challenge. And contestant number ten split his head open with the vertical challenge.”

“I thought this was just a show about twentieth-century living. I thought it was primitive but not that dangerous.”

“You must be kidding me, right?” I glanced at him, the silver words of the message stream giving his sweaty face a strange glow. “Did you sleep through history class?”

Bob just shook his head and stared at the monitor, wiping his forehead. I turned back. The scene had flickered back to apartment six. One of the emergency medical personnel was holding contestant number six's head. Her expression was of faint surprise.

I slumped in my seat, rubbing my eyes. I had one more hour before I was off. But given what had happened, I would probably end up spending an extra hour up briefing the morning crew on the latest set mishap. I wanted to sleep, not describe a decapitation to another holographic projectionist who probably wouldn't care anyway.

This was not something that I had imagined that I would do when I grew up. I wanted to make meaningful entertainment. Art. Everything was going so well when I got into the Andromeda Film School. And then I decided to make a documentary for my first year project. That was when everything went to hell.

And now, I was a temp at a substandard reality show where even contestants dying in cruel and unusual ways were doing nothing to stop the declining ratings.

The door at the back of the control room hissed open and the footsteps of the producer clumped toward us. The thick man with thinning hair stopped at the space between our chairs and brandished his data pad like a sword. “You two will have to stay here until the next shift arrives. What have you got on the vids?”

“Nothing of interest, sir,” Bob answered promptly as he straightened his back. Probably hoping to impress him. It wasn't going to work. He'd realize that after the first month. “The vids show contestant number six getting the sonic toothbrush to brush her teeth and turning it on when it suddenly exploded.”

“Damn.” The producer whacked his data pad against the back of Bob's chair. “That means we'll have to shell out the dough to her grieving family. There's no way we can call it a suicide?”

Bob glanced at me, looking even more nervous.

“No,” I said. I had been sending out my resume for the past three months. I had stopped trying to please the higher ups long ago. I didn't quit because, well, there was the paycheck. But for some reason, they had yet to fire me.

The producer gave me a sour look before he turned back to Bob. “Show me the vid feed again.”

I leaned back as my co-worker jiggled with the controls. The message stream on my eye screen had already trickled down to a few half-hearted jokes about when the show will finally kill itself off. A few of the messages were flagged. Those were from my parents. I ignored them. Then something flashed at

the bottom of the eye screen. An incoming message of importance.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Bob and the producer were still examining the vids. I tapped my hands against my thighs to activate the sensors on the pads of my fingertips. I moved my fingers in specific patterns and accessed the message on my eye screen. The written message was short and to the point.

“Dear Ms. Euphrosyne Tanaka-Teng, We have reviewed your application and we are pleased to offer you a position on one of our experimental programs in development. This new show will be headed directly by Nigel Mot. If you wish to accept this position, please report to GBC headquarters as soon as possible. Sincerely, Rosalind Hect, GBC Program Coordinator.”

I stared at the silver words on my eye screen for a long moment before I rapidly typed out a terse response: “I accept.”

The message sent, I blew out a breath. A job. A real job where I could actually utilize my skills instead of sitting in a small control room like an underpaid security robot.

“You know, I'm not an expert about this,” the producer said, breaking my momentary euphoria. “Maybe we should show this to our lawyers.”

“All right.” Bob looked pale as if he was about to keel over in a faint. Shock, perhaps. This was the first time he had witnessed a death on the set. The producer nodded at that and then left.

“Maybe you should see a counselor,” I told him. “This sort of stuff can be hard for first timers.”

“Yeah. That sounds like a good idea.” He tried to shake his head and then he really did keel over.

I stared at Bob's body for a moment, not seeing the message stream continuing to scroll past my eyes. Screw it, the newbies always did this. I finally got out of my chair and walked out of the control room. I caught one of the emergency personnel walking by. The woman was holding a silver canister of decontaminant.

“There's a guy in there. I think he needs help.”

When she moved toward the control room, I quickly headed the opposite direction, avoiding the glance of the producer who was talking to another member of the crew. I slipped into the lift. I had been clocked out when I had exited the set floor. With the lift to myself, I triggered my fingers to send a message to the director.

“I quit.”

I walked out of the film building and into the New Caledonian morning feeling freer than I had in what seemed like forever.

Part II: Amuse-bouche

Rocket Fuel

The transport to Kraken arrived at the southern port just after I finished a small breakfast consisting of a protein bar and an energy drink of slightly dubious origin. Even the robot serving the drink had no idea where it came from. It was just loaded onto the transport along with all the other foodstuffs and the robot's job was to serve food, not answer questions about it.

My first view of South City was after I passed the airlock and the entrance checkpoint. At one of the waiting lounges, the entire wall was made of clear flex-glass which faced a desert of metal that stretched as far as the horizon. Periodically, from the field of metal, structures shaped like mushrooms erupted from the ground. Buildings and transmission towers, I guessed. The Galactic Broadcasting Corporation owned pretty much half the planet and I wouldn't be surprised if all of the towers also housed to offices of the GBC employees.

The port itself was crowded by numerous travelers dressed in strange costumes. But all of them had a certain air of intent, even if they were not talking to someone with their communications devices. Perhaps they were also employees for the GBC. I briefly fantasized that I was walking among a crowd of intelligent news correspondents that had just come back to headquarters after long stints from distant parts of the galaxy reporting dangerous and exciting news.

But I suspected the reality was far more mundane. They were probably all, in actuality, flunkies working on shows that were clones of *Extreme Living on New Caledonia*.

I hoisted my small travel bag over my shoulder—the rest of my belongings were being shipped to a small apartment in a suburb next to the offices of the Experimental Entertainment Department. But even

as I moved from the debarkation gates and waiting rooms to the main part of the port promenade lined with shops stocked for businessmen on the go, I tried to keep down my nervousness and excitement. After all, things could totally go downhill from here. My new apartment could be a dump. My new boss, Nigel Mot, could be an annoying pinhead. I could be shoveling manure for this new experimental venture of which I had no idea what it would be—except for a hint from a transmission from Rosalind Hect that it would utilize my meager skills at documentary making.

My resume was still floating out there, being submitted to various matching jobs by a program I had tweaked. I could always tough it out on this assignment until I got another job. Or I could just quit and then move back in with my parents.

I shuddered at the thought.

There was a moving platform at the north end of the port heading out into the north end of the city. I tapped my fingers against my thigh and fired up the map finder on my eye screen. The rolling messages, GBC news feeds that I had subscribed to replace the mandatory feeds for *Extreme Living* that I had deleted, winked out of existence and was replaced with a grid of green with a yellow pathway indicating the route to the Experimental Entertainment Department offices.

I had initially planned to drop by the new apartment and relax for about an hour before heading into a debriefing session with my new boss, but a delay at one of the transport stops had forced me to redraw my plans. Now, instead of stopping by the apartment, I had to head straight to the offices after the ennui of the transport trip.

The journey to the offices, unfortunately, seemed to go by quicker than I would have liked. In no time at all, I was standing in front of the doors to the GBC Experimental Entertainment Department, plain and nondescript at the base of one of the mushroom-shaped buildings. The door hissed open at my approach and I found myself in a slick and narrow black lobby lit discretely at small vents near the ceiling. An identification screen decorated the wall at the end of the lobby. I approached the screen and felt the hairs at the back of my neck rise as I felt myself bathed with an electron beam.

Several indecipherable symbols appeared on the identification screen and a narrow opening next to the screen slid open. An arrow on the screen blinked, pointing to the opening.

I took a deep breath and walked in.

It was a lift. Once I was inside the small space, the door slid closed behind me and the walls pulsed subtly with color as it moved. A few seconds later, the wall opened again and I was disgorged into a white waiting room filled with orange pod chairs. There was no one in the waiting room except for one man sitting at the far end, dressed in a casual but smart jumpsuit of black. I was suddenly acutely aware of my less than ideal gray travel attire. Hopefully people would mistake it as a fashion statement. The man was reading a data pad and did not appear to be aware of my arrival.

Glancing around and seeing nothing else in the room, I moved toward the pod chairs and took the one across from the man.

“Hello.”

The man glanced up. He gave me a slightly distracted smile. “Hi.”

“Are you here to see Nigel Mot?”

He nodded. “I got hired as the head holographic projectionist for some mysterious new experimental show. From what I gathered from the GBC coordinator, I was supposed to be briefed on the show today and to meet my assistant.”

I shook my head. “I guess you know more than me.”

He raised a black brow. “Oh?”

“I’m Euphrosyne Tanaka-Teng. Everyone calls me Euphie.” I held out a hand, which to my relief, he shook. “I got hired for the experimental show, too, but no one would tell me anything about it except that maybe it might be a documentary. I’ve been trained as a holographic projectionist, so maybe I’m going to be your assistant.”

“I see.” He squinted doubtfully at me. “I’m Vikram Assam. Or Vik. I have to tell you up front that all the assistants I’ve ever had were flakes. It was the reason I quit my last job.”

“Er, really?”

“He was the director’s son,” he explained. “Most of the time, I wouldn’t look too closely at the bit of nepotism if he had been even halfway decent with his work, but the boy was a disaster. He blew up an entire monitor station. No one knows exactly how he did it, but it was obvious that he did.”

“Well, I’ll try not to blow anything up.”

“Please do.”

Another opening which I had not noticed before slid open and a faceless blue android motioned for us to follow it. Vik was the first to get up and he strode forward without looking to see if I followed. The next room appeared to be a beige conference room with a long white table with more orange pod chairs. One side of the conference room was taken up by a rectangular flex-glass window which overlooked part of the surface of the planet. From our vantage point, I surmised that we were on one of the upper floors of the department.

Two men were already in the room. The tall, athletically built man with salt and pepper hair standing next to the computer screen at the far end of the room was Nigel Mot. He looked exactly like his profile image on the file that I had looked up on my way to Kraken. When he smiled at us, I decided that he really did have dental blinkers installed on his teeth.

“Ah, the holographic experts!” Mot exclaimed. His voice was deep yet slightly nasal. He had good projection. “Mr. Assam and Ms. Tanaka-Teng, I presume?”

Vik and I shook hands with Mot who then gestured to the giant standing beside him. Mot was tall, but this second man was taller. He had muscle bulk and I wondered if he was Mot’s bodyguard. From Mot’s file, I knew that my new boss had some royal blood in his background and plenty of important connections as the Galactic Broadcasting Corporation’s CEO. His brooding stature certainly hinted at it. But then Mot introduced him as the show’s minder and researcher.

“Mr. Remington Vyne has been an extensive traveler of the galaxy. He knows pretty much everything there is to know about every planetary system in the Empire,” Mot said.

Vik shook Vyne’s hand. His mouth twisted. “Does this mean that there will be traveling involved in this new show, Mr. Mot?”

“All will be revealed in good time once the entire crew gets here,” he replied. “And please call me Nigel.”

Vik and I glanced at each other at that remark. Vik just shrugged and took one of the pod chairs. I went to shake Vyne’s hand. I noticed faint silver threads running underneath his skin. This guy was cybernetically enhanced. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Vyne,” I said neutrally.

The man just nodded even though his dark gaze missed nothing.

I hurried to a seat across from Vik, hoping that I did not just piss off a cyborg. The cyborg in question decided to pick the pod chair next to mine. Noticing my slightly panicked expression, Vik smirked. I tapped my fingers on the side of my leg as if in a nervous gesture. In reality, I was actually sending out a message into the endless data stream that scrolled across the eye screens of anyone subscribed to my personal feed (parents not included).

Fuck. I’m sitting next to a cyborg and I’m not dead yet.

I was not expecting the network aether to respond. No one ever responded to my rambling on the message stream.

But a moment later, I got a reply from an anonymous feed.

If you’re not dead yet, it’s quite possible that the cyborg wants something from you first.

I glanced around the conference room, but none of the three men were paying any attention to me. Vik had assumed a bored expression as he was examining his data pad again. Nigel Mot was talking to someone who had pinged him on his earcomm. And Vyne the cyborg was sitting back in the pod chair with his hands folded across his stomach and his eyes closed as if he were asleep.

Feeling unnerved, I tried to trace the anonymous feed. And almost immediately came upon a firewall. As I set upon trying to untangle it, the faceless android came back into the conference room with two more people. One was a bald man with reptilian-like eyes and an extremely large girth that was ill-concealed with his choice of flared silver pants and wick-leather coat. He gave his name as George Zero and his occupation as the sensory technician. Symbols were etched along his bristly jaw. When he turned his head to greet Mot, I could see them more clearly. Zero had apparently spent some time on a prison planet.

The second person was a red-haired woman named Annette Bakkar who Mot introduced as the show director. Bakkar gave everyone wide smiles and chattered about how she had a million ideas on how to make the show a success.

Once everyone was seated, the faceless android glided around the table with a small tray. As the android passed each person, it placed a napkin on the table. A black porcelain spoon was placed on the napkin. On the spoon was a small cube with a metallic sheen.

“Before we start, bon appetite!” said Mot, using an ancient phrase to indicate that we should start eating.

No one reached toward the spoons.

“What is it?” asked George Zero as I accessed the data stream on my eye screen and proposed the same question.

“Paranian carbide,” Mot replied with a flourish. “A friend of mine gave it to me yesterday in celebration for starting this new show. I’m not quite sure what it is, but I was told that it’s a delicacy.”

On my eye screen, a response blinked. It was from Anonymous.

It’s a special rocket fuel developed by the Paranians which can also be eaten. That is, if you have the right intestinal microflora to safely process uranium.

I blinked at the message. “Rocket fuel?” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Vyne’s mouth faintly twitch as everyone’s attention swung towards me. Goddamn it. *You cybernetic bastard.*

Well, you asked.

“No thanks,” Vik said as he carefully edged backward into his seat.

Annette made a face. “Your friend must have gotten something mixed up.”

“Or maybe not,” George said in a dark tone. “Maybe your so-called friend is actually out to get you.”

Mot looked vaguely confused as he shrugged. “What do you mean? I’m sure it’s harmless.” He raised his spoon to his mouth. We all watched in frozen fascination as he chewed and swallowed. “Hm. It tastes a little like licorice.”

A second later, his eyes rolled up in his head and he crumpled to the floor.

Vermouth and Pate

It was only a second later that the emergency droids came charging through the conference room doors, hovering metal balls with segmented arms beeping and flashing furiously. One of the droids raised Mot’s feet. A second droid raised his head. And a third suddenly whacked the man on his sternum. Mot involuntarily coughed and bits of metallic matter flew out of his mouth to land on the conference table in unsightly gobs. The fourth and final droid hovered near the conference table and vacuumed up what was left of the rocket fuel food, presumably to be sent to a toxicology lab.

The rest of the new show crew was standing slightly apart from the scene, gawking. I peered around the bulk of Vyne the cyborg to see the third droid inject something into Mot. I caught the color green before the droid stored the syringe back into its central compartment. The droid had injected the man with an anti-radiation serum.

“Do you think he’s going to be all right?” Annette said to no one in particular.

“That was pretty quick,” said George, squinting as the droids examined Mot’s vitals. Three of them soon retreated back through the conference door leaving the last droid on standby at his side. “I’m sure he’ll be all right. I think. He’s breathing, right?”

“Appears so.” Vik took the initiative to crouch down next to Mot’s body. “His color looks fine. It looks like he’s just temporarily out of it.”

As we all leaned in closer to see if Vik was right, Mot’s eyelids suddenly flickered and then opened. His eyes seemed clear as he glared up at us.

“Why are all of you up there?”

“You fainted, sir,” said Vyne.

Mot shook his head and slowly got up. He raised a hand to rub his temples. “I feel as if I just came out of a bender. The only thing I remember is eating the Paranian delicacy and then ending up on the floor.” He finally stood up, slightly wavering. He shook his head again and then decided to slump down into the pod chair at the head of the conference table. “I’m fine. It was probably the galactic fricassee I had the previous night. Everyone, please have a seat. I need a drink.”

We sat back down as Mot fiddled with some of the hidden controls on the conference table. The view screen behind him suddenly lit up with a star chart of the Andromeda Galaxy Delta Quadrant. The faceless blue android drifted toward Mot with another tray in its appendages. It poured out a dark amber liquid in a clear glass and handed it to him. Mot downed the drink without a blink before grinning at us and blinding us with his dental blinkers again.

“Well, since everyone is here, why don’t we start?” Mot tapped a control on the table and the star map zoomed toward the galactic center to the Kraken System, our current location. “As you all probably

know, the GBC has recently been forced to downsize due to our decreasing revenue stream from advertisers. The powers that be at GBC headquarters have been brainstorming for the past several months on what to do about this problem. Some executives have decided that remedying the problem meant offering more programs of the same thing—the reality shows and interactive games that have originally catapulted the GBC to its current prominent position.”

I gave a mental sigh. But times were changing. I used to work at a reality show. And viewership and advertising was noticeably going downhill even before I made the bad decision of signing on to the show.

Mot motioned to the faceless android for another drink. The android obliged.

“But while I was sitting at one of those meetings listening to yet another unoriginal idea for setting a reality show on Targas XII, I thought, we should really do something different. Something experimental. And I looked through the ancient archives and discovered an art form that has been little used except at disreputable film schools. The documentary. So I thought, why doesn’t the GBC make a documentary?”

Annette tapped her fingers on the table and frowned. “Aren’t documentaries a lot like news shows? Are we going to cover a war? I’ve never done that before.”

“Or maybe we’re going to cover a band,” said George. “Sort of like *This Is Spinal Tap*.”

“I’ve seen that,” Vyne finally spoke up. “It was a very interesting documentary with the interplay between the director and the band itself.”

Vik nodded. “I thought it was very deep myself.”

“But Spinal Tap was a fake band. The people from the twentieth century called a mockumentary. It was satire, not a documentary,” I said.

Everyone else ignored me as Mot leaned forward from his chair, eyes bright with enthusiasm. “Exactly! I thought *This Is Spinal Tap* was brilliant. We should do something like that. But I didn’t exactly have a band in mind. I thought we would do a culinary based documentary. We’ll go from planet to planet examining each culture’s cuisine.”

“There’s this ancient documentarian called David Attenborough,” Annette said slowly. “He went around surveying primitive cultures in some of his shows. I can see the possibilities. Do you already have a list of the planets we’re going to visit? Or a theme at least?”

“In fact, I do.” Mot tapped a few more controls and the star map on the view screen disappeared to be replaced with a list. It was a banquet menu filled with items that that I had never heard of before. “I am one of the direct descendants of Harmonious Mot, the forty-second emperor who died of food poisoning at his coronation banquet. Recently while looking through my old family records, I came across the menu for the coronation banquet. I thought it would be a great idea to visit all of the places that these foods originated from.”

“You sent me that banquet list without telling me what exactly it was for,” said Vyne. “I did the research and discovered that all the items are found in the Delta Quadrant. Which is rather convenient for traveling.”

“Convenient?” said George. “I’d say it is downright suspicious. Maybe all the foods were found in the Delta Quadrant because everyone living there was against the Imperial Regime.”

Mot frowned. “I don’t follow, Mr. Zero.”

“It’s obvious.” George motioned toward the view screen. “There’s no such thing as coincidence. The Delta Quadrant has always been known as the Sector of Renegades, Outlaws, and Dissidents. My guess is that all the disgruntled denizens of the Delta Quadrant managed to get their most dangerous foods onto the coronation banquet menu in hopes of killing the emperor. And judging from the food poisoning, they succeeded.”

“That sounds like a paranoid conspiracy theory,” Mot replied dismissively. “It was confirmed by no less than three independent labs with the initial analysis that my ancestor died of food poisoning, particularly by a piece of Gardan goat cheese that went rancid during the dessert course. It was ruled and proved to be an accident.”

George crossed his arms against his chest. “Humph.”

“Never mind about that,” said Vik. “It’s old history no matter what the case. So is that what we’re going to do? Travel around the Delta Quadrant making a documentary about food? Isn’t that going to be kind of boring? There’s only so many ways you can make a holographic projection about cheese. It just sits there.”

“And everyone knows what it smells like,” George added. “It’s not like adding the other sensory aspects of the experience is going to gain the GBC a sudden new audience. Unless you’re aiming for the

geriatric crowd.”

“Are you sure old people can even smell anything in the first place?” said Annette.

“My grandmother can still detect a gas leak within a thousand paces,” I said.

The show director stared blankly at me. “Gas leak?”

“My grandmother works as an engineer in one of the mining systems in the Alpha Quadrant.”

“But we’re not making a documentary about a gas leak.” Mot tapped the controls again to switch the menu back to the star map, but not before Vyne made a sudden movement, leaning forward.

“While I was doing research on your banquet menu,” he said lowly, “I did notice some unusual items.”

“See, what did I tell you?” George said immediately. “It’s a conspiracy.”

This time, everyone ignored Zero’s outburst.

“Take, for instance, the first item on the appetizer list,” continued Vyne. “Miilax Pate. Do any of you know what it is?”

“Cheese and crackers?” guessed Vik.

“I seem to remember that pate means fatty goose liver,” I said. “But Terran geese are extinct. People only grow goose liver in vats now.”

“I know!” Annette bounced up in her seat like a small child. “It has to be those small yellow fruits they serve at those cocktail parties at the GBC games department. I’ve been wondering what those were.”

“Those are genetically engineered pineapple-cherries,” said Mot as he beetled his brows.

“The games department serves those because they look like pieces from the ancient game of Pacman. I just assumed that Miilax Pate was just some sort of fancy spread. So what exactly is it, Vyne?”

“Insect larvae.” The cyborg sounded ominous.

Vik was already shaking his head. “That’s like the first challenge they always do on the *Extreme Eating* shows. Grubs are so passe.”

“But wait, we may be able to work with that,” said the red-haired director. “If this cuisine documentary is going to be experimental, we need to ease the audience into it first. You know how people are. They hate change. So if we have Nigel here eat some Miilax Pate, it will be a comfortable first scene for the viewers. But it will also be fresh because it will be filmed like a documentary.”

Vyne frowned. “Comfortable? Miilax Pate is anything but comfortable if you eat it incorrectly. You might need a doctor.”

“Anything can be uncomfortable if you eat it incorrectly,” I pointed out.

“That’s not what I meant. And you know it.”

“Does Miilax Pate smell like anything?” asked George.

Mot shrugged. “Who knows. But I’m game for grubs. And don’t worry about the doctor. I’ve got one on board.”

Gelatin in a Bin

Nigel Mot had his own private spaceship.

I suppose I should not have been surprised. After all, he was a scion of an emperor. And emperors do not have negligible fortunes.

It was called *The Bacchus* after an ancient deity of food and wine. Which was apropos to the mission at hand.

I ended up not even visiting the apartment that I had originally planned on living in while I was working at the GBC Experimental Entertainment Department in South City. Instead, I had my belongings diverted and sent to *The Bacchus* where the entire crew would be living and traveling in the course of the duration of filming. I had pretty much no say in this—Nigel Mot was in charge and he wanted to start as soon as possible.

It was about half an hour after the meeting at headquarters when I entered one of the small bars in downtown South City along with Vik, Annette and George. Mot had gone off to do preparations while Vyne claimed that he had prior obligations. The bar itself didn’t even have a name. It was a small establishment located in a crack in a dark alleyway. It was the sort of place that George would look rather at home in, but it was actually Annette who had suggested the place. The other three ordered drinks and lunch. Feeling slightly anxious and not particularly hungry, I just ordered a soy burger. The fare at the bar was typical of any tourist dive—food designed to deliver the calories but not on taste.

“So what do you think about Nigel's itinerary?” said Annette as a waiter android arrived with the drinks. Mot had sent us the banquet list and his star charts to our accounts. I pulled the info up on my eye screen and scanned the locations.

George grunted noncommittally.

“It looks interesting,” said Vik. “The first stop is the Antares System. The natives there, I've heard, are highly ritualized in a lot of things that they do. It might be good to try to film them doing one of the rituals.”

“Nigel wants to film food,” Annette pointed out.

“But what if we combined it so that it's not just about food?” I suggested. “It could be cultural, too. I've been trying to do a search but it doesn't seem like there's much archival footage on Antaresian rituals. And much of it that's there is in flat mode, not holographics.”

“Yeah, that does sound interesting,” George finally said. “I've been thinking, ever since Mot started babbling on and on about pies and roasts that it would be really boring if all my skills were just used on food. But if we add in the rituals...”

Annette was frowning. “This is why I don't like working with a committee. Everyone has their own ideas about things. All the ideas get implemented and the end result is a mess. I think we should stick with Nigel's original vision.”

The rest of us were prevented from replying when the android came back with our dishes. I bit down on my tasteless burger. George had pasta with white sauce and Vik was eating curried chicken with fries. Annette was eating a salad. Everything was green except for the salad dressing which was a bright red.

After a moment, Vik twirled a fry between his fingers and pointed it towards Annette. “You know, sometimes the original vision might not be quite right. That's why there are editors.”

“Editors who are other people,” George nodded. “We just record stuff and let them do all the work of putting things back together into a coherent narrative.”

Annette scowled. “You three might be pointing and shooting willy-nilly, but I have to figure out what we should be filming in the first place.”

“But you already do.” Vik bit into the fry, chewed and swallowed. “Nigel very conveniently sent us all an itinerary.”

The director rolled her eyes. “Smart ass.”

“You know, it doesn't have to be that hard,” I said. “We'd just need more equipment. We'll just send in recording probes to all the places that you think we might be filming and then send in all the footage to the editors. Besides, if we're doing a documentary, shouldn't we the crew be mostly staying out of the whole situation anyway? When you're documenting something, you don't want to alter what's there by your presence.”

“Is that the philosophy that they tried to teach you at film art school?” said George as he pointed his fork at me. At one point during the meeting, Mot had made us all tell something about ourselves. I had mentioned that I had briefly been at the Andromeda Film School.

“Er...”

“I fell into this vocation by accident and learned on the job. It helped keep me on the straight and narrow.” The ex-convict gave a dramatic sigh. “In documentaries, old school documentaries that is, you just do what you have to do, even if you end up in the middle of the action.”

I put down my burger. “You mean old school documentaries from centuries ago? Oh come on. There are modern techniques out now. And the philosophy of most film makers now is that disturbing the native situation during filming is definitely a problem if you want to capture something accurately.”

“Is that what they taught you at film school?”

“I have no idea,” I shot back. “They kicked me out before I was even able to take that course. I've learned stuff on the job as you have certainly learned on yours.”

Vik's eyebrows climbed up his forehead while Annette concentrated on her salad. George stared at me with an ominous expression before he burst out laughing.

“Kid, you are positively suicidal.”

“It's not like I have anything to lose,” I sighed. I took up my burger again and began eating.

“Euphie's idea is a good one,” Annette finally said. “But it's not entirely practical. There's only limited space on Nigel's ship and you know how expensive it can get transporting things. I think it will be inevitable for us to actually get in there ourselves and do things. Just think of it as a new art movement, I suppose. Everything old becomes new again eventually, right?”

After lunch, we all went our own separate ways to do last minute errands before we were to leave Kraken at the local evening time. I ended up wandering along one of the main streets in downtown South City, not quite knowing where I was since I deliberately ignored the map find function on my eye screen. The sky of Kraken was a dusty gray as if the atmosphere could not decide whether it wanted to rain or not. But a moment later, it did, and I ducked into a nearby shop to escape the water.

It was a grocery shop selling a variety of non-perishable food. No one seemed to be in the shop except for a single cashier robot situated near the door. Instead, there were long vending machines and bins situated along the walls and aisles like a parade of anonymous black boxes. I looked in a few bins, seeing quite a few packages of freeze-dried dinners imported from elsewhere in the galaxy. Uninteresting stuff. But as I was to retreat back out of the store, something shiny caught my eye at one of the corner bins. I peered in it and found myself taking out one of the packages.

The package itself was made of clear plastic. It was labeled with the words “Gelatin powder, now in new ammonia flavor!” I tapped my finger against the code at the bottom of the package and more information—or more accurately, not much information—appeared on my eye screen. Ingredients: gelatin, gray dye number 42, ammonia flavor, synthetic sugar. Place of manufacture: Retribution IV. I glanced at the other packages in the bin, but they all looked identical to the one that I was holding in my hand.

I decided to purchase the package of gelatin. Ammonia-flavored gelatin sounded disgusting, but who knows. Maybe I would find a way to use it. Like putting it into the drinks of my enemies.

Checkout was quick as the robot packaged my purchase in an anonymous looking brown bag. By the time I walked out of the shop, the rain outside had momentarily stopped and I quickly walked down the street toward a larger indoor bazaar where a variety of vendors clustered around a long area filled with tables. One of the nearby vendors, with a sign proclaiming itself as a souvenir shop, was selling holovids of the local attractions on Kraken and small metal mushroom-shaped models of the main GBC station. In a fit of irrationality, I bought one of the models and ended up sitting at one of the tables staring at it as if it would give me the answer to life, the universe, and everything.

A message labeled as urgent suddenly popped up on my eye screen. I checked the sender. It was my mother. Having nothing else to do and feeling a bit masochistic, I opened up the message and read it with a groan. Apparently she had discovered that I had abruptly quit my job at *Extreme Living on New Caledonia* right after one of the contestants had killed herself and now she was worried that I might be having some sort of break down. After her message, she appended a list of psychiatrists that she had also helpfully already contacted for me.

Great. Now I was going to get unsolicited messages on my data stream from quacks asking after my mental health. I set about erecting a firewall to block any messages from anyone even remotely related to the psychiatric field. That was when I got a message from *him*. The anonymous cyborg who wasn't so anonymous.

Want to meet up to head over to The Bacchus? I'm just a few hundred meters away from you.

I tapped my fingers against my wrist as if I was fidgeting. *Creep*, I replied.

Young Gouda

Trying to avoid a cyborg was like avoiding an asteroid demolition team. Impossible. One moment, I was looking at my ridiculous souvenir purchase and the next, when I looked up, he was standing over my table, looming like a monolith. If only I had not agreed with the others that we all go about our own last minute preparations before heading to *The Bacchus*. I should have suggested that we went to some nearby superstore where we would all have had a chance to purchase what we needed. Or not. And I wouldn't have to run into him again.

But then, I had to work with the overgrown bucket of bolts anyway. I'd have to get used to him sooner or later.

He was staring down at me as if I was an unexpected and unsightly bug.

“You know, you could have just walked here directly and acted surprised when you found me,” I finally said. “I don't like weirdos barging into my message stream, even after I've erected a firewall specifically to block them.”

“You don't like people like me, do you?”

“It's not that. It's the whole invasion of privacy thing. It's like having you peering into my head.”

"I wouldn't be peering into your head if you weren't already transmitting them on your message stream to all a sundry." He tilted his head down to look at the souvenir I had placed on the table. "What the hell is that?"

"It's a model of the main transmission tower. I got it from the shop over there."

"It looks like a demented marital aid."

In an impulsive and perhaps very unwise decision considering my present company, I grabbed the metal model and hurtled it at his forehead. Vyne's cyborg reflexes enabled him to catch it in midair. He slipped it into one of the garishly colored bags that he was holding with his other hand.

"Hey, give that back!"

"Later. Perhaps when you're not in such a disagreeable mood. Come on, stop sulking and start walking. We have about fifteen minutes to get to the docking gate on the south port."

"Fine." I was extremely aware that I sounded like a petulant child, but at that moment, I didn't particularly care. I stood up and shoved the chair back under the table and tucked the small brown package of the ammonia-flavored gelatin under my arm. "Lead the way."

He glanced at me as we started to walk toward the back of the indoor bazaar toward the enclosed walkway heading to port. "So you made another purchase?"

"It's a postcard," I lied.

"You're lying. It's some sort of powder."

"How the hell do you know that? Do you have X-ray vision or something?"

"I can see into the thermal spectra. And technically, it's not X-ray vision. It's backscatter detection."

"Perv. I bet you can fly, too," I replied sarcastically.

"Actually I can."

I tried not to do a double take. And failed. "What?"

"Well, only if I'm wearing my rocket-powered boots," he admitted. "Unfortunately, these are not it."

I glanced down at his feet. He was wearing large black boots that gleamed so much that I could see my reflection in them. He might as well have mirrors attached to them. I slid my eyes back up. From the meeting that the film crew had at the GBC headquarters, Vyne had changed from a dark ensemble to a gray travel suit. I had not changed from the travel suit I had on since I had arrived on Kraken and I felt even more rumbled than before. That did not help my mood.

"If you must know, it is jello," I replied. "Or at least I think it's jello. I haven't run a mass spectrometric analysis on it or anything."

"Why jello?" The cyborg seemed genuinely curious. "You don't strike me as someone who would like that kind of stuff."

I shrugged. "Maybe I thought I'd poison someone with it."

His eyes narrowed. "Poison?" Then after a moment, his eyes cleared and he chuckled. His laugh was low and gravelly like that of a junket grinding across a rock-strewn pave-lot. It seemed to make the entire walkway vibrate and my toes tingled. I scowled as he said, "Oh, that's a good one. You can't poison anyone with jello unless you mix something unorthodox into it."

"Right, I'll keep that in mind." I waved a hand toward his garishly colored bags. "So it looks like you did some last minute shopping."

"Cheese," he replied easily. "Specifically, gouda made from the milk of North Krakenese dairy cows. It's a delicacy around these parts. They say that it gets better the older it is."

"Oh? And how old is the cheese that you have now?"

"Well, it's actually only two months old. But I was hoping to age it myself. I have this arrangement with the captain of *The Bacchus* to install a special aging compartment on the outside of the ship. Once the hyperdrive goes into action, we'll have instantly aged cheese!" He punctuated with last word with a movement of his hand that made his shopping bags rustle. "And considering the itinerary that Nigel Mot has planned for us, I will have the opportunity to obtain some much coveted Rillan cheddar. Do you know how much of a delicacy two hundred year old Rillan cheddar is for connoisseurs of fromage? How about two thousand after a bit of faster than light travel?"

Fantastic. I was stuck with a cyborg who was also a cheese fanatic.

The Bacchus was docked at one of the private gateways in the South City port. We passed a glassed in waiting room which overlooked the airstrip. Nigel Mot's private spaceship was in the shape of a sleek, silver pod about the size of one of the mushroom heads of the GBC transmission towers. Heck, I

would not have been surprised if the ship *was* a sawed off portion of one of the transmission towers.

Vyne left me as soon as we passed the airlock, heading off to another part of the ship with nothing more than a, “See you after the launch.” I opened my mouth to demand that he give me back my GBC transmission tower souvenir, but he was already walking away down one of the corridors. Instead of running after him like a fool screaming for him to give it back, I decided to head to my own assigned quarters.

No one had greeted us when we had arrived on the ship. No Nigel Mot, no ship’s captain, not even a flunky from the ship’s crew. The entrance scanners had simply recognized us once we boarded. The airlock to the ship was part of a small alcove fitted with a variety of docking instruments that I only theoretically knew how to work. Past the alcove was a corridor which branched in two different directions. The walls of the corridor were plated in an opaque silver metal that also gleamed like a mirror. I could see my own reflection in the walls as if I had suddenly stepped into some kinky bordello. My reflection, a woman with short dark hair sticking out in all directions after running fingers through it, stared back with a cynical twist of her mouth.

A slow whirring sound briefly caught my attention. I looked to my left, where Vyne had disappeared to. A small cleaning robot covered in rhinestones was hovering next to the wall with rotating cleaners attached to several of its appendages. It was polishing the walls, making them even more shinier.

Triggling my fingers, I tapped them at the side of my thigh as a menu popped up on my eye screen. Nigel Mot had sent everyone a map of the ship as well as their room assignments. I accessed the map of the ship on my eye screen and then proceeded to the right on the ship’s corridor.

All of the corridors looked alike except for a few discrete numbers written at each intersection indicating which sector of the ship one was located at. Eventually, I found my cabin which was located at the center of corridor 4C. I felt a brief electron field scan me before the door silently slid open, revealing a dark interior. I walked in.

“Lights, fifty percent.”

The front room of the cabin became illuminated, revealing a small sitting room with a couch, a couple of chairs, and a view screen. My belongings had already been sent to the ship as several bags and traveling trunks were settled at the side of the couch. I set my package of ammonia-flavored gelatin on a metal table that was decorated by a chunk of smoky quartz. Otherwise, there was no personality to the room—reminding me of the anonymity of any number of hotel rooms.

There was a small porthole at one side of the sitting room and I looked out at the airstrip. I saw the flex-glass and metal structure of the port itself and the numerous space-faring vessels that took off or decelerated towards the port. An archway on the opposite side of the room led into a tiny kitchen which possessed a few cupboards, a freeze-box, a hot plate, and a sonic-powered sink. I peeked in all the drawers and found rations in the form of energy bars and a few utensils.

Beyond the kitchen was the bedroom which contained a closet for storage and another view screen. The bed, to my surprise, was enormous—enough to fit four or five people comfortably. And next to that was the bathroom which was just big enough to be constructed with a sonic shower.

Just as I walked out of the bathroom, intent on heading back out to the sitting room to start putting my things away, a buzz sounded on the intercom frequency in a series of five bursts. The Bacchus was getting ready to take off. I headed back out to the sitting room to peer out of the portal. The sudden acceleration of the ship was hardly noticeable. But the change in scenery was. The ground dropped away quickly and soon we were up into the higher atmosphere and then into space. The gray ball of Kraken shrank as did the star of this particular planetary system.

I sat down on the couch and checked the bags that I had sent to Kraken from New Caledonia. I counted them. There was supposed to be three of them, but now there were four. I rubbed my eyes and counted again. I asked the computer to count them for me. I used the sensor on my eye screen to count them. There were four, not three. I pulled them all along the floor to sit at my feet. My bags, unfortunately, were all made of an identical plas-steel colored turquoise. It was going to be impossible to tell which one was actually one that I had packed unless I opened all of them. I sighed and went about opening up the nearest bag as a warning buzzer sounded indicating that the ship was nearing the hyperspace jump point at the outskirts of the Kraken system.

Nope, the first one just had clothes.

I felt the faint vibration of the hyperdrive getting ready as I flipped open the thumbprint activated clasps on the second bag. Nope. Nothing here either except more clothes and a pair of boots. But as I was about to turn to the third bag, the second bag suddenly exploded in a flurry of t-shirts. As one of the boots

smacked me in the face, I saw something round and furry jump up onto the arm of the couch.

I fell back onto the couch, feeling somewhat dizzy. But as I tried to get up, the ship abruptly launched into the hyperdrive. And my vision suddenly became dark before I could investigate what had hitchhiked onto my belongings.

Part III – Appetizers

The Winning Blue Gerbil

When I awoke, my fingers were tingling as if I had been triggering nonstop for the past twenty-four hours. The message stream on my eye screen was scrolling past as if nothing of importance was happening. Since at the moment, I was only subscribed to a couple of GBC news feeds, it was mostly about small wars in distant parts of the galaxies, the usual political scandals, and reality show stars making fools of themselves while being tailed by the paparazzi.

My fingers were still tingling even though I was not doing anything except lying on the couch in my assigned cabin on *The Bacchus*. I looked down and saw that somehow, I had acquired a small rodent like creature licking my fingers. It stopped and chirped at me when it noticed that I had finally regained consciousness. I checked the database via the eye screen and only came up with one answer. The creature was an Eridanese jerboa genetically engineered for its blue fur. Some people called it a gerbil.

I picked the fur ball up and examined it closely. The rodent peered at me with its dark beady eyes, cocking its head as if it was examining me in return. The jerboa did not have any sort of identification on it indicating that it had any other owners. I pawed through the rest of my bags. The third bag contained more of my own belongings, but the fourth bag—which was also tagged as belonging to me—contained a variety of equipment to aid in the care of a jerboa. There was a small wire cage with a few exercise toys, a bag of woodchip bedding, and other bag filled with food pellets specially formulated for the jerboa diet.

And then there was the small silicon data chip.

The jerboa scampered to the arm of the couch as if it recognized the chip in my hand and nosed at a small control which slid the top of the arm open to reveal more controls and several data ports. I glanced at the rodent suspiciously before I plugged the chip in. The view screen on the side of the room flashed with a few symbols that I couldn't decipher until it resolved into a message.

“Greetings! You have just won a one-of-its-kind Eridanese jerboa with unique genetic modifications in our New Kraken Tourist Sweepstakes! Have fun with your new gerbil!”

The rodent squeaked at me as if to emphasize the numerous exclamations on the message. Frowning, I accessed the database again and pulled out the entry on the Kraken Tourist Sweepstakes. As far as I could tell, it was a legitimate contest that the Kraken Tourist Bureau put out every year in order to stimulate their almost nonexistent tourist industry. Kraken, after all, was more well-known as the headquarters of the Galactic Broadcasting Corporation and not some sunny beach resort planet.

Pressing on the couch controls, I discovered that the data chip had other information on it, like directions for caring for an Eridanese jerboa and the complete genomic sequence and annotation for the particular animal now sitting on my knee. As I was no biologist, I quickly skipped through all of that information to look at the more practical stuff.

When I was a kid, I had once begged for a pet since everyone else my age had one. Even my brother had one—a Relgan boa constrictor. My parents had resisted. After all, they had reasoned, the family already had a Relgan boa constrictor. Why couldn't I just have shared the pet with my brother? But the boa constrictor, while a very docile creature that didn't care one way or another about anything and was more practical than anything else—it ate all the tree bats that were pests on the farm, it lived in a glass tank that was located in my brother's room. It was pretty much his, even though no one had ever officially tagged it as being owned by anyone.

So I had no pets, unless one counted the small robotic beetle that I had to construct for a project during grade school.

I lugged out the wire cage and set it on the table next to the smoky quartz centerpiece. I poured in some of the wood chips and put some of the food pellets into the food bowl. I scooped the jerboa up and placed it into the cage before locking the top. The jerboa squeaked and scampered around a bit before deciding to stuff its mouth with the food pellets. I watched the creature a moment longer before finally grabbing my bags to take to the bedroom for storage.

I wondered what Nigel Mot would say if he knew that I had a pet aboard his precious spaceship.

Maybe, I thought, I wouldn't tell him at all. Things that he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Theoretically.

The sound of a chirp distracted me as I shoved one of the bags into the closet. I looked up, thinking that it might be a notice from the ship's intercom. But the second chirp, at my feet, told me otherwise. It was the jerboa. I picked it up and went back out to the sitting room. Maybe I did not close the cage door even though I thought I had. But when I went to examine the cage, the door was still locked.

The jerboa chirped and seemed to grin at me.

That was when I went back to the data chip to look at its genome annotation. Apparently some of the genetic tinkering that had been done was not just on the jerboa's fur coat.

A notification popped up on my eye screen. Nigel Mot wanted the entire crew to meet on the ship's bridge before we reached our first destination. I looked out at the portal. The outside was dark without the light of even the stars. We were still in hyperspace.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to stay here while I'm out," I told the jerboa.

The rodent gave a recalcitrant squeak.

"Oh come on. You're not the center of the universe."

I found myself screaming when the jerboa suddenly launched itself at me and landed on my head, squeaking angrily as it tugged at the hair on my head.

"Arg! Fine! Stop that, you miserable fur ball!" I grabbed at my head and managed to capture the creature by the scruff of its neck. It dangled from my fingers, its paws swinging. I marched back into the bedroom and set it down on the bedside table. "Stay!"

I turned to pull a black jacket from the closet and tugged it on. When I turned back, the jerboa was still sitting on the table, staring at me with its beady black eyes. Little devil. I grabbed it again and put it in one of the jacket pockets. Immediately, it poked its head out to survey its surroundings from its new perch.

"Stay in there," I told it. "And don't show your furry face if you see Nigel Mot around. Who knows what he'd do if he discovers you."

The jerboa gave a reticent chirp.

Finished berating the rodent, I strode out of my cabin only to run into Vik who was coming from further down the corridor. He gave a small wave.

"My cabin's three doors down," the head holographic projectionist informed me. "So I guess we're neighbors of a sort. I wonder what Nigel wants from us this soon on the journey."

"Who knows. Maybe he got a bright idea that he couldn't wait to share with us."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just send us the idea on the intranets?"

"Yeah. But who says that the boss is going to make things easy on us?"

"Well, there's that." When we entered the lift to take us to the bridge, Vik turned to me with a frown. "So what's with the jacket?"

"I was feeling a little cold."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, fine. I had to wear it because of this." I showed him the jerboa which looked up at the holographic projectionist with a curious expression. Vik made uncharacteristic cooing noises. It leaned over from the edge of the jacket pocket to take a sniff at the man. After a moment, satisfied with whatever it had detected, it ducked back into the pocket.

"I didn't know you had a pet!"

"I didn't either. It arrived unannounced with the rest of my belongings."

"It looks like one of those animals that I've only seen in texts during grade school." He snapped his fingers. "Ah, I remember. A gerbil, right? Have you already given it a name?"

"Er, no."

"You should totally call him Bob."

I had flashbacks to my former co-worker who had fainted on the job. "Bob?"

"Yeah, Bob. It has a certain ring to it. Bob the gerbil."

The jerboa peeked out from the pocket again and actually stuck its tongue out at Vik.

"See, it even likes the name."

"I don't think so, Vik," I replied. "I am not calling it Bob."

Vik's expression fell. But only for a moment. When the door to the lift opened again on the bridge deck, he was smiling again. "Well, if you're not going to call him Bob, I'm going to call him Bob."

I wanted to smack my head against the wall.

The bridge was a wide room filled with several orange control panels and yellow desks near the

back which were manned by several technicians and officers dressed in severe black uniforms with silver piping on their shoulders to indicate their positions and ranks. There was an enormous view screen at the front of the room that was presently looking out into the blackness of hyperspace. The pilot and co-pilot were sitting at the front, at their stations which were in the shape of orange dodecagons, busily monitoring the ship's trajectory. The rest of the walls and floor of the room was paneled in the same reflective metal that coated the ship's corridors, but instead of gray, it was the same eye-straining orange as the controls. But the ceiling was another story. It looked like the entire thing was coated in green fur. Shag carpeting?

In the center of the room, Nigel Mot stood with Annette, Vyne, and three other people in uniforms. Mot waved us over and introduced us to the crew who would be commanding *The Bacchus*, Captain Avery, the first officer Commander Tautu, and the second officer, Lieutenant Mahler.

"The captain and his crew just signed on two weeks ago," said Mot. "But they're quite the seasoned crew. Before *The Bacchus*, they worked as merchant escorts. The captain has been telling me that they've had quite a bit of experience navigating through the Delta Quadrant. They've been to the Antares System a few times before."

Mercenaries, I thought.

"The Antares System is a piece of cake," said Captain Avery. He was a tall man, towering over everyone. He probably even had a few centimeters on the cyborg as well. His skin was dark and with the dark uniform and frizzy hairstyle with sideburns, he gave the impression that he was a shadow sprouting a black dandelion. "The Antarians have quite the appetite for new things so we had been able to take quite a few jobs ferrying merchants to that system."

At that moment, the door to the bridge hissed open again, revealing George, the final member of our film crew. He huffed as he ambled toward our group, giving a brief apology for his tardiness. The introductions went around again. He was neutral with his greetings to Captain Avery and his second officer, but he eyed the first officer with a certain gleam in his eye. Which wasn't all that surprising. Commander Tautu was a statuesque blonde wearing a mini-skirt version of the dark uniform. Much of her charms were also on display considering the cut of her shirt neckline.

"Well, hello there, commander," said George as he shook her hand for a little too long. "You can command me any time."

Tautu gave him a laser-eyed stare that would have reduced a lesser man to ashes.

"I think she likes me," I heard George whisper to Vik.

Cupcakes of Red Velvet

An hour later, I was in one of the ship's conference rooms monitoring a series of control panels containing vids from various parts of the ship. I ignored the feeds from such areas such as the engineering deck or the medical bay. Instead, I concentrated on the bridge and the outside sensors. Nigel Mot had decided to make some introductory narration for the first episode of *Dining in the Delta Quadrant*. Annette had readily given in to Mot's suggestion and was standing at the edge of the bridge with the captain and the other officers overseeing things as Vik toted an old fashioned hand held holographic recorder to film Mot who was standing in front of the view screen, bracketed by the pilot and co-pilot of *The Bacchus* who seemed amused by the hoopla. Vyne was also standing in the back with a few of the technicians, concentrating on a data pad in his hand. He was probably feeding lines to Mot.

"You have to give Nigel some credit," said George. "He's a good narrator." The sensory technician was sitting at the opposite end of the table looking at another series of control panels. He had an audio transmitter attached to his right ear which relayed all the sounds from the bridge to him. "I bet Annette will be pretty pleased about it all. The editors won't have to do much tweaking for him to sound like that Attenborough fellow from who knows how long ago."

"I still have reservations about all of this," I replied. "Have you ever given thought of what the Antarians would think of this once they see this first episode? They're going to think that he's being patronizing with all the narration. There's a reason why any documentaries these days try to be as unobtrusive as possible."

"I haven't seen any modern documentaries," he replied as he tapped the control panels to adjust the sound. "Besides, the modern documentaries can't be working all that well if there isn't an audience for them nowadays except for the intellectual art crowd. So I'd say, why not use the ancient methods? It can't hurt to try."

"If the ratings for the first episode don't have things breaking even," I warned, "it would mean that we all will have to find new jobs. Again."

"You're such a cynic, kid." There was a pause and then George said, "Huh. I did not know that Antarians preferred their meat extra fresh."

I made a face as I listened in on Mot's monologue. Apparently Antarians liked hunting down their food rather than getting it already prepared or prepackaged from some food depot like any other civilized person. "Maybe Vyne is feeding him bull on the prompts."

"Vyne? He doesn't strike me as the sort of person to play that kind of prank. Cyborgs are known to be rather straightforward beings, right?"

"Who knows. Cyborgs aren't particularly thick on the ground. I've never encountered one before. I thought they all worked as bodyguards or in the military black ops due to all of their expensive hardware. Not as minders and researchers on an experimental documentary."

"You do have a point."

As I was tapping the controls, examining all the ship's external sensors—nothing yet since we were still traveling in hyperspace—the small blue jerboa in my jacket pocket decided to wake up from its brief nap and scamper up my arm to my shoulder to peer at what I was doing.

"What the..."

The jerboa pounced onto the control panel on the conference room table. I lunged, making a grab for it. The rodent danced out of my grasp and wriggled its nose as if laughing at me.

"Come back here! I told you to stay in the pocket."

I made another grab for it and finally caught hold of it. The jerboa chattered excitedly as it stared beyond me. Almost reluctantly, I looked in the direction of its gaze and saw that one of the vid feeds had been changed from its inane scampering. The new feed was from one of the sensors on the outside of the ship recording a section where there were several outer compartments. I remembered that Vyne had made some arrangements with the captain to put his cheese in those compartments to age it. But that was not what had caught my attention. Beyond the view of the compartments, out into the darkness of hyperspace, I saw a faint glimmering shadow trailing the ship.

"What the hell is that?"

"Hm?" George looked up from his work. "That thing in your hand? It looks like a blue gerbil. Is there some sort of rodent infestation on board?"

At George's words, the jerboa climbed back onto my shoulder to squeak in indignation.

"No. The sensors seemed to have picked up something. Come here and take a look. What do you think?"

He ambled over to the panel of vids and looked at the feed that I pointed out. He squinted. "You know what that looks like?" he said after a moment. "It looks like someone's tailing us."

"As far as I know, we were traveling alone." I trigged my fingers and quickly sent a message to the navigational technicians on the bridge. I got a terse reply back with a short explanation and a retort that if there really were ships following us, we'd be informed about it promptly.

"Well?" asked George.

"The navigators say that it's just a neutrino field that the ship leaves behind every time it travels in hyperspace," I

replied. "I'm not an engineer, so I guess I'll have to take their word for it. But they didn't have to be so rude about it."

"It could still be another ship following us," said George. "Theoretically, one could hide in the wake of another ship's turbulence to confound the sensors. Especially in hyperspace where there is a scarcity of photons to enable us to actually see anything with our own eyes."

"Yeah, but really, what are the chances that anyone is really following us? And if they are, why on earth would they do it? We're not spies or anything."

George shrugged. "Or maybe you and the navigators are right. It's just a neutrino field of no importance." He turned back to me. His gaze swept toward the jerboa. "Is that thing rabid?"

"I have no idea. It doesn't seem like it. It just came with my belongings." I explained about the Kraken Tourist Sweepstakes as George walked back to his station. "So I guess I'm stuck with it. I just have to make sure that the boss doesn't discover it."

"Well, I suppose you could look on the bright side," the sensory technician replied. "It does make a rather nice accessory. Does it have a name?"

"Vik seems to think that it should be called Bob, but I'm not calling it that."

"Huh. Well, I agree with you on that. Bob would be an inappropriate name."

"Exactly." I felt vindicated in my rejection for that particular moniker.

After a moment, when I became engrossed in my work, George suddenly said, "You should call him Balthazar the Terrible. That has a nice ring to it."

"It's a gerbil, not a constipated Gardan pot-belly pig," I sputtered. The jerboa chattered in agreement.

"You've got it all wrong," he countered. "Balthazar the Terrible is a great name for a gerbil. Now, if it was a Gardan pot-belly pig, I would have suggested something like Princess Pretty Poo Poo."

"Good God, George. You're worse than Vik. If that's what you name your pets, I pity your future children."

Before George could reply to my remark, the door to the conference room slid open admitting a blue android that looked identical to the one that had served us back in the headquarters of the GBC. This particular android was holding another tray that contained quite a few snacks and drinks. The android headed toward me first and bent its arms in offer. I eyed the servings with suspicion. There was a plate that contained something that looked like a cake in small cups. Except it was red. The clear glasses held some sort of bubbly liquid.

"What exactly is this?" I asked.

The android replied by showing me its hand. A screen on its palm flickered with the menu. Red velvet cake and carbonated sugar water. It seemed harmless enough. I took one of the cupcakes and a glass of the carbonated drink. The android gave a small bow with its head and then walked to George who took two of the cupcakes and a drink without even asking the android what it was.

"Aren't you even worried about what you might be eating?" I asked him as he stuffed one of the cupcakes in his mouth.

He swallowed and then punched into a few controls without looking at me. "Why would I be worried? It's obvious that this is red velvet cake and soda."

"Why should it be obvious? Maybe it just looks like red velvet cake and soda. It could be something completely different."

"Now you're more paranoid than me," George declared. He slurped his soda loudly.

I found myself shaking my head as I turned back to my own viewing monitors. I switched the screens to the sensors at the front of the ship. At the moment, it was still blank since we were in hyperspace, but there was a small timer at the corner of the screen indicating a countdown to when the ship would drop out of hyperdrive. About five more minutes. Of course, the data from all of the existing sensors on the ship were being recorded and sent to the editors back in GBC headquarters, but it wouldn't hurt to actually monitor the more important feeds to make sure everything went well. From the previous meeting with the entire crew, Mot and Annette both expressed their preference for showcasing a scene where *The Bacchus* would arrive in the Antares system in the first episode of the show.

Which was all well and good, of course, unless the editors decided to nix the scene.

On one of the axillary screens, I also kept an eye on the bridge where Mot was still intoning his monologue. I listened with half an ear as I continued monitoring the front sensors and watching my eye screen message stream. Since coming onto the ship, I had decided to divide the message stream into two: one stream contained all the unimportant stuff, such as the GBC news feeds and any "urgent" messages my parents decided to send, and the second stream contained the ship status. So far, both streams went by on a normal status.

A strange shuffling sound finally brought me out of my concentrated attention. I looked to the side of my control panel and found that the jerboa had pushed the red velvet cupcake I had taken from the android away from the controls and was now systematically devouring the cake.

"Red velvet cake is not part of a gerbil's balanced diet," I told the rodent.

The jerboa briefly looked up at the sound of my voice with cake crumbs clinging to its face like a red beard. It squeaked and then started eating again. I rolled my eyes and looked back at the control panel. Ten seconds. Nine, eight,

seven, six, five, four, three, two, one...

And the hyperdrive abruptly rumbled off, the persistent vibration beneath my feet suddenly gone as the ship dropped from hyperspace to normal space. The front sensors flickered and on the monitors, stars flashed into the darkness. There was one particularly bright star—the star of the Antares System—at the center of the screen. For an instant, everyone was silent, from George to the people on the bridge. Even the jerboa had momentarily stopped munching to look up at the monitors on my control panel.

Now we wait.

How the hell did the cyborg hack into my feeds again? I swore I shored up my firewalls just an hour ago.

We wait for what? I finally asked.

For the Antarians to greet us.

I looked at the monitor for the bridge. I saw Mot's mouth moving. "Hey George, what's Nigel saying?"

"Something about full speed ahead," he replied.

On the monitor, Captain Avery shook his head at Mot's comment. The captain replied with something, probably contradicting Mot's order for the "full speed ahead." As I watched Mot argue soundlessly, I recalled that someone mentioned that the Antarians were big on rituals. Maybe it had been that damned cyborg. He was, after all, in charge of the research for this documentary. In the momentary lull, I searched through the info briefing that Vyne had sent all of us before at GBC headquarters. I had not had a chance to look at much of it, but this time, I skimmed the information on Antares a little more carefully. Hm. My gut feeling was right. The Antarians *were* big on rituals. Especially on their greeting rituals. Apparently their greetings had the tendency to scare of the unprepared visitor.

I watched, amused, as Mot's face started turning red. This was quite early for the host of a show to have a meltdown. Usually that only happened in the third or fourth episode.

And that was when the other ship suddenly materialized on the monitor feeds, close to starboard.

Welcome Grub

"Intruders, prepare to be boarded."

Was it horrible of me to be privately pleased at the expression of utter surprise that crossed Mot's face when the Antarian greeting ship appeared out of nowhere and hailed our ship with that menacing introduction?

I glanced at the monitors and saw that Vik had moved closer to Mot with his old fashioned holographic recorder. He was getting a closeup. Annette was moving her arms vigorously and saying something to Vik. Maybe she was telling him to move closer. The captain was ignoring the antics of the documentary crew and gave his communications officer a signal to open a hailing frequency.

"This is going to be great," George exclaimed. "The viewers are going to totally eat this up. Figuratively, of course."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"The surprise. It's completely unfeigned. You know how everyone is. If you can catch royalty with all its warts, everyone will have a field day—because it indicates that they're actually humans, not some sort of construct." George popped the second cupcake into his mouth. Chewed and then said, "Of course, one would have expected that the host of the show would have been briefed about the Antarian greeting rituals already. I mean, I just got Vyne's info briefing not an hour ago and I managed to read it."

"Since Vyne's doing the research, didn't he just send a message to Mot's eye screen or ear comm or something?"

"Why would he? The boss was the one who put together the itinerary in the first place. He's the one who insisted on visiting Antares first. One would think that he would have done the initial research regardless."

"Sure," I replied. "Or maybe he was just simply surprised. We don't have to analyze his actions to death."

"But he argued with the captain beforehand to just enter the system. That meant that he didn't know that we had to wait for the Antarian greeting ship to arrive."

I mused that over for a second before triggering my fingers for a message to Vyne. *Was the boss briefed on the Antarian greeting ritual?*

I thought he knew, came the reply. *But I sent him a copy of my info brief anyway. And I sent a message about it to his ear comm when he started arguing with the captain. Needless to say, he did not pay attention to it.*

"So what do you make of it?" I said aloud. "It seems as if the boss is not paying attention to the warnings from the rest of his crew."

"Does it matter if he pays attention to our warnings or not?" George replied. There was a faint smirk on his face. "You haven't been in the business long enough, kid. When the boss stops paying attention, that's when the show gets really interesting. It's going to be great entertainment, *This Is Spinal Tap*-style."

The jerboa punctuated the sensory technician's remark with a burp.

After a few ritualized greetings between Captain Avery and the captain of the Antarian greeting ship, *The Bacchus* was granted a pass to visit the Antarian homeworld which rapidly approached the view screen as a brown and green sphere. Antares IV, known to the natives as the almost unpronounceable A'kanxxz. Everyone else called it the Antares homeworld and fortunately, the Antarians didn't seem to mind. Once the ship was in orbit around the planet, another timer at one of the minor monitors went off. Filming was technically finished for the moment and we would have one more final briefing with Mot before we were let off for the rest of day.

The next day, the plan was for the film crew to go planet-side.

Heads up, the meeting brief needs to be filmed.

I frowned as I went through the final routines on the monitors at the control panel. As I watched one of the command channels scroll through the latest transmissions, I tapped my fingers against my thigh. Why?

The Antarian emissary sent a gift basket for the boss in welcome. It's unprecedented. We're meeting in the conference room on deck five.

"You look perplexed," George remarked.

I grabbed the jerboa and dusted it off before tucking the creature into my pocket. The rodent did not even try to struggle. I got up and grabbed a pair of clunky eye wear that went over my head. It was a rather primitive holographic recorder developed in the last century, but it was the sort of device that this experimental project demanded. I also grabbed my previously untouched carbonated drink and took a gulp. And promptly coughed. It was much too sweet, like concentrated molasses. How George was able to swig the thing, who knew.

"Vyne sent me a message. We have to get to deck five for the briefing," I told him after I recovered from my coughing fit. "The Antarians sent a gift basket for the boss. And we're supposed to film it."

"A gift basket, huh? Maybe it's a Trojan horse." George tucked an outdated sensory scanner into the pocket of his pants and followed me out into the ship corridors. "Maybe something nasty is hidden in the basket."

"Why would the Antarians do that?"

"Well, you did see their greeting, didn't you?"

"If they wanted to hide something nasty, I'd have thought that they would have done something more subtle," I replied. "Vyne said it was unprecedented, but most people who visit Antares are entrepreneurs and traders. Maybe this is part of the Antarian greeting for hosts of entertainment programs."

George and I entered the conference room on the fifth deck to see that Nigel Mot, Annette, Vyne, and the senior officers of *The Bacchus* already standing around the table. Vik was standing somewhat apart from the crowd with his old fashioned holographic recorder trained on the tableau. The head holographic projectionist motioned at me and I headed toward him as George went toward the crowd with his own sensory instruments out to record the scene.

"I'll be trying to get a close up of Nigel since he's the star of the show," Vik subvocalized to me. He motioned toward the opposite side of the room. "You get the scenes shot from over there so we can get all the angles covered."

"Was this Nigel's idea?"

"Actually, it was Annette's," he replied. "After we got the boss's unexpected reaction when the Antarians gave the greeting, she got the bright idea that we should try to record as much as possible to get some surprise shots. It's going to make the ratings shoot up the roof, figuratively speaking. That is, if the editors decide not to edit them all out."

"They wouldn't if they knew what was good for the show," I muttered. I headed to the area that Vik indicated, the opposite corner of the room. I turned so that the ship's windows were behind me and I trained my own holographic recorder toward the scene.

Everyone was crowded around the table because one of the ship ensigns had placed the Antarian gift basket there after hauling it from the transport room. The gift basket itself was an enormous bowl, perhaps a meter in diameter, made of some sort of metal alloy. Inside the bowl were several odd looking fruits, although they weren't so odd that they looked too unusual and out of place. But among the fruit was a cylindrical cake that looked suspiciously like an ancient Terran fruit cake.

I recalled urban legends when I had heard when I was a small child about fruit cakes. People would give them out on holidays, but since the cake was naturally very hard and almost inedible, people would keep them in their closets until the next holiday came around and then they would regift it for their enemies or relatives they did not like very much.

The jerboa scampered up to my shoulder to see what all the fuss was all about. I tried to brush it off, but the rodent evaded my hands. After a moment, I gave up and continued to concentrate on the filming.

"What do you suppose it is?" asked one of the officers. It was Lieutenant Mahler, the second officer.

"I have no idea," Captain Avery replied. "As I recall, we've never gotten this sort of welcome before when we visited the Antares System for trading contracts. Maybe it's because Mr. Mot is aboard."

"One could say that Mr. Mot is a dignitary of sorts," his first officer said reluctantly.

"A dignitary of the GBC, certainly," echoed Annette. "So, Mr. Vyne, what is your opinion?"

The cyborg shook his head. "I've searched the databases and have found nothing of this sort in the Antares cultural guides. Of course, the guides themselves are a bit sketchy and out of date. The Antarians do not reveal all of their rituals to outsiders. Like their marriage rituals. Outsiders have been trying for centuries to view one but no one has

succeeded yet.”

“So this could mean that we’re looking at a never before seen ritual,” George couldn’t help putting in. “So what did they give us?”

“Mr. Mot, you mean,” said Vyne in a slightly disapproving tone. “The fruit is easy to identify. They’re all natives of the homeworld. Plenty of purms, yarblots, and gazeems which symbolize peace and hospitality. Which is good, I suppose.”

“Or it could all be a diversion,” George replied. “It’s just hiding the piece de le resistance, the outside of the Trojan horse.”

“Not everything is a conspiracy, Mr. Zero,” Mot told George. “As far as we know, this is a perfectly innocent gift from the Antarians. What I can’t really figure out is, what is this thing in the middle? It looks like a fruit cake.”

“God, I hate fruit cakes,” Annette replied. “I had a particularly traumatic experience with one when I was a kid.”

“Did you get hit in the head with it?” I couldn’t help ask.

Annette looked at me wide-eyed. “Yes. Of course. How did you know?”

“Because I got hit in the head with one when I was five.”

“Me, too,” said Commander Tautu.

I exchanged meaningful glances with the other women in the room. Fruit cake was a menace.

“Enough,” Vyne finally said. “I’ve finally cornered the answer in an obscure Antarian database I was able to access. The cake at the center of the gift basket is what the Antarians call ‘The Welcoming Cake’.”

“No kidding,” said Mot. “What is it made of?”

“A moment please.” Vyne stood still as his eyes flickered. Then he said, “The cake itself is made out of quadricalium, a grain that is analogous to wheat, graken eggs, sugar, graken fat, and water.” Grakens are genetically modified chickens that were imported to the Antares homeworld a few centuries ago. All of the ingredients so far sounded quite ordinary.

“Sounds good,” said Mot. “Does anyone have a knife? Let’s all try a piece.”

“According to the database,” Vyne added, “The Welcoming Cake is also supposed to have a surprise inside.”

What sort of surprise, I have no idea, the cyborg privately sent to me.

Mot grinned. “Ooo, I love surprises.”

One of the ensigns called up a blue android that arrived in the conference room with plates and utensils. The ensign moved the cake out of the gift basket and placed it on a separate platter in front of Mot. The android handed Mot the knife-laser to do the honors. With a flourish, he brandished the knife like a rapier and activated the laser and sliced the cake straight into the middle. The cake squealed, making everyone jump back a pace. The android bent over the table to open up the halves of the cake.

Inside the baked good was an enormous white grub with sharp mandibles and a multitude of black eyes, glistening with clear digestive slime that carved channels within the cake. Now exposed to air, the grub turned out to look at the crowd around the table to wave one of its ten appendages in welcome.

The only sound in the room was the thump of one of the ensigns as he hit the floor in a faint.

Hunting Party

My breath came out in frosty clouds as I stepped out into the central courtyard in the Palace of Foreign Affairs.

After a night’s sleep and a morning checking and collecting the equipment that we decided to take with us, the documentary crew boarded one of *The Bacchus*’ two shuttles and flew down to the Antares homeworld to meet our point of contact that Vyne and others back at the GBC headquarters had been in contact with prior to our arrival in the system. From the brief itinerary that the contact had sent us, this person, a Reggda Illinois, or Reggie as apparently he wanted to be known as, would take us on a traditional Antarian hunt and subsequent feast.

But first, we had to visit the Palace of Foreign Affairs to get our permits. For me, getting interviewed by the Antarian officials only took a few minutes since I was one of the holographic projectionists out to record the excursion and not actually participate. It wasn’t so much that they cared about recording the hunt—as there was precedence to it—but in who they allowed to participate in the hunt. Since Mot, as the host to the show, was going to be participating, he was getting the most scrutiny.

In the meantime, Vik, George and I were roaming the immediate grounds, recording footage. Vyne and Annette were in conference with Reggie to figure out the logistics of the hunt. The pilot of the shuttle that took us down to the planet was probably doing his own thing since he was the only one in the group who had been to Antares before.

It was cold and I was glad that I had decided to bring a thermal jacket with me on the trip. The capital city of the

Antares homeworld was located in the extreme southern latitudes of the planet, putting it in almost perpetual cold most of the year. As I walked around the courtyard with my holographic recorder, I heard the jerboa in my jacket pocket chirp. The small animal had insisted on following me down to the planet. Annette had noticed the tiny hitchhiker in my pocket before while we were checking the recording instruments back aboard the ship, but she had seemed charmed by the rodent and had decided to give it a tiny lavender knitted scarf made of moose-yak wool.

"I knit in my spare time," the director confided to me. "That's why I had to run some 'personal errands' back on Kraken before we took off. I had to buy a stash of yarn for myself for my free time. Because I doubt I would be able to get yarn out in the Delta Quadrant. It's a bunch of savages out there."

"Aren't you stereotyping a bit?" I had said in reply. "The Delta Quadrant is a huge place. It's a quarter of the galaxy. There are a lot of diverse people living there. Some of them are quite civilized. I think."

"Well, maybe so," Annette said grudgingly. "But I doubt anyone out there has any yarn. Anyways, put the scarf on him. I want to see."

Sighing, I plucked the clueless jerboa from my pocket and wound the scarf around its neck. The small creature, in curiosity, stuffed the end of the scarf in its mouth and chewed a bit before spitting it back out. Then it scampered along my arm completely ignoring its new piece of clothing.

Annette, however, had not been so blasé. "Oh, how cute!" she squealed. "Kawaii! You should call him Blueberry. He looks so cute I could just eat him up."

I was not going to call the jerboa Blueberry. The little pest might look like a cute fur ball to other people, but its personality was definitely not that of a small fruit that people made pies with.

At that moment, the rodent in question poked its head out of my jacket and then climbed up my sleeve to my shoulder. Its breath came out like mine, in small white puffs.

"You're going to freeze your furry little butt off."

The jerboa ignored me. Instead, it took a flying leap and landed onto the courtyard ground stones without any trouble. It scurried off toward a corner in a blue streak.

"Fine," I yelled after it. "Go off on your own. If you don't come back, I'm not going to search around for you." Considering the wildlife on the Antares homeworld, the jerboa was going to be someone's lunch in no time flat if it wasn't careful. And then I literally smacked my head with the palm of my hand when I realized that I was screaming at a rodent as if it was actually a person.

I turned my attention back to the courtyard. Everything was constructed of thick gray stone. There was a certain heavy elegance to the place, but I could also see that it could be boring compared to some of the flashier reality shows being transmitted across the galaxy. The editors would probably cut all of this footage. But I would record this anyway, just in case.

I walked back into the Palace of Foreign Affairs and ran into Vik who had strapped his holographic equipment to his back. It was turned on and recording from behind.

"I got a bit of footage of the east side of the building," I told Vik, "but it wasn't particularly very interesting. The Antarians have no sense of style when it comes to architecture or landscaping."

"We're here to make a documentary about food, not architecture and landscaping," Vik replied. "But at any rate, it would be difficult to do any sort of landscaping around here anyway. The whole environment is just rock and snow. Anyways, I've got most of the west side. Not much there. I ran into a few officials who seemed interested in my gear, but they just waved me through when I explained about the show."

A message suddenly flashed on my eye screen. *Mot's out. We're meeting out front.*

Vik and I headed to the main foyer where we met the rest of the crew in front of a pair of large thick doors that had been opened. There were two Antarians dressed in formal blue garb standing in front of the doors like two matchstick guards, staring at nothing in particular. In between them stood Mot who had a cocky grin on his face and a big knife sheathed inside a scabbard that was remarkably ornate for Antarian design.

"What happened?" I whispered to George who was waving his sensors around the room in an apparent random motion. There was a beep on one of his sensors and he brought it back to his face to examine the readings.

"Apparently Nigel got to meet with the Minister of Defense while he was being interviewed by the officers in foreign affairs. Our minder for the Antarian trip had planned on a hunt being put on by one of the locals, but apparently Nigel had managed to charm the minister into coming to the hunt with us."

"Really?" I glanced around and saw that Vik had unstrapped his holographic equipment from his back and was now aiming the instrument at Nigel who was brandishing the sword in front of the recording equipment and explaining about the upcoming Antarian hunting trip. "What did Annette say about this change in plans?"

George shrugged. "You ask her."

But I didn't get a chance to ask Annette. In the next moment, several people on large Antarian snowbeasts—enormous creatures in gray fur with six powerful legs and a long grasping trunk that could be used like a hand—arrived in the courtyard in front of the foyer. These people were wearing thick furs and carrying assorted weapons on their backs. The hunting party had arrived.

There were several extra snowbeasts for the crew which we had to attempt to get on ourselves. I attempted to get on the snowbeast assigned to me by grabbing onto its fur and hauling myself up onto the blanket-saddle that one of the Antarians had placed on the back of the beast. After a few futile tries where my legs flailed about like a fish out of water, I managed to climb up onto the snowbeast's back.

Vyne had a much easier time of it since he had his cyborg senses to rely on. Both Vik and Annette flailed about like I did, but Vik got on his beast a little sooner and managed to get in place to film Mot's own trial at trying to get on a snowbeast. There was a very small scuffle as the snowbeast at first mistook Mot as an annoying fly, but soon, even the host was on the snowbeast's back. George was left and it took ten more minutes for the man to finally get his bulk onto the snowbeast—but only after one of the Antarians reluctantly decided to help in order to speed the party along.

And it was just in time, too, as the Minister of Defense finally came out of his office arrayed splendidly in blue velvet and black fur. The minister was middle-aged, but fit and he spoke with Mot in fluent Galactic Standard with a slight guttural accent. As the hunting party started out, I reached back to the pack I was carrying and grabbed a small spherical holographic recording device that was of a current make. I pressed a few controls on one side and let it fly out of my hand. The device would be following the hunting party and recording the event. I would be monitoring its feed on a section of my eye screen.

The snowbeast I rode on, fortunately, was easy to guide. With a few nudges of my heel, I got it to follow the rest of the hunting party. I looked on and saw that Vik had strapped the device back on his shoulder and he was angling his snowbeast toward mine. When we were riding side by side, Vik motioned toward Mot and the minister who were in a deep private conversation.

"I heard a bit from some of the Antarians that we are heading into a petrified forest not too far from here. Apparently there is a herd of ice boars roaming the area. They're hoping to catch one of them for the feast later tonight. I'm going to follow along with Mot once the hunt gets underway."

"Do you want me to trail behind to get shots from there?"

"No. You can just let the auxiliary devices record from behind. I think you should try to get up ahead to get the shots from the front. It would be great if we could get a scene where Nigel and the prey are running toward the holographic projection."

"That's going to be dangerous. Are you sure Annette wants to do this?"

"Annette had messaged me a couple moments before that she wanted to do it. If you think it's so dangerous, then take the cyborg with you."

I frowned at Vik, but he was already moving away to keep on filming Mot. I dug my heels into the sides of the snowbeast and urged it forward to catch up with Annette's mount. The director waved to me and exclaimed, "Isn't this wonderful?"

I glanced around the scenery which was mostly snow, rock, and dead trees. The sky overhead was overcast, as gray as the stone on the ground. "Yeah. Whatever. So Vik told me that you wanted some front shots of the hunt."

"Yes," she beamed. "I think it's going to be pretty awesome if we include such a scene. It will have the audiences creaming their pants in fright. The ratings are going to be out of this galaxy. We'll have to fight the fans off with the stick if we can pull this one off."

Sighing, I nodded and then kicked my mount to spur it further forward. I didn't have the heart to tell Annette that the shot was going to be horribly risky. She seemed so upbeat. And, after all, this was the first episode that we were filming. If it all went to hell, well, I suppose I should say hello to the job search again.

I heard the sudden sound of quicker snowbeast hooves behind me. I looked back to see that Vyne had followed me. Behind him were a few of the Antarian assistants to the Minister of Defense, the minister himself, Mot, and the rest of the film crew. We were still a few paces behind three of the Antarian trackers who were trying to find an ice boar in the first place.

"I overheard that you are going to try for the front scenes," he said. "I should come with you to spot you. In case anything goes wrong."

"Great."

"You don't sound enthused."

"Everything's going to go wrong," I replied. "Because I just searched for what an ice boar was on the database and it had nothing on the entry."

"I just assumed that an ice boar was a genetically modified boar, probably of ancient Terran extraction," Vyne replied. "A lot of cultures on different planets on which humans had settled on centuries ago brought with them a lot of Terran animals that had been modified to be suited to the environment of the planet. Unless, of course, if you don't even know what a boar is. Which is totally understandable. Very few people have seen boars of any kind in their lives."

"I know what a boar is," I replied testily. "I've seen holographic projections of the original Terran boar when I was in grade school. They look like pigs. But wilder."

In a few more paces, my snowbeast had reached the Antarian trackers who had stopped at a small copse of dead trees that were ringing three craggy boulders on the hilly terrain. They were talking among themselves in their own

language, which unfortunately I could not pick up since I had neglected to wear my translator ear comm in the morning. But they stopped talking when they noticed Vyne and me approaching. When I was finally just a pace away from their group, I raised my hand in the Antarian greeting and asked about their progress tracking the ice boar in Galactic Standard.

"The ice boar is not far from here," replied one of the trackers who was wearing a dark blue scarf with spotted patterns. It was Reggie, the guide who had been contacted previously to help head up the hunting party. "From the pattern of its tracks, it came by this place not too long ago. It is probably headed toward the plain past that line of trees."

"What tracks?" I asked.

Another tracker, this one with a red scarf, pointed to the rocky ground where I saw nothing. I made some noises in the back of my throat as if I understood what the hell he was pointing out. Then I explained what the director and head holographic projectionist wanted me to do.

The three trackers briefly conferred with each other and then Reggie pointed to a high ridge past the line of trees that he had mentioned before.

"You two can go ahead over there," said Reggie. "From what we have read from the tracks, our hunting party may be able to corner it in a gully close to there. You can wait there for the hunting party to come and kill the ice boar."

I nodded at Reggie's suggestion and then spurred my snowbeast toward the line of trees. Vyne followed slightly behind. The snowbeasts went at an appreciable rate and soon we were past the line of dead trees and galloping over the vast snowy wasteland that was the plain that the trackers had indicated. Ahead, the ridge rose like a nose in the ground. When we closed in on it, it was then that I noticed that the plain did not go directly to the base of the ridge but suddenly dipped into the gully that Reggie had also mentioned.

It was finally on the other side of the gully that I set up my waiting station. There was a wide alcove where our snowbeasts were able to stand in. The alcove had a wide opening at the end where we could escape if it was required. And then we simply sat and waited, watching the other end of the plain and our breaths, white in the cold air.

On my eye screen, the message stream trickled with minor notices from *The Bacchus* and other minutia. A few messages from one of George's sensory instruments and Vik's holographic recorder gave me clues as to where the hunting party was currently located. They were nearing the edge of the plain and one of the trackers had finally caught sight of the ice boar. The pace of the rest of the hunting party had picked up.

I see it.

"Why are you sending me messages on my eye screen when we're right next to each other?" I demanded.

The cyborg put a finger to his lips to indicate silence.

The ice boar may have exceptional hearing. Especially if it has been engineered into it.

I triggered my fingers and finally sent off a message into the stream. *That doesn't make any sense. If the ice boar had excellent hearing, it would have heard all the noise that the hunting party is making and it would be far away from here and not close enough to be captured.*

You may have a point.

I squinted at the horizon and then reached back to my bag to activate another holographic projection sphere. I launched it into the air and then tapped my fingers against my wrist and part of my eye screen magnified the scene.

A black dot was moving across the plain. It was being pursued by two other dots. I increased the magnification again and focused the recording device. The two dots further away were the Minister of the Defense and Mot on their snowbeasts. Vik and the rest of the crew held back a little further, perhaps relying on magnification for the close up shots. The closer dot was that of the ice boar.

That's an ugly son of a bitch, Vyne messaged, echoing my thoughts.

I triggered my fingers again and manipulated the image on a separate part of the eye screen and did some impromptu measurements. The ice boar was approximately three meters high and two meters wide. It had no tail like any other image of the boar I had seen in grade school holographic images.

This boar was completely hairless. It did not even have bristles. Instead, its hide appeared to be a leathery black with a smooth sheen like that of a seal. Its eyes were red and its face, only vague resemblance to its ancestral stock. Its most prominent feature was its nose which looked like it had turned inside out and its jaw which I noticed contained three rows of teeth when it opened its mouth for a roar.

And as the trackers had predicted, it was moving straight toward the gully.

Its Beating Heart

My hands suddenly felt hot and sweaty underneath my gloves as I directed the snowbeast I was riding a little to the left to get a better view of the action. The ice boar was galloping at an appreciable rate toward the gully with the hunters coming up from behind the prey quickly with the powerful sprints of their snowbeast mounts. The ice boar was now only a few meters away from the edge of the gully and at the edge, it paused momentarily.

That moment's pause was an almost fatal mistake. That gave time for one of the hunters who had caught up with

the forerunners—the Minister of Defense and Mot—to raise his weapon which was strapped to his arm and fire. A bright red laser bolt erupted from the weapon and it the ugly ice boar in the back of its neck. Instead of instantly killing it, it merely irritated the beast so that it whipped its head around to roar at its attackers. Saliva dripped from its maw to hiss on the ground snow. I monitored both the front and back holographic projection devices for closeups of the creature. Vik was also with the hunting party so that he would have the opportunity to get a closeup of the creature as well, but he was primarily concentrating on Mot. Whether any of this would make the cut into the episode, who knows. But I figured that the editors, if any of them had any brains, would keep at least one closeup for the shock factor.

A message flashed on my eye screen, momentarily distracting me from my work. *Move. To the right.*

I ignored the message. From the holographic projection instruments strapped to my shoulder, I was getting a great angle from where I was already at. If I moved, it would spoil the view. I kept filming and monitoring the movements of the prey. The ice boar was going over the edge of the gully and heading down into the depression. A fatal mistake, I thought. Heading into the gully was like heading into a dead end. Unless the ice boar could magically leap over the enormous ridge on the other side, there was no escape from the hunters here. The end of the hunt would be inevitable.

Go right.

I ignored Vyne's message again. The cyborg was the crew's researcher and minder, not the director. And I was not getting any messages from Annette that what I was doing was wrong, so as far as I was concerned, I was exactly where I needed to be.

The ice boar came closer, its ugly visage filling the holographic projection feed on my wrist. I suppressed a shudder and kept my eye on it as it came closer. It did not appear to notice that there were other creatures in the gully with it.

The hunters had finally reached the edge of the ridge and were looking down. I could hear Reggie call the others. The Minister of Defense replied with something and then started down the edge of the gully to trail the beast of prey. It was then that the snowbeast underneath me fidgeted and made a distressed grunting sound. The ears of the ice boar pricked up and suddenly, its red eyes stared directly into the holographic projection device that I had hovering nearby. It reared up on its hind legs and in a split second, before I could send a command for the device to move, the beast had crushed it to the ground in an enraged growl.

Move!

The ice beast had now seen our presence and was barreling toward us at full tilt, intent on doing damage. Finally, I grabbed the reins of my mount and kicked my heels into its sides. The snowbeast lost no time in moving as it followed the cyborg's mount out the other side of the alcove where we had been staying. I risked triggering the fingers of my right hand as I held on with my left and sent a command for the holographic projection device on my shoulder to begin recording behind me.

Snowy spurts erupted from the hooves of the snowbeasts as we rode onward. The snowbeasts were swift but the ice boar had no difficulty following them around the litter of boulders at the floor of the gully. But then again, the hunters were now all in the gully tracking the ice boar and they were quickly gaining on the prey, with an enthusiastic Minister of Defense leading the pack. Mot was barely holding onto the reins of his mount.

Vyne and I swerved our snowbeasts around a corner and on my eye screen feeds, I saw that the ice boar had paused momentarily to get its feet underneath him to try to turn. It was then that the Minister of Defense took his chance and fired twice with his laser rifle.

The first shot took out one of the ice boar's hind legs. The second shot hit the back of the creature's head and blood and brains exploded from the force and energy of a high power setting and rained onto the surrounding snow, staining it red.

The Antarian hunters shouted their approval of the kill. The Minister of Defense was the one who was the first at the kill. Once he had maneuvered his snowbeast mount next to the carcass, he leaped down from his seat and brandished a large shining knife that was similar to the one that Mot had received back at the Palace of Foreign Affairs.

“The ritual of a first hunt with visiting guests includes an offer of the first bite to the guest of honor,” said the Minister of Defense in a voice that was loud enough for me to pick up distinctly. George had managed to steer his own mount close by and started his own recording instruments. “Mr. Mot, you have that honor.”

The boss had also gotten off his mount to stand beside the Minister of Defense. “Fantastic!” exclaimed Mot. “But exactly what does that mean?”

“You must use the Antarian hunting knife that was gifted to you,” said the minister. “Hold it up like this.” He demonstrated with his own knife.

Gamely, Mot copied the minister's move. Next, the minister went over to the fallen ice boar and stabbed the knife into the creature's chest cavity. Watching, Mot looked slightly green, but he followed through by making a similar cut. Together, the minister and Mot cut open the chest and through the first few ribs. The cold air steamed from the recently dead body.

I resolutely kept my eye on the running time and other various statistics being recorded by the holographic devices rather than the actual scene. I tried to imagine the whole thing as something recorded and distant rather than something real and very much happening at the moment in front of me.

After carving a hole in the ice boar, the minister took off his gloves and then reached into the chest of the creature to pull out its heart which steamed and dripped blood. The minister was grinning in triumph and holding it up for the holographic projection before directing it toward Mot. “You have the honor of the first bite, Mr. Mot.”

If Mot was green before, he was now positively flashing the color as he looked from the freshly torn heart to the minister's expectant face. He pointed to himself and then to the heart. The minister nodded encouragingly. He looked briefly at Annette who simply shrugged and mouthed, “Do you want to cause an intergalactic incident?”

Mot visibly swallowed before taking the heart from the minister's hand. He stared at the heart for a long moment before he closed his eyes and put the organ to his face and took a bite, smearing blood all over his lips and cheeks.

The minister and the other Antarian hunters yelled in approval. Quickly, Mot gave the heart back to the Minister of Defense who took the second bite of the heart with relish.

The jerboa came back right before the Antarian feast was about to be served at the Central Global Rotunda at the Antarian homeworld capital. But the feast was already crowded with many Antarian dignitaries and their accompanying flunkies so that hardly anyone would have noticed a small rodent scurrying among everything let alone someone who was on a visiting documentary crew.

It was Vik and George who ended up trailing Mot around the Rotunda meeting various other Antarians and recording Mot's monologues of descriptions and explanations of various aspects of the Antarian culture. As the assistant, I was relegated to recording random and wide shots around the Rotunda to get a “feel” of the Antarians in their own milieu. I briefly argued that all of this could be done remotely with robotic holographic recorders, but everyone else on the crew nixed the idea citing their admiration of the “ancient greats”. So I was relegated to wandering around in the Antarian crowd being stared at as I monitored the recording feeds.

This was not how a documentary is supposed to work, I thought to myself as I aimed one of my recording devices at a small crowd of entertainers who were playing a traditional melody with Antarian zithers. I grabbed a small blue chip, one of the small audio recorders that George had let me borrow, from a pocket and attached it to the holder of my holographic recorder that was strapped on my head. A documentary of the modern style was supposed to be recorded without the subjects even realizing that they were being recorded. With that method, the subjects would be interacting naturally in their environment doing exactly what they would be doing if no one else was observing.

Trying for a closeup, I tried to maneuver around a small group of Antarian dignitaries talking close to the musicians. That's when someone bumped me from behind, sending me reeling out, almost crashing into one of the dignitaries. The man I nearly crashed into briefly gave me a dirty look and then tugged his green velvet cloak closer to himself as if I was trying to take it away from him. I gave the dignitary an apologetic wave and then looked behind me to see who had caused my stumble. I only caught sight of a bit of blue cloak as it swirled away into the depths of the crowd.

The rest of the night was somewhat uneventful as I tried to record the rest of the crowd. Eventually, there was the sound of a chime and everyone automatically migrated toward a large hall at the end of the Rotunda where large banquet tables were set up for all of the guests. The Minister of Defense was sitting near the front and with him was Mot. Vik and George were both trailing, recording their every interaction. I did not see Annette or Vyne anywhere.

I followed a few dignitaries in red robes through an archway and continued to record as all of the Antarian officials took their seats.

There's a seat next to the entrance to the kitchens. I've saved it for you.

I had tried to shore up the firewalls during the lull while we had traveled from the hunting grounds to the Rotunda, but apparently even that was not enough to stop Vyne.

I found Vyne at the end of the banquet hall sitting in one of the seats at the last table. There were a few other Antarians there, all of them the large burly type which marked them as either guards or security. Although they were sitting next to Vyne who looked busy analyzing a data pad, they were all looking at him warily as if they had expected the cyborg to go berserk at any moment. Every single seat in the banquet hall was rapidly filling up although the seat next to Vyne at the last table was empty.

The musicians at the opposite end of the banquet hall were bringing their latest song to a close as I managed to slid into the last seat. Someone, the master of ceremonies a note on my eye screen told me, rang the large gong at the front of the room and the voices in the room quieted somewhat as serving persons began coming out of the archway to the kitchens. Quickly, I aimed my recording equipment towards the food being brought out and launched another holographic probe up into the air to record any vantage points that I was going to miss from my seat.

After the first few entrees and appetizers, four servers finally brought out the main course—the ice boar that the Minister of Defense had single-handedly slaughtered. There were impressed exclamations as the ugly thing, now roasted and glazed in a traditional Antarian sauce, was paraded around the room before being placed at a central table where one of the servers was going to carve it up into portions for all of the diners.

As I set my holographic recorder on automatic as the final servers exited the kitchens, I turned my head slightly to see Vyne putting his data pad back into his pocket to finally observe everyone else in the banquet hall.

“According to that menu that Nigel gave us,” I said, “The ice boar was served at his ancestor's coronation banquet

as an appetizer and not as a main course as it is here.”

“Times have changed since the forty-second galactic emperor's brief reign,” Vyne replied. “Back in those times, the ice boar was one of the smaller animals that roamed the Antarian homeworld. The seas on this planet used to be teeming with enormous creatures that they called the kr'ken. Those had been served as the main course for feasts, traditionally. And since the ice boars were smaller, they had been relegated as savory appetizers.”

“So what happened to change the tradition?”

“There were some activists on Antares who were afraid that the kr'kens were being hunted to extinction. The activists soon gained traction and eventually they were phased out of the traditional Antarian menu. Also, the relocation program that was instigated about two centuries ago probably contributed to it, too.”

“Relocation program?”

“The kr'kens were taken from the Antarian homeworld to a different system for some reason or other. I'm still trying to find the reason, but my access to the Antarian information systems have been spotty at best.”

“You could have fooled me,” I muttered. “You seem to have an extremely easy time of it hacking into my message stream.”

“That's because you don't try hard enough,” he replied.

Before I could retort to that, there was a collective murmur of surprise from the dinner guests as the head server cut into the belly of the ice boar. The stomach split open and something white and slithery erupted from within, waving its multiple segmented arms and glaring out at the crowd with its shining, faceted eyes. Surprised, the servers at the central table reflexively took several steps back as the enormous grub tried to swipe at them. The jerboa, which had been sitting on the shoulder where I had not strapped my holographic recording equipment, emitted a frightened squeak and then dived into my coat pocket.

The thing in the ice boar stomach was larger than the grub inside the Antarian welcome cake, but all its features were the same. Another Antarian delicacy, according to my quick search of the database. Despite my inner disgust, I triggered my fingers and programmed the recording probe to go for a closeup.

That was when the head server whipped out the microwave gun at his belt and shot at the grub.

The crowd cheered as the enormous insect larva fell over with a plop on top of the leafy garnishes.

Part IV: Salads & Soups

Disrupted Feed

I was sitting in one of the offices aboard *The Bacchus* reviewing some of the footage that Vik had taken on Galena where we had filmed our second episode. The Galena System was not very far from Antares requiring only a ten second jump into hyperspace from Antares. The fifth planet in the system was occupied by recent colonists from Antares so that their rituals were very similar to the homeworld. The only difference was that the climate where the colonists had made their homes was in a temperate region of the planet rather than an icy one. And the grubs that they were so fond of for using as surprises in their cooking were brown rather than white.

Once we had assembled a rough draft of the first episode, we had sent the footage to GBC headquarters where the editors had further polished it to whatever standards they had decided to take with the experimental documentary. It was not long before the final draft of the first episode had been transmitted throughout the galaxy. *The Bacchus* had received the transmission itself not long before we finished filming on Galena.

I had to admit, it seemed rather polished and a bit old fashioned. But judging from the ratings that the GBC had also sent us, the viewership was quite a decent amount—enough for us to justify filming another episode at any rate. But while the ratings were decent, that still meant that we had to try to pull in more viewers in the next five episodes for the GBC to continue funding our little expedition.

I was running two feeds at once, each from a different vantage point, for one particular scene where Mot was being invited to an honorary dinner being hosted by one of the elders in the Galena colonial settlement. A few appetizers were being brought out featuring boiled vegetables on a stick. The vegetables were native to Galena and during the forty-second emperor's time, Galena was still a wild, unpopulated planet where only a few intrepid explorers traveled to. Back then those particular vegetables had been an exotic and expensive edition to any ruler's table. Nowadays, though, they were a regular staple in the Galena diet and were exported (in dried forms) to various locations in the Delta Quadrant as snacks.

The jerboa, which I had still not named, was currently sitting close to the monitors, watching the feeds as if it knew what was going on. In its paws was one of the dried vegetables from Galena. It was gnawing at it, almost absentmindedly as its beady eyes tracked the motion in the feeds. At the end of our filming on Galena, the owner of the cooperative that farmed these vegetables gave us a sizeable amount of the dried vegetable snacks—enough to last us several months—as a gift. Some of the crew did not particularly care for the vegetables which only meant that I could haul more of the loot to

my own cabin.

One of the feeds on the monitors briefly dissolved into static before righting itself again. Frowning, I rewound the footage and looked at the glitch again. It could very well be that there was something that had jammed the transmission at that particular point or there was something wrong with the equipment. I triggered my fingers to make a reminder to myself and then went about for the next ten minutes trying to reconstruct the disrupted signal.

It was nearly two hours later when I finally exited the office, intent on walking about the ship to clear my brain. The scrambled transmission at that particular point in the footage was not an isolated incident. There were also other parts of the feed that seemed to be disrupted. Fortunately, there were other recorded feeds from my backup recorders as well as from Vik's own instruments that could more than make up for it, but the messed up feed still somewhat disturbed me. Perhaps, I thought as I walked out of the office with the jerboa close to my heels, it was time to do another maintenance check on the holographic recording equipment.

I sent a message to Vik but got a reply back that he was sleeping for the next four hours. I shrugged it off and decided to head to the equipment room to do some of the maintenance myself. We had about two days before we were to arrive in the system of New Xena for filming. The jump in hyperspace from Galena had taken about a day, but our arrival point was some ways away from the system itself due to particular anomalies in that part of space that made it risky to arrive directly inside the system. One of *The Bacchus*' engineers had explained it to us in one of our crew meetings, but the explanation had gone from one ear and out the other—as most scientific stuff relating to astronomy and physics was wont to do with me.

My temporary office on *The Bacchus* was on deck five, in the same corridor as the conference room where everyone had met to look at the Antares welcome gift basket. There was a lift further on which I took to the tenth deck where all the equipment was stored. Once I stepped foot on deck ten, the jerboa demanded to be lifted up. I sighed, wondering why the hell I kept indulging the rodent, and picked it up to put it into my pocket.

I passed one of the ship's engineers walking in the opposite direction, his name was Singh I recalled, who issued an invitation to the night shift crew's traditional break time get together in the mess hall for drinks. Feeling a bit antisocial, I declined and continued onward to the equipment room at the end of the hall. Sometimes I passed several people in the ship's corridors during the day, but in the middle of the night, hardly anyone was around. Despite the hum of the ship's engines which only registered as a faint vibration underneath my feet, everything felt silent and empty.

I should have been asleep like Vik and the rest of the crew, I thought as I rounded a corner. It was, after all, the middle of the night. But I couldn't sleep and I thought I could very well get ahead on my work. The equipment room was at the end of the corridor and could only be accessed by the members of the crew working on the show. I waited for a moment as the electron field scanner worked across me and then the door slid open into a darkened interior.

The only warning I got was the jerboa chirping in surprise and leaping out of my pocket before I was tackled by something huge and immovable before I had a chance to react.

"Lights! One hundred percent!" I screamed.

The illumination blazed on, hurting my eyes. But after a moment, my eyes adjusted and I found myself pinned to the wall of the equipment by my arms which were in the iron grip of the cyborg who was glaring at me, eyes flashing red.

I had heard of cyborgs in battle mode, but I had not really seen one in person before. After this, I did not want to see one again, particularly one focused on me.

"Vyne?" I had managed to find my voice.

"So you're the saboteur," he said lowly.

"What the fuck are you talking about? I just got into this room to check on some of the equipment. Why the hell would I want to sabotage anything?"

He glared at me for another long moment. His face was close enough to mine that I could feel his breath on my cheek. His expression was unreadable, but a second later, the red faded from his eyes and he stepped back, letting me go. "It seems as if you're telling the truth."

"Seems? I am telling the truth, you mechanical lug."

"If you are, then how do you explain this?" He pulled out a data pad which looked like normal except when he powered it on. The entire data cache on the device was corrupted. "The entire batch down here is like this."

"I'm sure since you're such a hotshot hacker you could easily fix all of them," I replied, rubbing my arms down. They felt a bit bruised as if someone had locked me in manacles for a good six hours. And not for some kinky fun, either.

"Yes. But it's also a pain to do work that shouldn't be in the first place." He tossed the data pad back behind him onto the pile of other data pads. That pad landed perfectly onto one of the stacks. "I estimated the probability that the entire stash was defective and it was not that good. Either we just got very unlucky or someone is trying to sabotage us."

The jerboa peeked out from beneath a pile of spare parts for the holographic devices and seeing that an enormous monster had not jumped out from the depths of the equipment room to devour its owner, decided to scurry back out. The small rodent crouched at my feet to look at the cyborg and chirp its own version of a berating lecture.

Vyne looked down at me feet to the jerboa. "Your pet seems angry at me."

"Of course it is. As am I. No sane person suddenly attacks his co-workers both physically and verbally with

accusations. If you had a problem with the batch of data pads, you could have brought it up at the crew meeting during the day in a more civilized manner. And we could have addressed it promptly by either assigning some of the engineers about The Bacchus to help reprogram all of them or sent a message back to headquarters to give us another batch of the data pads.”

“Since you put it that way, your idea sounds so much more reasonable.” But there was a slight sneer in his voice as if he thought my own suggestion wouldn’t work at all. “But this is just as well. Right before I was going to turn in for the night, I was doing some last minute research and I came down here to get another data pad. It turned out to be bad. Which wasn’t cause for alarm in itself, but when I checked all the others, that’s when I started getting suspicious.”

“You could have waited until the morning to voice your concerns instead of lurking down here like a vampire.”

He ignored my remark as he paced around the room in an agitated, non-cyborg like manner. “I reasoned that if there was a saboteur at work on this vessel, I could easily catch him at night. So I came down here and started monitoring the movements of the crew. The only people awake was the night crew and you.”

“I was having a bit of insomnia so I decided to do some work.”

“Likely story.”

“It’s true. You can check the ship’s logs if you like.”

“True up to a point. Why did you come down here?”

“I wanted to check up on some of the holographic recording equipment. While doing some rough edits of the feeds we took down on Galena, I noticed that some of the transmissions were compromised. I figured some of the equipment might need some maintenance, especially since quite a bit of it is outdated stuff—which is all the fault of the boss. He’s the one who insisted that we do this documentary show with an old fashioned flair.”

The cyborg gave me an assessing look before he halted in front of some of the backup equipment. “Very well. If you’re not down here doing any sabotaging, then who is?”

I shook my head muttering, “And George thought I was more paranoid than he is.” I went over to the recording equipment that I had intended on surveying in the first place and took up the first one. I turned it on and accessed its system check routines. “Maybe no one is sabotaging anything,” I said in a louder voice. “Wouldn’t you give it the benefit of a doubt?”

“That’s not in my nature.” Vyne had walked back over to the pile of defective data pads and had finally picked up one again, ostensibly to try reprogramming it. The jerboa had followed the cyborg this time instead of me. The small rodent had climbed up on a stack of them and began pressing buttons with its paws. The data pad it was on began to beep in time with its punching. Vyne briefly turned his attention back to the rodent. “I heard Vik call your pet Bob. And George called it Balthazar the Terrible. Which is it?”

“Neither. I haven’t named it yet.”

“I have a suggestion.”

I glanced at the cyborg warily. “You have a name suggestion for the gerbil?”

“Yes. Call him... Killer.”

The jerboa continued to press buttons as if it did not hear Vyne’s pronouncement.

“That’s ridiculous,” I replied. “It might be annoying at times, but I have yet to see it kill anything. I think it’s a vegetarian, actually.”

He watched the jerboa lose interest in the data pad before leaping off the stack to explore the rest of the nooks and crannies in the equipment room. “You just haven’t seen it in action yet.”

Geiger's Hot Pot

When we finally arrived in the system of New Xena, the ship’s cook was having a mini-strike after a particularly unhappy breakup with one of the ship’s engineers. This resulted in having the cook’s assistant stepping into the breach, but the assistant had just been hired on since the start of the trip and had yet to learn how to produce everything that was currently listed on the ship’s menu. So for the past two days, we had all been learning to cope with eating toast and jam for breakfast and macaroni and cheese for lunch and dinner.

It was on the second day that George and Annette—both avid carnivores—had gotten fed up with the inadvertent vegetarian offerings and had stormed the ship’s kitchens in order to prepare a proper roast. But only, it seems, enough for the both of them. While I was smelling the roast in the dining room, I still had to content myself with the macaroni and cheese. That’s when I thought, how hard can it be to cook anyway? Maybe I should try it myself.

Apparently that was the same exact idea that Mot had gotten into his head. He announced in the next staff meeting that we were going to do the next episode with him learning how to cook a New Xenan dish. He didn’t really care what sort of dish it was, except that he was being filmed in the kitchen doing domestic things.

“Absolutely brilliant!” the director had exclaimed. “The audience is going to go wild for a host who would

actually do some dirty work!”

Mot had furrowed his brows at that remark. “But I thought I had helped hunt down an ice bear back on Antares.”

“Hunting is nothing,” Vik had replied. “Chicks really dig guys who can handle a frying pan.”

“I thought this was supposed to be a documentary,” I interrupted. “Not some sexed up reality show like everything else out there.”

Everyone ignored me, as usual.

“I just sent a message to the minder for New Xena. He replied that a cooking segment can easily be accommodated,” Vyne had told everyone. “That is, if you don’t mind making some traditional Xenan goulash.”

“That’s perfect,” Mot had replied. “It’s one of the items listed under soups on the banquet menu. We’ll do a showcase on the whole thing—maybe get footage on gathering all the ingredients before the kitchen scenes.”

And that was how I ended up in the kitchen of a country house in the boondocks of New Xena setting up recording devices everywhere to record every single conceivable part of the area. Vik and George were out with Mot to record the collection of the final ingredient, the rackbane, a small fleshy creature native to the New Xena homeworld that looked like tuna on legs and traveled in packs. They were in the hands of the New Xena minder, an old man named Eryl G’pin, who had worked as an expert rackbane tracker in his younger days.

The country house belonged to G’pin and his wife, the plump and apple-cheeked Myrm who was at least two decades younger than her husband. She bustled about the kitchen in preparation for the cooking segment without any care that I was occasionally getting in her way. This time, I had remembered to wear my universal translator so I did not have to resort to hand signals in order to get my point across.

The universal translator rendered Myrm’s speech in a Galactic Standard with the heavy accent of someone living in the backwaters of Grindan Minor in the Alpha Quadrant.

“What’s that?” I had asked as she began to throw in a mixture of herb-like ingredients into a bowl with some grain and began to pound it into submission with a pestle. It looked rather labor intensive as the New Xenan woman huffed and puffed with exertion.

“It is for the base of the sauce where we will baste the rackbane,” she replied. “It is a traditional sauce that can go with practically anything in our native cuisine. It is called rackbane-se, or rackbane’s sweat.”

“Uh huh.”

“Here, try some.” The woman spooned up some of the crudely crushed sauce ingredients and stuck it into my mouth before I could protest. “Good, see?”

The whole thing went down my throat and I coughed violently, almost dropping the recording device in my hand. “It’s interesting,” I finally managed. “It’s a bit spicy.”

“We like things spicy,” she replied blithely, and started pounding the ingredients again.

At that moment, Annette arrived in the kitchen with a data pad in her hand as she keyed in several last minute notes. “I just got a message from Vik,” she announced. “The party have just bagged two rackbanes for dinner.”

“That’s perfect,” said Myrm. “That’s plenty to make enough goulash for the entire party.”

The director then turned to me. “Everything set up yet, Euphie?”

“Just one more next to the oven,” I replied. “I’ve set it up so most everything can be recorded remotely. Vik wants to do the close-ups himself.”

“Excellent. Vyne’s doing the finishing touches on the info he’s going to feed to Nigel. See you in the control room.” Annette waved a hand and then wandered back out.

In another minute, I stuck the last recording device on top of the G’pin’s oven for some overhead shots of the pots and then headed out of the kitchen while Myrm was still grinding the herbs.

I continued coughing as I walked through the main hallway in the country house, through the living room and then to a large guest room where we had set up our monitoring equipment. There were a few water bottles standing next to one of the monitor screens. I grabbed one and popped the top before taking a swig. The water cooled my throat, but the water itself left a funny aftertaste on my tongue. Or maybe the aftertaste was from the herbs that the woman had put in my mouth. I wasn't all that sure.

Vyne was already in the control room keeping an eye on the feeds already in progress and working on one of his re-purposed data pads at the same time. Annette was nowhere to be found.

"Where's director boss lady?" I commented.

"She headed outside to check on some of the recorders that were placed near the front of the house." The cyborg pointed to one of the feeds on the monitors showing the front door with Annette adjusting something. "She said she would be back once she's done."

I glanced at the other feeds and saw that the hunting party consisting of Mot, Vik, George, and the minder Eryl G'pin was out in a back shed. G'pin had one of the dead rackbanes propped up on a short platform and was crudely descaling it with a blade that looked like a curved machete. I was forced to look away as I coughed again. I made myself sip some water.

"Can't handle the capsaicin?" Vyne inquired neutrally, still not looking at me.

"Not when it's been shoved down my throat," I retorted. "What about you?"

He shrugged. "Most things don't bother me. I have nanobots that help neutralize anything harmful that I might inadvertently ingest. And speaking of ingestion of harmful substances, you might not want to drink too much of that water."

"What? What's wrong with it?"

"It's heavy water."

"Holy f--," I capped the bottle hastily and stuck it back on the ledge near the monitor where I found it. "The damn thing's not even labeled. And why the hell is there heavy water in here anyway? I would have been guzzling the stuff non-stop to get the spices out of my mouth—enough that the crew would be one less holographic projectionist before the next episode."

"Mrs. G'pin put the bottles here thinking that we might need a drink while we're working. She mentioned that the heavy water was great for growing the engineered heavy watermelons that seem to thrive on this planet."

"Heavy watermelons?"

The cyborg finally looked up from his data pad with an indulgent look on his face. As if he thought I was an idiot. My hands itched to wipe the smirk off his face, but practically, if I tried to do that, I would break every bone in my hand. "Heavy watermelons were engineered about three centuries ago by Dieter Randolph, a scientist who lived in the Beta Quadrant. Randolph did it as revenge against a colleague because he had been passed for promotion in favor of this colleague also working at the lab. This particular colleague had a known fondness for watermelons. People got suspicious when his colleague fell ill from heavy water poisoning."

"Geez. So why did it end up here in the Delta Quadrant, of all places?"

"No one knows. Some people think that someone smuggled out one of the seeds from Randolph's creation before the authorities caught on. For a few years, there was a black market for the heavy watermelons, especially for those into the business of discrete assassinations. But then after a few generations, you couldn't even guarantee that any more. Some people have developed a natural mutation that allows them to metabolize heavy water without ill effects. The population of New Xena happen to be composed of such people. I assumed that Mrs. G'pin did not realize that we visitors are not quite so immune from it as they are."

"Well, that's all set up!" exclaimed Annette as she arrived in the makeshift control room. She waved a hand towards the bottled water. "I hope you didn't take a drink of that, Euphie. Bad for your health."

"Uh..."

"So." The director was rubbing her hands as she stared at the feeds. "Looks like the boys are doing a bit of last minute preparation. What's next?"

"They're probably going to take the carcasses up to the kitchen for Myrm to prepare it," I said. I triggered my fingers to bring up the recipe that the G'pins had helpfully provided the crew beforehand. "It looks like they're going to marinate the meat in their special traditional sauce and then as they say, 'nuke it in the hot box!'"

"They're going to use one of those ancient microwaves?" said Annette. "How retro!"

"No, it's more literal than that," Vyne replied. "Have you seen their oven?"

"Yeah, I got up close and personal with it," I said. "I didn't actually look inside it, but I did have a probe attached above it. It looks a little unusual. A unique design of the New Xenan artistic style?"

The cyborg's mouth thinned. "It's a miniature nuclear reactor. It appears to be certified for high levels of ionizing radiation and should be safe enough for use but...well, let's hope it does not melt down during the middle of a take."

On the monitor feeds, despite Mot having a little trouble with getting the machete to skin the carcass rather than

hacking it in half, the men had finished descaling the rackbanes and were heading inside the house. The monitors of the recording feeds automatically followed them inside as they came into the kitchen to hand Myrm the meat. The woman directed the men to put the two rackbanes into an enormous lead-lined pot. For the next ten minutes, she directed Mot to chop some of the native vegetables which subsequently also went into the pot to simmer in the goulash. Then came some herbs and then a secret “hot” mixture that Myrm only conceded had some hot chili peppers that had been imported to the planet. Several bottles of heavy water and some rackbane broth, prepared the previous evening, also went into the pot before the entire thing was loaded into the oven.

Once the oven was set at the appropriate time and temperature, Myrm herded everyone, including all of us hiding out in the guest room, out to the living room for a snack of cheese and elderberry wine. George attempted to sneak back into the kitchen to record a bit of the ambient noises, but Myrm caught him with her sharp eyes and hauled the ex-convict sensory technician back into the living room. I kept watch on the kitchen via the feeds transmitting directly to my eye screen. Nothing appeared to be happening in the kitchen although G'pin continued to make toasts.

By the fifth round, I was beginning to get a headache from all of the elderberry wine and I decided to discretely dump the shots into the potted helivianian plant next to my chair. The jerboa had retreated back to my pocket with a bit of cheese and a surprisingly censorious look at everyone else who was getting smashed. Mot was getting a bit red in the face although he had yet to turn down the next shot. Vik and George were getting quite loud as they argued the merits of recording sound in a vacuum. And Annette was giggling nonstop.

“Here's to my beautiful wife's goulash!” G'pin declared around the tenth round. Or was it the twelfth? I had lost track. The only thing holding my head up was my arm which I had propped up on the side of my chair. The cyborg, damn him, continued to down the elderberry wine shots like they were candy.

“Oh my!” exclaimed Myrm as she glanced up at the timepiece that hung on the side of the living room wall next to a particularly hideous piece of folk art that depicted a pair of mating New Xenan slugs. “I almost forgot about the goulash. It should be done by now!”

As the woman got up to head into the kitchen, Mot got up as well, and promptly fell back onto the couch with a groan. “Wait! I'm coming! I want to see how I did on the goulash. I mean, I've never cooked anything before. I want to see how it turned out.”

With a sigh, Vyne stood up and hauled Mot up to his feet and supported him as he staggered into the kitchen. Seeing that Vik and George were not paying the slightest attention, I made myself get up from my chair to follow as well in case we needed a closeup. I turned on the portable holographic recorder on my wrist and hoped the feed would not turn out terribly jerky as I stumbled about.

In the kitchen, Myrm had donned a bright yellow protective suit, thermal gloves, and a face shield. She waved us off as she checked the readings on the oven before giving the all clear. Then she slowly opened the oven door and took out the pot with the rackbane goulash with a pair of metal tongs. She set the pot on the cleared work table and opened the lid. This time, she poured in regular water to rehydrate everything that had evaporated during cooking. The pot simmered on its own from its own internal heat.

“Can we try it yet?” said Mot.

“One more thing, Mr. Mot.” Myrm took out a beige box from a cupboard and flipped the switch. It clicked slowly. She looked at the old fashioned dial on the outside of the box and nodded before turning the box back off. “Good. You can try it now.” She took a wooden spoon from a drawer and ladled out a bit of the goulash for him.

He took a small bite and promptly dropped the spoon fanning his mouth. “Hot, hot, hot!”

Vyne handed him a glass of regular water which he immediately gulped.

After a moment of breathing in air, Mot said, “My, you New Xenans really like your stuff spicy. By the way, what was that device that you just used?”

“Oh, it's an ancient machine called a Geiger counter. It's just to make sure that the cooking process didn't go wrong or anything. You wouldn't want to end up with radiation poisoning, would you?”

Squeaky Greens

I should have been happy that I was temporarily the head holographic projectionist when Vik discovered that he was allergic to G'pin's New Xenan goulash and had to spend the next two days in the ship's infirmary, but I got saddled with the picnic scene. Oh, it might be a cinch, you might say, but how can you say cinch when Nigel Mot decided that to go with the domestic scene back on the New Xenan homeworld, he wanted something romantic on Silvblade, the largest of New Xenan's ten moons. It wasn't so much that it was a picnic scene or that it was supposed to be a romantic scene, too, but that the whole thing was going to take place on a lump of rock that had no atmosphere.

Considering the fact that this was supposed to be a culinary documentary, it would require quite a bit of finagling to figure out a way to eat while one had his life support helmet on his head. But, of course, no one listened to my arguments until George discovered that the freeze-dried ice cream snacks he had purchased on the New Xenan homeworld could not

phase through the glass of his helmet's face shield.

Only then did Mot concede that we move filming to the observatory that had been built on the moon a century ago by the third wave of colonists. It was with wary relief that I entered the observatory and shucked my space suit. Finally, something more reasonable. Of course, that didn't mean that a more mundane setting would guarantee ratings, either. Which was why, I decided on the spur of the moment, to include the feeds of our aborted attempts at staging the picnic outside with everything else that I was going to send to the editors at the GBC headquarters. Now, I had only to convince Vik that all the editing of this particular segment was resting safely in my capable hands.

"Well, look on the bright side," Mot said as we piled our suits into a corner and double checked our instruments, "Dr. H'lpin isn't scheduled to arrive until fifteen minutes from now. We didn't tell her where we were meeting in the first place so it wouldn't seem that we goofed up anything."

"Oh right," said George, "Like she's not going to notice the space suits that we have piled up in that corner over there."

Mot and George briefly glared at each other.

"Boys, boys, back to work," said Annette loudly.

Dr. Pilar H'lpin was one of the New Xenan minder's contact. As far as I could recall from my notes that I had recorded via eye screen, H'lpin was G'pin's aunt's grandmother's step-brother's second cousin removed. She was a scientist employed at the New Xenan University at the atmospheric and astronomy department and working on some sort of complicated research that I had tuned out as soon as she had mentioned the terms "scalar" and "atmospheric disturbances." I simply filed her under: extremely smart person you would never understand. At any rate, H'lpin was one of the New Xenans who regularly went up to the moon for various reasons and she had offered to be the local culinary guide once she heard about the documentary. She had even offered an idea for the moon scene—the picnic. She was the one who was going to arrive with the picnic basket filled to the brim with New Xenan delicacies.

I would have nixed the scene in the bud if I were in charge. Picnics are boring. But Mot was enamored with H'lpin—a rather statuesque, raven-haired woman who rivaled even Commander Tautu in endowments—and immediately took upon the idea. George had agreed, because he was enamored with the stunning doctor as well. And Annette, for some reason, was enthusiastic about the entire notion of having everything take place on a moon. Vyne didn't appear to have an opinion one way or another, so I was pretty much in the minority in my opposition.

As I was running one of my backup devices on another maintenance routine, there was a knock on the door leading to the quant pad on one of the observatory's underground levels. Vyne opened the door, as he was the closest one to it, and Dr. H'lpin emerged from the entrance. The doctor was wearing a silver form-fitting jumpsuit with a wide neckline and carrying an enormous basket made of red Javarian bamboo. I quickly hefted up the ancient holographic recorder that I had borrowed from Vik and headed for a closeup as Mot made his way to the doctor with a greeting and an offer to help carry the basket.

The doctor gave Mot a distracted smile and dumped the basket into his waiting arms. Mot staggered behind her as she walked into the main room where we were all standing in a somewhat haphazard pattern. She pointed to a corridor which led up to the telescope room.

"Let's go there for the picnic scene," she suggested. "It would look more interesting, I think."

So everyone followed her at her command while I managed to keep up with my eye half on the holographic device in my hands and half on my feet. There was a flight of spiraling stairs which led to an upper level where the main body of an old fashioned telescope was located. The upper level was entirely white and I quickly had to manually adjust the contrast on the recording device. When the doctor looked like she was about to speak again, George shoved me aside to get closer to her. I rolled my eyes and decided to keep going instead of yelling at the sensory technician.

Mot set the basket on the floor with a thump as soon as he had stumbled up the stairs. He was breathing hard. "That's quite a basket you packed there, doctor."

"It has everything that we will need," she replied. She went over to the basket and took out a white and red checkered blanket which she spread out at the base of the telescope. Then she began setting the blanket out with several containers of different sizes and colors. None of the containers were labeled. Mot started helping her set out the containers as he peppered her with questions about what sort of food that she had decided to pack today.

"Most of the food here is native to New Xena," she finally said as they both settled down on the blanket. I ended up kneeling on the floor so that I could get an even image on the holographic recorder. The floor of the observatory was metal and it was not long before my knees began to hurt. I tried to ignore the pain. "I did take a look at the copy of the banquet menu that you gave me and I saw one thing that Mr. G'pin missed when he had you over for dinner."

"Really? What was it?"

"Let's have some elderberry wine first."

I barely stopped myself from groaning. It was so not a good idea to get everyone smashed for this scene as well. Everyone on New Xena might be immune from the effects of the wine, but the documentary crew was not. Where was the convenient potted plant when I needed one?

As Mot insisted on pouring the wine for the doctor, he was making bedroom eyes at her. I went for the

magnification of the closeup. Since Mot mentioned that he wanted romantic, well, I was going to give the audience romantic. It was going to be so mushy that everyone was going to puke.

You're smirking. What are you thinking?

Damn cyborg. *None of your freakin' beeswax, boltbucket,* I triggered back with my free hand. Then I gave him a rude gesture when no one else was looking, just for good measure.

After a moment, the doctor merely ignored Mot's attempts at seduction with a pointed shrug and picked up one of the colored containers instead after he tried to hand her the wineglass. "The dish that Mr. G'pin missed was listed as a salad in the menu. Here, on New Xena, it is called a *palk*. In our language, it means 'squeaky green'."

"Don't you mean 'squeaky clean'?" Mot countered.

"The New Xenan language does not have the same metaphors as Galactic Standard," the doctor said loftily. "It's called squeaky green because it is, obviously, squeaky and green. There is nothing metaphorical about it." She opened the container in her hand revealing a variety of leafy greens harvested from New Xenan lands topped with small orange berries native to the planet as well as something round and brown that bore a very strong resemblance to Terran button mushrooms.

"Squeaky?" Mot said doubtfully.

The doctor nodded and took up a smaller container which contained a thin vinaigrette. She dumped it onto the salad before taking a fork to it. As she stabbed at it, the mushrooms began rolling around in the container, independent of the container's movement. After a few tries, she finally impaled a mushroom with the tines of her fork. The mushroom emitted a dying squeak. "New Xenan squeaky mushrooms. Children here love them." She popped it into her mouth and chewed with pleasure. It sounded like she was rubbing a latex balloon rather than eating.

The jerboa which had been napping the entire time in my pocket, perked up and poked its head out to see what was happening. I glanced at it and said silently, "Down!" The gerbil stuck its tongue out at me. I looked back at the picnic scene. Mot was busy trying to stab at his own salad as the doctor looked on in amusement. So far, the boss did not notice the rodent in my pocket.

I glanced about and noticed that George was standing slightly in front of me. In a back pocket were a few packets of the freeze-dried ice cream snack that he had been eating. I stretched out my free arm and quickly slipped one of the snack packets out of his pocket. George was so intent on recording the scene that he did not notice my small theft. I gave the snack to the jerboa.

The gerbil's eyes brightened when it opened the shiny aluminum package and discovered the freeze-dried ice cream. It managed to stuff the entire chunk into its mouth. Content, it sank, out of sight, back into my pocket. I took the discarded wrapping and managed to put it back into George's pocket with him none the wiser.

You must have been a pickpocket in a previous life.

I rolled my eyes at the cyborg's remark. *There's no such thing as reincarnation.*

That's what you think.

But I didn't spare another thought for Vyne's afterlife philosophy when Mot stabbed at his salad a little too hard and the whole container in his hand went flying. Greens and squeaky mushrooms tumbled out, some of them rolling out onto the blanket and others bouncing off the telescope barrel like cheap rubber balls. One of the mushrooms even landed in the doctor's cleavage and she started screaming and wiggling about as if she was being molested by a tentacled Vebarian. Mot jumped up attempting to help her, but she waved him off as she rushed down the stairs to the restroom on the lower level.

"Oh crap," George exclaimed when he tried to whip out a portable sound recorder from one of his numerous shirt pockets. "I left my recorder back in my suit downstairs. Hold the mushrooms! I'll be back."

When George disappeared down to the lower level as well, I sighed and strapped the holographic recorder on my back with it still on. I started to help the rest of the crew gather up the mushrooms and greens again. The first one I found was tucked in a small metal alcove at the base of the telescope. The mushroom felt rubbery and it squeaked as I put slight pressure on it with my thumb and forefinger. I could feel it trying to move. I pressed harder. It wiggled some more and then suddenly flew out of my hands and bounced off the back of Mot's head like a shot.

"Ow! What was that?"

Annette, who had been studiously dumping the bits of salad that she had gathered back into the container, looked up with a frown. "What did you say?"

Vyne, who had seen everything, merely raised an eyebrow at me and then turned back to gathering the mushrooms that had collected into a small depression on the floor. I pretended to search for more mushrooms underneath the telescope.

Fishwich on Rye

My mother messaged me again while I was sitting in one of the break rooms on deck six playing 3D chess with the jerboa. The rodent was winning.

As it squealed in triumph when it made another checkmate, this time of my bishop, I told the rodent I was finally

taking the message. The jerboa ignored me as I turned briefly away and stared out a window out into the darkness space. It was a day after filming the scene on the New Xenan moon and The Bacchus was moving into position just outside the system for the jump position into hyperspace and thus to the next destination.

I triggered my fingers and accessed the message that my mother just sent. It was basically asking about my job, whether I was getting enough sleep, getting enough vitamins or if I was seeing anyone. And a subtle hint that I had better get cracking on those grandchildren. I rolled my eyes at that last bit. My parents came from a culture with extremely traditional values in the Beta Quadrant and I had been relieved when I had been accepted into the Andromeda Film School that I would have an opportunity to escape my home planet. And when I got kicked out of film school, well, I decided not to go back. Getting a crappy temp job at some third rate reality show was better than going back there where Aunties of various persuasions would attempt to pair me up with half-wit sons who no one else would take. Because the old adage about all the good ones either being already taken or swinging the other way was completely true.

I messaged back saying that the job was fine, that I was getting sleep and that I was getting my vitamins (after all this was a culinary documentary). I ignored the last question hoping that it would go away. I fired off the reply into the communications network that pervaded throughout the galaxy by relay points at every system and even points in between. But just as I replied, another message popped up on my eye screen. It was from my brother.

My brother was a few years older than I was and was, to be frank, the family overachiever. When he was a teenager, he managed to get into medical school and for his residency, he managed to apply for and get a position on an imperial battle cruiser. The last I heard of him, he was the head surgeon on a diplomatic vessel captained by a very famous ambassador. He almost never contacted me while he was away on a mission. But it wasn't just his job, either. While he had still been living with the family, he was always busy, sparing no time for anyone, let alone someone like me. A loser sister usually did not rank very high on anyone's list.

So my brother's message was a surprise. And it was a double surprise that the message was on network transmission mode. He actually wanted to talk to me, rather than send passive aggressive texts like my parents. I triggered my fingers, accepting the message. My brother's image appeared on my eye screen. He looked good. I could see why there were rumors that he had a girl at every port.

"Euphie! It's a long time since we've seen each other."

I attempted to school my features into a neutral expression. It certainly was a long time since I've actually seen my brother face to face. It was probably just before I had headed into film school. And it was probably due to some sense of obligation of his. It certainly wasn't out of any sense of familial love.

"Hello Eric," I replied. "It has been a long time. What's up?"

"I just wanted to see how you were doing," he replied with a grin. "The last time I heard, you were working at some reality show or something as a holographic projectionist in New Caledonia?"

"Yes."

"It was good of you to jump ship. New Caledonia is a backwater, dead end place anyway."

"Maybe for the career climber," I replied, having the urge to defend my previous choice in going to New Caledonia. "It was relaxing and in a sense, it wasn't particularly stressful."

"Yeah, well, you haven't stayed there, have you? Our parents sent me a message saying that you took a job with the new CEO of the Galactic Broadcasting Corporation. I didn't pay very much attention to it, you understand. I don't really have much free time to watch any vids or holographic entertainment."

No, of course not. My brother was the hot shot surgeon of an imperial vessel. He didn't have any time for anything unimportant. Which, of course, begged the question, why was he messaging me? But I did not ask the question outright. Instead, I said, "I suppose so."

"However, some of the crew on my ship do spend some time watching the vids, and they've all started watching this new show called *Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant* that is being hosted by Nigel Mot, one of the scions of the imperial family. They're telling me that this show is unlike anything they've seen before. The format is completely different from a reality show or one of those ancient documentaries they sometimes made you watch in school. And then again, it's like both at the same time."

"Uh huh."

"And they were telling me that you were in it. So of course, I had to watch a bit of it to see if what they were saying about my little sister was true."

I blinked. My brother actually deigned to watch one of the shows that I worked on? Had I just witnessed the heat death of the universe? "What? Really? I'm just the assistant holographic projectionist. I'm in some of the final scenes, but not many." There were only two, really. The editors back at headquarters had the grace to send back the final edited versions. Out of curiosity, I had watched them. They had not been all that bad. And I was glad that I wasn't in too many of the shots. The only two shots I was in included the scene where one of the auxiliary recorders had caught me filming the ice boar back on the Antares homeworld. The second shot was the whole scene of the G'pin's offering their home cooked goulash to the entire crew. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't doing anything particularly embarrassing in those scenes. Which was all good with me.

“The whole thing was hilarious,” my brother continued as if he had not heard me. “Everyone watching has started taking bets on when Mot will finally eat something that will kill him. Or at least piss off some colonists with some cultural misunderstandings. It is the show on everyone’s lips.”

“Uh, that’s good,” I said, now frowning. We had yet to get the ratings on the third episode on New Xena since the transmission had yet to reach the outer limits of the main Alpha Quadrant viewing range, but the second episode ratings had been relatively steady. There were a few more viewers compared to the first episode, but nothing to call home about. Maybe the show was gaining traction among the imperial military. I would have to inquire about that the next time I was in contact with anyone back at the GBC headquarters.

“Of course, all of your fame is rubbing off a bit on me,” my brother said. “Now everyone thinks that I have some insider information on where you may be heading next. There’s a betting pool that was started just yesterday on that very subject. Ten to one that your next destination will be the Kiber Field. And people have even started a fan club in this sector hoping to appeal to the higher authorities of the broadcasting network to influence your filming schedule.”

“Eric, I’m just the assistant holographic projectionist,” I emphasized again. “I have no influence on the filming schedule. All of this has been set up ahead of time by the boss, Nigel Mot.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have any idea where you would be going next, would you?”

I opened my mouth to reply but then thought better of it. My brother had mentioned a betting pool. How well did I know my brother anyway? Everything that I thought of him had been formed from memories dating back to my childhood, before he headed up to medical school. Who knew what sort of person he was now. Maybe he was a part-time bookie when he wasn’t cutting people open. I wondered if my parents knew.

“I have no idea,” I finally replied, thinking that I should keep everything fair, even if this was my brother. Just because I was related to him didn’t mean that I would automatically give him an advantage in the betting books. “Mot likes to keep the rest of the crew in the dark. You’ll probably find out when the next episode airs.”

“Damn,” he said in a relatively cheerful tone. “Well, here’s to trying.”

“How’s work at your end?” I asked.

“My schedule has been pretty full. I’ve been kept busy with a lot of civilian casualties from the recent outbreak of violence in the Pelgan Beta Sector. We just debarked from Eranus VI and are heading out of the sector to Reggian II. There’s supposed to be some kind of diplomatic meeting there where Ambassador Coran is planning to attend. I heard there were going to be meaningless awards and speeches which is going to make the whole visit rather boring.”

I brought up a brief subsection on my eye screen, looking up Reggian II. It was known as neutral territory over in the Pelgan Beta Sector. Many visitors came to the system for vacations. It was also known for its bevy of beautiful women.

“Are you not going to have time to explore planet side?” I asked.

My brother brightened. “Well, now that you mention it, I do, for about three days. I hear the night life there is great.”

“Well, I hope you have a good break when you get there,” I said politely.

“Thanks. And good luck on your next episode! Don’t get eaten by a Telarian grue!”

I signed off and then rolled my eyes. I turned back to the chess board on the table in the break room. The jerboa had reset the entire game and was waiting for me to make my first move as it gnawed on a roasted pine nut that I had obtained from the ship’s mess hall. I randomly moved a pawn and then pulled a plate of sandwiches close to me. The ship’s chef was still on strike and everyone had decided to lighten the load off the assistant cook by making their own meals whenever they had some extra time. On my break, I had decided to make sandwiches. Particularly, New Caledonian algae-fish sandwiches, the recipe for which I discovered during my time there.

The sandwich itself consisted of toasted New Xenan rye bread that the ship had recently stocked from the last stop—the closest match I could find to the traditional New Caledonian baguettes. Algae-fish, the descendant of the ancient Terran swordfish, was a farmed and engineered animal found on many colonized worlds that obtained all its food from algae symbionts that lived just beneath its skin. On New Caledonia, the particular algae-fish sandwich was unique because the fish was grilled in a peculiar sauce consisting of unusual New Caledonian spices that were exported everywhere but rarely used except for chili fertilizer. Well, everywhere except for the Alpha Quadrant due to some arcane quarantine and import tariffs for anything grown with the aid of slime molds. Apparently there were a group of bureaucrats in the Alpha Quadrant who absolutely hated slime molds. Which pretty much made my decision for not taking any jobs in the Alpha Quadrant especially easy. There was little that would make me part from my relatively new love of New Caledonian algae-fish sandwiches.

I took a bite of the sandwich while the jerboa finally chewed the last mouthful of the pine nut and considered its opening move on the chess board. That was when the door to the break room hissed open, revealing the cyborg on the other side.

“What are you doing here?”

“You don’t have to be so hostile,” Vyne replied as he stepped inside and took a seat across from me. He glanced at the chessboard and watched the jerboa jump up to the second level of the three dimensional board and push one of its pawns

to an adjacent cell. "I heard that you had been cooking in the mess hall. And you were making sandwiches."

"So?"

"You were making algae-fish sandwiches."

"Algae-fish sandwiches aren't illegal."

"No, but I heard from Commander Tautu that they were to die for."

Commander Tautu had been in the kitchens the same time I was, making a tuna casserole. She had asked to try some of the sandwich in exchange for some of the casserole. The casserole had been good. I had even tried to feed it to the jerboa in lieu of the pine nuts, but it had refused. Apparently, it was a strict vegetarian. No fish for it.

"Yeah? So what if the commander liked it?"

The cyborg stared at me. His eyes suddenly glinted slightly red. "I was wondering if it was true."

"You're not going to scare me with that look," I scoffed. "Nigel would not be pleased if you killed off one of the holographic projectionists. And Commander Tautu would not be pleased that you killed off her only source for professionally made New Caledonian algae-fish sandwiches. She could lead a mutiny. Or at least convince Captain Avery to throw you out of the airlock."

"No one can throw me out of the airlock."

The jerboa chirped, telling me that it was my turn. I finally sighed and scooted the plate towards the cyborg.

"Fine. You can try one. You'll have to do something for me in exchange, though."

Vyne took half of a sandwich and took one bite. He chewed slowly. His expression did not change. Maybe he hated it. But I saw him swallow the bite. "It's good," he said simply. "Maybe I'll treat you to dinner in exchange."

"What?" I jerked, almost toppling another pawn. I hastily righted it and then moved another one which I had been eyeing a second earlier. "That's ridiculous. My sandwich is not worth a dinner, no matter how good it is."

"Well, maybe it is."

Good God, dinner with the cyborg. No, no, no, no. "Never mind about the exchange."

"You can't take it back."

"Whatever. Forget about it."

Vyne was about to reply to that but then it looked as if he thought better of it. Instead, he asked, "So I take it that Killer is winning?"

"The jerboa," I said firmly, not wanting to encourage the name to stick, "has won the last three games. Likely, it will win this game, too. Which says a lot about my intelligence. Or lack thereof."

"Oh, I don't know about that. It may be because the creature has been engineered to be a genius, not because of any deficient brain power on your part. Weren't you considered a chess prodigy while you were growing up on your homeworld?"

"That fact," I said, "was supposed to have been expurgated from my records."

"Expurgation doesn't stop me when I'm trying to do research," he replied. "Maybe we could play a game against each other some time. I'll have you know that I'm pretty good at chess, too."

"I would be too easy of an opponent for you. But if you're so sure about your game prowess, why don't you try playing against genius gerbil yourself?"

"No thanks. I'd rather keep today on the up and up by contemplating ways to wrangle you into dinner rather than getting beaten by a rodent in 3D chess."

I ignored that remark as I sat back in my chair and finished my sandwich. Nanobot brain could contemplate all he wanted. But that didn't mean that anything that he would be coming up with would ever come to fruition.

Arrival at Happy Hour

After Captain Avery and Nigel Mot had prolonged negotiations with the ship's head chef, they finally reached a compromise about the cooking arrangements on *The Bacchus*. The head chef was to work five days during the week. The other two days he would have to do whatever he wanted, which everyone figured would be moping. I had a suggestion about the entire situation in the last crew meeting when everyone else had been complaining about it. I suggested that they fire the chef. Oh sure, the engineer who supposedly broke his heart was the impetus for his current tantrum, but at least said engineer was still working like everyone else despite the awkward social situations. The chef had shown no such maturity.

Mot had told me that my suggestion showed no sympathy to a man in love. Annette had rolled her eyes and Vik and George had even laughed at it. Vyne had sent a message to my eye screen pretty much saying, *Good luck with that*. No one agreed with my assessment that emotions from one's personal life should be divorced from one's job.

This strengthened my resolve that I start hoarding food in the small kitchen in my quarters in case the head chef decided to go off on one of his tantrums again.

The jerboa had climbed up on top of the couch and was looking out into the vast darkness of hyperspace. I wonder

what it saw out there. Nothing like the rest of us? Or did it imagine something outside—a country vista, terrible monsters, or just mountains of jerboa friendly food?

I was sitting on the couch working on the next episode's itinerary on a data pad. The ship was eventually heading toward uncharted territory, or at least uncharted according to the official imperial star charts. The next location was called XDZ-7, a singular black hole in the middle of the Delta-Epsilon sector. Very few travelers went in that direction except for refueling. A space station was located close to the black hole whose sole purpose was to harvest the radiation emitted by the anomaly as energy. There were no other planetary systems located near the black hole as all of them had been swallowed up by the anomaly millennia ago.

However, there was the population living on the space station. According to the research that Vyne had gathered and distributed to all of us, the residents of GSS-7 referred to the black hole as Ecstasy Seven, after its call letters. The name particularly stuck when GSS-7 had been briefly taken over by drug lords during the Delta-Epsilon Insurgence about half a century ago and used the place as a depot for all sorts of illegal pharmaceuticals that enhanced sensory perceptions in those ingesting such drugs.

Now, of course, Ecstasy Seven was just a way station with few visitors except for the annual Ecstasy Seven Festival which originally celebrated an ancient musical form called techno. A not so official fact about the festival was that it was also during the celebrations that the art of extrasensory enhancements via medicinal route was also performed. It was said that the officials on the space station looked the other way during the festival if any of this went on. It was an unspoken rule that it was bad form to crack down on the party when all anyone was doing was having a good time.

Apparently, Mot had timed it exactly so that that we would be arriving at XDZ-7 just as the Ecstasy Seven Festival was about to start. This, I figured, was not a coincidence. To say the least, I was not particularly enthused about this particular episode. So many things could possibly go wrong. Someone had to stay sober. Although if things did go wrong, the sober person would probably not be me.

The ship's hyperdrive soon powered down and the darkness of hyperspace gave way back to the faint glint of normal space. The jerboa chirped as we dropped back into normal space and then scampered off to its cage, which to my chagrin, it used rather infrequently.

I scrolled down the data pad and grimaced at the schedule that Annette had outlined for everyone. I was apparently on kitchen duty again. This time, I was tasked to film one of the large kitchens on the station which was used to churn out all the food during the major events during the festival which included the first day's evening feast, the next afternoon's brunch, and the ton of Galican turkey legs for the turkey pie eating contest. I had seen an eating contest once, as it was staged on a reality show. It had not been a pretty sight. For that particular show, they had used Bavarian cream pies. Half of the contestants had passed out from sugar overdose before the third pie. And the winner had to be carted off to the infirmary to make sure that he didn't explode.

A message flashed on my eye screen. It was a general one aimed at all the members of the film crew.

Debarcation in half an hour. Be ready at the transport room.

Damn. And I thought I would still have half a day until I would have to set foot on the station to do any filming. Apparently Mot wanted us to get in there as soon as possible. And in order to do that, we would be transporting onto the station rather than waiting until *The Bacchus* actually docked. Mot must be extremely impatient for something. I quickly scrolled back up the itinerary and looked at the first event. Meeting with the space station commander, Akar Dorfendorf. I pulled up Dorfendorf's profile and saw that he was a decorated veteran from a distant conflict in the Gamma Quadrant and that he had been "awarded" a command post on XDZ-7. I wondered who Dorfendorf pissed off in High Command.

I quickly grabbed a light pack that I had stuffed earlier with three changes of clothes, the data pad, and a wristband that doubled as a holographic projection recorder. I had appropriated it from the stash of extra equipment down on deck twelve and had recalibrated it so that it only worked when I was operating it. Vyne's paranoia about equipment sabotage had slightly rubbed off on me. Just as I was about to leave my quarters, the jerboa dashed back up to me with a packet of dried vegetable bits in its mouth. Before I could even react, it scampered up my leg and dove into the pocket of my jacket.

I was not the first at the transporter room. George was there first. He had a traveling rucksack strapped to one shoulder and a silver case of equipment in his other hand. The transporter operator, a brown-haired man of middling height and in officer uniform—was standing at the controls checking various parameters, completely oblivious to everyone else in the room. The jerboa peeked out of the pocket to see what was going on.

"Hey Balthazar!" George exclaimed. "What's up in gerbil world?"

The jerboa stared at George for a moment and then disappeared back into the pocket, deciding that the large sensory technician was beneath its notice.

"Gerbil world consisted of eating pine nuts, beating me at 3D chess five times in a row, and running about the cabin disturbing my sleep," I said.

"Too bad, kid," George said. "Maybe you should just get some earplugs. Or a white noise generator."

"Whatever, George."

"Are you two the only ones quanting to the station?" the transporter operator said when he finally looked up from his routine checks. "My schedule here says that I'm supposed to be quanting off the entire film crew."

"They'll be here soon enough," George said. "We're just early."

At that moment, the doors to the transporter room hissed open, letting in Vik and Vyne. "Lucky bastard," Vik had exclaimed. "I wish I had nanobots so I could metabolize everything known to man. And pretty much half the stuff that isn't known, too."

"You can get nanobots," said Vyne. "But you'd have to give up a kidney and part of your liver. Oh, and there's also some brain surgery involved."

Vik gave a shudder. "On second thought, maybe not. I don't want anyone digging around in my brain. I'm a private person, I'll have you know. Anyways, how did you get nanobots?"

"From a hoverboard accident."

There was a bit of silence as everyone digested that statement. I wondered if the cyborg was lying. He might be able to tell if anyone else was lying with his thermal imaging abilities, but what about the rest of us? I discretely trigged my fingers.

You're kidding us, right?

What if I am?

What's the real story?

That's the real story. Or rather just part of it. Maybe I'll tell you the entire sorry tale sometime. Perhaps over that dinner I owe you.

Ooo, that was tricky. Trying to get me to have dinner with him by dangling a bribe. I was not going to take it. If I wanted the explanation badly enough, there were other ways of finding it out. It might take every single bit of knowledge I knew about hacking, and then some, in order to unearth the story of how the cyborg got his nanobots, but it would be quite possible to do it. The question was, of course, was I desperate enough to attempt to go through all that trouble?

I decided at that moment, no. I had better things to do. And if I was tricky, perhaps I might be able to get him to tell me without all the hassle of the dinner.

Annette came into the transporter room next, weighed down by three bags made of designer synth-leather the color of a Galican sunrise. She was complaining about trying to lug everything down to the transporter room herself, but no one offered to help her put everything onto the quant pad.

Mot arrived last. And he gave no excuses or apologies for his late arrival. But once everyone was there and loaded onto the quant pad (and Vik had one of his holographic recording devices already turned on and running), the transportation operator nodded to himself and simply activated the device with a pull of a lever.

Quanting was an odd phenomenon. In school, I had learned that it was a form of quantum entanglement involving particles at one location or the other. But other than that, I had completely tuned out the nitty gritty details of the explanation. Physics was just not my thing so I did not even bother to pay attention to it. Then again, a lot of things that weren't related to film were not my things. Maybe that was why I sucked at a lot of things at school compared to my overachieving brother.

At any rate, quanting was a rather frequent transportation device used on interstellar ships and emergency relocation stations on planets in case there were cataclysmic disasters like being bombarded with planetary destruction devices by disgruntled overlords of the malevolent type. When it was activated, the person or object that was being transported simply disappeared from the first point and reappeared at the second point without any particular fanfare.

Of course, there was the slight chance that the quanting instruments would malfunction and that you would either get yourself doubled or eliminated out of existence, but everyone said that those risks were so small that they were in effect, nonexistent.

So from one moment, we were standing on the quanting pad in the transportation room and the next, standing on another quanting pad in another transportation room, located on the GSS-7 space station. The transport operator of the space station's quant pad looked up from his controls with a bored expression. Which wasn't surprising—he probably transported hundreds or thousands of people in a month. It was probably ten times as much as that during the festivities. Beside the transport operator, however, was another man wearing a red uniform with several pips on his collar denoting his high rank. The man himself was rather tall and thin with only a ring of gray hair around a bald pate.

"Mr. Mot!" the man exclaimed as we climbed off the quant pad. "What a pleasure to see you in person after all of our correspondence about your future film project."

"Commander Dorfendorf," said Mot as he came forward to shake the man's hand. "Likewise. This is my film crew." Mot introduced each of us and we all shook hands and nodded our heads. "We have a bit of equipment with us, but otherwise, we don't require all that much room."

"Oh, don't worry too much about room," Dorfendorf said. "I had a suite of rooms on one of the upper decks reserved for your entire crew. I hope it does have enough room for you to set everything up. I can't wait until we finally get into the itinerary. I must say, you and your director have packed your schedules full. I hope you do have some free time reserved so you can enjoy the festival without the specter of work looming over your heads."

No such luck with that, I thought. It would be work the entire time I was on the station and awake. And maybe while I was asleep, too, depending on how many auxiliary recorders I had employed around the station at one time.

Part V: Entree

Coral Chips

“I will not have some uncouth filmmaker sully my kitchen!”

The chef of one of the space station's main kitchens on the upper decks was yelling at the lieutenant who had been assigned to take me to the kitchen to have some of the holographic recording devices installed to get some food shots for the show. The chef was a short man, shorter than me, with pitch black hair and an enormous mustache. The apron he wore was red and white plaid. Lieutenant Walden, to his credit did not flinch even when the chef decided to swing the laser-guided rolling pin in his face. The man was a professional officer to the end.

“I am making art and I will not have anyone who are not my own assistants wandering around on the premises.”

“Chef Gark, I assure you, there will be minimal intrusion into your domain during filming,” said the lieutenant.

“Everything has already been authorized by the commander.”

“The commander is not the boss of me!”

“Actually, he is,” said the lieutenant evenly. “If he decided to, he could ship you off tomorrow for insubordination.”

“Pah!”

“Sir,” I said, addressing the chef who was giving me the evil eye, “My involvement in the kitchen will be quite minimal. All I will be doing will be installing some holographic recorders so that we can get some scenes of you and your assistants working in your element.”

The chef did not seem particularly swayed by my explanation. “Art cannot be made with the eye of some authority looking over my shoulder! In the end, it will be the idiotic public who will be scrutinizing the way of the artist. And does the public know anything about art? No! They're all ignorant about art!”

The lieutenant gave the chef a stony expression. “There are already security cameras in the kitchens so that people are already scrutinizing you and your assistants. The holographic recorders will not be any different.”

“It's an invasion of privacy!” The chef's voice, which was already at a loud decibel, rose even higher in outrage at this latest piece of knowledge. “Artists need privacy to create art!”

“Your art ends up being eaten by the public.” The lieutenant glanced down at the schedule on his data pad and then looked back up at the chef, now with a bored expression. “All right. So you don't want any holographic recorders to record what you are doing in the kitchens? Very well then. You will be relieved of duty for the entire duration of the festivities. Your second in command will take over until after the festival.”

“What?” Chef Grak shrieked. “The festival is the culmination of all my efforts and talents. You can't put me out of commission for this!”

“If you're going to be so temperamental about this little thing, then there is no choice to do that, isn't there? As far as we can tell, your second in command is well trained to run the kitchens during the festivities if he needs to. And we can move everyone else up a position and put a novice in one of the lower positions. One of the administrative assistants would be happy to fill in. They have little to do during most of the festivities anyway.”

“No, no, no.” The chef flapped his arms and suddenly looked contrite. “Art cannot be put off like this! I'll make a compromise then. I'll allow the holographic recorders into my kitchens. But make sure they are not obvious! I do not want to have a constant reminder that there are billions of people out there watching my every move!”

The lieutenant just shook his head and waved his hand at me as this was probably the only concession that I could get out of this temperamental cook. So in the next few minutes, I was ushered into the large kitchen on the upper deck where I could install a few of the holographic recorders. The chef hovered the entire time that I was installing the recorders, making sure with an eagle eye that I was not trying to trick him with anything. He even kept up a running commentary on how I should have been doing my job. I ignored him and concentrated on doing this as I had always done. At least I attracted a few sympathetic glances from the assistants in the kitchens who were busy preparing the day's lunch menu.

Walden was waiting for me just outside the kitchens when I finally departed with six of the recorders installed in various locations. He motioned with his hand for me to follow him down one of the corridors that led to one of the smaller kitchens on the same deck.

“I must apologize for Chef Grak's behavior,” he told me. “He is the head chef on the upper decks and for the past couple of years, he pretty much has free run of the entire place since none of his customers have filed any complaints about his cooking. I had not realized that he has had such strong beliefs about the culinary arts.”

“If it's any consolation to you,” I replied, “That's the first time I've encountered anyone who was so passionate about food. Most people, of course, just think it's stuff to eat. Not something worthy of existentialist contemplation.”

“You may be right, Ms. Tanaka-Teng.” The lieutenant nodded at a passing officer and then turned around a

corner. I followed, lugging all the equipment that I had the transport operator back on *The Bacchus* quant to the station. “There is probably someone in every field who considers himself or herself an artist.”

I had no more problems installing the recording devices in any of the other kitchens. In fact, the chefs in charge of those kitchens seemed to welcome the fact that there was going to be some filming going on. They had even confided to me that they had even watched the first episodes of *Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant* and had hopes that they would get interviewed by Nigel Mot when he visited the kitchens and become stars themselves.

I was, of course, privy to the schedule and knew that Mot had planned on visiting only the kitchens on the upper decks. But I did not want to deflate these chefs' hopes. Of course, there was always the chance that Mot would encounter Chef Grak and decide at the last minute that he didn't want to be filmed with a pretentious culinary artist who didn't want to be filmed in the first place. So I just told these hopeful chefs that Mot could be coming in at any time during the festival to see how everything was being cooked up for the celebrations.

The entire installation of all the recorders took up most of the afternoon and by the end of it, I was exhausted and headed straight toward the crew quarters that the commander of the space station had assigned to us for the duration of our stay. The quarters were a suite of rooms located on the upper levels. The bedrooms themselves, each with their own bathrooms, were arranged in a semicircular pattern around a central living area where Mot decided would be great for our periodic crew meetings. Mot, of course, took the master bedroom on the far side of the series of rooms and as far as anyone knew, spent his entire day either there in private communications with other executives from the Galactic Broadcasting Corporation or at one of the meeting rooms on a lower deck fine tuning the filming schedule with Annette and Commander Dorfendorf.

When I arrived back at our temporary lodgings, I found George already in the common area doing some maintenance on his sensory equipment. I asked him where Vik was and he mumbled something about “filming the milieu.” Guessing that the head holographic projectionist was still doing some last minute work, I headed to my own bedroom which was located closest to the entrance to the suite. It was, obviously, smaller than the master bedroom which we had all had a peek at, but it was still quite sizable. It was still double the size of the room that I had on *The Bacchus*. Once in the room, the jerboa jumped out of his hiding place in my pocket and decided to race around to exercise its legs.

I dumped the rest of the recording equipment that I had been lugging around into the corner and then flopped backward onto the bed. I stared up at the ceiling, ignoring the mundane messages flickering on my eye screen. I was exhausted. And hungry, despite the fact that I had been spending my entire day in kitchens. I wondered what there was good to eat on the station. According to the festival schedule, the opening ceremonies was going to start in the evening with a light dinner and some opening performances by several musical groups that specialized in the ancient form of techno.

The notion of a light dinner did not quite appeal to me. I felt so hungry that I imagined that I could eat an entire banquet. I put my hand to my stomach when I heard it growl. What I needed right then was a snack to help tide me over before I was forced to do any more filming. With a groan, I got out of the bed. The jerboa, I noticed, had stopped running around and had found a high perch on a bookshelf at the side of the room. It looked like it was sleeping. I headed back into the communal room where George was sitting. The sensory technician looked up at me as I took a seat on a couch facing him.

“I thought you were going to take a nap.”

“I was too hungry for a nap,” I replied. “What I want is a snack before we have to do the filming of the introductory ceremony for the festival.”

“Then go get a snack. While I was recording some ambient sound on one of the mid-decks, I heard some people talking about all of the little food stands on deck one that sell a variety of snacks. It seems that they were quite popular.”

With that dubious third hand recommendation, I headed back out of the suite and took a lift down to the lower level. The place was crowded and a bit smokey—completely different than the clean, sanitized, and upper class frippery of the higher decks. Here were the immigrants and ne'er-do-wells of the space station. This was where all of the real mixing and action happened on Ecstasy Seven.

George would have a heyday with this, I thought as I moved along a stream of people heading from the lifts to the central promenade of the level. There were so many sounds and languages from a variety of people. And there were all sorts of scents, too. One could smell the sweat and grime of everything. But above that, there was also the fragrant odor of incense being peddled by the wayward cults setting up their booths in the empty alcoves of the station and the pungent aroma of fast food.

The most prominent smell was meaty and yeasty at the same time. I had no idea what it was, so I simply followed my nose until I came upon a small shop at one alcove that sold what they called the Ecstasy Seven Burger. From the images on their menu, the burger looked very similar to the burger that I had ended up eating on Kraken before *The Bacchus* had departed for the documentary trip. It didn't smell like the burger on Kraken—that had been odorless and bland—but that didn't mean anything. The scent itself could be merely an additive for something that was in actuality exactly the same. I stood in front of the stand pondering on whether or not I should order the burger to appease my immediate hunger. My stomach growled again, insisting that I make a decision soon.

“I know a place further down that would probably have something more appealing to your palate.”

“What the...” I turned around to find that Vyne was standing right behind me. He was carrying a small dark bag, which could be filled with anything from several data pad backups to an illegal weapon, and his hands were in the pockets of the large knee-length black jacket that he wore. He wasn't smiling. As usual. “What are you doing here?” I demanded.

“Doing research, what else?” He swept a hand out to indicate the entire deck. Several people immediately detoured away from the cyborg. “Nigel Mot wanted to film a couple scenes of this episode on some of the seamier side of things on the station. I wanted to gather as much information as possible before any actual filming took place on this level.”

I had to admit, that was a sensible decision to send a cyborg off to the darker parts of the station. If there were any shady characters around, the cyborg would well take care of himself. I decided that his pack had a better probability of containing a weapon than data pads. “So did you get a lot of material for the episode?”

“Enough,” Vyne replied. “So what do you say about dinner?”

“You are not treating me to dinner.” My stomach growled in protest but I ignored it. I might be hungry, but I was in no danger of starving. Yet. “I was just pondering the choices for a snack, that's all. I'll eventually get to the place you mentioned and maybe I'll order something from that place. But that's a maybe. It's not an acquiescence to your suggestion.”

“I never said it was.” There was a strange tone to his voice. Was he laughing at me?

I turned to walk further down the promenade to examine the food options. The cyborg trailed after me, leaving us with a wide berth from everyone else mingling on the deck. So much for blending in with the crowd. A few other stalls down, I finally encountered a dim place offering traditional New Illion fare. I had never heard of New Illion so I quickly triggered my fingers for a search. The answer soon popped up on my eye screen.

New Illion was a star system far enough from the black hole that it was in no danger of being swallowed up any time soon, but it was also still close enough that it would probably only take a few minutes in hyperspace travel to get from here to there. It was a system with two habitable planetary bodies, each with their own cuisines. The one being on offer at the station was the food from New Illion III which was characterized by cuisine that was centered around a microscopic organism that lived in the seas of the planet and chemosynthesized its own food. It built its own shell-like skeleton which housed it in a variety of shapes and colors, depending on the species. It wasn't even remotely the same as the Terran coral, but the structure of the organism was similar enough that it was commonly called the New Illion coral.

At this particular stand, there were several aquariums situated close to the small, possibly hazardously designed kitchens. I watched a moment as another customer ordered a dish and the cook at the stand simply reached into the aquarium with his bare hands and broke off a chunk of the coral. In a couple of seconds, the cook had cut the coral into wafer thin slices and dumped them into a bowl of cooked root vegetables before handing the entire thing to the customer.

“They eat it live,” Vyne told me as I stared at the customer happily picking up the sliced coral with a pair of chopsticks and shoving it into his mouth without any apparent ill effect. “It's supposed to deliver a unique stinging sensation whenever you chew it.”

“Really? So you've tried it before?”

“No. It's what I've found in the databases on New Illion cuisine.”

“Right, right. You're the crew's walking brain bank.” There was still a small part in the back of my mind that urged caution, but I found my feet propelling me forward to the stall. I encountered the robotic cashier that inquired what I would have. I glanced at the menu and decided promptly, “I'll have the Traditional Meal.” I gave the robot my credit chip to scan and then glanced at the cook in the back who was already at work, preparing the meal. The cook did not even look at me or even anyone streaming outside in the main promenade as he went to the aquarium to acquire another chunk of coral. I raised my wrist which contained my portable holographic recorder and began filming the New Illion cook's ritual.

In the next minute, my meal appeared in a nondescript, disposable bowl. I picked it up and examined the food closely. The slices of coral appeared as bright apricot discs alongside the more dull, white and beige root vegetables. There was also some leafy greens scattered among these bits making the whole thing very colorful. I obtained some chopsticks from a dispenser in the tiny stand-and-eat area adjacent to the stall and quickly tried a bite of the coral as the cyborg had his back turned to me to order his own snack.

The New Illion coral had a spongy texture and it bristled against the insides of my mouth like a sonic toothbrush, that was used properly, of course. When I swallowed, I could feel it going down my throat. It had a slightly sweet yet savory taste to it. After another bite, I decided that I would like it.

“I see you haven't thrown up yet.”

I glanced at Vyne as I popped another piece of coral into my mouth. He was holding another bowl which contained blue New Illion coral. “Ha ha. Very funny. What did you get?”

“The South New Illion Special,” he replied. He picked up a slice of the coral with his own pair of chopsticks and put it in his mouth. If I had blinked, I would have missed his eyes going momentarily red. His expression did not change as he chewed slowly. “It is interesting.”

“I wonder what creates the unique sensation in the mouth.”

“The microscopic creatures that make up the coral have small stingers which they use against predators and to trap prey,” he replied as he retrieved another coral slice from his bowl. “Individually, they would have no effect. But together,

it creates the sensation. That's why much of the cuisine of the place, I gather, uses it live."

"I see you're holding up well to the onslaught of live coral," I said as the cyborg ate his portion. "What can't you eat?"

He swallowed his last bite and regarded me warily. "I'm not indestructible, you know. My nanobots can metabolize a lot of things. But there are some substances which act as inhibitors for the nanobots."

"Oh? What sort of things?"

"Like I'm going to tell you," he scoffed. He tossed his now empty bowl into a waste receptacle. "Do you think I'm stupid enough to give away my weaknesses just because you asked?"

"It was worth a try." I picked up one of the root vegetables from my own bowl and threw it. It hit his forehead and slid down his nose. He made a noise that suspiciously sounded like a growl.

"What was that for?"

"I'm trying a new tactic. Maybe I can annoy you enough so that you have no choice but to spill all of your secrets."

He gave me a strangely feral grin. "Bring it on, shorty."

Ooo. The cyborg was going to be so sorry that he messed with me.

Vitamins Via Glow Stick

Nigel Mot was dancing on a table with one of the space station's light fixtures on his head.

Vik was in charge of filming all of the scenes where Mot was in so he and the boss had gone over to the VIP table at the station's grand meeting and banquet hall where the main mid-week celebrations for the Ecstasy Seven Festival were being held. Earlier, Annette had managed to arrange with the premier food and wine taster of the Beta and Gamma Quadrants, Yarbaro Jardin, and all about traveler and acquaintance to Mot known only as Kameel, to meet with Mot to discuss the beverages that could have been served during the coronation of his emperor ancestor because there was only really one beverage listed on the official menu—Agoutain wine—which several centuries ago was also served on the space station until it was outlawed by the local government for being too liberal a libation. It was only recently that the law had been repealed and that the drink in question was slowly making a comeback.

What "liberal libation" in this particular context actually meant, who knows.

At any rate, Vik had gone to film Mot, Jardin, and Kameel in their discussion. From my monitoring of the recording feed on the other side of the room where I was busy taking in some crowd shots of partyers dancing to ancient techno, I noticed that as Jardin lectured Mot about the historical significance of a variety of drinks, several waiter robots came by their table to deliver each drink. The three men took a couple sips of each drink—normally a precautionary measure if one was to expect a lot of alcohol—but it was only a couple of minutes after they had tried the Agoutain wine when they noticeably began behaving differently.

According to the research that Vyne had sent everyone, Agoutain wine was originally made in a distant Delta Quadrant system called Agouta X. The religious colonists there had developed the drink from an old recipe book that had been published by a monastery in the Alpha Quadrant. But instead of the Terran grape and grain that the original recipe that had originally been called for, the colonists had substituted the grain portion of the recipe with fermented Galican apricots since that particular variety grew particularly well on the climate of the Agoutain homeworld.

But even that was not enough to propel that particular wine out of obscurity. It was only until one of the colonists visiting the GSS-7 station had thought to age the wine by putting a bottle of it just before the event horizon of the local black hole and letting it circumnavigate the spatial anomaly a couple of times before retrieving it. However, the way a black hole bends space and time was not exactly the same thing as aging anything via hyperspace jumping or faster than light travel. Something peculiar happened to that first bottle of test wine—something about neutrinos and quarks—that changed the mixture into something wholly different and more potent.

That was the simplified explanation that Jardin gave to Mot while they had been talking about the drink. A more complicated and complete picture would have to be explained by a physical chemist.

However, the potency could not explain the men's change in behavior. According to all the reports about Agoutain wine consumption, drinkers were said to become mellow and more sociable. Relaxed. They weren't supposed to be unusually energetic. The first sign that we got that something had seriously gone wrong was when Kameel abruptly decided to leave the table and pursue an attractive woman on the dance floor. Then Jardin suggested that they go our dancing with the rest of the revelers and Mot had readily agreed. From what Mot had told us during our last crew meeting, he hated dancing. And singing. And that no one, no matter how adamant or high up in the GBC chain of command, was going to coerce him into doing any of these stunts.

But here was Mot, dancing on a table with a light fixture on his head. Vik, of course, kept filming as he kept remarking to me in my ear comm, "This is awesome! Think of the ratings!"

I panned my own holographic recording device around the dance hall catching the usual dancers, flashing lights,

and what looked like ancient glow sticks. They looked very authentic. I wondered if they were manufactured exactly the same way the ancients made them—with a plastic tube containing a small glass vial of fluorescent dye and phenyl oxalate.

On my feed, I saw Vik cheerily accept a drink from one of the circulating robot waiters and down it in one gulp before he started to shift his recording focus. “Man, that was a bracer!” Vik exclaimed.

“Did you know what you just drank?” I shouted into my ear come. It was kind of loud at my location. The music coordinator had decided to put on a particularly punishing and pounding song. Was it my imagination that the floor beneath my feet had started vibrating?

“I think it was some sort of tequila called The Galactic Center,” Vik yelled back. “Except it had a slightly funny taste, like someone had put in some anise flavoring. Different. But good nonetheless. Oh God, look at Nigel go! He’s got some dance moves on him. I wonder why he didn’t want to do any dancing on the show in the first place?”

“Maybe because he knows that this is a culinary documentary and not a dancing reality show!”

“Pah! You’re such a spoilsport, Euphie. There’s never enough dancing in the galaxy.”

I sidestepped a dancing trio and slowly made my way across the crowd with my equipment on my shoulder. Most people ignored me, but the few who saw me started waving and giving me thumbs up for no apparent reason. I frowned, unsure of whether or not to acknowledge any of them. I decided to pretend that I was engrossed in my work.

There was a platform at the center of the room where the music coordinator stood at a series of controls, cueing up for the next sets. Next to the coordinator was a bar where several bartending robots were busy mixing drinks to hand out to nearby dancers and to the other robots circulating the room. I moved closer to the bar. The editors would want to have at least a couple shots of the thing even if they ended up not really using it.

My recorder caught one of the robots adding a mysterious white powder to the latest batch of margaritas.

“Hey!” I called out. “What was that you just added into those drinks?”

The robot briefly turned at the sound of my voice and slowly shook its head.

“I’m with the GBC film crew. We’re filming a culinary documentary and we would like to know what you’ve put into the drinks for the Ecstasy Seven Festival,” I explained.

A few lights flickered on top of the robot’s head and then it extended its arm for me to look at the view screen on its wrist. It said: It is a special herbal blend by Chef Gark.

“Oh great,” I yelled at the robot, over the music, “that explains a lot.”

“Explains what?”

I looked over to see that Annette was dancing with one of the officers who worked at the station. “The mystery powder they’re putting into the drinks.”

“It’s probably just sugar.” Annette and her partner grabbed drinks and waved to me. “Keep up the good work, Euphie! You might also want to take a couple shots over there where they’re doing some cage dancing!”

“Wait, don’t drink any of that stuff! We don’t know what’s in…” I trailed off when the two of them ignored me and downed about half their drinks before disappearing back into the dancing crowd. “Great. We’re all doomed.”

The robot at the bar offered me a drink.

“Thanks.” I took the drink and then rummaged around in the pouch I had strapped around my waist and managed to retrieve an empty data chip container. Carefully, I poured a bit of the drink into the container and then put it back into my pouch. Once we got back to where the music wasn’t so loud, I was going to run an analysis on the thing—even if I didn’t understand all the data readings. That was what chemists were for.

After a few more shots of the bar and a tentative sip of the drink the robot gave me, I headed to the cage dancing area to film more people making fools of themselves. From my feed, I saw that Mot had moved on to break dancing with a bunch of drunk station officers. Jardin was laughing along and Mot’s friend Kameel was now dancing with a crowd of women. Which was really strange because Kameel was a short, hirsute man who looked more like a drunk clown on the dance floor than a ladies’ man. Vik was onto his second drink and he was already slightly weaving.

“This anise flavored stuff is awesome!” the head holographic projectionist slurred into my ear comm.

“You should stop drinking that stuff, Vik,” I replied. “It’s making your recording all jumpy. The editors won’t be able to use any of your footage if you keep this up.”

“It’s all artistic license! The editors can’t argue with that!”

The drink that I had tasted did not taste of anise. And so far, I still felt like myself. Perhaps the robot had given me a drink that had not been spiked. Feeling rather confident in my assessment, I downed the rest of the drink and then put the empty glass on a tray being carried around by one of the robot waiters. A little alcohol was fine to clear my head from all of this ridiculousness.

Women wearing far more skin than clothes were writhing about in metal cages suspended from the ceiling at the cage area. Here, the music seemed particularly loud, making me feel like I had suddenly shrunk down to microscopic size and had been placed in the middle of someone’s beating heart. I trigged my fingers to adjust my ear comm to noise canceling levels. That was when I saw George wander past with a recorder in his hand and another one strapped to his neck. On his other arm was a very tall woman with mannish features and impressive endowments nearly bursting out of her tiny sequined dress. In his other hand was an empty drinking glass.

The sensory technician gave me a thumbs up and a loopy smile. "Isn't this great, kid!" he yelled at me. Then he moved off with his latest paramour, slightly unsteady on his feet.

George is going to be unhappy when he wakes up tomorrow morning finding that he bed partner is not what he thought she would be. The message scrolled past my eye screen from a familiar anonymous source. The cyborg had, yet again, cracked my firewall. At this point, I might as well give up, I thought cynically.

"I want to go on record to say that in my opinion, everyone in this crew is stoned," I said into the ear comm. "This scene will probably end up a bust. I'm launching a holographic probe to record remotely. I'm going home before this idiotic music makes my ears bleed."

"Aw, don't be such a spoilsport," Vik said into the ear comm. "But I suppose it's all right if you're still recording remotely since you're not following Mot. Annette?"

"What? Oh yeah. Whatever," the director said, slurring the last word until it sounded like she was purring. She giggled. "Oh Lieutenant! Stop that! It tickles!"

I manually cut my connection with Annette. At this point, she was probably useless.

Vik is right, Shorty. You're a spoilsport. Don't you want to see what other skills Mot has in dancing? He's doing the Robot right now.

"I'm going to be outside the room," I said into the ear comm, ignoring the cyborg's goad. "I'll see everyone tomorrow morning."

I managed to make my way to the room entrance and deployed a holographic recorder probe which floated up to the ceiling where it would have a good vantage point. I triggered my fingers to manually activate the feeds and have it directed to part of my eye screen. However, getting to the entrance in the first place was not without its mishaps. I was temporarily waylaid by a man in tight orange pants and an oiled chest attempting to dance with me. But he moved away right quick when I showed him my ancient handheld holographic recorder that looked vaguely like a stunner. I breathed in a momentary sigh of relief when I finally got out into the station corridor. It was still crowded outside, of course, but it did not seem like such the free-for-all that people were having inside.

"Glow stick symbionts, ma'am?"

I glanced around at the voice and found a small stall set up just outside of the main celebration hall filled with packages of the glow sticks that I had seen inside. "Symbionts?" I repeated. The last word seemed rather random.

"Symbionts," the glow stick seller agreed. She was a thin woman with blue and orange hair that was arranged in a large pouffy style that was bigger than her head. She was wearing black synth leather with silver buckles. Her arms were bare, revealing several swirling tattoos and a couple of glow sticks which she had wrapped around her arms like bracelets.

"I don't follow."

"These glow sticks are good for your health," the seller said. "The glow sticks themselves are coated with *Luminarium agouti*, a type of symbiont that lives on the Agoutan home world. They're preferred place of habitat is the skin. If you have it on your skin, they will send parapodia into you, just like the roots of plants. They use any of the waste your own cells produce as their food. And their waste products are actually vitamins and other nutrients that your cells will want. And as a result of their metabolism, the *Luminarium* symbiont will produce fluorescent light. Various strains, of course, will produce different colored light."

"That's interesting," I replied as I triggered my fingers and accessed the local database to find out if what the seller said was actually true. When the information scrolled past my eye screen, I found myself frowning. I had expected the seller to be telling me a bunch of hokum. But apparently what she said was true. "How much?" I finally said.

The seller gave me the price and I let her scan my credit chip. I picked up a variety of packages and then stuffed them into my pouch before I made my way down the corridor to the lift. There was a line at the lift which was very odd. I asked a nearby couple dressed in matching blue outfits with flaring pant bottoms and glittering lapels about the sudden lines at the lift.

"Apparently there's supposed to be another gathering on Deck One," the man told me. "And it's supposed to be even bigger and better than the one up here where all the posh people are. They say there are some actual performers down there rather than just some music coordinator piping in some already recorded music."

"Yeah," his partner added. "I hear that the Screaming Quarks and the Schrodinger Antimuons are going to be playing. You don't even need a ticket."

"Are they supposed to be playing now?" I asked.

"In about an hour," the woman confirmed. "We're trying to get there early so we can get some seats. Sweetie pie here is the cousin to the synth-drummer in the Screaming Quarks so we're guaranteed a space no matter what. But apparently word has spread and it's very popular at the festival!"

The man was looking at me with narrowed eyes as his partner spoke, but then the light of recognition seemed to brighten his features. "I know you!"

"You do?" I said with slight apprehension. I was used to being buried under obscurity. Nobody was supposed to know, or care, who I was.

"Yeah. You're one of the holographic projectionists for *Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant*," he replied. "I

just watched the last episode last night. It was awesome!”

“Oh, now that you mention it sweetie pie, I do recognize you! They call you Euphie, right?” said the woman. “That last episode was just brilliant. Now I simply must try the squeaky greens, just so I could secretly throw those mushroom things at my boss who I absolutely deplore!”

“Uh...” There were certainly holographic recorders on the New Xenan moon during that particular picnic scene, and it was true that I had also submitted some of the footage of the salad debacle to the editors at the GBC without specifically telling Vik about it, but I didn’t even think that it would make the final cut. “Thanks, I think.”

“I’ve also gotten my cousin to watch the show,” the man said. “And he’s a big fan, too. I know! You can totally come down to Deck One with us to film the bands! You’re here for filming the festival, right? What episode about the Ecstasy Seven Festival would be complete without a bit of footage on the Screaming Quarks?”

String Spaghetti Theory

It took fifteen minutes before Hagar and Freya Bjornstad, the couple who claimed to be fans of the food show, and I got to get into the lift heading down to Deck One. The lift itself was crowded and I ended up squashed in the corner along with other partyers who were excitedly talking about the bands that would be playing on the lower level.

Privately I sighed and wondered what I had gotten into. I had wanted to go back to the crew quarters and working on filming remotely there without the distraction or annoyance of all the rabid and drunk party goers. I felt a headache coming on and wished I had an alcoholic drink (not drugged!) in my hand at the moment. On part of my eye screen, I watched with a bit of detachment as Vik attempted to film Mot who was now attempting to do the waltz with a bemused woman standing nearby. The other feeds from the other members of the film crew were practically incoherent from their recent intoxication. Only the cyborg’s feed was halfway sensible. I figured that if he had imbibed anything at all, his nanobots probably got rid of all the toxins before it could have affected him.

The lift reached Deck One in a couple of seconds and the doors opened, disgorging all of the occupants. I followed the Bjornstads out into the corridor. This time, the place had been changed from earlier. Instead of food and merchandise stands from when I had been there earlier, all of this was cleared away to make room for more stands selling the glow stick symbionts. The Bjornstads stopped briefly to buy some. When they inquired why I wasn’t buying any, I simply whipped out one of the packages I had purchased earlier. I opened it and wrapped the glow stick symbiont to my wrist so that they wouldn’t try to bug me further.

My wrist slightly tingled as the *Luminarium* symbionts sank their parapodia into me. The plastic tubing around my wrist began to glow a silver-blue light.

The surge of people were heading into one of the main performance rooms on Deck One. But unlike the upper decks, the decks in the lower part of the station had an old, grungy feel to them. They felt as if they had not been renovated since the last century. The performance room itself was a dark gray, made even darker since there was no light except from a few rotating strobes which had been installed on the ceiling. One of the bands was already playing on the performance platform at the center of the room. According to the database that I accessed, the band was called The Lazy Neutrinos. The Bjornstads waved me over to one of the preparation rooms adjacent to the performance room where several bands were getting ready for their performances. The four band members of the Screaming Quarks had staked out a corner of the room for their own.

A woman with bright yellow and green hair was busy checking her synth guitar while another man with blue and green hair was adjusting the ancient electronic panel that he had lugged into the room with him. The singer for the Screaming Quarks was currently screaming at a waiter robot who had arrived with a tray of food.

“I can’t do anything with this!” the singer exclaimed. “You can’t make a sandwich out of this. Look, look.” He took one of the small slices of bread that was about the size of his palm and then a slice of Vanadian lilac-colored lunchmeat and put it on top of the bread. The lunchmeat was probably about twice the size of the slice. “It just doesn’t fit.”

This particular waiter robot had a voice. “Mr. Igan, you can just fold it in half and make the sandwich that way.”

“No! It just simply wouldn’t work.” He shook the lunchmeat and the bread slice in the robot’s face. The robot didn’t not even blink at the singer’s antics since the robot didn’t even have eyelids. “They don’t fit no matter what you do! This is impossible! Impossible! I demand to speak with the chef. Or his superiors so I can give them a piece of my mind. I can’t eat like this!”

“You can submit a complaint to Chef Gark,” replied the robot. Then, it simply left the tray there and went away to attend to another band.

The singer rolled his eyes and threw a slice of bread at the retreating robot. “You mechanical coward! Come back here and fight like a man!”

The woman with the yellow and green hair briefly looked up from her fiddling with the guitar and sneered at the singer. “You can’t fight like a man if you’re not a man in the first place.”

Hagar Bjornstad's cousin, Boris the synth-drummer, was a beefy looking man with a shaved head and several piercing in his ears, lip, and nose. He greeted Hagar and Freya with a nod and then looked at me as if I was some strange alien that had suddenly appeared. Maybe he wasn't so much a fan of the food show as the Bjornstads had said he was. But I was wrong.

"Whoa," he drawled. "You're hotter in person."

I frowned. "I think you have me mixed up with someone else."

"No, I'd recognize you anywhere." He slapped his synth-drum which sent out a reverberating boom that made the floor in our vicinity shake in vibration. No one else seemed surprised. "You're one of the holographic projectionist, Euphie Tanaka-Teng. Your work is absolutely brilliant."

"Er, the show is being made by the GBC. It's being headed by Nigel Mot. If anyone deserves credit, it would be him."

"Nigel Mot is hot, too," Boris said. "But he's a bit old for me. Everyone's betting on when he's going to get creamed by the natives. So is the GBC here to do a show on the festival?"

"Yeah. Your cousin convinced me that a shoot here on Deck One might be a good addition. I won't guarantee that any of this will make the final cut, though, since Mr. Mot won't be in any of these scenes."

"That's fine. I'm just really excited that we might even have a chance to be shown on the GBC at all." The guitarist and electronics operator—although they did not say anything to that—nodded in agreement. The singer, Igan, was not paying any attention at all. He was still muttering about improper sandwiches.

"We're a pretty small time band," Boris continued to explain. "We're pretty well known on our home planet and maybe a few nearby systems, but it's difficult to get any gigs further out than Ecstasy Seven where pretty much every techno band comes anyway. One can get lost in the shuffle. Of course, playing an unfashionable genre of music probably contributes a bit to our obscurity, too."

"Oh come now, Boris," said Freya. "You have fans. Just not as many fans as, say, The Ringo Brothers. Of course, that's also a bright side. Your fans aren't, you know, insane." The Ringo Brothers were singers from the Alpha Quadrant who liked to sing saccharinely sweet songs about love and loss. Their songs were on the transmissions of practically every station across the galaxy. They had fan girls. Crazy fan girls who would do anything to get to their idols. That was why no one knew where The Ringo Brothers actually lived. They were in hiding. Except when they were singing at concerts. And even then, they were always surrounded by security.

An android dressed in a black uniform similar to the officers of the space station came by and indicated with a monotone voice that the Screaming Quarks were up next. Hagar and Freya bid goodbye to Boris and the rest of his band mates. I gave them a little wave and followed the couple back out to the main room. I could still hear the lead singer for the Screaming Quarks loudly complaining about the food even as Boris and the electronics operator forcibly dragged him toward the stage platform.

I adjusted my holographic recorder on my shoulder and studied the shot. It wasn't good, mostly because I was, unfortunately short. I hit a button on the recorder and the recording lens telescoped upwards, above the heads of even the tallest party goer. No one around me seemed to notice. The couple who had brought me down to Deck One was yelling at the stage along with everyone else for the next band to come out. I rubbed my temples, feeling a little tired. I snagged an energy drink from a passing waiter robot and quickly downed the drink. It tasted slightly tangy.

The Screaming Quarks arrived on stage via a hidden platform that rose from a lower level. The band members were all wearing cloaks with hoods that concealed their features. They began their first set and the strobe lights and colored lasers blinked on and off in time with the beat in pulses of blue and green. The crowd around me swelled and writhed with the music and for a moment, I imagined the entire audience like the ebb and flow of an ocean tide.

After a few more beats, a small strangely shaped stone was lowered from the ceiling to sit squarely at the center of the stage. The crowd roared.

“What's that?” I shouted.

“Stonehenge!” Hagar shouted back.

“What?”

“It's a replica of an ancient Terran landmark,” he explained. “The ancients used it to study a defunct field called string theory. It was supposed to be bigger, but due to time and budget constraints, that was all they could do for the festival. But isn't it great anyway?”

“I thought Stonehenge was used as an astronomical clock by the ancients, not as a computer for studying string theory.”

“That's not what the archaeologists say!”

“Yeah. Whatever.” I shook my head as a dotted lights clouded my vision briefly. “But wait. This seems a little familiar. Are you sure the Screaming Quarks didn't copy this whole idea off of somebody?”

“Boris told me that they came up with the idea all by themselves.” The Hagar ignored me as he whooped with the sudden change in tempo. The change in the music also caused the strangely shaped stone to suddenly erupt like a volcano. Long stringy confetti rained down on the audience. Everyone went wild.

One of the strings landed on my head. I pulled it off and sniffed it. It smelled like triticale flour. Was this pasta? As I dropped it onto the floor, another bolt of dull pain lanced through my head.

My head was swimming as if I was nearing the end of a bender. Not that I knew anything about benders. I wanted desperately to sit down and hang my head between my knees. The room was pounding and my stomach was roiling. I tried to tell Hagar and Freya that I wasn't feeling to well, but my mouth seemed to have been suddenly stuffed with cotton. The faces of the people around me stretched and twisted into demonic shapes. The dancing laser lights stabbed into my brain every time I blinked. And the glow stick wrapped around my wrist had turned into a sliver-blue snake.

I managed to trig my free hand. I'm not feeling too well. Help.

The holographic recorder on my shoulder felt as heavy as a boulder. I was tired. Oh so tired.

“I'm coming, Euphie,” said the snake.

I blinked. The snake was a glow stick again. The voice was coming from my ear comm.

Freya turned to me. In my hallucination, she looked stick thin and had eight gleaming eyes like a spider. Beside her was a mime. Or was that just Hagar and my vision had just gone haywire? “Are you all right?”

I finally worked my mouth open. “Don't worry. He's coming for me.”

“Who's coming for you?”

“The devil.” I stepped back, trying to stabilize myself against the heaving floor. And I hit upon something particularly large and unyielding. Something held me up before I slid onto the floor. I turned to see the devil. His eyes were glowing red and a network of silver ran underneath the skin of his cheeks.

“Are you here to take me down to hell?” I asked.

“No,” said the devil. “But you’re definitely going to feel like hell tomorrow morning when you wake up.”

“Right,” I agreed. And promptly fainted.

Weird Wontons

When I woke up, I saw the jerboa sitting on top of the blanket staring at me with its beady little eyes like a small monster just waiting to pounce. I still had a headache and the jerboa multiplied into two, then four, two, and then back to one again.

“What. The. Fuck.”

I abruptly sat up and the jerboa rolled off the blanket in a blue colored squeak. A moment later, it popped back up again with something in its mouth. It scampered toward me again and then dropped the thing in its mouth. It chirped, urging me to pick it up. It was a small metal case containing painkillers.

“Thanks. I think.” I took the case and opened it up, revealing a stash of small white pills. I tapped one out and swallowed it without any water. After about a minute, my headache slowly subsided. The jerboa chirped again and then raced off, out of the bedroom.

As my head cleared, my memory slowly came back. I remembered that after my faint on Deck One, I wound up back at the crew quarters on the space station courtesy of the cyborg who had also taken the liberty to have me scanned by the station medic to make sure that I wasn’t doped up on some sort of illegal drug that had been slipped into one of my drinks. Fortunately, that had not been the case. It was just a bad reaction after downing the energy drink on Deck One and the alcoholic one I had on the upper deck on the same night. And since I didn’t have any handy nanobots to clear any toxins from my system as they came into my system, everything just hit me at once. And as a result, I went out.

My body, it seemed, was extremely slow in naturally clearing out the toxins. So even after the festival week was over at the station, I was still waking up hung over. It was a wonder that I managed to function the past couple of days to help film the rest of the festival. The rest of the crew, damn them, seemed perfectly fine. But then again, they weren’t so foolish as to follow random party goers off into the depths of the space station.

I stumbled out of bed and made it to the bathroom to clean myself up. After getting dressed, I headed out to the main room of my quarters and found that the jerboa was perched on a table with an energy bar and a bag of dehydrated vegetable snacks beside it. It chirped at me and pushed the energy bar toward me.

“You’re acting like my mother,” I told the rodent. “That’s totally unacceptable.”

The jerboa cocked its head in inquiry.

I headed to the couch and activated the controls on the armrest to take a glance at the crew schedule. The previous day, we had departed from Ecstasy Seven and sent off a transmission with all of the raw footage we had taken from the space station’s Ecstasy Seven Festival—including Mot’s table dancing. Mot had objected, of course. He wanted it suppressed. But unlike his ancestor, he was not the emperor. And although everyone in the crew had argued for keeping the footage, it was Vik’s and Annette’s vigorous defense that it was going to help increase ratings that finally had him reluctantly agreeing.

I, of course, privately thought that the particular scene was going to make the show more like every other stupid reality show rather than the sort of documentary that we were trying to aim for, but I had had a horrible headache during that meeting and didn’t have the heart to put forth that particular argument when Vik and Annette were right in that instance.

“Hm.” I scrolled through the meeting schedule on the room’s view screen and then came back to the meeting scheduled for that day. “It seems like we’re having a breakfast meeting today. Looks like I won’t be eating that energy bar anyway.”

The jerboa gave a refuting chirp.

“Yeah, whatever. I’ll put it in my pocket. And then maybe you’ll decide you want to eat it yourself.”

The meeting was in ten minutes, so I tugged on the jacket that I had gotten accustomed to wearing and put the energy bar in one pocket and tucked the jerboa—with the vegetable snacks clutched in its paws—in the other. There were two private dining rooms on *The Bacchus* and both of them were on the second

deck. I hurried off to the lift. No one seemed to be wandering around anywhere. The rest of the crew must have already left for the meeting.

I was the last one to arrive at the meeting room, but no one seemed to notice my entrance. Everyone was settling down at the table which was already set for breakfast. The blue skinned android was wandering around setting food in front of everyone. I took the last empty seat at the end of the table, next to Vyne and across from George. There were soup bowls with lids in front of everyone. No one had touched the bowls. Instead, the rest of the crew was drinking coffee or tea, depending on their preference. I indicated to the android that I wanted a glass of orange juice and then settled back to see what everyone was doing.

"I'd rather have waffles. Waffles with Terlurian chicken," said George. "Now that's what I call a breakfast."

"You and me, too," said Vik who was sitting beside George. "I would love waffles. But I'm waiting until we reach the Old Minos system. I heard they serve a lot of traditional foods there."

"Old Minos is more well known for their pancakes," said the cyborg. "There's a famous pancake house there in the capital city of the Old Minos homeworld where it is said that you can get pancakes of any flavor that you want."

"Oh God, Vyne, you're killing me," said Vik. "Now I'm starving for pancakes, too. When I was little, my mom would make me these Galactic Center pancakes with Galican buttercream. With Terran strawberries, too."

"My mother abandoned me when I was a baby," said George. "But one of the foster parents I grew up with made a mean chocolate pancake. It could make your heart stop. Literally. What about you, Vyne?"

The cyborg looked thoughtful for a moment. "I was raised in a military creche. But sometimes we had pancakes on the holidays. They were plain, but you could put a little pat of butter on top and cover it with synth-maple syrup."

Then George turned to me. "How about you, Euphie? How did you eat your pancakes while you were growing up?"

Caught under the scrutiny of three pairs of eyes, I squirmed in my chair. "Er, I've never had pancakes. I had always thought that they were some sort of clothing accessory for pet Terran rabbits."

"What?!" George exclaimed. Vik gaped at me in horror. Even the cyborg looked at me in pity. "How can you not have had pancakes? It's the traditional breakfast in every homeworld in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants."

"Not every homeworld," I countered. "On my homeworld, the traditional breakfast was either rice porridge or Centarian turnip cakes. If you were really lucky and went to a special breakfast place, you might be served cakes made from modified Centarian turnips that turned different colors depending on what temperature you cooked it."

"It seems that you have a gap in your education," intoned Vyne. "Which we will have to rectify as soon as we get to Old Minos."

"Which will be a while yet," I said. "According to the schedule, our next stop is Rilla. Which come to think of it, isn't it the place where you said you would be getting some cheese?"

The cyborg gave me an odd, half-smile. "You remembered!"

"Whatever." I took the glass of orange juice from the blue android waiter and drank half of it while Mot, who was sitting at the head of the table, banged the lid of his soup bowl with a spoon to get our attention. On either side of him were Annette and his friend Kameel who had decided to tag along and act as impromptu guide as he had claimed that he had traveled quite extensively in the Delta Quadrant.

"It has come to my attention that there are certain rules at our next destination that we must follow, even though we are visitors and filmmakers," said Mot. "I have consulted with both Kameel and Mr. Vyne and they both agree that it is essential that we follow these rules or it would bring dire consequences."

"What sort of rules?" said Vik.

"Nothing too terrible. It wouldn't really be a hardship on our part. We just need to dress appropriately to follow their cultural rules. If we don't, well..." Mot made a cutting motion with his hand.

"Getting decapitated was one of their ancient punishments," Kameel said as he opened his soup bowl. He poked around in it and a tentacle whipped out, splattering his face with brown broth. He wiped his face with a napkin and continued on as if it was of no consequence. "Nowadays, they just throw you in jail for a couple of months. I was lucky. I got bailed by a friend after a week, along with a liberal greasing

of palms.”

“Greasing of palms?” asked Annette with a frown.

“Bribes,” Kameel clarified.

“Well then,” said George, “Then we'll all have to take care to dress in the homeworld costume. I sure it won't be that much of a hardship, as Nigel has said.” He then opened his own soup bowl and grimaced. “What is this stuff?”

I peeked into my bowl. It was a murky brown broth, completely opaque. There was a slight rippling on the surface indicating that there was something lurking below. I took a spoon and dipped it into the broth. I felt something tug at the utensil. I brought the spoon back out. Except with it was a small tentacled beast wrapped around it. The creature appeared to have a slick, brown-green skin with a body that pulsed and glistened with movement. There didn't seem to be any discernible eyes or mouth on the thing, but there were tiny rubbery hooks on the underside of each tentacle that helped it to cling onto the spoon.

“I told the chef that I wanted wonton soup served at breakfast,” said Mot. He dipped his own spoon into the soup and retrieved it with a creature wrapped around it. He grimaced. “It seems as if the chef has misunderstood me.”

“I want my waffles,” muttered George as he took a fork and stabbed at a questing tentacle at the edge of his bowl.

The jerboa peeked out of my pocket. It saw the creature on my spoon, squeaked in fright, and dived back down into the pocket. Maybe the jerboa's suggestion of an energy bar wasn't so off the mark after all. I beckoned to the blue android and requested toast instead—even though it was boring and I had eaten it more times than I could count on this trip so far. Everyone else decided to follow my lead to order toast.

Only Kameel declined to have his order changed. He had taken a knife and had started hacking away at the tentacles and slurping them down noisily even as they still wiggled. After he had eaten the tentacles, he started on the bodies of the creatures. Every time he chewed one, it made loud squishing noises. Annette was turning green as she observed Kameel eat and she briefly excused herself to use the restroom.

Even Mot was looking at his friend in grossed out fascination. “How can you eat that stuff?” he finally asked him.

“It's a breakfast delicacy on Yabin V,” Kameel finally said after slurping up another tentacle. “It's called wonton beast soup. These creatures are native to Yabin V and a lot of foodies compare them to squid or octopus. You have to be quick, of course. You don't want them wrapping themselves around your spoon before you can eat them. So you have to hack off the tentacles first. Then you can eat the bodies. Don't drink the soup, though. They've been living in this broth for their entire lives so who knows what's in it.”

Vik made a disgusted face. “You were right, Nigel. The chef did get confused. When you said you wanted wonton soup, you didn't say what kind you wanted.”

Toga Printing

“I am not wearing that. No fucking way.”

The jerboa briefly looked up at the outburst and then went back to gnawing the latest bit of dried vegetable snack that it had retrieved from the package in my pocket. I tried to ignore the shouting at the back of the dressing room as the ship's tailor made a motion with his hands for me to turn around to be scanned with his measuring device. I was going to be outfitted with a toga for the duration of our stay at the Rilla homeworld for the next episode's filming.

The Rillan System, a short hyperspace jump away from the black hole of Ecstasy Seven, was a single star system orbited by seven rocky planets and five gas giants. Three of those planets were habitable, but only one had any significant population at all. Rilla V and Rilla VI were mining planets occupied by several corporations interested in extracting minerals and metals that were used in the construction of ships, buildings, and various types of machines. Those two planets were rather cold any any significant settlement on either planet was confined to underground cities or aboveground domed towns.

Rilla IV, on the other hand, was a more temperate planet that boasted forests, rivers, plains, deserts, and any number of other landforms. But that was not what made Rilla IV famous. It wasn't the

cheese that the cyborg was after either. What everyone in the Delta Quadrant and beyond knew about the original Rillan homeworld was that it was a pleasure planet that catered to the tourist. When The Bacchus came into orbit around the planet, there were already hundreds of other vessels already orbiting Rilla IV, everything from day trip vessels and daily ferries from other nearby systems to gigantic cruise ships that floated above the serene blue globe of Rilla IV like bloated silver pustules.

Oh sure, there were self-sustaining industries on the planet which included cheese and wine making among other things, but quite a few things were also imported into the planet. Because the primary business was pleasure. There was a saying about Rilla IV that practically everyone in the galaxy understood. Rilla IV was basically just one giant bordello that encompassed an entire planet.

One of the rules that Mot had alluded to during the previous crew meeting was the Rillan dress code which was strictly enforced. Any deviation from the dress code was subject to fines and incarceration. Why this was so strict stemmed historically from colonial times. Rilla IV had originally been settled by colonists of a fundamentalist religious persuasion where clothing choices were also heavily regulated. From historical incidence, no one had ever bothered—or cared much—to change those particular rules even though the sexual mores of the colonists' descendents became more lax.

“I think this will look fabulous on you,” the tailor said. “Well, as fabulous as it is considered on Rilla IV.” The thin man in the ship's black uniform inputted my measurements into a wide machine—a clothing synthesizer—sitting at the end of the room. He entered a couple of other parameters and in the next minute, a long white garment emerged at the other end of the machine. The tailor pulled it out and hung it up to see if it matched my height. From my vantage point, it appeared to be a shapeless white mass.

“How am I supposed to put this on?” I asked.

The tailor took up a data pad and punched a few controls before he showed me an image of someone wearing a toga. It looked like something that the primitives would be wearing. Then again, this was a pleasure planet and I could see why the people of the planet would want something like this, especially if it was easy to take off for other activities.

I grabbed the garment and went behind a changing screen to see if it would fit. It was very airy, for the lack of a better world.

There was agonized moaning coming from one of the other changing screen. “Holy fuck. I am not wearing this.”

“Yes you are,” said Annette who was at the third changing screen. “You had better wear it or you're not going planet-side with the rest of the crew.”

I had hung my jacket on one of the hooks behind the changing screen. The jerboa jumped out of the pocket after I had changed into the toga and was chirping at me. I picked up the small blue rodent and then patted my costume. I found a pocket near my hip. I tucked the rodent into the pocket and then walked out. The tailor scrutinized me and nodded.

“It looks like it fits you, Ms. Tanaka-Teng. Would you like more to be made in this size?”

“Yes. I think we'll be on Rilla IV for about a week filming. Oh, can you get something really small for this, too?” I pointed to my pocket at the jerboa who had poked its head out to sniff the air. I had no idea what the Rillans thought about pets, but one could never be too careful.

“Ah! A gerbil. Why don't you put him here and I can measure him for a small costume.”

As the tailor was scanning the jerboa for its dimensions, Annette pranced out from behind her changing screen wearing a bright pink toga which clung to her curves. She twirled around and the toga fluttered up, showing her knees. “Isn't this beautiful?” she asked me.

“That looks great on you,” I said. “But isn't the traditional color supposed to be white?”

“Sure. But this color is fine too. I figured, since we have to go in costume, why not go all out?”

“Right.”

“You look great, too, Euphie,” the director added. “You'll have the guys all slaving over you.”

“Ew. That's gross.”

“Maybe you should take Mr. Vyne with you whenever you're off filming. He could help you beat them off with a stick.”

“Whatever.”

“I am so not going to wear this,” came the voice from the last changing screen.

“Yes you are!” Annette yelled back.

The tailor clicked his scanner closed and then plugged it into the clothes synthesizer. In a few seconds, a small white toga appeared at the end. He put the small costume on the jerboa. The little beast preened as the tailor cooed over him. “Oh how cute! What's his name?”

“Uh, I haven't named it yet,” I replied.

“Doesn't he look like a Blueberry?” said Annette.

“Not really,” I said as the tailor grimaced at the director's suggestion. “The jerboa is too much of a menace to be called a small round fruit.”

The tailor then brightened. “What about Brutus? I mean, with the toga and everything, he looks like he could play the part of that backstabbing traitor in that ancient play called Julius Caesar.”

“Julius Caesar?” This time it was Annette frowning. “I've never heard of a play called that.”

“It's by Shakespeare,” I supplied.

“Oh! Right. I know Shakespeare. He's the one who wrote Beowulf, right?”

I shook my head. “I think you've gotten your ancient literature mixed up, Annette.”

“If you say so. Ancient literature wasn't my strongest subject in school. All I remember about it is that our class got to act out a tragedy and I got to pretend to stab somebody with a fake laser-sword.”

The tailor and I exchanged exasperated sighs.

“Cover your eyes! I'm coming out!”

Of course, the three of us did no such thing. Instead, we turned as one to look at the source of the exclamation and saw George stumble out from behind the changing screen in his toga. It was green. With yellow polka dots. It was ugly. It was also unfortunate that the toga costume also left a lot of skin bared. George's arms and legs were covered in unsightly, wiry hair. But one would have to admit that the color scheme made him look a lot thinner than his usually rotund self.

“Uh...” for once, Annette was speechless.

“I think it looks slimming,” suggested the tailor.

The jerboa jumped back into my pocket to hide.

“See! Even Balthazar thinks I'm hideous!” complained George. “How the hell am I supposed to get any chicks in this getup?”

“I don't think that will be any problem on Rilla IV,” I told him. “You could look like a Farisian slime monster and still get a girl if you have enough credits.”

“That's true,” mused George. “But still, I can't get past the fact that I'm ugly, no matter what sort of beauty standard you try to apply to me. I might as well throw myself out the window and freeze my balls off in the emptiness of space.”

“Now don't be so dramatic, George,” said Annette when she finally found her voice again. “That wouldn't be productive at all. Then the crew will be short a sensory technician. And Nigel certainly wouldn't be happy with that turn of events.”

“Maybe you could say that you're starting a new fashion trend,” I suggested. “Someone has to be cutting edge. Why not you?”

“Thanks, kid. But I'm not that delusional.”

About two hours later, the entire crew was packed and dressed to go in the transport room. We were also quanting down to the surface since the horrendous orbital traffic made shuttle service problematic, if not outright hazardous. As I was no fashion buff myself, I had a few more white togas, in addition to the one I was wearing, stuffed into my travel pack. Since Annette was in the fitting room the same time I was, I knew that she also possessed at least another toga in bright pink as well as a silver sparkly one which she had mentioned, with a wink, was for special occasions in case she found herself hooked up with someone on planet.

George had resigned himself to the polka-dot togas. Mot was wearing a stately black toga which according to the information that I had read on Rillan culture, indicated high status. Vik was also wearing a white toga. (“Us holographic projectionists have to stick together!” he had commented when he found out I was also being rather unoriginal in my color choices.) Mot's friend Kameel was wearing a black and silver striped toga that had small lights flashing on and off in time to some contemporary synth rock that was blasting out of microscopic speakers that had been sewed onto the toga straps. And the cyborg, Vyne, had opted for dark blue. It didn't match his eyes.

When we reached planet-side, we were abruptly greeted by a large number of toga wearing women carrying necklaces made of the native flower, the rose-pansy, which resembled the head of a Corigian raptor, except with more frills. And more pink. Annette seemed thrilled with the welcome because the flowers were all in her favorite color. So too were Mot, Kameel, Vik, and George for more obvious reasons. The cyborg, as usual, looked rather bored with the welcome display. I tried not to sneeze from the pollen as I triggered my fingers to send a message.

Bored already, bolt bucket? That girl in the yellow toga seemed particularly keen on you.

They all look keen. It's their job.

You found this out from experience?

Vyne finally turned his head to glare at me. I found this out by doing research, Shorty.

"Hey, don't look so constipated," I said out loud. "You'll scare everyone off if you continue to frown like that."

"And your mouth could get you into some serious trouble," the cyborg returned silkily. The rest of the crew had already moved with the welcoming committee toward the door of the transporter room to the hallway outside. We were briefly alone and the cyborg took the opportunity to step closer to me. He loomed. I imagined that his shadow caused the immediate vicinity to drop a few microdegrees. "Did you know that the Rillans have another rule that's not so well known? If you decide to defame an important personage on Rilla IV, you could get a maximum of ten standard years incarceration along with daily reconditioning classes that some could say would make you wish you were a vegetable."

"You're just making that up," I replied. "There's no such rule on Rilla IV that is that harsh. If you're complaining about someone, it's free speech."

"You want to bet? Not all worlds are the same, you know. Rilla IV is known for pleasure, not for its freedom of speech."

"I think you of all people know that it would be foolish to bet against you."

"Then I win." He smiled at me. I thought my heart skipped a beat. I tried to tell myself it was because I was scared of him. Or at least scared at what he might do if he truly disliked me. "What do I get as my prize?"

"I never even entered into a bet with you," I retorted. "Now stop blocking my light and move. Everyone's getting ahead of us."

"As you wish." He finally moved off and I was able to breathe a little easier. But as we walked to the door of the transport room, he added, "I still owe you that dinner."

"No you don't. It's all in your head. Besides, weren't you coming to Rilla IV because of the very fact that they make Rillan cheese here? You said you wanted to obtain some samples and put it in that storage capsule that's attached to the ship so you can age it whenever the ship does a hyperjump."

"Yeah. But I can do that when we have a day off filming tomorrow. According to the schedule, today we're meeting with the mayor of the capital city on Rilla IV and having dinner with him. There isn't much scheduled the next day except for a breakfast scene which I've already done research on and then for the rest of the day, we will be free."

"Yes. I know the schedule." I had glanced at it before we had quanted to the surface. The entire recording schedule for Rilla was actually rather lax. There would be several dinners where Vik and I would be required to attend to do some recording, but then the rest of the time, we would be installing some remote recorders in several kitchens around town to do some remote recording. "It sounds nice to have a day free tomorrow. But I'm not sure there's really anything interesting to do here in my free time except to, you know, sleep."

"You could come with me to the cheese factory that I've already made arrangements with," he said. "Mr. Mot had also mentioned that he might want to come too since he thought it might be good to get some shots of him doing some educational stuff with the making of indigenous Rillan food. It would sort of be a precursor to the visit with the whisky distillery on the third day."

"That sounds like more work," I remarked. "If Mot's there, that means more filming."

"You know it could all be automated if you wanted."

"That's true."

Up ahead, Vik was waving at us. "Come on, slow pokes," he called out to us. "We're heading to the mayor's house straight from here. Nigel just got a message that the mayor wished to extend his hospitality to the entire crew during our stay on Rilla for filming. Apparently the mayor has been watching our show and is a big fan."

"I doubt it," I muttered, only loud enough for Vyne to hear. "It's more likely that he wants to be the star of the episode and perhaps get some free promotion for this planet."

"That could very well be," the cyborg replied. "But isn't that what everyone who had ever been interviewed on the show so far were aiming for? It's true that this is a documentary on the culinary delicacies of the Delta Quadrant, but it's also showcasing different destinations in the Quadrant for the discriminating tourist. According to all of the statistics that I've seen, there are far fewer tourists in the Delta Quadrant compared to any of the other quadrants. The Delta Quadrant desperately needs the infusion of tourists to stay afloat economically in the long run."

“You sound like someone's financial advisor. Maybe you should go into the business sector and not in the entertainment business.”

“I'm quite content where I'm at,” he replied. “Business does not hold any interest for me. And I've been in other industries where things were literally more cutthroat.”

“Literally?” I said with a raised eyebrow.

“Maybe I've said too much.”

I pondered that remark as we followed the rest of the crew down the hallway and out a pair of doors to a wide walkway outside that led into the center of town which looked like a idyllic park filled with blossoming trees. Did the cyborg really mean that he had been in a cutthroat business? Perhaps my initial impressions about what cyborgs did for a living was correct. Everyone always said that cyborgs were made to work in the military, especially for dangerous missions. And I seemed to recall an earlier conversation where Vyne had let slip that he had grown up in a military creche. I wondered how many people he had killed while he had been employed in the military.

And more importantly, why the hell he was working as a documentary researcher with a third rate film crew. Why did he leave the imperial army? Did he suddenly develop some morals in his cyborg heart and decide that he had enough of killing? Did he decide that devoting the rest of his life to cheesy documentaries was a better way to live than serving the imperial military's brand of justice?

But before I could further ponder on that philosophical point, the bevy of toga-clad women who had been our welcoming committee gestured for us to head into a large building built in ancient classical lines. The roof of the place was supported with impressive white marble columns lined with what looked like gold. A large archway led into a vast foyer that was empty except for a statue in the middle of the slick floor which reflected the light in a blinding glare. When we got closer to the center of the foyer, I realized that the statue was that of a naked couple in the middle of an intimate act. Vik was doing closeups of it.

I found myself sighing and turning on the holographic recorder at my wrist. I aimed it at the rest of the crew, particularly at Mot who was gaping around at the huge place. I was surprised at his surprise. As the scion of an ancient emperor, wasn't he supposed to be used to this grandeur?

Part VI: Entrement

Flower and Prey

“Welcome to the Mayoral Pleasure Palace!” boomed a voice, startling everyone in the crew. I turned my attention away from Mot briefly to look toward the sound. An older man of a stately stature and graying hair was striding toward us with a shorter and more rotund man following behind him. The older man was wearing a gray toga. The rotund man behind him was wearing burgundy robes lined with gold thread. The older man motioned toward the shorter man and introduced him as, “His Mayoral Highness, Pratus Heiniken!”

“Everyone calls me Heini,” the shorter fat man told everyone in the crew in a nasal voice. I could see George immediately adjusting his recording instruments. I wouldn't have to know squat to tell that the sensory technician was doing his best to get the sound quality across. The mayor's voice was uniquely annoying. “You must be Nigel Mot. I've watched your show religiously since it started airing in this sector.”

Mot shook the mayor's hand. And pasted on a smile. Someone who did not know him would think that the smile was genuine. “Mr. Heiniken. It is a pleasure to meet you. I must thank you for your generous hospitality for letting the crew stay in your home during filming. It's an honor to be associated with such an esteemed personage as yourself.”

Heini preened as Mot plied him with several more superlatives. Vik and I kept filming the entire exchange with our holographic recorders that we already had on us and George kept recording the sound. On my eye screen, there was a distinct message stream from the rest of the crew as they discretely triggered their thoughts about the entire sequence. Everyone thought that this was just a waste of recording time. Even Annette agreed that there was very little chance that the editors back at the GBC headquarters would keep any of this footage in the episode.

Maybe it would be in the collector's edition of the the show's recording, the cyborg added to the message stream. *It might be an extra.*

Only crazy, diehard fans would even want to see this sort of stuff, I replied back. *I'm used to recording boring stuff, but even this is making me fall asleep.*

Finally, after about half an hour of inane pleasantries said to make the mayor pleased about our presence, the older man, who we later found out was the mayor's assistant, indicated the location in the mayor's home where the crew would be staying. We were all being lodged in the northern wing of the house on the second floor. But we didn't have much of a chance to examine our own rooms very much since almost immediately, dinner was announced.

Dinner was interesting. Interesting in the way that a stereotypical bacchanal the ancients would have had was interesting. The banquet hall on the first floor of the mayoral house was an enormous room glistening with polished marble and accented with soaring columns carved in a classical style mimicking the true Ancients. The only difference was that the small reliefs that accented the tops of the columns were carvings of copulating figures rather than the more staid gods, goddesses, heroes, and musicians that one would be accustomed to from their school readings.

But that was a minor detail. I'm sure that Vik, with his fascination of all the naked statuary, was already taking quite a few recordings of all of this. The banquet hall was arranged so that the dining tables ringed the room in a horseshoe shape where Heini sat at the head on a raised dais that was covered in velvet pillows. To his right was the spot for the guest of honor, in this case, Mot. Mot handled himself urbanely throughout the entire affair even though there were points it was obvious that he was a little uncomfortable with some of Heini's ribald comments. To Heini's left were two harem girls dressed in almost nothing except for some flimsy wisps covering the essential bits.

The rest of the diners were the mayor's advisors, all of them older men with young beautiful women fawning over them. Annette was sitting at the end of the table trying not to draw any attention initially, but she seemed to limber up when one of the young attractive male servants volunteered to sit next to her and inform her of all the courses being offered up from the kitchens.

I managed to stake out an ideal location right next to the archway leading out into the hallway that went into the kitchens. Each time one of the servers came out, I had the vantage point to take closeups of all the foods. Most of the foods being served appeared to be rather conventional fare that anyone living at the Galactic center would have encountered. Most, except for the dish that looked like an enormous version of the rose-pansies that the welcoming committee had given the crew earlier in the day.

Vik had a better vantage point on that particular dish since it was carried directly to the head table where a server carved the flower up to be served to the mayor and the guest of honor first. Fortunately my eye screen feed was wired up to Vik's equipment giving me a good view of what was happening even though I was not standing with the head holographic projectionist. When the server cut into the flower, I noticed that the petals themselves were not flimsy like actual flowers. Instead, it had a fleshy texture. I briefly wondered if the entire dish was actually meat that had been carved and cooked in the shape of a flower. But no, I was corrected in my assumption by the cyborg on his hacked transmission line as well as from what I heard from my ear comm.

"This is a special delicacy in Rilla IV," said Heini in his nasal intonation. His voice was going up so it was evident that he was taking great pleasure in explaining this to Mot who was gaping at the flower as it was being carved up. "It is called the Yona or Rillan carnivorous flower. It is known as an aphrodisiac since it resembles a woman's intimate parts."

The server pushed away part of the meaty flower and delicately sliced parts into the mayor's and Mot's plates. From my eye screen feed, I could get a few of the interior of the flower which Vik was currently filming. Inside the flower were shiny black insects with round carapaces, four antennae, and ten segmented legs. The insects were alive, but they were all trapped in the flower's sticky sap, wriggling about helplessly as they were slowly being digested into the plant.

"Is it supposed to look like that?" Mot inquired.

"Yes. In fact, the Yona is best eaten when there are live insects trapped inside because it tastes best that way. From what I understand, the presence of a live insect in the flower triggers a particular biochemical reaction where the flower starts releasing these enzymes which begin to digest the insects trapped inside. These digestive enzymes also make the flower itself very tender and juicy in comparison to when it is not actively consuming its prey."

"I see," said Mot. "So are these digestive enzymes like the stuff they use to tenderize meat?"

"I have no idea. You would have to talk to an actual biochemist to get the answer to that."

Or talk to someone who can do some research, the cyborg triggered. The cyborg was sitting a little ways down from the main table, just beyond the recording radius of Vik's instruments. There were several

nubile young women attempting to get his attention, but he was ignoring them in favor of working on his data pad. All of this information was probably also being relayed to Mot on his ear comm. *According to what I've managed to pull up, the digestive enzymes that the Rillan carnivorous flower produces is structurally very different from the enzymes used in meat tenderizers. However, they have the same mechanism of action which points to the fact that it may be convergent evolution.*

I tuned out Vyne's pedantic rambling about flower enzymes and concentrated on getting a shot of the next dish which looked like a traditional Terran turkey trussed up with twine and overflowing with breaded stuffing. Except the turkey was an outrageous neon blue. An indication that it was not a Terran turkey. Unless it was dyed with some sort of chemical.

"Psst! Psst!"

I turned my head at the noise. It was Mot's friend, Kameel. He was supposed to be sitting next to Mot, trying a slice of the Rillan carnivorous flower. On my eye screen, I watched Mot put a forkful of it into his mouth. He made a surprised expression. "This is really good!" he exclaimed on the ear comm.

"Hey, you." It was Kameel again.

I sighed as the short, hirsute man started dancing around in time to the lights blinking on his toga. "Yes, Mr. Kameel? What is it?"

"Where's the restroom?"

"How should I know? I don't work here."

"Huh." He continued to dance around, although his moves now took on more meaning. "Well, I thought the crew was supposed to know everything. I guess I'll have to find someone else then." He meandered off to pester one of the servers coming back to the kitchen.

"Prick," I muttered under my breath. "The crew didn't get any time to tour the place before we were put to work."

A couple more platters came out of the kitchen and then the parade of dishes stopped for about an hour as everyone started eating and having conversations about various topics. From my ear comm, apart from the one-sided conversation that Mot was having with Heini—where the mayor was mostly monologuing about Rillan customs—I could hear other conversations in the background. Most of it was spoken in the Rillan dialect, but my translator was able to decipher most of it. The mayor's advisors were mostly talking about the laws being currently passed in the Rillan legislature or about getting laid later that night.

I managed to snag a small plate of food from one of the more sympathetic servers during a moment of downtime in filming. The plate contained bits of every dish that had been served. There was even a slice of Rillan carnivorous flower, with crawling bug still intact. I flipped my fork over and scooped the poor bug out of the sticky goo that was slowly digesting it and put it into one of the silver napkins that came with the plate. I wadded up the napkin and discretely put it on the empty tray of a passing server. I forked a little of the flower into my mouth. It tasted savory, almost like chicken. And there was a sweetness to it, mostly attributed by the digestive enzymes. Mot was right. It was good.

The jerboa chose at that moment to peek out of my pocket. Seeing the numerous people wandering about in the banquet hall, it jumped out of my pocket in a blue and white blur and dashed off down the hallway that led to the kitchen before I could call out to it. I looked around furtively to see if anyone noticed anything, but everyone seemed to be doing everything normally as usual. So I went back to eating as if nothing had ever happened.

Tranq'd

Something whizzed by me when I stepped out of my room the next morning. That thing hit the opposite wall down the hall with a distinct thunk. I raised my wrist with the portable holographic recorder and pointed my hand toward the wall and triggered my fingers to increase magnification. It looked like a steel bullet had pierced the wooden wall at the end in a discrete hole with fracture lines emanating from the center. There were several such holes in the wall. I turned to look at the other side and saw a figure in a hideous yellow toga with red polka dots standing at the end holding an old fashioned revolver that looked like it had been designed from back in the twenty-second century.

"What the hell?" I yelled. "If your aim had been off for another millimeter, my head could have been blown off!"

“Sorry, Euphie. The sound of your door opening startled me,” said George. “I was hearing noises during the night and I decided to practice my aim with this thing that the mayor gave me.”

“The mayor?!”

“Yeah.” George ambled up to the hall toward me. He handed me the revolver so I could get a better look at it. The barrel of the weapon still felt warm from when he last fired it. “I got up during the middle of the night since I heard noises and decided to check it out, although I wasn’t so foolish to go unarmed. I took one of the fireplace pokers with me. I was wandering the halls when I saw Mayor Heini walking around testing all of the doorknobs. He was just in front of Annette’s door when I caught him doing that.”

“That sounds very suspicious.”

“Yeah, it looked suspicious to me too. At first, I thought he was trying all the doors to see if he could get in, but he assured me that he was just testing all the doors to see that we had locked them. He told me that there had been recent reports of predators in the capital city.”

“Predators?” I picture large beasts like the ice boar back on the Antaran homeworld rampaging through the city filled with toga-clad inhabitants. It would not be pretty.

“Predators,” repeated George. “Predators of the human kind. Apparently, even though Rillan morals are rather lax when it comes to pleasure, the law is not so lax on anyone who seeks to take pleasure when there is no consent involved.”

“I don’t know, George. It sounds like to me that Mayor Heini is the one who’s being the predator. He was, after all, stalking through the guest hallway at night testing all of our doors. And isn’t the mayoral palace guarded by all of his flunkies? It’s a good thing that we already have the policy in place to lock all of our doors because we don’t want any of our equipment getting stolen before the episode is finished.”

“Yes, that’s fortunate, isn’t it?”

“However, that still does not explain why the mayor gave you a revolver.” I handed the gun back to George.

“Well, he gave it to me for self-defense. So I figured that it probably wasn’t the mayor who was being creepy if he was giving me a weapon in which I could use to shoot him if he did anything.”

“But I wonder what...”

Another door opened in the hallway, startling George. He whipped around and fired another round.

The cyborg had stepped out of his room and had reached out with his silver lined hand. His fingers wrapped around something in the air. When I looked closer, I saw that it was the bullet that George had just fired. It figured that the cyborg would be the one to catch the bullet.

“Your aim is off,” he said. “If you had aimed thirty centimeters to the left and twenty-one centimeters higher, you would have it here.” Vyne moved his free hand up to his forehead. “And you would not have missed.”

“Thanks for the tip!” George said cheerfully. “Next time, I’ll hit those molesting predators dead!”

“Maybe it would be better if you try to aim that thing away from the guest quarters,” I said. “It wouldn’t be right to kill one of the crew. That would not be good.” That was an understatement. Losing one of the crew at this juncture would mean disaster. Last night, when I had checked back at the GBC headquarters to see what the ratings were for the latest episode of the documentary show, the ratings had abruptly soared. Everyone thought it was due to the table dancing.

The increased ratings, of course, meant that the show must go on. And the quest for higher ratings would escalate. But what could be more extreme than table dancing? Well, a lot of things. Things that could already be readily seen at a fair number of reality shows that were currently being transmitted across the galaxy. What we needed was something extreme but also unique. Last night’s banquet scene in the mayoral house was not extreme nor unique filmmaking. Which meant that put more pressure on the crew to find that particular scene in the coming days. We only had a week on Rilla IV before we were scheduled for our next stop.

“You’re probably right, Euphie,” said George. “Here, you take it.” He handed the revolver back to me. Without knowing what else to do with it, I stuffed it into the pocket of my toga. The jerboa which was hitching a ride again, glanced at its dangerous pocket companion and decided to hug it like a long lost pillow.

“Yep,” said the cyborg as he looked at the jerboa. “Definitely looks like a ‘Killer’ to me.”

“I am not naming it Killer.”

George ignored the byplay about the jerboa’s name. “Now that I think about it some more, I don’t

think killing a molesting predator would be the best way to send a message. It would be like nuking a one-man moonshine operation from orbit. Maybe the aim should be to hit them where it hurts. Like their balls.” George grinned, looking like a deranged clown.

“George, how many hours of sleep did you get last night?”

“I probably got about half an hour of sleep before I heard the noises,” the sensory technician said. “Why do you ask?”

“You look really tired. I think you should try to go back to sleep. Maybe even take some tranquilizers to help you take a nap, at least.”

“I don't need tranquilizers!”

“Yes you do.”

Before George could react, Vyne moved swiftly, so fast that I could hardly tell that he actually moved. If I had not been paying any attention, it would have seemed that Vyne had been at one location and had quanted a few meters away. Once the cyborg was behind George, he grabbed at a pressure point at the back of the sensory technician's neck. George abruptly slumped onto the floor like a polka dot colored blob.

“Is he dead?” I found myself saying.

“No, just sleeping.” The cyborg hauled up the sensory technician's body with one arm as if George weighed as much as a grocery bag. He walked over to one of the doors in the hallway and opened it before walking in. “He will probably sleep this off for an hour at least. Several hours if his body is trying to catch up with sleep deprivation. Even more if he's sedated with drugs.”

I followed Vyne into George's room and saw him dump the sleeping man onto his bed and then withdraw a small medical injector from the pocket of his dark blue toga. He pressed the injector into George's neck and it gave a small hiss. “Three cc's of dopacortizone should keep him out until tomorrow morning.”

We then headed out and made sure that the door was locked. “Poor George. I know that up on *The Bacchus*, he had a specially designed white noise routine set up in his quarters to make sure that all of the engine noise was blocked out while he was sleeping. And while we were on Ecstasy Seven, the crew quarters there also fortunately had a noise blocking mechanism. Apparently the mayor's house doesn't have one so any little noise has disrupted his sleep.”

“Well, he'll get some sleep now,” said Vyne. “Hopefully he will be rested before tomorrow's filming at the whiskey plant which is a critical scene for the episode. Or at least a planned critical scene.”

“I know. I've read the schedule,” I sighed. I felt my stomach rumble. “I wonder if they're serving breakfast in that banquet hall. I don't recall anyone telling us about breakfast.” At my mention of breakfast, the jerboa popped out of my pocket with a chirp and an energy bar in its hands. I took the energy bar. “Thanks.”

The cyborg seemed amused, but continued, “The Rillan day for most inhabitants doesn't start until well after noon due to the late nights of carousing that is normal for this culture,” the cyborg said. “However, for those that work in the factories and other essential sustaining industries on the planet aside from the jobs that only deal with pleasure and tourism, the day starts much earlier. You're coming with me to see the cheese factory today, aren't you?”

“I suppose so,” I said somewhat reluctantly as I walked with Vyne down the hallway to a flight of stairs that led back down to the first floor and chewed at what was now my breakfast. “But didn't you also say that Nigel was also going to be coming with us to observe how the Rillans make cheese?”

“Yes. But I know for a fact that Mr. Mot is not in his room at the moment.”

I glanced at the cyborg in inquiry as we reached the first floor. “How do you know that? I thought everyone just had access to his transmission feed.”

“I know his location since I have a private line with Mr. Mot,” the cyborg said vaguely. “Mr. Mot is currently with the mayor overseeing some of his surrounding estates. I think he is probably trying to work on the mayor so that he can broach the subject of bordello cuisine.”

“There's actually a specific cuisine for bordellos?” I suddenly felt naïve.

“Don't feel so bad. Most people don't know such a thing exists. I just found out about it by doing some serious research in the Rillan archives. And even then, it was only alluded to. Mot and I think it would be a coup for the documentary if we could expose what this sort of cuisine is.”

We walked down one of the hallways on the first floor and passed one of the house servants who nodded to us briefly before hurrying off elsewhere. Past the hallway, we ended up in a short foyer and then walked through a door to the outside of the house. The morning light was glinting off the shrubbery

surrounding the front of the house, making the leaves on the plants look like rubber. I had not thought about making documentaries that way. Modern philosophy said that a documentary should observe what was there. It never said anything about making exposes of the culture under scrutiny.

Vyne smiled coldly as he waved down a passing transport. "I just got a message from Mr. Mot. He says he will be meeting us at the cheese factory along with Mayor Heinikin and his friend Mr. Kameel. Apparently Mr. Mot has managed to convince the mayor and has discovered that the cheese factory will be the key to explaining this obscure cuisine. Very fortuitous."

Very fortuitous indeed, I thought as we climbed into the hover cab that stopped for us. As I put the wrapper of my finished energy bar into my pocket, I briefly touched the revolver. The jerboa gave an inquiring chirp. George's paranoia was catching. What were the chances of this being simply a coincidence? Certainly, the cyborg could calculate the probabilities, I but I doubted that he would care. This was a cheese factory that we were going to and most people might think, what could possibly go wrong?

Waxing the Fromage

The hover car stopped just outside the capital city of Rilla IV in the middle of an idyllic countryside filled with rolling green hills blooming with native wildflowers. A few stunted trees dotted the landscape here and there with a copse of them further off in the distance between the shadow of two hills.

The Rillan cheese factory was situated along the side of one of the hills, a squat two story building made of stone and intermittently decorated with thin slitted windows. Bright red brick tiles baked in curving slats composed the roof. All in all, the entire place looked more like a quaint villa that the ancients might have built centuries ago rather than a large and impersonal factory. At the entrance was a small paved path leading up to the main road. A small wooden sign hanging on pewter polls stood at the intersection declaring this the main Rillan cheese factory.

Vyne and I went inside the factory via the front entrance which immediately led into a small foyer with a few padded wooden chairs for visitors. A secretary, a blonde haired android in a brilliant blue toga, sat at a desk in the corner working on a data pad. In one of the chairs, Nigel Mot sat with his legs crossed, slowly twiddling his thumbs. He jumped up from his seat when he saw us.

"Hey, Euphie, Vyne, am I glad to see you! I thought for a moment there that I would be stuck in this weird place all by my lonesome."

I checked the holographic recorder on my wrist to see that it was on. Then I looked in my backpack to lug out a larger recorder which I put on my head. There was a small clip on the recorder where I placed a sensory recording device which I had borrowed from George earlier. "Vyne told me that your friend Kameel and the mayor was also going to be here," I said as I got the instruments ready.

"Yeah, they were," said Mot. "But Kameel wasn't feeling so well this morning. He thinks that he may have drunk too much last night at the banquet. So he decided to lay down for the next couple of hours until he feels better. As for Mayor Heini," and Mot shrugged at this, "He got called away on an emergency at the last minute. Apparently there is this dispute on the south side of town between two business owners who could not decide where their property lines were drawn and the case has escalated until it now is in the city's supreme court. The mayor usually decides on cases like that."

Vyne frowned. "You did not send a message to me about the change in plans."

"Oh, well, I didn't think it was too much of a problem," said Vyne. "It is, after all, not an official filming day. And I figured we three could muddle along, don't you think?"

"If you say so," I said doubtfully. "You do know everything's going to be filmed anyway. If we get any good shots today, it's going to end up in the next episode."

"Sure," Mot said dismissively. "Anyways, the mayor told me that the owner of the cheese factory would be here to give us a tour. And then maybe tell us more about bordello cuisine if we were really nice. You'll have to put away that contraption on your head then, Euphie. I don't think the owner would much like having all of his secrets filmed."

"Things are going to get filmed whether or not this is on my head," I said, pointing to the holographic recorder on my wrist—which if not examined closely looked like a bracelet rather than a recorder. "And I could always say that this is my hat."

"A really ugly hat," said Vyne. "It looks quite unbecoming on you."

“I'm no fashionista so I don't care what you think.”

Mot ignored our comments. “Hopefully the owner of this factory will show up soon. The mayor said that he had his assistant make arrangements for the tour. You know, I got to read up on cheese making a little bit this morning. It's really a fascinating process. The base material, of course, is milk, but some cheeses aren't even made of any dairy product at all! In fact, a lot of the mass produced cheeses out at the Galactic center are made of chemicals...”

The secretary android suddenly got up from the desk. It looked almost like a human woman, except its skin had a strange sheen to it in the light that made it look like it was made out of some sort of polycarbonate or plastic. It was eerie as it walked up to us and addressed us with a very human-like expression of regret. Most androids on other worlds, as well as the androids on board Mot's ship, definitely looked like androids. Those androids looked more like walking and talking versions of what was known as twentieth century “modernism.” But this one looked like a person. I wondered if this particular android had been originally manufactured on Rilla for “pleasure purposes.” On the briefing file that Vyne had prepared for the crew, there had been a brief section on such things.

“Mr. Mot?” the android inquired. “I must apologize on behalf of the factory management. The owner, Mr. Haverstonian, is unable to make the tour today. He has had a family emergency. However, he has authorized me to give you a tour of the factory if you would like.”

“Well, that's an unfortunate turn of events,” said Mot, but he seemed, oddly, relieved. “However, the show must go on, as they say. I would be delighted to go on the tour of the factory anyway. I am intrigued about this cheese making process.”

“Very good, Mr. Mot. This way. While there is much on Rilla that is similar to other cheese making operations in the galaxy, there is something unique about Rillan cheeses. We do things specially and carefully here and I believe that our artisan attention to our craft is what makes Rillan cheeses delicacies throughout the galaxy.”

The android pushed open a door at the side of the waiting room that swung inward on hinges that creaked. One would think that a well-run cheese factory would have everything in tip top shape, including the oiling of hinges. But I mostly shrugged it off and hoped that the recording device was able to get the sound. It would be great, if the editors decided to use this clip to make the whole montage into a horror episode. Quite a few ancient horror movies utilized strange sounds to scare the audience.

The first room we came to, the android instructed all of us to get into clean suits—white suits that covered our entire bodies like biohazard uniforms that scientists working on infectious diseases would usually wear—as well as white caps to cover our head and face masks. That meant that the holographic recording equipment on my head would be covered, but I still had the recorder on my wrist. I decided to walk around with my arms crossed at my chest, careful to aim my wrist outward so that I could get a good view of everything. I triggered my fingers to make sure that the main feed going to my eye screen. The jerboa, unfortunately, had to remain outside in the clean room since the android was adamant that rodents were not allowed in the rest of the factory for purposes of cleanliness. The small rodent, fortunately, seemed content to stay in a corner of the clean room with his bag of vegetable snacks.

Past the clean room, there was an enormous room filled with shiny silver vats filled with milk from Rillan cows. The android began droning on about how the cows were fed a special diet in these farms not far from the city and how people were careful to transport the milk to the vats in the factory where it was further cooked and churned in the traditional twenty-first century style. Mot gave a fair approximation of someone who was carefully listening to the lecture, but from the glaze in his eyes, it was apparent that his mind was mostly elsewhere.

Discretely, I moved my wrist so I got a fair number of angles in the room. Beside me, the cyborg seemed to be paying more attention to the android's lecture than the boss. I could see him making notes on his data pad for further information to include in the next scene or for messages to Mot on questions he could ask the android once it had finished talking.

We went through a couple more rooms in the factory as the android continued explaining all the processes that went into cheese making from the instrumentation, temperatures, and microorganisms that were involved. The rooms themselves weren't extremely interesting as they all mostly looked the same—as one would expect a factory to look like. As I continued to film, I was thinking how most of this footage would inevitably be cut by the editors back at GBC headquarters because it frankly wasn't very interesting. Any possibility of getting a viable scene from today to the next episode was growing dimmer by the second.

It was in the next to the last room that the cheeses, now packed and fermented for approximately

one week, was sent to be dipped in a green wax before it would be transported to an underground storage room to be further aged. The cheeses from the one week storage room was brought out on a conveyor belt and fitted to a metal ring. Hooks which ran up from the ceiling to the floor on a rotating track carried the cheeses to an enormous boiling vat in the center of the room which contained the wax. The android activated the entire mechanism from a control panel on the side of the room and I was able to film the entire thing going. The cheeses slowly traveled to the vat where it was dipped for approximately ten seconds before being brought out and carried to a dark tunnel heading into the next room where the wax would be dried.

Just as the fifth cheese was being carried off to the next room by the machines, the android got a transmission from the factory management at another part of the building to report for something urgent. The android gave us the message to stay in the room until it got back from responding to the message and promptly left us in that room.

“Man, they must think we're really trustworthy if they've left us to our own devices in here,” Mot said when the android disappeared through the door. “If we were really saboteurs, do you know how easy it is to mess things up in here?”

“I'm sure they have security recording every room in this place,” said the cyborg. “Just from where I'm standing, I can see one security recording in that corner over there next to some of the pipes for the wax.”

“Good thing we have you here then, don't we? Otherwise, we'd be flying blind around here.” Mot slapped the cyborg on his shoulder and then winced as he wrung out his hand. “Holy blue, man, you're like a boulder. Is that metal or are you some sort of workout fanatic?”

Vyne merely raised an eyebrow.

I ignored the men as they continued to talk about the cheese factory. I had found an interesting little bit of the room when I had walked over to the control panel where the android had used to activate the machinery. There were all sorts of controls on the thing. Everything was labeled in the Rillan script, but even with the translator going on my eye screen, there were only a few controls which I was able to decipher. One of the controls I was able to read as “dunking”. Perhaps all of this was used for manual control in case something went wrong.

“This is really ancient stuff,” said Mot as he went to stand underneath the track where the hooks were hanging. Not all of the hooks had cheeses on them. He reached up to touch a hook with his white-gloved hand. “It feels like steel. You don't suppose they've also used one of those ancient alloys to make everything authentic, too?”

“You could probably ask the android when it comes back.”

At that moment, something on the control panel beeped and it began operating on its own. I hastily stepped back. “I did not touch anything!” I exclaimed reflexively.

The cyborg turned to me. “People who are guilty always claim that they didn't do it.”

Something in the room started grinding. Mot yelled in surprise. One of the hooks on the track had somehow moved down to hook Mot by a loop on the back of his biohazard clothing. He thrashed about, attempting to get himself unhooked, but was only successful at giving himself a wedgie.

“Get me the fuck off this thing!”

The cyborg quickly whirled around and attempted to grab at Mot but the track with the hooks took that as a cue to move faster and Mot swung out of his grasp. Mot was headed toward the boiling vat of green wax. When Mot briefly looked up from his thrashing and saw where he was heading, he let out a couple more curses and began to thrash even more violently than before.

Since I was the closest to the control panel, I glanced back at it, seeing that everything was still operating on its own. I finally found what I was looking for in the bottom corner. “I found the stop button!” I cried out. I pressed it.

The whole entire mechanism stopped just as Mot was about to be tipped over into the wax vat.

“Thank God.” Mot panted. “That gave me a scare.”

Vyne and I headed over to Mot to help him off from the hook. Since Vyne was taller, he was able to see what was the matter. “Your uniform is tangled up on this hook quite well,” said the cyborg. “It's going to take some doing to get you off.”

“Can't you just rip him off?” I said.

“I can try,” said the cyborg. But before he could do so, the machine started up again.

“Oh no, not again,” Mot moaned.

I made a grab for Mot's legs, but the sudden jerk of his body and the hook track slammed me into

the side of the vat. Stunned, I suddenly let go and slid to the floor. The cyborg made a move to try to pull Mot away again, but the momentum from the machine and the cyborg's move suddenly tipped the both of them over. Alarms in the room began blaring.

As I tried to shake myself from my sudden collision with the vat, I saw Vyne and Mot in the vat of wax. Mot was screaming as the cyborg finally pulled him out. From their waists down, they dripped with the green wax. In the next moment, the secretary android with a couple of other security robots burst into the room with wax extraction equipment in their arms.

"The emergency crew has been contacted," intoned the android. "Please lie down and stay calm. They are on their way."

"Calm? Calm?" yelled Mot. "I nearly became a candidate for Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum on Alpha Regulus!"

I could see that the cyborg was annoyed. His eyes were glowing red as he looked at the android. "I, for one, would like to know exactly what happened."

"A glitch," the android responded as I continued to film the entire debacle. "The factory system computers was running a check and suddenly developed a looping glitch."

Lasagna in Translation

Two days before we were to arrive in the Anoxsis System, I was sitting in one of the smaller conference rooms on Deck Three of *The Bacchus* with the communications officer Mr. Odaba working on some translator subroutines for the program that was currently installed on my eye screen and eye comm.

After the debacle at the Rillan cheese factory, the owner and the mayor had contacted Mot with abject apologies on behalf of all the Rillan people—even though such an elaborate apology wasn't precisely called for. The emergency crew had gotten to the factory in a few minutes of the mishap and along with the security robots from the factory, had managed to chip away most of the wax that had gotten on Vyne and Mot. The cyborg, with his super healing properties from his nanobots, had not required much medical attention, but Mot had a few burns on his legs that had required some time with the medics. Fortunately, the burns were minor and Mot was ready to go on filming the rest of the episode on Rilla IV.

It turned out that the whole debacle could have been prevented if I had hit the override button rather than the stop button on the control panel in that factory room. But how was I supposed to know what the override button was if that particular button was labeled in Rillan and literally translated as "The Flying Dutchman" in Galactic Standard?

So that was why I was in the conference room with Odaba working on the translator subroutines, to make sure that something like this would not happen again. In the best case scenario, we wouldn't be in such a situation again, but who knows. After the cheese factory, we had to tour a Rillan whiskey factory and Mot ended up being on edge for the entire time. Although Vik ended up being the primary holographic recorder for the scene, he had voiced his doubts about it not being cut after the editors were done with it.

The only good thing that came out of the whole ordeal was that Mot was offered numerous gifts for all of his trouble. This included a lifetime supply of new Rillan cheese and last year's vintage of Rillan whiskey, both foods that were on the menu at his ancestor's coronation banquet. After trying a bit of all of this, Mot declared that he didn't care much for either food—although they were far more palatable than certain other things that we had been forced to eat during our journey—and had graciously given the rest of the crew his things. The cyborg promptly put the cheese and the whiskey into the storage unit outside the ship to be aged whenever the ship went into hyperdrive.

"The language of the Anoxsis people is quite peculiar," Odaba told me as we were both working on our data pads in the conference room. Odaba was a long time colleague of Captain Avery and the rest of the ship's crew. He was an attractive, dark-skinned man who hailed from Zeta Omicron Regulus and had earned doctorate degrees in fourteen different languages before signing up with Captain Avery for something "more exciting" than the academic world. "Every noun in their language has an accompanying set of verbs. For instance, in Galactic Standard, we would use the word 'sit' for a chair or a couch or even a rock. That is, 'sit' would be used for sitting no matter what sort of furniture was being used. But in Anoxian, there are different verbs for 'sit' whether you're using a chair, a couch, or a rock. As a result, their vocabulary is ten times as large as that of Galactic Standard. And students of Anoxian take twice as long to learn their own language than any other language."

"How complicated and tedious," I remarked. "It's a wonder that Anoxian hasn't died out since pretty much every other language in the galaxy is easier." The jerboa who had taken a brief break from

playing with a bunch of puzzles consisting of interlocking metal rings to look at my data pad, chirped in agreement.

“Well, I wouldn't say that, Euphie. Anoxian, in some ways, is easier because it does have all of these strict grammatical rules which almost never are deviated from. Sabaratuese, on the other hand, is far more difficult. Because even though there are rules for that language, they have far more exceptions.”

“I seem to recall that our itinerary included a visit to the Sabaratu System,” I said.

“If that's the case, then it's going to take us a little longer to reprogram your translator.”

“It would be worth it to avoid any mishaps like the last one.”

“True.” Odaba tapped for a few seconds on his data pad and then reached for his cup to drink a sip of Galactic Standard tea. “So, I heard that your little pet was named Bob.”

“That's Vik's name for it,” I replied absentmindedly as I worked on the subroutine. “I actually haven't named the gerbil yet. He doesn't like any of the names that has been suggested so far.”

“Well, he does seem like a very smart ball of fur,” said Odaba. “Maybe you should call him Brainiac Byron.”

“I don't think so.”

“You don't have to look so disapproving. It's not like I'm trying to call your pet gerbil something obscene.”

“I just don't want a reminder that this ball of fur is probably smarter than everyone else in this room put together.”

“That's harsh, Euphie.”

We worked on in silence for a few more minutes before Odaba sighed again and took another sip of his tea.

“Hey, Euphie,” he said. “Apparently it's going to be lasagna night in the mess hall. The head chef is actually working today rather than moping about. Want to come with me for dinner after we're done fixing this translator subroutine?”

“Are you asking me out?”

“What if I am?”

I looked up and Odaba was looking at me with an odd look on his face. I briefly thought about it. Then I shook my head. Odaba was attractive, but there was no spark. I just thought of him as a colleague and not as a potential romantic partner. Of course, the last time I had a romantic partner, we broke up because he had accused me of being too cold. So even if I were inclined toward Odaba's favor, I had other personal issues to work out.

“Sorry. But I promised Vik that I would help him do some maintenance on some of our holographic recording equipment.”

“Well, what about dinner after you get off work?”

“Lasagna sounds good, but I'm not so sure about it. I don't think I'll be the right fit for you.”

“It's Vik, isn't it?”

“I don't think of Vik that way. He's my colleague. And I report to him since he's the head holographic projectionist. It would be awkward at best, even if I did think of him in that way. Besides, he's the sort of guy who has a girl at every port. Sort of like my brother.” The previous evening, my brother Eric had sent me another transmission, asking me for the second time what destination would be in our next episode. I had managed to put him off yet again.

“Then it must be that cyborg, Vyne,” said Odaba with a definite nod. “He has half of the female part of the crew drooling over him. You probably are, too. I, personally, don't understand what people see in that walking bucket of bolts—as you say.”

“Hey, I'm the only one allowed to call him a bucket of bolts,” I replied. “If you said that to his face, he'd make sure you wouldn't be able to walk for a week.”

“Is that right?” Odaba looked at me suspiciously. “I see you haven't contested the fact that you aren't drooling over him either.”

“I don't drool.” I looked back down at my data pad. “And I've noticed that he doesn't pay any attention to anyone unless it's related to work. And I'm pretty sure he doesn't like me either.”

“I've heard that he's been trying to get you to have dinner with him.”

“It's to annoy me,” I replied.

“Well, it is unusual,” said Odaba reluctantly. “And maybe what you say is true. The cyborg does keep mostly to himself. Well, I suppose I should take that as a consolation. That you're not having dinner with him.”

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not having dinner with anyone unless it's during a scheduled crew meeting or a banquet on some planet that we're currently filming."

In another hour, Odaba and I finally finished modifying the translator subroutines and I escaped gratefully out into the corridor. It was getting a little bit awkward, at least on my part, after Odaba decided to cajole me into having lunch with him if I wasn't going to consider dinner with him. I had told him in unequivocal terms that I didn't want to have any sort of meal with him in the romantic sense and that seemed to stop all of the invitations. But still, it was a little weird. I wondered if I shouldn't just invent a boyfriend to prevent people from asking me out.

Out in the hallway, I ran into Commander Tautu heading in the opposite direction to one of the meeting rooms. She briefly greeted me with a wave.

"Did you get your translator recalibrated?" she asked as we briefly stopped in the hallway to chat.

"Yes. Mr. Odaba was helpful on that front. I've run a few tests on it and it seemed to translate Anoxian very well. As for any languages, well, I was figuring that I'd do some fine tuning as I go."

"That sounds good," nodded the commander. "I was heading to the mess hall for dinner. I heard that the chef has deigned to do some actual cooking tonight. Lasagna from what I've heard from the rest of the crew."

"Me too. But I was heading out to recalibrate some other instruments. I will probably head off to the mess hall a little later."

"Well, don't be too late. If the lasagna is as good as everyone says it is, there won't be any left if you come too late."

The commander waved again and headed down to the mess hall as I headed back to the lift to go down to the lower decks where the equipment was stored.

Of Microbes and Fans

The Anoxian homeworld, the fourth habitable planet in the system, was a rather vile place, filled with comestibles that were poisonous to pretty much everyone except the inhabitants of the planet. One day before we were to fly a shuttle down to planet-side, the entire crew made a visit to the medical bay where the doctor had everyone inoculated with a special cocktail of microbes that had been engineered to digest Anoxian food for our guts in case we had to consume any of the food there. All of this, of course, was filmed by me and Vik. Everyone got ill for the next two hours from the sudden influx of new microbes into our intestinal microflora. Everyone, that is, except the cyborg who seemed completely unfazed. Nanobots again, I figured.

The original plan for the episode was for Mot to visit various locations and to talk to the inhabitants about how the food was made and at what occasions the food was served. It would mostly be an educational segment rather than an eating segment. Mot was complaining that it was going to make the entire thing boring and that this would turn out to be our lowest rated episode yet—until he found out about how Anoxian roast was made. That made him perk up.

As for ratings, it had continued to climb with our episode on Rilla IV. While there had been plenty of scenes on naked statuary that made it on the final cut, that had not been what had all the viewers clamoring about on the intergalactic transmission discussion boards. No, it was what they had colloquially termed, "the wax dipping" scene. Apparently quite a few people were happy to find that Mot had gotten dunked, even though he ended up requiring some medical attention. Mot himself had not been pleased when he found out that his fan base was now almost entirely consisting of people wanting to see him in humiliating situations.

"Where are the fangirls?" he had complained at the last crew meeting. "I want the fangirls. I want to have my pick of girls at every port!"

Annette had rolled her eyes at Mot's complaint. "You should be glad you don't have fangirls. Fangirls can be a vicious bunch. Why just look at the Ringo Brothers. They have to live in hiding because of their rabid fans."

Mot had sulked. "But look at Kameel! Even he has more fangirls than I do! In our last segment on Rilla IV, he had had no less than four women hanging on to him. And Vik and Euphie were not doing me any favors when they concentrated on filming him!"

"It was a funny scene," I said. "It was a really unusual juxtaposition right there."

“What Euphie is trying to say,” said Vik with an exasperated sigh, “is that the audience wouldn't expect Kameel to have all the fangirls since he's your friend and not the main host of the show.”

“See,” said Kameel who was still sitting with us in the conference room. He motioned to the rest of the crew. “That's what I told you over breakfast. And they agree with me.”

“I still want fangirls.”

“You really should be careful for what you wish for,” said George as he had been fiddling with one of his recorders during the entire meeting. “You could get it and discover that everything is not what you thought it would be. Besides, a horde of fangirls is excellent camouflage for an assassin.”

“You're too paranoid George,” Mot had finally said. “Who would want to assassinate me? I'm just an employee at the GBC.”

“You're the CEO of the GBC,” George had corrected.

The shuttle trip from *The Bacchus* to planet-side on the Anoxsis homeworld was rather uneventful. We landed on one of the southern continents of the planet in a small county called Traxan.

The county of Traxan lay in the center of the southern Anoxian continent in country that could best be described as swampy. The transport hub in the largest city of the county was a black metal structure built on numerous pylons that had been sunk into the soggy ground like so many flimsy sticks. The shuttle itself had to land on a docking platform that was held up by the pylons in a very precise manner. The pilot of the shuttle had claimed that he had flown in all sorts of hazardous weather, but he had never been to Anoxsis and even he had admitted that he had sweated for a bit when we were coming in for a landing and the landing platform itself had started shaking.

Our minder for this particular trip was a tourist guide named Grassian Grauss. Mr. Grauss was a lanky man, perhaps in his late twenties to early thirties, wearing a traditional Traxanese costume that consisted of denim jeans, plaid shirt tucked into the jeans, straw hat, and boots with thick heels made of synth leather. He was chewing a long bit of purple grass when he met us at the port and he spoke in a thick Traxanese accent which was rendered as a drawl in Galactic Standard by the translator.

“Well, Mr. Mot,” said Grauss, “You're in for a treat this week. I've got quite a bit of stuff lined up, even if you've mentioned that you aren't able to eat any of the native foods. There's a rodeo festival starting today over in Y'bin, a small town not far from the Traxan capital.” On the translator, the word rodeo was rendered as row-day-oo. “Lots of entertainment and traditional foods will be on offer. Quite a few ranchers from around the area will also be there today to test their mettle against the Y'bin wild bull. You might try it too, if you wish. And afterward, there will be a barbeque. Roasted Y'bin wild bull is a favorite dish around here.”

“I had heard about that,” said Mot as we walked through the port toward the ground transport area. “I'm looking forward to the event. Maybe I'll even try my luck at roping the Y'bin wild bull.”

“That'll be a sight to see, Mr. Mot.”

Out at ground transport was an enormous hover truck the size of a small building waiting for us. The driver was a red-haired bull hand named Feezle who had just immigrated To Anoxsis from the Beta Quadrant. Which probably explained why Kameel immediately recognized him. Feezle and Kameel greeted each other like long lost brothers while Grauss directed the rest of the crew to put our equipment at the back of the truck. Feezle invited Kameel to stay for the rest of the month and he readily agreed. It seemed that our new crew member was already leaving us.

Feezle, Kameel, Grauss, and Mot sat up front in the hover truck. The rest of us crew was relegated to the back. According to Grauss, the drive down to Y'bin would take about an hour. We would all be living in a guest ranch house just outside of the town. The back couches were rather comfortable. Annette and Vik settled in to work on some last minute details on their data pads. George was tinkering with his equipment again and Vyne had tilted his head back with his eyes closed, perhaps to take a short nap.

“I heard that the rodeo is going to be a sight to behold,” chattered Intern Wrenhold sitting next to me. The intern was part of a small crew of interns that had met up with *The Bacchus* the day before. Seeing that *Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant* was getting more and more popular with each episode, the Galactic Broadcasting Corporation decided to finally send us some extra help. The rest of the interns were still aboard the ship doing maintenance on equipment and organizing any correspondence that was coming in to the crew—particularly fan letters. Wrenhold had been picked randomly by Annette to help haul all of our luggage.

I briefly looked up to see the brunet and freckled intern literally bouncing up and down in his seat as the hover truck moved smoothly through the marshy landscape of the Traxanese countryside. “Oh?”

“I did all sorts of research about Anoxsis for Mr. Vyne,” the intern replied. “The rodeo is the most well-known event in these four sectors. Ranchers from all around go to see and participate in it. Because the Y’pin wild bull is an extremely dangerous animal. Only those with the most chutzpah would be able to capture it in the rodeo ring.”

“Hm.” I was already bored by the intern's lecture. I tuned him out as I worked on some of the instrument subroutines on my data pad. Only occasionally did I nod or murmur noises to make the intern think that I was actually listening to him.

At the guest ranch house, we all hauled our luggage and equipment inside. We only had time to dump everything into our rooms before heading back out to go to the rodeo, but from what I saw, the rooms were sparse but clean with all of the necessary amenities.

Feezle drove everyone out to the town center of Y’pin. The entire ground at this part of town was soggy and soft which made me glad that the crew had been prepared by wearing thick rubber boots and synth-rubber pants that could be easily hosed down to get rid of any dirt at the end of the day. Past the entrance of the rodeo fairgrounds, the crew split up. Mot had wanted to see the actual rodeo contest, and perhaps even ride one of the steers. Vik, of course, went with Mot. The cyborg also went along to make sure he could directly feed lines to the boss.

As the sensory technician, George's job was to record as many unique scents, textures, and tastes as possible around the fairgrounds. The intern went along with George to make sure he recorded anything that was on the list of scenes that we were required to get to the editors. Vik had given Kameel one of the spare hover holographic recorders to use on his trip around the fairgrounds. Mot's friend and Feezle were heading off to the games section which Feezle had assured Kameel was the best part of the whole rodeo.

Annette and I were off to record anything else unusual at the fairgrounds. As I walked with the director to the west part of the town to see some of the local craft project contests, I triggered my fingers and tapped out several commands to my eye screen on my thigh. My eye screen automatically split into several feeds, each one from the different crew members' vantage points. I noticed that Gauss the tourist guide had taken Mot to the relative safety of the spectator stands at the rodeo ring. Vik was currently pointing his recording apparatus into the ring where one of the ranchers was trying to rope a scaly, thrashing beast that looked like the cross between a cow and a lizard. George was currently attempting to stick one of his sensory probes into a fried edible that the intern had bought from a food stand. And Kameel and Feezle were trying to outdo each other in a game of darts.

“Oh, look at that!” exclaimed Annette, drawing my attention back to my present surroundings. “It looks like the Taxanese here know how to build barns. Isn't it amazing that their structures can even stand on this swampy ground?”

“I'm sure the foundations are firmly sunk into the ground like those pylons back at the transport hub in the capital city,” I replied. “And that doesn't look like a barn to me. For one thing, it's painted pink. And it has two chimneys.”

“Who cares. It looks like they're having some sort of contest inside. My translator is picking up something about contestants.”

There was a sign next to the front doors of the pink Traxanese barn. My eye screen, with the new translation subroutines, rendered the Anoxian script into Galactic Standard. “I think the sign says that it's a livestock competition for children.”

“Oh, how cute! Let's go see.” Annette strolled up ahead as I made some final adjustments to my holographic recorder which I had strapped to my shoulder. The jerboa scampered out of my pocket to sit on top of the holographic recorder.

“Hey,” I exclaimed. “Get off of there. If you move one centimeter, you could block the view.”

The jerboa gave a smug chirp and continued to sit on the small platform where I would usually hook up an additional recorder if I needed it.

“Fine. Stay there, then. But don't blame me if your little butt overheats a coil and the thing blows out from below you.” I headed onward in Annette's wake. The interior of the barn was a bit darker than outside where the sun was shining so it took a couple of seconds for my eyes to adjust.

But when my eyes finally registered images, I saw a multitude of yellow slitted eyes turned toward my direction. The jerboa, seeing the ugly creature, stood up on its hind legs and gave an angry squeak. In reply, the owner of the yellow eyes roared, emitting a stench so foul that I reared back to the wall of the barn, reflexively covering my burning nose.

Part VII: Main Course

The Hydra and the Firebird

“Lady, you might need this.”

I looked up with my watering eyes and saw an older man in the traditional Traxanese clothing wearing a gas mask over his face. He handed me another gas mask. I took it and secured it to my face. Once I could breathe, I looked past him to see that the entire barn was filled with cages of strange, unnatural animals. Annette had snagged a gas mask from somewhere and was securing it to her own face. She gave me a thumbs up and then started meandering around the barn to look at everything.

“Thanks, Mister...”

“You can just call be Able,” he said. “I’m one of the volunteers helping out at the kids’ contest barn. We’re currently judging the genetically engineered species. It’s the Unnatural Critters That Shouldn’t Exist Contest.”

“I see.”

Able motioned toward a small blond boy standing beside him who was also wearing a gas mask over his face. “This is my son Jimmy. He has a few entries in a couple of contests. I’m real proud of him. I see you have a holographic recorder. Are you from the capital city news?”

“Sorry, no. I’m actually one of the holographic projectionists from the GBC.”

“I recognize you!” exclaimed Jimmy. “You’re Euphie Tanaka-Teng. And the other lady must be the director Annette Bakkar. I just started watching *Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant*. Is Nigel Mot around? Is he going to interview me?”

“Mr. Mot is working on some other scenes right now, unfortunately.”

“*Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant*, eh?” said Able. “Now that you say so, you do look familiar. I’m afraid it’s Jimmy who watches the show. I only catch bits of it when I come home from work. Is it a big show?”

“Dad,” said Jimmy in an exasperated tone that only children could achieve. “It’s like the biggest show ever. All of my friends will be jealous that I actually met someone on the crew.” Then the boy turned to me and gestured to the ugly multi-eyed creature in the nearest cage. It was currently in a staring contest with the jerboa. “This is my prize-winning engineered critter, Pipsqueak. It looks like he’s not to pleased to see your pet.”

“Oh, this fur ball?” I glanced at the gerbil. “Yeah, it is a bit surprising, isn’t it? Usually it’s so easy going. Looks like it’s decided that Pipsqueak is his mortal enemy.” The jerboa agreed with my assessment with another chirp.

“Your pet’s really interesting, Ms. Tanaka-Teng. I’ve never seen its kind before.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. It’s a genetically engineered Eridanese jerboa.”

“Cool,” Jimmy drawled. “It’s really cute. Does it have a name?”

I shrugged. “No name yet. Nothing that I’ve thought up so far really fits it.”

“The jerboa seems so ferocious for a small animal. Maybe you should call him Suliman the Bold.”

“Suliman the Bold?”

Hearing my confused tone, Able explained, “Every kid on Anoxsis knows who Suliman the Bold is. He was one of the original colonists who braved the elements of this hostile planet and organized a counter attack against the Imperial army when it wanted to take the planet over for its own industrial purposes nearly five hundred years ago.”

“Ah. I see. Well, thank you for the suggestion, Jimmy. I will certainly consider it,” I said even as I automatically discarded it in my mind. “Anyways, tell me more about Pipsqueak. What sort of animal is he anyway?”

“I call him a hydra-turkey hybrid. Pipsqueak is a little smelly. That’s why we’re all wearing gas masks. I’m already thinking about making a lavender-smelling hydra-turkey hybrid. I’m going to call him Pipsqueak II. It’s all a matter of tinkering with the metabolic pathways, you know.”

Despite the gas mask, I could tell that Able was beaming at his son’s engineering prowess. “Isn’t Jimmy the brightest? Our family has been ranchers for generations, but Jimmy’s showing real promise.”

Jimmy nodded. “I’m hoping to one day get into Andromeda University and work with Dr. Travalyen Lovecraft.” Travalyen Lovecraft was a well-known geneticist who specialized in making hybrids of all sorts. Some of the hybrids, however, were illegal in several sectors due to some groups

considering the geneticist's work as immoral. But immoral or not, one had to admit that Lovecraft's work was genius. It made even the surprisingly sophisticated Traxanese contest seem like a quaint backwater breeding experiment.

“Good luck with that, Jimmy. Judging from your work so far, it seems like you're on the right track. Why don't you take me around the barn and tell me about all the other entries in the contest?”

“Sure thing, Ms. Tanaka-Teng. Come over here. This is a modified pecking hen spliced with a Prillan lizard. My friend Peter made that one. He calls it Aunt Edna because its temper is a lot like his aunt's when she finds out that his Uncle Mike has left his socks on the floor again.”

As I filmed Jimmy giving me the grand tour of the entire barn, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Annette looking at one of the cages which contained what looked like a bird with brilliant red feathers. The director peered closer at the silver plaque welded to the top of the cage. Unsettled, the bird squawked and let out a breath of flame that almost singed her hair. Startled, Annette warily stepped backward and bumped into a brawny local also wearing a gas mask. They talked with the local motioning toward the bird with some sort of explanation.

On one of my feeds to my eye screen, I noticed that George and the intern had headed to yet another stand which was serving something that looked like Galactic standard fries. The stall manager said something and the intern took one of the fries to sniff at it. George yelled at him. But it had no effect. The intern popped the fry into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. A minute later, he was passed out on the ground. George yelled some more before picking up the intern and calling on his ear comm for a medic.

Annette and the local had moved on further down the barn. It looked like they were getting cosy.

“And this,” said Jimmy as we neared the red bird, “is a firebird from North Anoxsis. It's been engineered to breathe fire. Look.” The boy took out a small scrap of paper from his pocket and tossed it in the cage. The bird squawked and the piece of paper burst into flame before it floated down to the bottom of the cage in a pile of ash. “Neat, huh?”

“Fascinating,” I said. “It's just like those stories from the ancients about firebirds.”

“The ancients had stories about firebirds?” Jimmy's eyes were wide. “I never heard about that.”

“Yup. You might try to look them up sometime. They're pretty interesting.”

A message suddenly appeared on my eye screen. It was from Annette. *Looks like you have everything in control here. I'll be right back. My new guide Antoine here says that he has something to show me back at his trailer.*

I frowned at that and then triggered back, *If he's going to show you what I think he's going to show you, you'd better make sure that he's clean of swamp mud.*

At that, I saw Annette wiggle her fingers at me from the barn exit and then disappear off with her latest beau.

“Well, that's it,” the boy rattled on. “I could give you a tour of the rest of the fairgrounds if you like. Right Dad?”

Able shook his head. “I have to stay here to supervise the barn, Jimmy. But make sure you don't wander too far, you hear? If you get into trouble, just trig me or your Mom.”

“Yes, Dad.” Turning back to me, Jimmy eagerly jumped up and down. “Come on, Ms. Tanaka-Teng. There's tons of cool stuff at the fairgrounds. There's the barn next door which is the vegetable contest. My Mom has some stuff entered there, too. Do you think you could get Nigel Mot to visit this place?”

I checked my eye screen feeds. Mot had convinced someone to give him a try at the rodeo. He was currently riding a Traxanese rodeo horse and was competently whirling a lasso over his head. He managed to snag the horns of the Y'pin wild bull, but the bull took him for a harsh spin. A sudden jerk sent Mot flying off his mount. He did several flips in the air before crashing down in a pile of what looked like manure. I involuntarily winced.

“Even if he wanted to,” I told Jimmy, “I'm not sure he could right at the moment.”

House of Pancakes

In her copious spare time on the ship while we were traveling between destinations, Annette had managed to knit several hats. They were all identical. They were all modeled on a deity that the ancients worshiped many centuries ago which they called Mukmuk. Mukmuk was still worshiped in pockets of

civilization around the galaxy, especially in temperate climates near coastlines. Mukmuk was a Terran marmot with wide cartoon eyes and smiling mouth. Annette claimed it was cute.

In the system of Old Minos, about forty percent of the population still worshiped Mukmuk. In the galactic encyclopedia, it was said that the Minoans built elaborate structures and temples in celebration of their god and that it was considered by the Association of Galactic Architects to be famed for their beautiful buildings. They were also famed for their adherence to traditional Terran foods. According to the banquet menu that we were following for the documentary show, Old Minoan pork roasts had been served as the main course way back when. That, of course, meant that we did a scene where Mot had to witness an Old Minoan farmer slaughtering a pig in the traditional way before roasting it over an enormous bonfire that was sure to panic any code inspectors on any other planet.

The upside of that, however, was that we had gorged ourselves on succulent roast pig. So much so that the next day, I was still feeling a little drowsy from the previous evening's meal. That was why I did not immediately understand when Annette had burst into my room early in the morning before I had even gotten out of bed and was yelling at me to get up.

"Wake up, Euphie! I just got the most brilliant idea! We're going to have pancakes for breakfast!"

"Pan what?" I muttered. I automatically pulled the covers back over my head.

"Come on, sleepy head. We're heading out. The Old Minoans are famed for their pancakes. At least that's what Vyne told me this morning."

"It figures that the cyborg was behind your brilliant idea," I said. From underneath the covers, my voice came out muffled. "This is supposed to be my day off."

"Come on, Euphie. Everyone has time for pancakes!"

Suddenly, my blanket was gone and I yelped. "Annette!"

"Out! Get dressed and brush your teeth. We're heading out to the Old Minoan House of Pancakes whether or not you like it. If you're not out of your room in ten minutes, I'm going to sic Vyne on you. You know he'll drag you out even if you happen to be taking a shower at the moment."

"You're not kidding, are you?"

"Nope."

I cursed and then zoomed into the adjoining bathroom while I heard Annette cackling evilly behind me.

The jerboa had just jumped into my pocket and I was buttoning my jacket when the door to my bedroom slid open again. In the doorway, stood the cyborg.

"Look, I'm almost ready. I'm coming."

"You're coming now?"

"Now wait a minute. Stop right there! Don't move another millimeter...ah!"

The cyborg had simply strolled into the room and hauled me up in the air until he had me draped over his shoulder. I pounded on his back, but it was like hitting an immovable rock. "Let me down this instant, you barbaric idiot with wires for brains! I said I was coming. You didn't have to drag me out like some sort of deranged caveman."

"Be quiet. We're taking you to the House of Pancakes."

"I am not going to be quiet! Put me down right now!"

The cyborg slapped me. In the ass.

"Fuck! Did you just spank me?"

"What if I did?" He punctuated his words by patting me on the butt. "You have a nice ass, by the way."

"You are so going to pay for molesting me," I growled.

"Will it involve getting tied up?"

"You, just shut up. When I'm through with you, you're going to think that getting tied up is the least of your worries."

"That sounds kinky. When will the torture start?"

My next response was an incoherent yowl.

The cyborg dragged me out into the hotel lobby where the rest of the crew was already waiting to witness my humiliation. Vik already had his holographic equipment on and ready and was recording everything. But the weird thing was, nobody seemed particularly fazed by my awkward position. Annette made a pleased exclamation when we entered the lobby. She walked over to us and gave the cyborg a hat that was made of black yarn. It was the face of a marmot with an eye patch like a deranged space pirate.

The cyborg put it on without a comment and managed to make the whole thing look badass. Annette had a small pink marmot cap to put on the jerboa which had scampered out of my pocket during my scuffle with the cyborg and was currently sitting on the cyborg's opposite shoulder. There was a larger pink cap, a pink marmot I noticed, that Annette put on my head before I could do anything. I scowled at her.

That was when I noticed that the rest of the documentary crew were also wearing marmot hats knitted by Annette. Annette herself was wearing a purple marmot. Mot had a brown one. Vik's was blue and George's was orange.

"Can't I have one in a different color?" I said.

"No," said Annette. "Besides, you look really cute in that color."

"I don't want to look cute. I want to look scary."

"Too bad, Euphie, you're going to be the cute one," said Mot. "We've already decided."

Vik and George enthusiastically agreed and clinked their coffee mugs. I sniffed the air and smelled coffee and something else.

"Are you guys already drunk this early in the morning?" I demanded.

"It's coffee," Vik slurred. "With a bit of peppermint schnapps. The hotel manager says that it's all the rage with the tourists. Besides, I still have all of my reflexes intact." He twirled a small recorder in his hand in a quick and practiced movement to illustrate his point.

"Whatever." I pounded at the cyborg again. "Let me down now."

"What else do you need to say?"

I rolled my eyes. "Please, bucket-brain."

The cyborg let me down with seeming reluctance. "You can still record the proceedings if you're over my shoulder, right?"

I glared at him before taking the holographic recording equipment that Vik handed me. I strapped them over my shoulder. "No. I don't think so." The jerboa tugged at my pant leg and I bent down to pick up the rodent. I put it back into my pocket. "You are going to be so sorry for this bit of humiliation."

"Here's a coffee, kid. It'll make the humiliation go down faster," said George as he handed me a steaming cup. "It might make the pancakes go down faster, too."

"I hope you're right, George." I took the mug that he offered and downed the brew. The coffee tasted a bit of peppermint and alcohol. At the moment, I didn't care if I did get smashed before we got to order breakfast. "What's with these silly hats anyway?"

"They're not silly," said Annette. "I had already planned to make them when I found out that we would be going to Old Minos on one of our stops. You do know that the Minoans are fervent worshipers of the ancient deity Mukmuk. So I decided to make Mukmuk hats. It would make us more accepted in the traditional places that we'll end up going. Especially at the pancake house. According to the Minoan Mukmuk bible, their god ate pancakes every morning. This means that pancakes are considered a sacred food."

"Mmm. Pancakes," said Vik.

"I had pancakes at least once a week when I was a kid," said Mot. "With raspberries."

"Well, is everyone here?" said Annette. "Yes? Well, then, here we go. I've called for transport off to the Old Minoan House of Pancakes. I heard that it was located just on the edge of town near some really quaint scenery. We could probably all gaze at it and contemplate nature as we eat pancakes."

"I don't know about that," said George as he finished his own mug of spiked coffee. "I think I would be primarily contemplating the food."

Just as I've barely finished my own spiked coffee, the transport, a hoverbus painted with numerous frolicking marmots arrived at the front of the hotel where we were staying. We all piled into the vehicle with Annette sitting in front with the native Minoan driver to give him directions. The rest of us were piled into the back. I ended up squashed between Vyne and Mot. Mot was glancing out of the bus window and waving with a loopy smile on his face. I peeked out the window and saw several of the hotel employees standing outside gaping at the hoverbus.

"Isn't this great!" said Mot enthused as he turned back to the rest of us. "I love pancakes! This is going to be the best episode yet, according to my stomach."

"Do they serve rice porridge there too?" I asked.

Everyone else in the bus yelled a negative answer. "They don't serve rice porridge anywhere on Old Minos," berated Vik. "Didn't you even read the dossier that Vyne had provided everyone?"

"Yeah, but it didn't mention anything about..."

"They don't serve rice porridge," the cyborg cut me off. "We're going to get you to try pancakes."

And you're going to like it.”

“That really sounds ominous, bot-bucket.”

You really should stop calling me those nicknames, the cyborg sent to my eye screen. *Vik and George are recording this entire outing and who knows what the audience will think. Maybe they'll think that you're in love with me.*

In response, I slammed a fist into the side of the cyborg's face. I cried out, both in frustration and pain. Nothing happened except that my hand now felt like a pulp. The cyborg, damn him, just raised his fucking eyebrow and grinned.

So you do love me.

“When you least expect it,” I told him, “you're going to be flushed down a black hole.”

Mot frowned. “Black hole? We already did an episode on a black hole.”

“Arrgh!” I banged the back of my head onto the seat behind me.

The House of Pancakes was located inside a large pagoda of a building on top of a rocky hill at the edge of town. The pagoda itself was made of gleaming stone veined with pink marble and roofed with dark green tile. If one squinted, one could make out that there were small statues and reliefs on the pagoda. At the edge of the pointed roofs at each level were small marmot carvings, mouth open as they served as drainage spouts. All around the pagoda were more small gray stone statues of marmots in all sorts of poses. Most of the creatures were eating pancakes.

The hoverbus stopped near the entrance and everyone piled out and headed straight to the pagoda where a smiling hostess wearing a sweater and marmot earrings happily seated us in a small glassed in patio on the third floor overlooking the scenery.

I managed to get a seat next to the window. I leaned back on the chair, feeling still a little drowsy. I figured it was a mixture of getting woken up at such a hideously early hour in the morning, the large dinner from the previous night, and the spiked coffee. I briefly wondered if it was such a good idea to put a sedative in with a stimulant. Wouldn't my body get confused?

The jerboa popped back out of my pocket and scrambled up onto the table to admire itself in the shine of a nearby fork. It was then that Mot noticed the rodent.

“A rat!” he exclaimed.

“That's Euphie's gerbil,” said Annette who was sitting next to him. “Isn't he cute with the tiny matching hat?”

“I don't know about that. When did you get the gerbil? Last night?”

“Uh.” I sat straighter on my chair. “It arrived with my belongings when I first boarded *The Bacchus*. Apparently I had won some sort of contest on Kraken even though I don't even remember entering in the contest in the first place.”

“So long ago? How come I didn't even know?” Mot demanded.

“You've been oblivious, man,” said George as he took the old fashioned plastic menus from the server and passed them around the table. “Balthazar has been running around the ship like he's owned it the entire time we've started filming. You must have been blind if you've missed the little bugger.”

“It's named Balthazar?” said Mot in disbelief.

“It doesn't have a name at the moment,” I replied. “That's George's name for it.”

“I still think it should be called Bob,” said Vik.

Annette shook her head. “It's too cute to be called Bob. It should be Blueberry.”

“Killer.” The cyborg had his arms crossed about his chest and was observing the jerboa sniffing the table knife. “It likes guns.”

“You don't know that for a fact,” I countered.

“Balthazar, Bob, Blueberry, and Killer,” Mot counted on his fingers. “That's quite a variety. You know what you should call your pet, Euphie? You should call him Fuzz.”

“No.”

At that moment, the server came back. The server looked like a teenage girl who was still in school. She rolled her eyes at us and continued to chew something in her mouth. In one hand, she was holding a recording data pad. “Are you guys ready to order?”

The jerboa squeaked.

The server widened her eyes as she observed the blue rodent flip the nearest menu, which happened to be George's, to one of the pages and point to one of the items listed. The jerboa squeaked again.

“It's the second coming of Mukmuk!” the girl exclaimed. And she promptly fainted.

“Holy marmot!” exclaimed Vik as he grabbed the holographic recorder that he had placed next to him to film the entire thing. “This is awesome!”

“Is she all right?” asked Annette. She looked up and waved her arms. “Hey you over there! I think we might need a medic!”

I grabbed a hover recorder from my pocket and quickly launched it into the air. It was quicker than trying to strap the larger projector back on my shoulder. In a few seconds, I had triggered several commands to it and it had started recording the entire scene. The feed scrolled down half of my eye screen. I glanced toward the end of the table where Mot and Annette were looking worriedly at the fallen server. George was attempting to prop her up on one of the chairs from a nearby table.

“You, come back right here!” I hissed to the jerboa. “Stop making a nuisance of yourself!”

The jerboa shook its head and tapped the menu with its paw. It still wanted to order one of the dishes.

“I think she just fainted,” said the cyborg.

“No, duh,” I replied with a sigh as one of the House of Pancake employees, a thin young man who didn't seem that much older than the first server, finally came over to our table to see what was wrong. At that moment, the young server's eyelids flickered. She opened her eyes and stared directly at the small jerboa still sitting on the middle of the menu. “Mukmuk!”

“What, where?” exclaimed the other server. He saw the jerboa and then reeled back one step. Fortunately, he did not faint. But he did bow to the jerboa. The rodent chirped. “Mukmuk, oh great one, we are so honored by your presence at the House of Pancakes!”

The female server finally stood up after thanking George for putting her in the chair. “Mukmuk has spoken. He wants the summer squash pancakes.”

“I'll go make sure that the cook knows this immediately!” exclaimed the other server as he walked backward a few steps before hurrying off to the kitchens.

Satisfied that his order had now been taken, the jerboa scampered back to me and sat on my shoulder where the holographic recorder would normally be resting.

“You're the chosen one!” the girl exclaimed. “What will be your order miss? It will be on the house.”

“Er...” I had been too busy calibrating the recording devices to have looked at the menu in front of me. “What do you recommend?”

“A lot of our customers love the chocolate pancakes,” she supplied. “But strawberry, orange, and gooseberry are also popular flavors.”

“Wow. That's kind of difficult to choose.”

“I'll have the raspberry,” said Mot. “Euphie, you should also get raspberry. It's good.”

“I vote for the chocolate,” said Vik.

“With maple syrup,” Annette supplied.

The cyborg shook his head. “Plain with a little butter is the way to go.”

George set down his menu and handed it to the server. “I want waffles.”

“Waffles?” Mot glared at the sensory technician. “This is a pancake establishment.”

“We also serve waffles,” said the teenage server. “Would you like waffles, miss?” she asked me.

I put a hand on my head, feeling a headache coming on. “I don't know. I've never had waffles.”

“I can bring all the flavors out, including the waffles,” the server suggested. “That way, everyone can try everything.”

“Yes. Fine.”

“Great!” The young server beamed and quickly tapped on her data pad to relay the information to the kitchens. “It looks like the estimated time of arrival for your breakfast will be in fifteen minutes. I'll also bring out a selection of coffee and tea if you like. I hope Mukmuk is pleased!”

The jerboa chirped.

The girl blushed. “Thank you, Mukmuk! May the day be good with you, too!”

As the server skipped away, Mot looked at the jerboa with new found respect. “Well, it seems that there is an advantage to having a deity in our midst.”

“The lawyers and ethicists have nixed the idea of going to Delphinus III,” Annette said at the next crew meeting.

We were all in one of the conference rooms on *The Bacchus*, gathered to discuss what we would be doing in the next episode. After the pancake scene at Old Minos, word had gotten out to the general populace that I was the owner of Mukmuk's latest avatar. It was a little annoying because the natives would come out to bow and claim that I was “the one” whatever that meant, and give us free food whether or not we wanted it. The practical side of me made me hoard the food away in my cabin on the ship in case the ship's chef suddenly decided not to cook dinner if his temper went south.

“You're called 'the one' because you own Killer,” the cyborg had told me. “That makes you some sort of high priestess or something.”

“I'm no priestess. I'm not religious.”

“You could start to be. You should check out the costumes that the priestess wears. It's quite impressive.”

Expecting to find a picture of a person dressed in heavy robes and elaborate headdresses, I was quite surprised when I finally found a picture of a Minoan priestess in the data archives. “You idiot,” I had ended up yelling. “A Minoan priestess hardly wears anything! She might as well be naked.”

The cyborg had raised his damn eyebrow again. But there was a definite glint in his eye.

“May a huge boulder with your name on it drop on your head,” I said ominously.

“You'd make a cute soothsayer.”

“Arg!”

Back in the conference room, Mot was fiddling with his data pad with a frown. “But Delphinian swordfish was listed on the banquet menu. We can't take that out of our documentary. That wouldn't make it complete. And the fans would revolt.”

“The fans would only revolt if something funny doesn't happen,” said George in a bored tone as he tapped on his own data pad. “Have you guys checked the message boards last night when the Old Minoan episode aired in most of the Beta Quadrant? They loved what they call the pancake scene. There are fan sites springing up nearly overnight for Euphie's pet. He's pretty much the star now. He's even got fangirls, from the looks of it.”

The jerboa, sitting at my elbow and nibbling on a bit of Minoan waffle and studying a data pad that had a puzzle on it, briefly looked up and chirped.

“This is ridiculous,” said Mot with a snarl. “A rodent has fangirls and I don't?”

“Well, you do have a fan site,” said George. “And some fangirls.”

“Yes!”

“But the fangirls are trying to petition for you to go to Gamma Cygnus for the jello wrestling championships.”

“Dammit!”

Annette pounded her fists on the conference table. “Come on, guys. Let's get back on topic. They don't want us to go to Delphinus III. What are we going to do as a replacement? Our episode on New Minos has currently been sent to the editors. I got a message back from headquarters saying that they liked all of our scenes that we got there, especially on the New Minoan tuber stew.”

“They only liked that scene because the server dumped it on my head!” exclaimed Vik. “I'm still trying to clean all the bits out of my holographic equipment!”

“You only got dumped on the head because you tried to hit on her,” said Annette in a repressive tone. “In the future, try not to annoy the hand that feeds you.”

“Yeah, yeah. But how can you resist a hot piece of...ow!” George, who had been sitting next to Vik, smacked him on the back of his head with his data pad. “Stew! I was about to say stew!”

“So why don't they want us to go to Delphinus III?” Mot finally asked.

“Cannibalism.”

We all stared at Annette who was sitting at the head of the table with a grim look on her face.

“Excuse me?” asked Mot.

“You tell him, Vyne.”

The cyborg suddenly looked chagrined. “I suppose I should apologize for this last minute mishap. There was a slight miscommunication with the person who was supposed to be our minder on Delphinus III. Apparently there is a little known ritual on the planet that is performed every time someone dies. To honor their dead, the Delphinians eat their dead relative to make sure that they 'go on living!'.”

“That's kind of gross,” I said. “So they eat grandma after she passes away.”

“Pretty much. And that whole thing would be a legal landmine, let alone an ethical one. So the powers to be at the Galactic Broadcasting Corporation headquarters has decided that we not go there at all, even if we're only going there for the swordfish.”

“Bummer,” said George. “But might as well. I'm not sure most of the viewership would appreciate getting the scent and taste of someone's dead grandmother on their holographic sets.”

“So,” said Annette after a moment as we all digested this setback, “does anyone have any ideas for alternatives?”

“I have one alternative,” said the cyborg. “The Delphinians, fortunately, do export some of their swordfish catches out to the Belkan Federation. The Belkan Federation is already on our schedule of places to be filmed because it's there where two of the banquet side dishes originated, sweet candied eggroot balls and mozzarella sticks.”

“Are you sure mozzarella sticks originated in the Belkan Federation?” said Mot. “I seem to recall that it was an appetizer that went all the way back to the ancient Terrans.”

“I believe what you are thinking of is bread sticks,” the cyborg countered. “Mozzarella sticks are supposed to be a uniquely Belkan Federation food. That's the whole reason why it is in the banquet menu in the first place.”

“Well, whatever the case, mozzarella sticks doesn't sound all that interesting,” muttered Mot. “What are we supposed to do, use them for sword fighting?”

“Now, that's an idea,” said Vik. “I'm sure that'll increase the ratings in the next episode.”

Annette sighed. “I feel kind of doubtful about that, Vik. But we'll figure it out once we get there. So fine, the Delphinians export the swordfish to the Belkan Federation. We'll get a scene of the swordfish once we get there. So, what's next in our agenda? According to Captain Avery, our current heading is to the Kiber Field. It's the only detour to the Belkan Federation besides the Ralgan Corridor. And we all know how dangerous the Corridor is considering all the reports that are coming out of there of the two local political factions waging some sort of guerrilla warfare.”

“What about going to the Belkan Federation through the Epsilon Volans System?” I asked as I triggered my fingers and brought up the local star charts for the system on my eye screen. From my vantage point, the system appeared to give a clear route toward the Belkan Federation. Of course, someone ignorant of the entire sector of the galaxy would think that we could have just as easily hyperjumped from our current position into the Belkan Federation, but things were not so easy. According to the nature of space in the region, it would be rather hazardous to do any hyperjumping. One could risk creating a temporary black hole from the emissions of the hyperdrive interacting with the unique exotic particles in the sector and getting sucked in to a never never land dimension.

The reason for all of the exotic particles scattered throughout the sector was a historical one. Several centuries ago, a couple of warring factions developed a muon bomb that got detonated near an existing wormhole. The entire interaction of the explosion caused an intense emission of exotic particles that prevented any ship from traveling in the area for several decades while people tried to clean the mess up. Most of it was cleaned up, but there were still pockets of the mess still existing.

“No,” Annette told me. “I had suggested that route to Captain Avery at first, too, but we can't go that way. There have been some recent reports of some fighting in that system as well. Apparently there are two groups there that had previously had a tenuous peace, but things have flared up again. Someone blew up a moon and the debris in the entire area pretty much means that no one can travel there.”

I sighed as the jerboa chirped and tugged on my sleeve. “Well, there goes that idea.” I then looked down at the gerbil. It was trying to get me to look at the data pad that it had been working on. “What the...” I took up the data pad and stared at it as Annette continued talking.

“That's why we're going through the Kiber Field. It's going to take us an entire three weeks, according to the navigational engineers. We need to figure out a way to utilize all of that free time productively for the show.”

“Sleep!” Vik and George said together.

The director pounded the conference again. “That's unacceptable.”

“Well, there are some colonial settlements in the Kiber Field, according to my research,” Vyne said slowly. “I need to do a little more digging in the databases, but I'm sure they will have some unique cuisine which we could film. There are still some foods on the banquet list where we're still trying to figure out where we can get it.”

As the rest of the crew discussed the possible colonial outposts to stop at while the ship was slowly navigating through the Kiber Field, I looked from the data pad and back to the jerboa who smugly chirped at me and continued nibbling at the piece of waffle in its paws.

“You're just full of secrets, aren't you?” I whispered to it.

All I got back was a squeak that could have been interpreted as anything.

“Okay,” said Annette as I focused back on the meeting. “So the largest settlement is in Eidolon Alley. That's what, three days from now at the speed we're traveling right now?”

“That's correct,” said Vyne. “From what I've been able to pull up from the databases, Eidolon Alley grows their food in a network of underground hydroponics bay on the large asteroids which have posts settled there. Their bay designs are quite unusual which might make for an interesting scene.”

“Right,” said Mot doubtfully. “I guess we'd better prepare some questions on hydroponics bay construction. Which, by the way, I know nothing about.”

“That's what the databases are for,” Vik replied. He tapped on his own pad and shook his head. “Still, it's three days from now. On our original schedule, we would already be arriving in orbit around Dalphinus III and getting ready to film.”

“We will have to take the obstacles as they come,” said Annette. “We'll just have to cut filming time and hope for the best when we reach Eidolon Alley.”

I glanced again at the pad in my hand and then slid it over the table to the director. “You might be interested in seeing this. It might cut our travel time through the Kiber Field in half and get us enough scenes from the Kiber Field settlements to cobble together a decent episode.”

“What is this?” Annette frowned when she picked up the data pad. Then her expression cleared and took on one that was of surprise. “Good grief. How did you figure this out, Euphie?”

“I didn't. It was fur ball over here.”

The jerboa chirped.

“O! Blueberry is a genius!” she exclaimed. “Here, look everyone, Euphie's pet solved the Kiber Enigma!”

“What?!” exclaimed George. “That can't be possible. Astrophysicists have been trying to figure that one out for centuries!” The Kiber Enigma was the name given to the problem of navigating the Kiber Field in the most efficient way possible—that is, to hit every settlement in the least amount of distance and circumnavigating the least number of uninhabited asteroids. The the complication of having so many objects in space going at different velocities, even computers had a difficult time keeping up with the calculations involved. But what had taken astrophysicists and their computers centuries to solve had taken the jerboa about half an our during the crew meeting.

“Here, I'll put it on the conference table projector.” Annette tapped a few controls on the data pad and then the view screen on the conference room table flickered to life. The holographic projection that was being show was that of the Kiber Field, with the balls of golden energy representing the individual objects in the Field. Among the asteroids was a flight trajectory in blue. “Isn't this brilliant?”

We stared at it for a moment before Mot said, “Give this to Captain Avery. If he changes course now, we'll be able to reach Eidolon Alley before dinner. Vyne, send out a message to the Eidolon Alley minder to expect us soon.”

“Great!” exclaimed Vik. “I can't wait to take some shots of a hydroponics bay. Won't Captain Avery be surprised the Enigma got solved? I think we should submit this to the Guinness Recording of Galactic Records. For smartest gerbil ever.”

“Bad idea,” George cut in. “If the government finds out about Balthazar, it's going to sweep in and take him away for secret military purposes. You don't want to tell the entire galaxy about this, believe me.”

“Oh come on George,” said Vik. “That's a crazy conspiracy theory. The military doesn't care about a rodent.”

“They will about this one,” the sensory technician said in dire tones. “What do you think, Euphie?”

I glanced down at the jerboa. It seemed to be ignoring the conversation around it, but I knew the rodent was listening. “Maybe we should hold off on that for a little bit,” I said. “The fur ball is pretty famous already as it is.”

Mot frowned. “That's right. It already has fangirls.”

Zero-G Jello

It was in the middle of the night and both the ship's chef and his assistant were asleep. I knew this because I had hacked into the personnel files and the personnel monitoring system. That was one upside of being a holographic projectionist. One learned enough to hack one's way through things without too much trouble. Conversely, this also made one good enough to build firewalls around one's own personnel files. Unless you were trying to keep out a cyborg.

And that was precisely why I was in the ship's galley in the middle of the night. Vyne was going down. And he wouldn't know what hit him. The kitchen had some equipment that my own cabin did not possess. And I wanted to make something that required this sort of equipment. Inside the kitchen, I adjusted the lighting to half illumination and rummaged around in the drawers until I found a metal pot. The jerboa had tagged along and was chattering at me in disapproval from his perch on top of a toaster oven.

"Look, I'm not going to kill him," I said as I filled the pot with water. "That would be beyond the pale, even for me. I'm just going to give him a little taste of his own medicine. Cyborgs can't be indestructible."

The jerboa gave a doubtful chirp.

"Oh, come on, really. He's not going to know anything that's going on. Last time I checked in the personnel logs, he was in his quarters doing who knows what. Maybe sleeping. Do cyborgs sleep anyway?"

The fur ball chirped again and then jumped off his perch to pull open a drawer that appeared to be full of small packages of freeze-dried rations. The jerboa took out a package that said it was freeze-dried ice cream and tore open the package with its paws. It took out a small chunk of the food and began nibbling on it.

I set the pot filled with water on the stove and turned the temperature knob to high. I took out the package of ammonia flavored gelatin that I had gotten from Kraken and placed it on the counter. Now, to find a bowl. "He's not going to find out," I said, not sure if I was repeating this for my own benefit or the gerbil's. "Besides, even if he is suspicious, it won't be the ammonia per se that will knock him out."

There was a large metal bowl in one of the upper cabinets. I brought it down and then opened the packet of gelatin. I poured that into the bowl. Then I took out another package that I had managed to obtain at one of the mining colonies that we had stopped for refueling between our stop with Eidolon Alley and the next colonial settlement in the Kiber Field, Proctor's Post. I had been surprised that the mining colony had even had a supply of the stuff since it wasn't in particularly high demand in the Delta Quadrant, but I took it as a happy coincidence. I poured the contents of that package into the bowl as well and then settled down to wait for the water to boil.

"He is so going to be sorry he messed with me. Torture, indeed."

The water came to a boil in precisely seventeen point six minutes. I took the pot off the stove and poured the water into the bowl. An ammonia scented stench rose from the bowl, making me cough. I stirred the whole mixture with a spoon very quickly before putting it into the cooler at the end of the kitchen. I punched a program into the cooler's control panel and leaned against the counter to take in a fresh breath.

"Whew. I did not expect that."

"Expect what?"

I yelped and whirled around. The cyborg was standing in the entranceway to the galley. His hair was slightly wet, from a recent shower, no doubt, and he was wearing some black pajamas that looked more like a ninja costume than sleepwear. Or maybe it was a ninja outfit. Maybe he had been heading to the exercise room when he noticed the noise in the galley. Wait a minute...

"What the hell are you doing here?" I demanded.

"I could ask the same thing of you." Vyne stepped into the galley and lifted up his face to sniff the air. "I see you've been busy."

"It's none of your beeswax. Are you here for a midnight snack?"

"No." He took another step inside the galley. I took another step back to keep the distance between us. The corner of his mouth slightly tipped upward. "I had a bit of insomnia and decided to check up on you. Imagine my surprise when the ship's computer told me that you were here in the kitchen."

"Insomnia? I thought cyborgs don't sleep."

“You'd be surprised at what cyborgs are capable of.”

I scoffed. “Like checking up on other people's whereabouts? I can't decide whether or not it's paranoia or just plain creepiness. I wonder what the statistics are on cyborgs who turn into stalkers.”

He finally looked a little offended. “Me? A stalker?”

“Yeah, a stalker. I mean, look at all of the evidence. You hack into my eye screen feeds. You track me down at weird hours in the night...”

“I'm just worried about you. I still think there's a saboteur on this ship. The last batch of data pads I recalibrated have been wiped again. Once might be attributed to simply bad luck. But having it happening again? It can't be coincidence.”

“Or maybe there's some sort of program virus that you haven't been able to track down. Look, if you're not here to get food, then go away. You've satisfied your curiosity that I'm here.”

“Ah, but the question is, why are you here?”

“I'm just making something.”

“Something?”

The cooler chose at that moment to beep. “Ah!” I lurched backward and grabbed the handle of the cooler and jerked it open. I took the bowl with the gelatin out and poked a finger on the surface. It appeared to have completely solidified. “I was just making something. This.”

“So that's what's making the smell. You were making jello? In the middle of the night?”

“Why not?”

“I can't believe that you would be doing this just because. I hope you're not going to eat that.”

“I'm not. You are.”

“Me?” He stepped even closer until he was close enough to touch me. “You were going to give that to me?”

I felt my cheeks heat. I scowled, telling myself that it was because the cyborg had caught me just before I was ready rather than being embarrassed. “Yeah. So what? You're probably the only one on the ship who could eat this without getting sick.”

He looked down at the bowl of jello. “I'm not sure I trust that.”

“Why not? It's ammonia flavored jello. I didn't put any actual ammonia in it. I don't think.”

“For one thing, my thermal detectors can't really tell if you're lying or not. Which could still mean more than one thing. You could be not telling me something.”

“Have you ever heard of this Old Earth saying about not looking a gift horse in the mouth?”

“I'll try it,” he said. “If you give me something in return.”

It was my turn to be suspicious. “Yeah? What do you want?”

“This.” He took another step closer, leaned over, and put his mouth on mine.

The floor beneath my feet shook and alarms started blaring.

Dammit. I was not supposed to be falling for some pushy cyborg. Why couldn't I be attracted to someone normal, like Odaba or Vik or even old paranoid George? I tore my lips away and tried to bash Vyne with the bowl of jello. Instead, I found myself floating in mid-air. The bowl of jello bounced off the cyborg's indestructible head and whizzed out of the galley. The jello floated past me with a piece of freeze-dried ice cream in its paws, chittering hysterically. Spoons, forks, and a salt shaker drifted by as I looked up to see the cyborg also floating above the floor, giving me a smug smile.

“Apparently our chemistry was so explosive, it blew out the gravity generators.”

I pointed a finger at him. “You. Are. Going. To. Be. So. Sorry.”

“You keep saying that. If you really wanted to hurt me, you wouldn't be giving me any advance warning.”

I grabbed a butter knife that was floating by and half-heartedly flung it in his direction before attempting to haul myself out of the galley to find the bowl of jello. After a few false starts, I managed to swim my way out of the kitchen and into the mess hall where I saw the metal bowl floating near one of the light fixtures a few meters away from my head. Without anything to push against, there was no way for me to propel myself upward. Unless...

I bent down and untied one of my boots. Then I flung the boot down toward the floor. The opposing momentum brought me within striking distance of the bowl. I reached up, grabbed the lip of the bowl, and pulled it toward me. The bowl came to me. The jello did not. The transparent gray gelatin remained near the ceiling, gently wobbling from its recent separation.

“Fuck!”

I was halfway done untying my other boot when the cyborg finally drifted back out to the mess

hall to see what I was doing.

“What you should do is find the emergency gravity generators. Or at the very least, some magnetic boots.”

“That’s being entirely too sensible.”

“Well, someone has to be. I think the kiss has rattled your brain.”

I threw my second boot at him and ended up getting propelled to the opposite wall instead of up near the ceiling. “If you think you’re so smart, then go get the jello yourself, hot shot cyborg.”

“I need the bowl first.”

“If I throw this bowl, I might end up crashing somewhere else in this room.”

“Well, then, I’ll come and get it.” But instead of slowly swimming across the room like I had done before, Vyne merely reached up to grab a bit of the railing along the side of the room—railing that I had not noticed before, I thought with chagrin—and simply hauled himself toward me. When he was only an arm’s length away, I wordlessly handed him the bowl.

He didn’t immediately take it.

“What are you waiting for?”

“I don’t know. Maybe for you to kiss me back?” he said hopefully.

“I wish I still had that butter knife.” I grabbed his shoulders and pulled myself closer to him.

From my close vantage point, I saw his eyes glittering. I grinned, right before I swiftly brought my feet up and used his chest as a spring board to launch myself back at the jello.

“That was cruel, Euphie.”

“Whatever.” I flung my arm outward and managed to scoop the jello back into the bowl as I continued to drift over one of the mess hall tables.

The ship shuddered and the alarms started blaring again. Something wrong was definitely going on. I knew that the Kiber Field itself was studded with obstacles, even if the genius jerboa had figured out a way to chart a course through the place without running into too many asteroids. But one could never say that anything could be predicted with one hundred percent accuracy out in space. The astrophysicists haven’t figured everything out even in this day and age. Nothing was absolutely certain. We could very well be hitting an unplanned meteor shower. Or worse yet, have stumbled onto some kind of spatial anomaly that was currently damaging the ship.

But all thoughts that this could possibly be caused by some kind of natural phenomena flew out of my head when there was a sudden buzzing alarm sounding in the mess hall as there was something unauthorized happening in the vicinity. Exactly what that was revealed itself when four figures quanted into the center of the mess hall. The four figures wore gray black armor and were armed to the teeth with all sorts of weapons. They were standing on the floor because they had come prepared with magnetized boots.

Their eyes glowed red. Cyborg space pirates.

Before I could let forth with a string of expletive laden invective, Vyne launched himself toward me and tackled me to the side of the room. The pirates fired at will, sending sparks and exploding furniture smoking in the air.

Say nothing, Vyne sent to my eye screen. Let me handle them.

Who are they?

It’s Captain Redeye and his Merry Band of Revelers.

Those cyborgs do not look very merry.

The ship shuddered again and then the sound of a backup engine roared into life. The sudden activation of gravity had me and the cyborg sliding down the wall to the floor. I let out a grunt.

“For blue’s sake, you weigh a ton. How much hardware are you packing anyway?”

“Enough,” he replied as he slowly got up with his arms held out to indicate that he was not armed. “What do you want?” he asked the pirates.

I heard the safety to the weapons click into place as I stood up, rubbing the side of my thigh with the hand that was not holding the bowl of jello. There was going to be a bruise there in the morning, I thought with not a little annoyance.

“If you move from behind that table, we’re going to blast you into smithereens,” said the head cyborg. This must be Captain Redeye, I thought. He had bronze hair that was liberally streaked with blond. His face was all harsh planes and there was a holographic recorder, masquerading as an eye patch over his left eye. His right eye glowed red from a modified retina. He was even bigger than Vyne. Then again, he was also wearing quite a bit of armor. In one hand, he held a high tech phaser rifle, which

currently was aimed at the ceiling.

I continued to pretend to rub at my thigh. Discretely, I triggered my fingers to send a distress message to the ship's security.

"What do you want?" Vyne asked again. "As you can see, we don't have anything."

"Nothing except some tasty jello," I said.

Didn't I tell you to be quiet?

You can't shut me up, Nanobot Magoo.

Nanobot Magoo?! Where the hell do you come up with these stupid nicknames?

Twentieth-century television. You should watch it some time.

"We're not here to harm anyone," said one of the other cyborgs. "We just want to resupply our ship. Your ship is handy."

Vyne frowned. "So is that why you quanted into the kitchen?"

Captain Redeye nodded. "We just want your food."

"If you just wanted food, you could have just asked."

"That would have been too polite." Three of the cyborgs turned away from us as the fourth cyborg remained close by to make sure that Vyne and I weren't up to any funny business.

I gave a large sigh. "Fine. Whatever. Take whatever you want. So long as you don't take this jello."

The cyborg pirates turned back to look at me. Captain Redeye took a step closer to me. "Jello?"

"Yeah. Jello. I was making this specially for snookums here. I don't want all my hard work to go to waste."

Snookums? Vyne gave me a strange look.

I futilely elbowed him in the stomach. *It's a term of endearment. You should get your jollies when you can.*

I have a feeling that that's not what you meant at all.

"What sort of jello?"

"It's special jello for our anniversary present," I said hugging the bowl to myself. "Go on now, raid the kitchen for the rest of the food. You can take everything, except this."

"Well, I don't know about that. I want to try this special jello of yours. Nothing like demoralizing hapless travelers by stealing their anniversary presents." Before I could even react, the cyborg pirate struck out in a lightning fast movement and tore the jello bowl out of my arms. I involuntarily cried out and almost fell onto the floor if Vyne had not grabbed my arm and hauled me next to him.

"He's got the jello!" I yelled.

"Shh," said Vyne. "You can always make some more."

"No I can't! I got the jello mix specially from Kraken. Who knows when we'll be able to visit the Galactic center again." I started to cry. That much was true. Who knows when ammonia-flavored gelatin mix would be on sale again.

Vyne brought me closer to him so that it looked like I was crying into his shoulder. He patted my back. But in reality, he was triggering a message. *Euphie, what the hell do you think you're up to?*

You'll see.

"Captain, I found some spoons," called out one of the cyborgs. "Here you go."

Redeye gave out a harsh bark of laughter. "Special anniversary jello, hm? I bet it really makes you mad that we're eating your girlfriend's hard work."

"Very." Vyne sounded extremely serious.

I triggered a command and easily hacked the feeds to one of the security cameras in the mess hall so that it could be transmitted to my eye screen. As I continued to pretend to bawl my eyes out, I watched the space pirates take generous spoonfuls of the jello and eat it. Sensing nothing amiss, they ate second spoonfuls. Then thirds. By their fifth, they had all toppled backward onto the floor, their eyes flickering shut as their nanobots shut down their bodies to unconsciousness.

I pulled away from Vyne and went over to the unconscious space pirates. I nudged Captain Redeye with my sock-clad toe. Redeye did not move. At that moment, the doors to the mess hall slid open revealing the ship's security team. They took one look at the scene and immediately came over to secure the unconscious cyborgs.

As the security team hauled them away, I went over to where I had flung my boots and began to put them on again. The jerboa trotted out of the galley dragging an enormous bag of corn chips behind it. The rodent chattered as if nothing of consequence had happened. I glanced into the galley and saw that the

kitchen was a mess. I groaned and headed inside to start cleaning up. If the ship's chef came in the next morning to a disaster area, there was a very real possibility that he would decide not to cook anything that day. And the rest of the crew would be blaming me for empty stomachs.

As I set all the spice containers back into their drawer, Vyne came into the galley with a handful of utensils that had floated around the mess hall during the brief gravity outage. "You were originally intending to give that jello to me. What exactly did you put in it?"

"Oh, it was just ammonia-flavored jello and something I picked up at the last fueling point," I replied.

"And what would this something be?"

"Pentadecahalohydride or something like that. I don't remember the exact chemical name at the moment. It also had some kind of long acronym, too. The owner of the general store at the fueling point told me that it would pretty much knock anyone out cold. Especially people with cybernetic enhancements since it's a known nanobot inhibitor."

"Nanobot inhibitors of any sort are illegal."

"Maybe in the rest of the galaxy," I replied. "But not in the Kiber Field. Besides, that stuff saved your butt from being blown into smithereens, didn't it?"

"I suppose so." As he was about to head out of the galley, he turned to look at me one more time. "You were telling the truth when you said that you were out of gelatin."

"Yes." But I found the edge of my mouth moving upward in sudden humor. "But I never said that I was out of nanobot inhibitor."

Playing Dead

Captain Redeye and his cronies had a rap sheet that was probably about a light-year long. The space pirates were originally law abiding members of the imperial military until they had decided to revolt on one of their missions out in the Gamma Quadrant and had discovered that it was more profitable to loot passing ships than to work for the Empire. That was, of course, his crew's entire purpose for lurking out in the Kiber Field. Because this section of space was the only viable route to the Belkan Federation, Redeye found it easy to loot any passing ships and then sell the loot back to the black market to finance his own crew's travel.

So while *The Bacchus* had been traveling through the Kiber Field, Captain Redeye's ship had ambushed us while our shields were down. They had hit the main gravity generator to disable us before boarding our ship. Of course, the last laugh was now on them. The ship's security team had managed to contain the cyborg pirates on a lower level with some specific restrains that Vyne had designed. *The Bacchus* towed Captain Redeye's ship behind us and once we had reached the Belkan Federation's territories, Captain Avery promptly turned the miscreants to the appropriate authorities.

From what I've gathered from overhearing some of the crew, Captain Redeye and his cronies would be tried in a Belkan Federation court for all of the crimes that he had committed in the sector before being extradited to the Galactic center where the Imperial courts would have a field day with him. The best Redeye and his crew could hope for at this point was a sentence to one of the prison planets scattered throughout the Galactic Rim.

"Retribution II would be the best that they could hope for," George said, echoing my thoughts. "Sure, there's hard labor involved in that place, but it isn't as terrible as some other places."

The documentary crew had arrived at D'vin VII, the capitial homeworld for the Belkan Federation which consisted of several star systems in the middle of the Delta Quadrant, approximately a week and a half after we had entered the Kiber Field. The Belkan Federation originally was a collection of colonies that banded together for commercial purposes. In the present day, they were a political force to be reckoned with. While the Federation was not part of the Galactic Empire, it did do trading with the imperial merchants and acted as neutral arbitrators in any disputes between the Galactic Empire and the Corporation, a group of independent nomadic merchants who had several bases in the Gamma Quadrant.

D'vin VII was primarily a desert planet. It wasn't very hot, but it did have very little water. Several centuries ago, while the colonists were establishing a base on the planet, there was a terrible cataclysm that killed off almost everything except for a few edible organisms. These remaining organisms were cultivated by the surviving colonists and they were elevated to almost sacred status. This small

collection of plants and animals were known as the Sacred Eight and were the primary ingredients for every traditional dish on D'vin VII.

Nowadays, with interstellar travel being very common, D'vin VII had begun trade with the surrounding systems in the Belkan Federation as well as beyond. That was why we were searching for Dalphinus swordfish in this dry climate. The minder for D'vin VII was a middle-aged woman named Lula Kes who worked as a chef at one of D'vin's premier experimental restaurants called The Sand. She had been contacted ahead of time by Mot's personal assistant Rosalind Hect from back at GBC headquarters. After hearing about our troubles about getting Dalphinus swordfish, Kes had offered to cook some up for Mot at her restaurant. At the moment, Lula Kes and Mot were strolling up ahead in the local market on the lookout for the ingredients required for making fried Dalphinus swordfish. Vik was not far behind with his holographic recorder strapped to his shoulder.

George and I were walking quite a bit behind as we took shots of the rest of the market. Annette and Vyne had gone ahead to make arrangements with the sous chef and manager at The Sand for the scenes that we would soon be filming in the restaurant. The market itself was a collection of colorful tents, a literal bazaar in the middle of the desert. The merchants at the market sold everything from food to clothing and houseware goods. As we passed a small candy stand, the jerboa in my pocket chirped excitedly. With resignation, I handed over my credit chip to the stand owner and purchased a small pouch of gingered D'vin nuts. I gave one of the nuts to the jerboa who began to happily gnaw on it.

"Really?" I said to George. "There are worst places than Retribution II?"

"Yes." The sensory technician frowned, even as he swept his equipment around him to make sure that he was recording the ambient sounds around us. "I was put on Retribution II way back when. I thought I was such a hot shot when I was younger, but some of the other prisoners put me to the right immediately. Some of the prisoners on Retribution II had seen worse because they were always saying how glad that they had gotten out of various other hell holes on good behavior. Some prisoners, you know, got shipped off to Omicron Tartaros which really is a hell. The entire surface is molten rock and you're forced to wear this special confining suit twenty-four-seven."

"That's horrible."

He shrugged. "Well, that's what you get if you're a mass murderer."

I didn't ask George what he did to deserve getting even to Retribution II in the first place. I figured it wasn't too horrible if he was finally released.

A moment later, we passed a stall which contained cartons of wriggling grubs. I aimed my holographic recording equipment into the cartons to get a close-up. The stall manager, a thin bearded man with sun-baked skin and flowing green robes, grinned in delight when George asked him what was in the cartons.

"You must be from the GBC!" the stall manager exclaimed. "I recognized you guys from that show, *Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant*. Gerald and Emily, right?"

"George and Euphie," the sensory technician said with a sigh.

"I'm Pinkerton Al Wassab." We all shook hands briefly before he gestured to the grubs which were probably about the size of a fingernail. The grubs' skin looked as sun-baked as Al Wassab although when I increased the magnification on my recorder, I noticed that they were also very hairy and had a set of four eyes on their heads. "These are D'vin larvae in their second instar stage."

"D'vin larvae," mused George. "I seem to recall from the dossier that Vyne gave us that the larvae is one of the Sacred Eight."

"That's right! It was one of the few organisms that was able to survive the cataclysm several centuries ago. Of course, at the second instar stage, you would only be able eat them after you've ground them into a paste. They're good as a dipping sauce. Or as soup. Or, you could wait until they get to the third instar stage and they will be a little tougher. Then you could put them in a dehydrator and make D'vin larvae chips!"

"Very interesting," I murmured. The jerboa in my pocket was chewing his nut and staring at the larvae as if the bugs would jump out at him at any moment. "So you have recipes for this insect at every stage of its development?"

"Yup. You have to be careful when it gets to the seventh instar stage, though."

"What happens in the seventh instar stage?" George asked.

"You could die if you eat it incorrectly."

George and I looked at each other and then back at Al Wassab. "Incorrectly?" we said together.

Al Wassab nodded vigorously. "The D'vin larvae are extremely tough at this point. You couldn't

even kill them with irradiation. However, there is one method that the original colonists found that could kill it—marinating in a briny vinegar made from the malakazem plant, another of the Sacred Eight. But even so, this is no guarantee. The larvae are very good at pretending to be dead.”

“Wow,” I said. “But that wouldn't be much of a problem would it?”

“The larvae are still quite small at this point so there's a chance that you might swallow the larvae whole instead of chewing all of them,” said the stall manager. “If even one of the larvae is alive once it reaches your stomach, it will attach itself into the lining of your stomach and start growing. In the wild, the seventh stage instar will eventually molt into the imago form and then metamorphose into the relatively harmless D'vin scarab beetles that you see scuttling about. But inside a host, the seventh stage instar will transform into a morph of what we call 'The Queen Mother.' It's a huge form that will eventually burst from the stomach of the host and start laying enough eggs to start a new colony of D'vin beetles.”

“That certainly is unusual.” George shook his head. “Thanks for the info. And your time.”

“No problem! Could you tell Nigel Mot that I'm a big fan of his? I loved him in the last episode where you guys were visiting the hydroponic gardens of Eidolon Alley. Man, I really thought that carnivorous plant was really going to get him then!”

“Uh, sure,” I said as George shook his head again and smacked his palm to his forehead.

Eventually, we caught back up with Mot, Vik, and Lula Kes. Mot and Kes were carrying several packages already under their arms, but they had stopped at yet another food stall. Vik gave us the thumbs up sign.

“We just got done visiting one of the intergalactic food stalls,” the head holographic projectionist told us. “There was plenty of swordfish from Dalphinus on sale so I think Nigel and Ms. Kes probably got enough to feed an entire army.”

“Great,” I said. “How much longer do you think we have down here in the market before we have to head back to The Sand for some cooking scenes?”

“Not much longer. Ms. Kes decided to stop at this stall because she mentioned that she wanted to show Nigel some unique D'vin snacks.”

Vik, George, and I looked on as Mot and Lula Kes bargained with the stall seller for a small opaque container of snacks. After a few minutes, some credits were exchanged and Mot came back to us with the snacks in hand. He spooned up something that looked like black worms dripping in some sort of sauce and ate the entire thing with relish. Lula Kes was continuing to bargain with the stall seller for some seasonings.

“What are you eating?” inquired George.

“Oh, this?” said Mot. “Lula said it's a D'vin delicacy. D'vin larvae. She said the larvae in the seventh instar stage were particularly delicious. I'm inclined to agree with her. These are pretty good.”

I involuntarily put a hand to my mouth. “Maybe you shouldn't eat that, Nigel.”

“What?”

George swore. And then he quickly told Mot what Al Wassab had told us. Even in the bright sunlight, we could see Mot become pale.

“Oh hell. Where's a medic when you need one?” Mot shoved the snack box into Vik's hands and then promptly turned around and retched.

Vik poked at the remaining larvae in the snack box with the spoon. “Hey!” he exclaimed. “This one looks like it's still moving!”

Part VIII: Side Dishes

Lord of the Sandwiches

In the Sabaratu System, seventeen moons orbited around the purple gas giant, SabaratuV. Of those seventeen moons, only five of them were habitable. And of those five, only three had any sizable population. For our next episode, Annette and Mot had planned on spending approximately the same amount of time on the moons Keiki, Meiko, and Totoro for the sakato mashed roots, frozen Meikoan penguins, and Totoran sandwiches respectively. These three dishes, of course, were found listed under side dishes on the menu for Mot's ancestor's coronation banquet.

The sakato mashed roots had been very similar to the Terran dish called mashed potatoes. Except

the mashed roots turned a brilliant red once they were cooked and the natives liked to season the dish with hot salsa that could very well have some sort of rating on a Geiger counter. Needless to say, the crew spent most of that particular scene guzzling water. Fortunately, we didn't have to worry about heavy water appearing mysteriously on the scene.

Meiko was a moon that mostly frozen year round. Most of the inhabitants for this moon lived underground and probably saw the daylight only once a year. But despite this sunless existence, the Meikoans had a strong culinary tradition, most of it stemming from the genetically engineered lifeforms that the colonists had brought with them that could survive the harsh winter conditions. The crew spent our entire time trekking across the vast icy wasteland in search of ice seals and ice bears. We saw both in the distance, but we hit jackpot when we found some frozen Meikoan penguins. The unfortunate birds had fallen into a trap that the natives had set up several months ago and had frozen to death. The frozen penguins were later brought back to the underground city where they were later made into a thick and hearty stew.

So it was after filming these two dishes that I got ready to film the Totoran sandwiches with some skepticism. According to the research that the cyborg had dug up, Totoran sandwiches weren't all that different from sandwiches in other parts of the galaxy. The Totoran sandwich basically consisted of two slices of bread made from the local grain. Between the two slices was usually some meat, like Totoran pork or veal, and some vegetables like sun beats and sea grass which was basically the Totoran equivalent of tomatoes and lettuce. The only thing that might be remotely interesting was that we had arrived during the Totoran Sandwich Festival.

“We could always do the human interest angle!” Annette had told me when I had voiced my doubts. “There are always intriguing people in every location. Nigel and I had decided that we would visit New Haikkido on the southern Totoran continent. It isn't the capital city, but it is a pretty large town and it's supposed to be the place where the Sandwich Festival originated. Vyne said he managed to get some contacts there who could talk about the historical significance of the festival.”

Several of the interns from the GBC had set up a tent for us on the festival grounds which were just beyond the city limits of New Haikkido. We had set the interns to work handing out data chips and buttons advertising the GBC and its broadcasting schedule to any passing festival attendee. Mot had gone out with George and Vik to the contest arena at the center of the festival grounds in an attempt to find anyone they could interview. Annette was currently talking to the owner of the next booth who was selling Totoran goat wool and yarn. No doubt, she was going to buy more of it to supplement her yarn stash. I would not be surprised if the entire crew got funny hats before we started filming the next episode.

Unfortunately, I got stuck in the back of the tent monitoring the feeds from George and Vik with the cyborg who seemed to be paying more attention to his data pad, and occasionally annoying me, than to the feeds.

“Please? I bought the mozzarella sticks just for you.”

“No,” I replied as I concentrated on adjusting one of the feeds.

“Mr. Odaba seemed to like them well enough.”

I turned to look at the cyborg who was looking for all the world as if he was just making some conversation while working on his data pad. “Mr. Odaba,” I said slowly, “was allergic to cheese. You should have never offered it to him. The poor man is now in sick bay recovering after the doctor had given him heavy doses of antihistamines.”

“How should I have known that Mr. Odaba was allergic to cheese?”

“Didn't you pay attention when he had declined the Rillan cheese you were serving during the staff mixer a week ago?”

“Why should I? I was too busy making sure that he was in the opposite part of the room from where you were at. I heard from the grapevine that he had been bothering you.”

“What? Where did you get that idea? Mr. Odaba has been very kind in helping me with the translator subroutines, nothing more.”

“Oh.”

I groaned. “Oh, very well. Mr. Odaba did try to ask me out for dinner. And lunch. And when that didn't work, he tried to ask me out for breakfast. And coffee.”

“At least you didn't accept any of his invitations.”

“I don't accept anyone's invitations.”

“Will you make an exception for me?”

“No.”

We worked in silence for a few minutes and then one of the interns poked his head into the back to let us know that Annette had gone off to another stall in the festival. She was now apparently looking some local synth leather goods, particularly some hats.

“I told Mr. Odaba upfront that I had mozzarella sticks but he ate it anyway.”

“You're not supposed to give the mozzarella sticks to someone who's allergic to them even if they should know better,” I said. “That should be the right thing to do.”

“I gave them to him because I figured I might as well take out the competition if it indeed was the case. And if he knew he would be allergic to them, he should have refused. It's his own fault that he ate them. It's not as if I forced them down his throat.”

“You know, you can be intimidating sometimes. It might be hard for some people to refuse you.”

“Well, you've refused me.”

“I'm just a weirdo. I shouldn't even be a data point for what normal people usually do.”

“You're just a grump. Not a weirdo.”

“Whatever. Besides, exactly what do you mean by 'taking out the competition'? Are you in competition with Mr. Odaba for something?”

“Um...”

“Never mind. We're wasting time blathering about nothing. We should be working.”

“I'm already working.”

“Arg!”

For the next half hour, I monitored the feeds. Mot and the two members of the film crew that followed him to the contest arena were now seated in the front row to a large auditorium where there were several benches set up. Contestants sat at the benches with their arms ready at a table. Each contestant wore large white bibs that covered their fronts. On front of the bibs were the festival logo, “Sandwich Festival of the Totoro Moon” written in Totoran script over a cartoon of a sandwich. In front of each contestant on the tables were platters of the traditional Totoro sandwich which consisted of Totoran pork slapped between two slices of golden bread.

In the center of the contest arena was a large square podium that was elevated above the surrounding benches and tables. Here sat a panel of judges with surprisingly solemn faces, the master of ceremonies in a hat that looked like the Totoran sandwich, and the official timekeeper who was wielding what looked like a laser pistol.

On my ear comm, I heard the master of ceremonies yell for the start and the laser pistol go off. On the feeds, the shot from the laser pistol accidentally went wide and shot at an enormous festival sign hanging on the east side of the pavilion. The sign crashed down and the spectators below attempted to scramble to safety. In the background, I could hear the emergency sirens go off. But the contestants of the sandwich eating contest started to eat as if they had no other care in the world.

“I don't know how they do it,” I said.

“Do what?”

“Stuff all those sandwiches into their stomach. It's unreal. After the second one, I'd probably be feeling like I'm about to burst.”

“It's a talent, I think.”

“A pointless talent. They had some of these eating contests when I was working at some reality shows. Some people had to go to the emergency medic afterwards because they overate so much. I don't really see the point in doing something if the end result is inevitably someone getting hurt.”

“Maybe it's the thrill and risk that lures them.”

“I would understand about bungee jumping or mountain climbing. There's something romantic about it if you say that someone died from falling off a cliff. But dying from eating too many sandwiches? I would not want that on my epitaph.”

“I think you should realize that everyone has their own likes and dislikes. To each their own.”

“Well, maybe. But I really think that people should set some sort of boundary on taste. I really think the ancients had it right when they started classifying things as either highbrow or lowbrow. Some things are too much of a lowest common denominator.”

The cyborg shook his head. “You're a snob.”

I shrugged. “And what of it?”

On the feeds, Vik was busy zooming in on the sandwich eating contestants. Which after a few reality shows, was kind of boring. Vik had also employed one of the hover holographic recorders to record anything that wasn't directly in his view. On these feeds, I saw that Mot was sitting back in his chair with

his legs and arms crossed. I saw his fingers tapping along his elbow in an impatient rhythm. George had a recorder out, but he wasn't paying any attention to the contest in front of him at all. Instead, he was turned around talking to a statuesque woman in a skimpy pink halter top. It appeared that she was only half listening to George as she sipped at her drink with a long straw.

The scene seemed fine, but the next minute, the woman George had been talking to gasped in outrage at something that he had whispered to her and she abruptly dunked her drink on his head. A moment later, a brawny man in a plaid shirt with cut off sleeves and denim jeans arrived. The woman told the man something and the man and George got into a shouting match. Mot turned around and said, "Hey, it's all a misunderstanding."

The man in the plaid shirt sneered at Mot. "It's none of your business."

"Wait a minute..."

Then the man in the plaid shirt shoved Mot on the shoulder and the host of *Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant* tumbled over the side and landed on one of the contestants' tables, getting sandwiches all over his shirt. The contestants looked at Mot in surprise and then continued eating as if nothing happened. Vik jumped over the barricade to help Mot up.

George and the plaid shirt man were still arguing.

Then, suddenly, the plaid shirt man pointed a finger at George and said in a loud voice that hurt my ears from the transmission on the ear comm, "I challenge you to a duel, swords, in this arena."

"A duel, a duel!" yelled the other spectators.

I heard Vik and Mot groan at the challenge. The plaid shirt man's girlfriend was grinning evilly. Bitch.

"I accept," George said loudly and recklessly.

"No, George!" I screamed at the feeds that we were looking at in the back of the GBC tent. My sudden scream startled the cyborg who nearly tipped over in his chair.

One of the interns came running into the back. "Ms. Tanaka-Teng! What's wrong? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"There's nothing you can do to help," I replied. "Unless you know how to wield a sword."

"What's a sword?"

The cyborg shook his head. "Kids these days. They don't know anything."

"I do, too!" argued the intern. "I got a degree in communications at the University of Kraken. With honors!" The University of Kraken was rather well-respected in academic circles. But still...

"Everyone knows that communications is a crap major," replied Vyne. "You might as well have majored in underwater basket weaving and be more qualified for your job. You're lucky you're even here."

"You can't insult me like this!" said the intern.

The cyborg grinned dangerously. "Just watch me. You can't do anything about it."

As the intern continued to argue, I watched the feeds. On the ear comm, I could hear the plaid shirt man say with some confidence, "Very well. You should name your seconds!"

George looked puzzled.

Thank goodness I had taken a class on ancient etiquette. I quickly triggered the explanation to George. In a moment, George's expression cleared and then he said, "I name Vik and Nigel as my seconds."

"Noooo, George. They don't know anything about swords!"

"And you do?" asked the cyborg.

"I know theoretical stuff about swords," I told Vyne. "And what I know about it tells me that George should be consulting real experts about this duel rather than randomly accepting this foolish endeavor."

On the feeds, after hearing about being named a second, Mot cursed and flopped back down on the table that he had crashed into, squashing another platter of sandwiches. Vik looked panicked and he yelled into his ear comm to me, "Euphie! You and Vyne had better get down here pronto! And bring lawyers!" He paused for a moment and then added, "Do lawyers have any jurisdiction on this?"

"How should I know?" I yelled back to him. Then I got up and hauled the cyborg out of his chair. Or more accurately, Vyne allowed me to haul him out of his chair. On the feeds, which I had triggered to be transmitted to my eye screen now, I saw the plaid shirt man—who I heard was called Windle by one of the other spectators—gesture to someone who nodded and said that they would be back shortly to get the swords.

"Ms. Tanaka-Teng! Mr. Vyne! Where are you going?" exclaimed the intern.

“You and the other interns should keep the fort down,” I said as I strapped on a holographic recorder onto my back. “And call the GBC lawyers. Something is going down over at the contest arena. Transmit the feeds from the past fifteen minutes to them and have them contact Nigel and Annette immediately. And speaking of Annette, send her a message to get her butt down to the contest arena, too. Her hat shopping can wait.”

“Do you think that there's really going to be a duel?” said Vyne as we jogged toward the contest arena past the crowd of festival goers. Nobody else seemed to notice that we were in a rush and the jumble of people slowed us down considerably.

“I have no idea. Are duels normal on Totoro?”

“Accessing the database now. Ah. Yes, apparently from the Totoro law archive, duels are still legal on this moon. But hardly anyone evokes them anymore since duels are considered barbaric. Most of the recent dueling have been done by people who the populace call “rednecks”. These rednecks do not know what they're doing and they usually end up injuring themselves and putting themselves into the emergency room. There was even a case where one of them died due to their carelessness.”

“What the hell does redneck mean?”

“The translator says that it's a Totoran colloquialism that means country bumpkin and ignorant person who has conservative and bigoted attitudes. On Totoro, they have a certain fashion that consists of ripped up shirts, clothing that bares too much skin, and driving monster hover trucks that have too many accessories added to them.”

“Weird. Anyways, we have to stop it. George doesn't know how to handle a sword.”

“You don't know that.”

“I have a feeling.”

“Your feeling could be wrong.”

We had entered the contest arena. There were a crowd gathering close to the front row. There was a huge clock in the arena counting down to the sandwich contest. There were ten seconds left. During those ten seconds, Vyne and I fought the crush to where George and the others were.

Before we even got there, one of Windle's seconds was carrying a large black box. He opened it revealing two long curving swords. Vyne whistled.

“What was that for?”

“Samurai swords,” he told me. “They're made in the ancient Terran style. Even if they aren't real, they are some pretty good replicas that probably cost whoever owns them a pretty credit. However, samurai swords weren't commonly used in duels. Usually they were supposed to be European fencing swords.”

“I wouldn't know. All swords look the same to me. Which of course, begs the question, how do you know the difference? You don't happen to know how to fight duels with swords, do you?”

“Me?” The cyborg's eyes briefly glinted red and then he smiled grimly. “In my previous life, I trained with a variety of weapons for any occasion.”

“Ah hah! That means you know how to fight with a sword! You could take George's place and easily defeat this other guy who looks like he's three sheets to the wind already.”

“I don't think that would be proper.”

“But you'd be fighting a redneck! If that's proper, then I don't know what isn't?”

The clock in the center of the arena buzzed when it was at zero and time keeper emphasized the point with another fire of his laser pistol. This time, the pistol hit one of the light fixtures on the ceiling and a shower of sparks ran down on the spectators who groaned. There was a brief review of the feeds from the contest by the judges and then the winner was announced—a rather thin man who was wearing a white t-shirt and sparkly red shorts underneath the large sandwich festival bib. There was a lot of cheering and hand waving and some pictures taken by the holographic projectionists from the local news stations. Meanwhile, one of the contest arena officials in a dark blue uniform had made his way to the ruckus that George and Windle had caused over some sort of comment to Windle's girlfriend.

The official introduced himself as Major S'lla. His expression was not a happy one when he said, “I'm afraid we cannot allow the duel in the arena center. The whole place has been booked up for the Sandwich Festival events. You will have to move the duel elsewhere.”

“I'm fine with that,” said George. “Maybe we should have the duel just outside the festival grounds where there's some unused fields.”

“No!” yelled Windle. “Then you would have the advantage.” Everyone looked at the plaid shirt man with incredulous looks.

“But I'm not even from here,” George said. “The advantage would still be on your side since this is your home moon.”

“No! I say that the duel will have to occur in the arena center! I know my rights as the initiator of a duel. In Section G, subsection four-b, it says that the initiator of the duel has the right of way when declaring the location of a duel. It must be in the arena center or my honor will not be satisfied!”

“This is ridiculous,” exclaimed Vik. “Why don't we just call this off...”

Windle immediately pulled out one of the swords and pointed it at Vik. The holographic projectionist gulped. “You don't know the rules, film nerd.”

Vik slowly edged away, back toward Mot who was brushing away sandwiches from his person a second time. “I still think this is a bad idea.”

“The only area that might be possibly available,” said Major S'lla, “is on the north concourse. However, at the moment, it is occupied by the Galaxy's largest sandwich. It needs to be moved first. But that would take the entire day.”

“The duel must be fought now!”

Man, I triggered to the cyborg, that guy is like the biggest spoiled brat ever.

Agreed.

S'lla sighed and then consulted with the data pad in his hand. “Hm. Well, it appears that the representatives from the Guinness Database of Galactic Records have already finished documenting the sandwich. About half of the sandwich has already been carted off to be served at the free evening meal, but there's still a lot of sandwich left. And that won't be able to be moved. However, Major Yed't who is in charge of this says that it is possible to actually walk on the sandwich. Parts of the bread, apparently, have been petrified after being exposed to the air the entire day.”

Windle crowed. “Perfect! My honor will be avenged!”

“We're going to be fighting on a sandwich?” George said in disbelief.

And that was how all of us ended up at the north concourse of the contest arena standing on top of a gigantic Totoran sandwich that seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see. Annette had finally arrived on the scene and she was jumping up and down in excitement.

“Now this is documentary material!”

“This is stupid material,” I replied. “Stupid material that the editors are sure to keep in this episode.”

“Don't sound so depressed about this,” the director told me. “This will totally increase the ratings! Now go on and doing some recording!”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Vik was already on the near side of the duel with his own holographic recording equipment at the ready. I walked over to the far side and set up my own equipment. I fiddled with a few controls to make sure I had George and Windle in view. Then I launched a hover holographic recorder to get some overhead shots. Windle was shaking his limbs up, getting read. His girlfriend was fawning over him. Then she gave him a big kiss. That seemed to get his hopes up and he sneered smugly at George.

George, strangely enough, seemed very calm. In contrast to Windle's torn shirt and jeans look, the sensory technician was wearing a bright blue pantsuit with trousers that flared out at the tips of his synth-leather boots. In contrast to his flashy clothing, George was busy checking the sword he had been given and was looking out serenely at nothing in particular. I wondered what exactly he was thinking at the moment.

Mot, as one of George's seconds, was looking at the sensory technician with worry. “If you get killed, we'll have to find another sensory technician. And I would hate to get a new crew member at this juncture of the series. Who knows how well everyone will work then?”

“Don't worry so much, Nigel. Everything is under control.”

“Nothing's under control,” Mot argued. “Come on. Do you even know how to use a sword? If you're have any second thoughts, any at all. Just give the word and we'll have Vyne take over for you. The cyborg knows everything. From jujitsu to Coralian arm wrestling. He's the expert. And he will win.”

“This isn't about winning,” George replied. “It is about honor. The best man will win. Besides, don't worry about my skills with the sword. I think they will be good enough.”

“Good enough? Good enough?! One can never be good enough if your life is on the line!”

“I didn't know you cared, Nigel.”

Mot sighed. “I only care because you're probably the best sensory technician that there is. If we didn't have you, the whole thing would fall apart. You know, if you win, you'll probably get a lot of fan

girls. Forget about that chick there. You already have your pick already.”

“No I don't,” George said gently. “I'm an ugly old fat man. Chicks don't dig me. They run away from me. It's not about the brains for most people. This way, if I lose, I'll get an epitaph that I can be proud of.”

“George, you're making me tear up,” said Vik. “And that's bad because I won't be able to see my equipment then. And the shot will go all blurry.”

“And it wasn't blurry on Ecstasy Seven?” I said.

“Euphie, all of the drug and techno was artistic license.”

“Vik, you're just full of it. George. Whatever you do, keep out of the way of that redneck's blade.”

George finally took his eyes off from the nonexistent point in space and looked at me. He saluted me. “Wise words, kid.”

Good grief. All of this was way too much melodrama for me. Like Vik, I felt like breaking down and crying. And not because George was acting all heroic and stoic and stuff. It was because all of the melodrama was going to rake in the ratings. The ignorant masses would just lap all this stuff up. Documentaries weren't supposed to be melodrama, damn it. It was supposed to be facts and reporting.

After another round of pleading with George to call off the duel, Mot resignedly walked away and slipped on a puddle of sauce and slid on his butt all the way to where Annette and Vyne were standing. The cyborg shook his head as Mot cursed his own clumsiness. Annette merely asked Mot if he cared to do it again so that one of the hovering holographic recorders could capture it as replay. Mot cursed loudly again. Major S'lla was acting as the arbitrator. As George and Windle stood a few paces apart from each other with their swords at the ready, S'lla announced the start. And then the sword fight began.

Surprisingly, both George and Windle were quite adept with the blade. The movements of the swords were swift, clean, and expert. A crowd began to form at the outskirts of the sandwich to gawk at the display since duels were a rare occurrence on Totoro even though they were technically legal. I tried to ignore the crowds continued filming, hoping that I could catch something on the holographic recorder that could be submitted as evidence that the duel was invalid.

Suddenly, George backed up and stepped on a soggy patch in the sandwich. His left leg sank knee deep into sauce and Totoran pork. The redneck, sensing his advantage, moved in for the kill. But in a surprising move, George flipped his large bulk to the side and his leg came free from the sandwich with a loud suction sound. Swords clashed. In my recorder's magnification, I could see that George was sweating even though his expression was stony. He managed to push back the redneck and the usual bout of dueling began again.

I briefly wondered where George learned all of his moves. Surely spending part of your life on some prison planet on the Galactic Rim gave one few chances to practice one's fencing skills?

The redneck seemed to have the advantage again. He was slashing at George's feet, which made the sensory technician hop about as if his boots were on fire. George then hit another strange spot on the sandwich and suddenly he was flying in the air as if he had been jumping on a trampoline rather than slogging on top of semi-petrified bread. George landed on the other side of Windle and grinned as if he had a secret move up his sleeve. There was a flurry of parrying swords and then Windle slipped on a white puddle of goo that looked like mayonnaise. Windle did a backflip and as everyone held their breaths, expecting him to land on his feet, the redneck missed and landed flat on his back.

George automatically lunged and brought the side of his blade to Windle's neck. “Yield!” he yelled. There was a strange, almost demonic look in George's eye. But the sensory technician did not go into the kill even though according to Totoran law, he could very well decapitate the annoying redneck.

Windle beat the back of his against the sandwich beneath him. Bits of bread squished at the pounding and mayonnaise squirted in his eye. He cursed. But then he admitted, “All right, I yield!”

The crowd, which had now grown to several hundred people, cheered loudly and swarmed the top of the sandwich, squishing sauce everywhere. But no one cared that they were getting their clothes dirty. George handed his sword off to somebody and then the native Totorans hoisted up on their shoulders yelling excitedly.

I gave George a thumbs up.

A small grin appeared on the sensory technician's face. For that moment in time, George wasn't old, fat and ugly as he believed himself to be. He was the hero.

Quicksilver and Caffeine

The jerboa sat on my shoulder and chirped.

“Yes,” I replied as I stood on the observation deck on Vircas Station. “There is no planet.”

The rodent shook its tiny head in a way that looked like pity. It was wearing a small knitted hat that was green with tiny tentacles sprouting out of it. How the hell the jerboa got this hat was a mystery. I was quite sure that Annette did not give the rodent the hat, but who knows. Perhaps she gave the jerboa the hat when I wasn't looking. Which was quite possible. As the jerboa mostly ventured about on its own, it was mostly a pointless exercise to try to track it unless one was willing to put a tracking chip on it. And I was too lazy to even think about doing that.

I leaned against the railing, briefly looking out into the star-studded darkness, past my own reflection in the observation deck's windows. There was nothing out there except distant stars. Vircas Station was currently orbiting Vircas Beta C, a large gas giant in the Vircas System not far from the Sabaratu System. The station itself was at the moment located on the dark side of the gas giant so that the star in this particular system was hidden from view. In the past, Vircas Station had orbited Vircas Beta B, a habitable planet in the system, but that did not exist any more. Vircas Beta B had been blown up in a war that had been waged in the system about three centuries ago.

The war itself was called the Eddillion-Yi'kat War, after the two warring factions. Both political factions had called Vircas Beta B home and had in fact once been one group. But after a severe religious schism caused by two bishops fighting over the hand of a visiting princess from a neighboring system, the group split into two. Things got so heated that several moons in the system got blown up during several space battles. And then, an ultimate betrayal took place. A Yi'kat ambassador was acting as a double agent for the Eddillion and had managed to smuggle in a neutrino bomb into the system. Another flunky detonated it on Vircas Beta B and blew the entire planet up. As a result, it decimated the population in the system to zero point zero zero one percent. Any Vircas left had been on Vircas Station or elsewhere.

And due to the massive explosion that occurred, Vircas Beta B's remaining moon and the station were blown out of their original orbits and were subsequently captured by Vircas Beta C's gravitational field. As I stood on the observation deck, looking out at the silent stars and the calm murmurings of the station inhabitants on the deck below me, it was hard to imagine that such violence had ever happened.

But, warned an article in the local Vircas database, one had to be wary anyway. There were survivors of the Eddillion and the Yi'kat and their little skirmishes had gone underground into what was called a “Cold War.” There was still an undercurrent of hostility among the natives even though it would be difficult for a tourist to detect. One had to be careful to not inadvertently stumble into some gang war. According to one guide that I had looked up, tourists were advised not to go to the lower decks on Vircas station as most of the remaining violence still happened there.

As far as outsiders were concerned, all of the Vircas might as well blow themselves into smithereens. The Vircas didn't have much to offer any of their neighbors in trade except for their exceptional cuisine.

And that was why we were here. The cuisine. On Mot's ancestor's banquet menu, one of the side dishes that had been on offer so many centuries ago was Vircan pike spiders. The menu itself had not specified exactly how the spiders were prepared, so currently, Vyne and Annette were interviewing the station cooks about any ideas.

Of course, one might ask, if the Vircas Beta B had been blown up, then didn't all the animals and plants of that planet also vaporize in the ensuing explosion? Well, yes and no. Yes, all of the animals and plants had been eliminated along with the planet itself, but when the war broke out between the two factions, some heroic scientists on both sides had the foresight to archive the genomes of as many organisms as they could get their hands on into a remote database in a neutral system out in the Gamma Quadrant. As a result, people now could resurrect these organisms via a bit of genetic engineering. And that was why the old dishes, such as Vircan pike spiders, still existed.

“Hey Euphie! What's up?”

I looked over my shoulder and saw Vik strolling over to the railing as well. I looked back out into the stars. The jerboa greeted the head holographic projectionist with a chirp and then scampered down into my pocket to get a sugared Vircan pine nut from the snack package that I had bought an hour before. The jerboa offered the pine nut to Vik. Vik shook his head, declining.

“So?”

I shrugged. “Nothing much. Just contemplating all the stupid stuff that people have done to blow up a planet.”

“People have been doing stupid stuff for millenia and we're still here.”

“Pure luck.”

“You know what, Euphie? You're a cynic. You should take a happy pill some time. Or maybe get laid. The cyborg would probably be pretty willing to do his part on that.”

I gave Vik an evil glare. “I know I'm a cynic. And I like it that way. I don't need happy pills. And the cyborg can just go fuck himself.”

“He probably already does.”

“Vik, you are gross.”

“As everyone eventually tells me once they know me well enough.” Vik leaned on the railing to look out at the darkness of space as well. “Anyways, I do agree that it's pretty stupid to blow up a planet. All of it, gone. Never to exist any more. Except in some alternate dimension. Theoretically anyway, according to the quantum physicists.”

“Why are you here? Did Annette tell you to come and get me for more filming?”

“No. Not really. Annette and Vyne are still talking with the chefs on the station about tomorrow's filming. From what Annette told me, she was pretty confident that she could get access for us pretty soon. We might have to work tonight to install all of the holographic recorders in the kitchens after the workers have finished cooking dinner.”

I nodded. “That's about as I had expected.”

“You know, I'm really looking forward to the filming tomorrow. Nigel is supposed to meet up with a food connoisseur on the station named Yanno Ekatrino. He was recommended by Nigel's personal assistant back at the GBC headquarters because she had taken the time to research the Viricans. Apparently Ekatrino is an expert on Vircan pike spiders and in all the different ways that they can be prepared.”

“Great.”

“You don't sound so enthused.”

I waved a hand. “I'm just feeling a little tired, that's all. I probably just need a little injection of caffeine.”

“There's a coffee shop not far from here. I think it's on the deck below this observation platform. Come on, Euphie. Let's go. Get your coffee. You need the caffeine to stay awake since we're installing recorders tonight.”

I sighed. “Oh, fine.”

Vik and I walked down a flight of stairs down to the deck below where several station inhabitants were milling about. No one on the station seemed to notice or recognize us. Which was just as well. It was just plain weird to have random people recognize you. The coffee shop, called Alpha Regulus Bean Brew, was located a few paces away from the stair up to the observation deck. It was a recessed shop on the station lit with blue lights and decorated with metal counters and tables.

The coffee shop was perhaps half full. Most of the patrons were clustered at the end of the counter taking shots of some sort of liquid that had a metallic sheen. Since we were both curious, Vik and I turned on the recorders that we had on our wrists and flagged down one of the waitresses and asked her about it.

“Oh!” the perky purple-haired waitress exclaimed. “That's our cafe special! It's called Quicksilver Rain. It's basically Centarian vodka, Vircan passionfruit juice, and specially treated liquid platinum. Of course, you need a special digestive system tolerant to metallics in order to consume it, but I've heard from many customers that it tastes great! Would you two like to order some?”

I shook my head.

“How would I be able to get a metallic tolerant digestive system?”

“Oh, you'll have to ask the station medic about that.”

“Hm. Maybe I'll order one anyway.”

“Coming right up!” the waitress said in a perky tone. “What would you like, ma'am?”

“Just some coffee.”

“Which kind of coffee? We have Alpha Regulan, Ionian, Eidolon's special party blend, Meikoan, and New Vircan medium roast.”

I put my hand up to my head to rub my temples. Way too many choices. The only one I remembered was the last choice that the waitress had mentioned. “I guess I'll have a New Vircan medium

roast. A small one, please.” I knew that if I drank quite a bit of it, I would be wired for half of the night.

“Excellent choice, ma’am. It will be right out.”

Vik and I took two of the free stools at the coffee cafe counter. I leaned my elbows on the edge of the counter and put my head down on my arms. I was feeling both tired and apathetic.

“Hey!” Vik suddenly exclaimed.

Startled, I nearly slid off my stool. The jerboa jumped on the counter and angrily chirped at Vik. But Vik was not paying any attention to the rodents’ invective or my sudden cursing.

“It’s Cyborg Vyne! Thank goodness you’re here. Euphie was absolutely pining away because you were trapped in a meeting with the station chefs and nutty Annette.”

“Really?” said Vyne. “That’s weird.”

“Vik, you are going to be dead.”

“Aw, come on Euphie. I’m trying to facilitate a romance here.”

“Well, facilitate this.” I punched Vik in the jaw.

“Ow!”

“Bad move, buddy,” said the cyborg. “Once she’s got you in her sights, you’re toast. She might put poison in your next meal.” He patted Vik on the shoulder, but the holographic projectionist yowled again.

“Vyne, you’ve got a tough hand,” replied Vik. “Besides, Euphie would never do that. She’s just a grump on the outside. Inside, she’s a total softie.” He patted the jerboa on the head. “See? If she wasn’t a softie, should would have chucked old Bob here out the airlock a long time ago.” The rodent briefly tolerated Vik patting him before losing patience and biting his finger. “Ow! I hope Bob’s vaccinated. I’d hate to come down with some zoonotic disease before tomorrow’s filming schedule.”

“The jerboa is as healthy as a Ursa Minoran horse,” I replied. “And stop calling it Bob. It’s name is not Bob.”

“It’s name is Killer,” supplied the cyborg.

I turned my glare to Vyne. “No it’s not.”

“You really should try to name it soon,” he replied. “Otherwise, what would we call it?”

“That’s your problem. I don’t have to call it anything.”

“Man, Euphie, you are mean,” sighed Vik. “If we didn’t know better, we would think that you were totally insane and evil. It’s a good thing that you became a holographic projectionist rather than, say, an atomic physicist. If you were, we would all be dead by now.”

“But if she was, she wouldn’t be with the crew, would she?” The cyborg took the stool on my other side, boxing me in. If I had decided to leave, both the men would probably drag me back to my stool. I glanced at the jerboa who was nibbling on a pine nut and staring at the rows of bottles behind the coffee cafe counter.

“I am so doomed,” I told the rodent. “What would you do if you had these morons with you.”

The jerboa gave me a querying chirp as if it had only listened to me with half an ear. It popped the rest of the pine nut into its mouth and then leaped over the counter to the other side.

“Come back here!” I called out, leaning over. I watched the jerboa scamper off on the floor down the length of the counter and then through a pair of swinging doors. I smacked the palm of my hand to my forehead and then sighed as I sat back down. I saw Vik at the corner of my eye shaking his head. The cyborg had been glancing behind me. I saw his eyes go back to my face when he became aware that I was scowling.

“What?” he asked.

“I’m going to pretend that you were not checking out my ass,” I said repressively. “If you were, you would be in a world of trouble, bucket-brain.”

“Aw, that’s cute,” said Vik. “How many nicknames do you have for him.”

“And you,” I said giving Vik the finger, “are going to die.”

At that moment, the waitress came back with the metallic drink for Vik and the coffee for me. The Quicksilver Rain was in a clear glass, identical to the ones that the locals on the station had been drinking from. Vik swirled the glass around, watching the liquid slosh around with a mesmerized stare. The coffee I had was in a red porcelain mug. It smelled pungent and there was a bit of foam on the top. And the mug was warm. I took a sip and felt the caffeine slowly leeching into me.

The waitress batted her eyes at Vyne. “What will you have sir? I am to serve.”

“Just some water, please.”

“Coming right up.”

When the waitress left, I said, "You should ask her out. She likes you."
The cyborg gave me an infuriating smile. "But why should I? I'd rather like a challenge."
"I need my coffee," I said. "Otherwise all of this would be over your head."

Unhappy Pills

The Vircan pike spiders were interesting. They had ten legs, colored red, and they wiggled when they were swallowed. Nigel Mot found out this fact when he had to eat the creatures live in a taste testing dinner that the Vircan station minder had him attend. Vik was chortling to himself when he was filming the entire scene because Mot was making weird faces before putting the spiders into his mouth, while he was swallowing them, and even afterwards when he felt the critters dying in his stomach juices.

George complained that Vik's laughter would eventually have to be edited out. And the editors at GBC headquarters would not thank him for sending them dirty recordings. "This will mean more work for me," George complained. "So Vik, just shut up. Or we'll have to duct tape your mouth shut."

"What's duct tape?" Vik asked.

The cyborg did the very helpful thing of bringing up an entry on the ancient Terran adhesive called duct tape and sending it in a transmission to Vik's own eye screen. The head holographic projectionist grimaced after he read the article.

"Really?" Vik yelled into the ear comm. His loud voice made me wince and I had to trig my fingers to turn down the volume. "Really? The ancients used duct tape to tape people to trees? Upside down? That's barbaric!"

"If you don't shut up now," warned George. "You'll be duct taped to a tree. As soon as we find a tree."

"Yeah, whatever." But after that Vik kept his chortling to a minimum and George kept his own grumbling to a low murmur.

Everything went fine throughout most of the dinner until one of the spiders decided to climb back up Mot's esophagus. He made an extremely strange expression then and started turning an interesting shade of purple. It was then that Annette started panicking and evoked her director status to stop filming and called for medics. Vik, of course, did not pay any attention to Annette and continued filming anyway, all the way to the point where the medics arrived at the dining table and performed various maneuvers to remove the errant Vircan pike spider.

"I am never eating that again!" Mot exclaimed after the dinner scene and we were heading back to our temporary quarters on the station. "I don't care if it is a traditional dish that my ancestor ate at his coronation banquet. Those things are damn dangerous!"

"They're only dangerous when they start to climb back up your throat because they've managed to overcome your esophagus muscles," said Vik with a smirk. Apparently Mot's close call with the spiders had not fazed him at all. He still found the entire thing hilarious.

"That's what you say," said Mot darkly. "You didn't have to eat them for the good of the show. I think after that particular meal, I can see what George was talking about."

"What? What did I talk about?" said George. While we were walking along the corridor to the section with all of the guest quarters, George had only appeared to be half listening to the conversation. Mostly, he was working with his recording instruments, probably attempting to delete Vik's laughing on the audio tracks.

"You mentioned in an earlier meeting that you thought that the entire banquet menu could have been the reason for the Galactic Emperor's demise," Mot said. "You said that it's quite possible that the menu could have been designed as an attempt to kill the emperor. With that in mind, I think that the Vircan pike spiders could very well be the murder weapon."

"Yeah, sure," said George absentmindedly. "But you said that the doctors said that your ancestor didn't die from the food. So it could have been something else."

"Very well," Mot sighed. "It's been a long day. I'm going straight to sleep. Assuming, of course, that the rest of the spiders don't crawl out of my mouth."

"Now that's an idea," exclaimed Vik. "We should have done this earlier. We should set a recorder on Nigel for while he's sleeping."

"Good God," the host moaned. "I don't think I could sleep then if I know that someone's watching

me.”

That made me giggle for some reason. I almost never giggled. Maybe it was my recent exhaustion catching up with me. “Who’s to say that we don’t film you sleeping already?”

Mot moaned again. “No. No. Now I’m going to lie in bed awake, paranoid that you two have installed some sort of recorder in my room, recording my very breath. Oh no.” Mot seemed to realize another thing. “If that’s the case, you would be filming my every move. Including when I’m getting dressed or when I head into the bathroom or when I just decide to scratch my butt.”

“Ew,” said Annette. “I’m glad I’m not one of the editors who’s required to actually watch that before cutting it out.”

“Maybe,” Mot said, now in a musing tone, “that’s why I have no fangirls. It’s because I’m filmed everywhere I go, just like a reality show star and all of the glamor and mystique just isn’t there for me.”

We stopped at the hallway leading to the series of rooms where we were assigned on the station for the duration of our stay. The jerboa, which had disappeared earlier in the day to do some exploring of Vircas Station, appeared again from behind a corner at the far end of the hallway. It was racing as if it was attempting to run away from a larger predator intent on stalking it. Except there was nothing behind it.

“Hey, it’s Bob!” Vik said, chuckling. “Whatcha doin’ little buddy? Find some snacks in your latest excursion?”

“I don’t know,” I said, only half listening as the jerboa ran up to us and began tugging on my pant leg in urgent motions. “I’m not sure you had any glamor or mystique to begin with.”

“Euphie, that’s harsh,” said Mot. “You need to take some happy pills. Or get laid.”

“Why does everyone tell me I need happy pills or sex?” I demanded.

George scratched his head as he tucked his recording device in his pocket. “Maybe because you do, kid?”

“All of you, just shut up. One day, I’ll take those happy pills and all of you will be sorry.” I bent down to take the jerboa up in my hand. The small gerbil raced around my palm like a deranged rodent and started emitting panicked squeaks. I patted it on its head. “Calm down. There’s nothing after you.”

“Maybe there is,” said the cyborg, probably just to irk me further. “Have you ever owned a cat?”

“No. Have you?”

Vyne shook his head. “I’ve read up on cats a while back and apparently sometimes felines get suddenly spooked even though there’s nothing there. No one has figured out exactly why that is yet. Some behavioral scientists think that it’s just a quirk in the cat’s physiology. But there are people with other theories.”

“Other theories?” said Annette skeptically. “What sort of theories?”

“Well, take quantum physicists, for one.”

Mot groaned. “It’s too late for quantum physics. Besides, that stuff hurts my head even when I’m sufficiently awake. I’m going to bed.”

Everyone ignored Mot’s protestations. “I want to hear this,” said Vik. “I thought quantum physicists only used cats as examples to explain certain quantum problems.”

“Well, they think that cats have the ability to see into other dimensions. They think that there may be sentient beings that live in alternate dimensions and these other beings, at the very least, frighten the felines.”

“Huh,” said Annette. “Beings from alternate dimensions. Sounds like something that comes out of a pulpy science fiction story. Wasn’t that the plot of a film not that long ago?”

“Yeah,” said George. “It was the plot of that blockbuster called *Body Snatchers from Dimension X*.”

“How was that movie, by the way? I never got to see it when it first came out.”

The sensory technician shrugged. “It was only so-so. There were plenty of explosions. But the acting was bad.”

“Figures,” Annette sighed. “Actors these days can’t act a damn. That’s why it’s so much nicer being a director for a documentary. Or even a reality show if you can get the gig.”

“I thought reality shows were a dime a dozen,” I said. “Hey!” The jerboa was now tugging on my sleeve, squeaking quickly. “What is the matter with you?”

The jerboa made motions with its paws as if it was triggering a message. Frowning, I triggered my own fingers to bring up my eye screen. There were the usual messages from the crew during the filming of the last scene that had piled up unread. There were several messages from the ship’s crew about minor maintenance issues. And then there was the GBC news feed. But the news feed had the usual headlines

about various skirmishes and events happening around the galaxy.

"I don't see what's wrong," I told the jerboa. "There's nothing happening. Maybe you need some sleep."

The rodent shook its head and then tapped out a rhythm with its paws. It repeated the rhythm.

The others in the film crew had said their good nights to me while I was trying to decipher the jerboa's paw waving and were heading down the hallway to their rooms. Only the cyborg was left. If he was hoping that I would invite him into my room, he was sadly mistaken.

But instead of asking that, he said, "I think Killer is trying to tell you to access the Vircas Station feed. I recognize that pattern."

"Huh." So I did. The feed scrolled down my eye screen. It didn't look any different than what I would have expected a station feed to look like. But there were some messages that looked like station warnings about unexpected breaches on the lower level.

"That's strange," said the cyborg, echoing my thoughts. "I've accessed the station feeds and it looks like they're having some trouble on the lower decks. You don't suppose that the local gang warfare has started flaring up again?"

"Maybe. Who knows about those crazy people. I'm not even sure what they're still fighting about. I mean, from what I read, the whole conflict started because these guys were fighting over a woman, right? And what ended up happening? They blew up a planet. That was really stupid."

"Yeah. But large scale things usually start very small. History is a very complicated thing," Vyne said. I could tell that he was getting pedantic. My mind had already started to tune him out. I wondered if it would be impolite just to leave him there conversing with the wall. But the jerboa had climbed up to my shoulder and was looking at the cyborg intently as if he was saying something that it wanted to listen to.

"The historians always say that everything is complicated," I ended up saying. "If it wasn't, then they wouldn't have any research to do. Or have any jobs, now that I think about it."

"Take for instance, the situation that had existed on Vircas Beta B when it was still intact," said Vyne. "The historians would tell you that the schism was already brewing beneath the surface. From my research, apparently there was already a group of Vircans who did not agree with their leadership and were already meeting in secret to discuss plans on separating. The whole fight about a woman was just the spark, the catalyst for the whole thing. They just wanted an excuse to let the simmering resentment from the ongoing social and political unrest to erupt."

"Yeah, that sounds about right. For a historian's point of view. Hey, maybe that's what you should do," I said brightening. "Since you're so good at dissecting the historical implications of even distant colonial cultures in the Delta Quadrant, you really should become a history professor. Quit the film business now and enter into academia."

"I know some people in academia," the cyborg said. "And it is not that easy. Besides, quite a few historians still have deep seated prejudices about cyborgs."

"What sort of prejudices?"

"Cyborgs have superior memory due to our cybernetic enhancements," Vyne said. "And a lot of historians don't like them. We could easily fact check them on the spot and spoil all of their fun."

"But fact checking is supposed to be good, shouldn't it?"

As the cyborg gave a laconic shrug, the jerboa dived into my pocket with a frightened squeak as if it had suddenly seen something. Maybe Vyne was right, I thought whimsically. Perhaps the gerbil was like those cats he had talked about. Perhaps it sensed something from another dimension. I wouldn't be surprised, really. It was already a genius. Why not have a gerbil that also could see into other dimensions.

"I really should get back," I said. I faked a yawn. "We have a long day tomorrow. We're supposed to film some scenes on some of the mid-decks on what the ordinary Vircans have during their meal times. Nigel was planning on doing some extensive interviewing with random people on the street, so to speak."

"I should accompany you to your door."

I looked at the cyborg in suspicion. "Why would you want to do that? The door to my quarters is just a few steps away."

"Well, maybe I was hoping for..." he paused and then shook his head. "There's a custom that the ancients had. After a man took his date out for a night on the town, he would take her home and walk her to her door. And then he would give her a good night kiss."

"We did not have a date," I pointed out. "We're never going to have a date. I'm all wrong for you. Maybe you're tired. If cyborgs don't get any sleep, maybe you should start doing so. In the morning, you'll

see that I was right.”

“Oh come on. Haven't you ever discovered that there was something that was totally wrong for you but you did it anyway?”

“Plenty of times. That's why I'm here doing this documentary that really isn't a documentary instead of making arty academic films at the Andromeda Film School. But that doesn't mean that I can't be sensible now.”

“Now you decide to be sensible,” the cyborg complained. “Can't you just throw caution out of the window?”

“No. I don't want it to get frozen in the depths of space. It's hard to thaw out.”

“Ha. Ha. That's very funny.” Vyne stepped closer to me. I stepped back to keep my distance, but my heel ended up hitting the edge of the wall. The cyborg had me hemmed in. He smiled at his advantage and he brought his arm up. His hand flattened on the wall next to my head. His eyes were glowing red.

This was it, I thought. Red eyes meant that a cyborg was in attack mode according to all conventional wisdom. The cyborg was only pretending to like me to try to get my guard down. Now he was going to kill me.

“Are you going to kill me now?” I asked, voicing my thoughts. I felt myself color at the waver in my voice. I sounded like such a coward. And where was the jerboa when I needed it? Was it still cowering in my pocket? Genius gerbil should be out on the attack now, distracting the cyborg while I got away.

“Maybe metaphorically,” Vyne replied. His face came closer to mine, his eyes intent. Oh no. He wasn't going to kill me after all. He was going to...

Goddamn it, why do these things keep happening to me?

I grabbed at the cyborg's shoulders, intending to push him away, but I found myself pulling Vyne closer, ignoring my need to breathe.

My surroundings shook and we ended up getting flung to the opposite wall. Vyne grasped my waist and covered me with his body as a beam from the ceiling came down with a crash not far from where we had been standing. The station shook again and the emergency alarms began blaring as I struggled to find air. A flurry of messages burst into my eye screen, flickering as if the transmissions themselves were panicking about the sudden attack.

I sucked in another breath and finally concentrated on reading the messages. There was definitely a haul breach on the lowest level. Something had blown out part of the last deck, according to one of the messages, and it was now off limits. Some anonymous source had also sent a warning to the station managers saying that there were explosives placed in random points at the station. And that if demands were not met, something big and terrible was going to happen.

Shockwave

“We have to get out of here.”

“No, duh,” I told the cyborg. “But what about the equipment?”

“I've already sent a message up to the engineers on *The Bacchus* to have all the equipment quanted back onto the ship.” As he said that, the rest of the documentary crew stumbled back out in the hallway from their own rooms, shouting. Annette and Vik were wondering what was happening. Mot put forth that the station was being invaded. And George claimed that everything was a conspiracy and that he was right and that no one ever listened to him.

“Stop arguing!” I yelled back as the rest of the documentary crew tried to talk over each other as another explosion rocked the station and the alarms continued to blare. I noticed at the corner of my eye other inhabitants of the station racing through distant corridors, probably to emergency pods. “We have to get out of here.”

Only Vyne seemed to be rather calm about the entire crisis. He held up a hand and everyone seemed to quiet down, even as another explosion from below caused the floor beneath us to vibrate.

“We're being quanted to The Bacchus...”

Suddenly, the view of the station dissolved and was replaced by the transport room aboard the ship. The transport officer was standing behind the controls, sweating.

"...right now," the cyborg finished.

Vik and Annette collapsed on each other on the quant pad. "Oh God," Annette exclaimed. "That was sudden."

"I need some pain killers," George said as he rubbed his head. "Quanting unexpectedly makes me dizzy."

I stumbled off the quant pad just as the transport officer said on his ear comm, "I've got them all up!"

At that message, the engines to the ship fired up, causing a slight vibration to ripple throughout the ship. I managed to get out of the transport room and run to the ship's lift. Close behind was Mot who was panting from the sudden exertion and Vyne who was not breaking a sweat. I imagined that the cyborg could possibly beat me but that he was purposely holding back.

But all of that merely simmered at the back of my mind when I impatiently waited for the lift. The three of us went up to the ship's bridge where the crew was in a hive of activity. Captain Avery was barking out orders as quickly as he could say them and the pilots' fingers were flying fast over the ship's controls. I came up from the lift and stood a little to the side next to one of the unused panels on the bridge. From my vantage point, I saw the view screen which was turned on toward Vircas Station. Behind the station was the serene purple haze of the gas giant Vircas Beta C.

The station itself, however, was not so serene. Even from the distance that the ship had managed to travel to between quanting us back from the station and the current time, I could see a multitude of escape pods zooming out of the station. There was another explosion and I could see the underside of the station burst in a momentary red fire ball. I checked the holographic recording device on my wrist. It was on, indicating that it was recording the entire scenario.

"What the hell is happening here?" demanded Mot.

The captain gave the pilots another directive to move the ship as far away from the station as possible, before turning back to the show host. Avery looked grim. "You're lucky that Vyne there had the foresight to make sure that the entire documentary crew was being tracked during your stay on Vircas Station. That pretty much saved us some precious seconds."

Mot walked over to stand next to the captain and the commander who was tapping on her data pad with a worried expression. He looked over at the view screen where the scene of the self-destructing station and the gas station zoomed further away due to the ship's current trajectory. "That's good, I guess. But what's happening to the station? One moment, I was ready to go to bed and then the next there were all of these explosions and alarms and my stuff suddenly quanting out of my room."

"We took the liberty to quant all of your things back to the ship," said Avery. "We managed to do that first because we were having a little difficulty with finding a fix on you and the rest of your team because you were moving."

Mot nodded. "Okay. That, I get. But what about the explosions?"

"You would have to ask Mr. Vyne about that," said the captain as he glanced over at the cyborg.

Vyne remained standing near the lift, his attention on the view screen. Then he briefly looked at the expectant Mot. "The answer to your question is terrorists. Probably some malcontent native Vircans who decided to escalate the hostilities. If you've read the dossier that I had prepared for the station episode, you would have noticed that there are currently two factions of Vircans..."

Mot waved for him to stop. "Yes, yes. I read all of that. So it's just local gang warfare? But why would it have escalated this badly today of all days?"

To that, Vyne shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, Mr. Mot." Then turning to the captain, he said, "Captain Avery, according to the operating station sensors, it's going to blow in thirty seconds. You will need your engineers to increase the engine's impulse power to six point five in order to sufficiently get out of the blast radius."

The captain nodded. "You heard Mr. Vyne. Make it so!"

I could hear the ship's engines revving up and the scene on the view screen began to recede even faster.

"Blow? What do you mean, blow?" Mot's voice ended on a high, almost hysterical note.

"The terrorists," Vyne said in his annoyingly patient voice, "had placed a neutrino bomb on the lower level of the station. According to the sensors that I've hacked into on the station, the bomb will detonate in a few seconds."

Mot gaped at the cyborg and then promptly went into a meltdown as he started pacing the length of the bridge, sprouting invective at no one in particular. Apparently he had been looking forward to the next day's scene, but that was being blown to smithereens, literally.

All of this was being recorded on my wrist holographic recorder, which wasn't quite ideal although it did do the job. I wondered where Vik was. He was supposed to be doing all this filming at the critical junctures. But he was probably still lying on the quant pad in the transport room in shock from the abrupt quanting.

But even as I was thinking about this, I was watching the view screen as another part of the station blew out, spewing out debris which spiraled down onto the neighboring gas giant. And then, just as suddenly, the entire station exploded in a flash of white-blue light. It was so bright, even on the view screen, that I had to use my hand without the holographic recorder to shield my eyes. A moment later, the view screen was dark as I tried to blink my eyes from the resulting after images flickering in my retina. And then, a glittering shockwave rippled from where the station used to exist. The ship shuddered as the shockwave hit us, but the integrity of the vessel held.

Tourist Guide Munchies

The Rillan revolver that George had given me came in handy when some idiotic Borderland townie, fancying himself some kind of hot cowboy outlaw, attempted to coerce Annette into doing some dirty dancing even though it was obvious to everyone around us that Annette did not want to do so.

After I managed to put a bullet through the wooden counter just behind hot shot cowboy, I simply smiled and said, "You try to bother my boss again and you'll get a hole right in the middle of your forehead."

The hot shot cowboy hastily made his apologies and bowed a couple times, his new synth-leathers squeaking with his movement, and then moved off to the rest of the bar. Thankfully away from us. Annette raised her glass of genuine Borderland whiskey to me and took a gulp.

"Here's to Euphie, shooter extraordinaire. Man, that was a pretty good shot. Just a hair away from that dork's ear! His expression was priceless."

"Yeah. Well I had some help. With the Self-taught Shooter 6000. I downloaded the program not long after George gave me the revolver and ran it on my eye screen for some practice. Otherwise, I could have very well shot my own foot." I clicked the safety back on the weapon and then tucked it into my jacket pocket. The jerboa, riding in the pocket, cuddled up to the revolver. Nobody would be able to take it unless they wanted to chance having their fingers bitten off by a rodent.

"Well, you could have fooled me. You looked like a cyborg out there."

I groaned. "No. Compare me to anything except that." I turned back to the bar counter and nursed my own whiskey. "Besides, I wouldn't have had to use it in the first place if we weren't stuck here."

"Sorry about that." But Annette didn't particularly look reticent.

Back in the Vircas System, most of the debris from the destroyed space station had either been swallowed up by the nearby gas giant planet or blown far enough away that they had been ejected into deep space. At the moment, emergency crews and garbage scavengers were at the scene trying to reclaim any wreckage they could find—as evidence. After the explosion, *The Bacchus* managed to fly to the edge of the system where there were several outpost stations built by various overseeing factions in the galaxy. Since *The Bacchus* was registered with the Empire, we had docked on GES-777 to survey any damage that the ship might have sustained from the shockwave of the explosion and to regroup and reschedule.

But even as we the crew did repairs, I kept track with the news feeds of the region. Investigators had so far found that the neutrino bomb had indeed been smuggled into the system by some Vircan terrorists. But the bomb itself did not detonate just because the ones responsible wanted to do it themselves. Originally, they had wanted to destroy the entire space station without any trace that it was their fault. So they had managed to stash the bomb into the lower level of the space station in a storage facility that was checked very rarely. That particular facility had, at the time, a stash of Millax beetle eggs. The eggs themselves were normally encased in inert material to prevent them from igniting the lower decks unintentionally, but on the particular day of the explosion, robots had been unpacking the eggs to be ready for delivery to the kitchens.

The following day's scene had been planned for Mot to eat one of the Millax beetle eggs.

The problem with these particular eggs weren't that they were particularly unpalatable or even visually disgusting. They appeared to be soft, spongy brown balls that seemed to be quite innocuous. They were also considered quite a delicacy by several of the neighboring systems because the eggs had a subtle sweet flavor that many foodies considered sublime. No, what was most dangerous was the yolk of the eggs. The yolk mostly consisted of a chemical that was very similar to nitroglycerine. A tasty sort of nitroglycerine that had very similar properties to nitroglycerine itself. That was why the eggs were always packed in inert material during shipping.

But the terrorists knew about this and thought that any accidental handling of the eggs would cause small explosions that would eventually detonate the neutrino bomb. The only thing they had not bargained for was a defector. It was that defector who had sent the warnings on the space station's transmission letting everyone know in advance that something terrible was happening. The whistleblower was currently at large and currently sought after by the authorities. But then again, the Vircan terrorists who were still about were probably also trying to find this whistleblower, mostly likely to silence him or her before any more of their secrets were given away. I did not envy anyone who was in the position of running away from the good guys and the bad guys.

We had stayed at GES-777 for a couple of days to finish transmitting any of the recordings that we did on Vircas Station to GBC headquarters and then Vik shot a couple of introspective scenes with Mot on GES-777 speculating on the historic blow up of the station. As the assistant holographic projectionist, I was there just to help take some alternate shots of the monologue which was all completely scripted by Vyne for the facts and Annette for the melodrama.

On our way to the Borderland System which was just a day's hyperjump away from GES-777, the GBC decided to air the Vircas station episode as soon as the editors had managed to splice together a reasonable hodgepodge of the entire adventure. I did not have time to actually watch the episode since I had been relegated to holographic equipment maintenance again, but I did hear from Vik that he had thought the episode was "reasonable".

"Well, reasonable for the amount of time they had to edit," Vik had explained. "It was mostly raw footage. A lot of it was your stuff, Euphie. You know, when you were filming on the ship's bridge with Nigel having a meltdown because he could no longer film the next day's scene, even though something else completely historic was happening before his eyes."

"When people are having personal meltdowns," I had replied. "They usually don't notice much outside their own little sphere of personal anguish."

The episode appeared to do very well. The ratings were the highest as it had ever been and there was even talk on some of the news feeds that I was following that the episode on Vircas Station might even end up getting nominated for some obscure news award in the Gamma Quadrant because our crew was pretty much the only ones actually on the scene.

But other than that, *The Bacchus* continued to travel blissfully onward to its next destination, no fangirls—as Mot would say—trailing behind.

So at the moment, we were in the Borderland System on the third planet that the locals had nicknamed Outlaw Star. It was a dusty, almost desert-like, place filled with architecture that all dated back to the colonial period. The Borderland System was a rather poor area in the Delta Quadrant where the people could rarely afford renovations and updates on any of their older buildings and machines. The Borderland System itself catered toward the "ex-pat" crowd, people coming in from the Corporation or the Empire who wanted a slower pace of life.

The Borderland System was also famous for being near a wormhole that was a direct line to the zeta sector in the Delta Quadrant. However, the officials in the Borderland System were known to be corrupt. Most of the traffic monitored to go through the wormhole had to pay a toll to the officials of the Borderland System in order to get through. Theoretically, the money from the toll would go directly to the planetary fund which would help build up the Borderland System infrastructure. But because of corruption, most of the money went into the officials' pockets. Only a pittance went toward the rest of the populace.

And that was why Annette and I were sitting in the Salty Horse Saloon in the downtown of the capital city located on the eastern continent of the Borderland homeworld, drinking whiskey. Mot had had the bright idea of doing some "investigative reporting" while trying to hunt down the elusive Borderland rock grubs that the minder for the system had mentioned was found out in ranch country. Annette had tried to nix the idea as this was a documentary and not some news show, but riding high from the news award nomination, Mot had thought that they could continue to roll with that idea. So he decided to take the Borderland minder, Vik, and the cyborg with him to do the investigation. George, unfortunately, could not

participate since he had gotten ill after eating some of the local grub tacos the previous evening.

While sitting at the bar, waiting for the rest of the crew to come back from their expedition for rock grubs and controversy, I had looked up what rock grubs were exactly in the slow accessing behemoth that was the Borderland database. Borderland rock grubs were apparently found in rocks from quartz quarries around the planet. The grubs themselves were a pale gray with a slightly translucent skin. People said that eaten raw, the rock grubs tasted like juicy stake. If grilled, the grubs took on a more fish flavor. However, no one really knew how the rock grubs got into the rocks in the first place as there are no holes in the rocks. The only way one could tell if there was a grub in the rock was by x-ray scanning or by actually cracking the rock open.

What exactly laid the grub in the rock? It was an unknown. No one had ever observed the grub maturing into an adult form. Geneticists had even tried to decipher the developmental pattern of the grub from their DNA, but came up empty. Most of the grub genome, apparently, was a huge black box.

But all of that when one was waiting for someone (or rather several someones) to show up. Boredom is a killer, I thought. After all of our adventures on making the documentary series, sitting here, I missed the crazy action, the strange conversations, and yes, even the cyborg.

I was turning into a sap, I thought as I stared into the glass of whiskey that I had already drunk halfway. It was maybe because I had started to care for my co-workers or maybe it was really the alcohol talking. It was probably the alcohol, I decided.

While sitting on the stool, I decided to scroll down the messages on my eye screen as Annette pulled out a small data pad from one of her pockets in her pant suit to work on whatever she had on the small hand held computer. The only messages that remained unread, unfortunately, were the messages that I had gotten from my parents in the past couple of days. They had sent me several, numerous transmissions that I had ignored in favor of working on the previous episode and doing holographic recorder maintenance.

I opened up the first message. It was my mother, asking me if I was all right after “that horrible explosion in the Vircas System” that she had seen on one of the Galactic news channels. The message seemed innocuous enough so I sent a curt message saying that I was all right and that the film crew was busy making the next episode.

The next message was a little more pointed, asking me if I was injured in any way and asking if I was so traumatized by the experience, because I had not been responding to her first message, that maybe I should seek out psychiatric help. I rolled my eyes at that and skipped to the next message. The third and fourth message were similar, asking me to reply back immediately about my status. The fifth message was extremely curt: “We saw the Vircas episode for *Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant*.”

That short missive made me extremely wary when I finally opened the sixth message. It started ordinarily enough.

Euphie,

We saw the latest episode that you filmed for the documentary series that you are working on. We saw that it was nominated for a news prize. We're really proud of you! I hope you are doing well.

There was one scene that we were curious about, though. After all of our friends saw the episode, they were congratulating us that you had finally found a boyfriend. When will we be meeting him?

Love Mom and Dad.

Boyfriend? Boyfriend?!

“What the hell!” I yelled aloud. Several heads turned around in the Salty Horse Saloon. After seeing that I was yelling at no one in particular, everyone turned back to their own tables.

Startled, Annette almost fell off of her chair. “Euphie! What's the matter?”

“My parents think I have a boyfriend.”

“Well, don't you?” the director said with a puzzled expression. The jerboa poked its head out of my pocket and gave me a chiding chirp. Perhaps I had been too loud.

“No. I don't. And I don't want one.”

“You don't have to sound so pissy about it,” the director replied. “Why don't you just send a transmission back to your parents telling them that it was all a misunderstanding and that you don't have a boyfriend?”

“I think I'll do just that.”

I trigged my fingers and sent off a message. All the way from the Delta Quadrant, it would probably take a couple of days for the message to arrive back on my homeworld in the Beta Quadrant before my parents could read it. I suppose they would be extremely disappointed. They had been

attempting to foist potential boyfriends on me ever since I was old enough to drive a hover car. Back on my homeworld, getting married at a young age for women was the traditional thing to do. And my parents were big traditionalists. So of course, I had to be a disappointment. My brother, being my brother, was the pampered genius who got to do whatever he wished.

After sending the message, I downed the rest of the whiskey and hoped the alcohol would hit my head real soon. Sending messages to my parents, although not entirely time consuming, was extremely stressful. In my reading of twentieth-century literature, a lot of characters during that time drank their stresses away. But come to think of it, people nowadays do that as well. It's just that there were a far larger variety of alcoholic drinks to choose from compared to the times on Ancient Earth.

The door to the Salty Horse Saloon creaked open, belying the saloon's age and disrepair. Three figures appeared on the threshold as if they were about to storm into the place. But after they walked forward a couple of paces, the glare from the light bounced back behind them and I could finally see that it was actually Nigel Mot, Vik, and the cyborg. Annette waved them over and the three men made their way to our small section of the bar counter. They took some free seats and ordered another round of whiskey.

Mot was sighing in dejection as he crossed his arms around his chest. "Well, that was disappointing."

"What happened?" I asked. "Didn't you find the rock grubs you were looking for? And what happened to the minder?"

"The minder," said Vik in a shaky voice. "Got eaten by the rock grubs."

"What?!" Annette exclaimed. "I've got to see this."

"He deserved it," the cyborg told me. "You don't disturb a nest of rock grubs without consequences."

I looked at Vyne. "What do you mean by that?"

"There's a legend by the Borderlanders that there was actually an earlier group of colonists that came to this world before their own ancestors did. They managed to make a place on the planet for a few months before they all mysteriously disappeared. According to the legend, it was the rock grubs that did them in. In their zeal to build a new colonial city, the first colonists hit a bit of bedrock that contained a colony of the grubs. And the grubs ate them."

"Too bad George didn't come down with us," said Mot as he accepted his glass of whiskey from the bartender. "He would have skewered all of those rock grubs like a bunch of shish kebabs with a sword. But as it was, we had to make do with Vyne's laser pistol."

"Here," Vik said, wincing as he handed me a small data pad. "I can't bear to watch it again. I'm going to have nightmares tonight."

"I've seen worse in the GBC boardrooms," said Mot.

"And what about Vyne?" asked Annette as I tapped the data pad to access the most recent footage. "Why aren't you traumatized?"

He simply looked at her.

She reddened in embarrassment. "Oh right, you're a cyborg. You guys see that stuff all the time during your training in the black ops or whatever it is the imperial military calls it."

"Ah, here it is," I said. Annette scooted closer to me to take a look at the data pad.

Mot, Vik, and Vyne were standing a little ways away from a large rock formation that looked like a Terran termite mound, except multiplied by a million times. The minder was standing along the side of the mound saying in an excited voice that they were standing on a rock grub bonanza.

That was when the minder took out a pick from his bag and began chipping away at the rock. A moment later, a large gray grub, about the size of a human forearm, emerged from the rock, wriggling helplessly about. The minder held up the grub with apparently no problem and simply bit into the grub with relish, the juices of the grub, a green blood, dribbling down his chin.

"Mm!" the minder exclaimed. "This tastes absolutely delicious. You guys should try this out for yourself."

But before the documentary crew could do anything, something else emerged from the hole in the rock behind the minder. It was as gray as the grub that he held in his hand. But big. Much bigger. It was the biggest grub that I or anyone had ever seen. It was probably as big as half of the rock mountain. It burst from the hole and roared, revealing a maw that separated out into five parts like the petals of flower. Except there were many, many sharp teeth. Everyone, except the cyborg, screamed.

But the minder was too close and too slow. The grub simply curled down and chomped down on the minder into he split in half, blood and bone spewing everywhere. I grimaced as I watched. Then the

feed turned choppy as both Mot and Vik scrambled out of the way and the cyborg pulled out his laser pistol to shoot at the creature. The laser pistol only glanced off the creature's gray slimy skin, annoying it. But fortunately for the documentary crew, the giant grub merely decided to head back into its rocky home rather than to pursue the others.

Or perhaps, it didn't pursue the others because they had not eaten the smaller grub.

Annette excused herself after watching the footage to go to the restroom, perhaps to throw up. She had looked a little green there. I handed the data pad back to Vik.

"Well?" said Mot.

"You know how everyone speculates what the adult form of the Borderland rock grub is?" I said. "Well, I think Vik just caught that adult form on his feed. You'll be a fan with the biologists."

Part IX: Dessert

The Black Box

After traveling through the wormhole from the Borderland System to the Zeta Sector, The Bacchus stopped off at a way station at the edge of the asteroid field to refuel from the grueling trip through the wormhole. I personally had never traveled through a wormhole before, and frankly, I would not care for experiencing that sort of trip again. Certain quantum particles present in a wormhole were able to penetrate the shielding of any ship. And although they weren't really harmful to living things, per se, sometimes it made susceptible people ill. I happened to be one of the susceptible people. And I did not treasure my time that was spent in the ship's infirmary.

The refueling stop was not very long. It was only long enough for the the fuel to transfer to the ship and for some of the crew to quant to the station to stretch their legs. I quanted off to the station to do a little impromptu filming as well as to get my equilibrium back. There was a small souvenir stall in the station that sold tacky little paper cards that showed the picture of the station from a little ways away. I bought one, as it was not very expensive, as well as a small packet of gummy snacks for the jerboa. The small rodent seemed to enjoy the snacks very much.

It was also at this stop that George bought a box filled with some additional data chips for "backups". "You can never be too paranoid about backups," the sensory technician had claimed. "You never know what might happen. Always be prepared!" The data chips came in a black box about half a meter on each side. It was quite large, but George seemed to be able to carry the thing with ease. The data chips, apparently, were very light considering the material that they were manufactured from.

Soon, we had to quant back to the ship and Captain Avery gave the pilots the heading to New Haven, a idyllic planet of temperate climate and beautiful scenery in the Zeta Sector, according to the databases. New Haven was apparently also famous for their variety of desserts. The desserts from New Haven were highly sought after by high class restaurants all over the galaxy. And that was also why the New Haven desserts were also on the forty-second emperor's banquet menu. But meanwhile, as the ship prepared to go into hyperdrive, the crew met in one of the conference rooms on the ship to do some last minute preparations on the schedule for our filming on New Haven.

"It's our last episode for the season," Mot declared when we had finally taken our seats at the conference table. Mot had taken his customary seat at the head of the table. By his side were a small stack of data pads and a cup of strong smelling coffee. At the center of the conference table was another carafe of coffee along with mugs. And there were a platter of pastries that looked extremely...normal. Apparently the ship's chef was having a good day today. "We need good ratings for this episode as well."

"Isn't that what you say at every episode planning?" said Vik with a sigh.

"Yes, but it's the last episode! Besides, we don't need to have extremely high ratings. Just high enough so that it will justify us having another recording season!"

"Another recording season?" I said. I digested that fact for a moment. If we got another season, that would mean that I would be guaranteed employment for at least the next couple of months. But then reality set in. "That doesn't make sense, Nigel. We've pretty much gone through the entire banquet menu except for the dessert. How would we make another season if it comes down to it?"

"We'll figure something out," he said with a wave of his hand. "Anyways, does anyone have any suggestions to make this the greatest episode ever?"

George set down the black box he had gotten at the way station. "Backups."

Mot rolled his eyes. "That's just common sense, George. So does anyone have any suggestions other than that?"

The rest of us looked at each other. Then the cyborg suggested, "How about eating some desserts?"

"That's a given!" said Mot.

George, meanwhile, was running his fingers along the black box containing the data chips, trying to find the opening. The jerboa jumped down from my shoulder to scurry toward the box. The rodent sniffed at the edge of the box and then crawled around it. It put its nose against the box and then seemed to think better of it. The jerboa squeaked and then scampered back to my side of the table, taking one of the pastries with it. No one, fortunately, thought its behavior was anything unusual and said nothing when the rodent simply sat beside me and proceeded to devour the entire pastry which probably weighed as much as it did.

"I almost got it. Aha!" George finally pressed a hidden button on the box.

"George," Mot began. "The staff meeting is not time time to open your purchases..."

The top of the box, at first, refused to budge and then it popped open and several data chips spontaneously popped out. Something else popped out of the box, too. It looked like a small dark vial with gold script. The script was not in Galactic Standard. George picked up the vial frowning.

"What is this?"

"Oh, a surprise!" Annette exclaimed. "I love surprises. The bottle looks like one of those things that they put perfume in. Open it, George! Maybe it smells really nice?"

George gave Annette a strange look. Mot rolled his eyes and began to tap his fingers along the edge of the table.

"Hello here!" Mot said. "I want to get this meeting rolling! We're supposed to be discussing ideas for the last episode! This is very important."

"You might get a better response after you appease Annette's curiosity," I said.

"Euphie, don't be an enabler," Mot said with a frown.

George then shrugged and put the bottle close to his face. "I can't read this script. I don't have the translation module on my eye screen activated."

"Here, let me see," said Vik as he reached over the table. George handed him the vial. Vik looked at the vial. Squinted. And then shook his head. "I can't read it either. My translator is giving me an error. Hey Vyne, why don't you look at it? You're the researcher of the group."

The cyborg took the vial between his thumb and index finger as if he was handling something particularly not pleasant. He did not have to squint. I guessed that his eyes were enhanced enough that he could simply trig his own vision for magnification. But then Vyne shook his head. "This is a very strange script. It looks like it might be a version of Rillan, but when my translator tries to translate the script that way, all I get is gibberish. Here, Euphie, you try it." Vyne dropped the bottle into my hand.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I demanded. "I thought that if you couldn't decipher it, then none of us probably can."

"Well, you were the one closeted with the communications officer upgrading your own translation subroutines." The cyborg's mouth was edged upward, teasing.

I glared at him. "If you're implying what I think you're implying, you're going to get some of this coffee in your pants. And it would not be comfortable."

"Now, now, Euphie. Play nice," said Annette. "You know Vyne doesn't mean it."

"Whatever." I looked at the vial. A few centimeters away from my face, it finally came into focus. At first, the translator on my eye screen did not respond. But then it started working. The script wavered and then came back into focus in Galactic Standard. "Whale pheromones," I read slowly.

"What the hell does that mean?" said George.

"I know! I know!" said Vik excitedly. "It means whale pheromones!"

Everyone glared at him.

"Pheromones," he repeated. "You know, chemical cues. I've heard that a lot of cultures use this chemical cues, particularly sexual chemical cues extracted from a variety of animals, as perfumes. The point of it is, of course, to attract the opposite sex if you happen to swing that way. It seems to be pretty popular."

"I have no use for whale pheromones," George said as I handed him back the bottle. "No amount of perfume will make me attractive to anyone."

“Don't be so down, George,” said Annette. “You just haven't found the perfect person yet.”

“Everyone says that,” the sensory technician said with a sigh.

“All right, enough with this perfume business!” Mot finally said with a slam of his palm on the table. “Now can we get back to the business at hand? Does anyone have any idea on how to do the last episode?”

Vik leaned over to finally pour himself a cup of coffee. “Well,” he remarked, “I liked Vyne's idea. We'll just eat a lot of desserts. It's bound to be our most delicious episode yet, even if it isn't the most intellectually stimulating.”

Mot moaned as he covered his eyes with his hand.

The jerboa scuttled to the head of the table and chirped. Mot peeked from behind his hand.

“What is it, Fuzz?”

The rodent offered Mot the remaining bit of the pastry that he had chewed.

“Unless you have a real suggestion, no thanks.”

New Whale

The space whale appeared on the view screen at about seven in the morning on the day before we were to arrive at New Haven. This time also happened to be when I was on the bridge of The Bacchus consulting with one of the ship's engineers about getting a copy of the feeds that were from the recorders on the outside of the ship. Of course, I could have hacked into them myself, but it was always a good idea to get permission first, especially if any of the feeds were going to eventually end up on the tables of the GBC editors at headquarters.

It was actually Commander Tautu who spotted it first. The pilots were too engrossed in looking at their instruments to recalibrate the flight trajectory to look up at the view screen. Captain Avery and his second in command, Lieutenant Mahler, seemed to be in deep conversation about some sort of maintenance issue of the ship.

“What the hell is that?” The commander's voice cut through the relative quietness of the bridge like a knife.

The captain's head snapped up and he looked at the location on the view screen where the commander was staring. I had my back to the view screen as I had been discussing the logistics of the ship's feed with the engineer on the bridge at one of the control panels, but at the commander's voice, we too also looked at the view screen. Out in the darkness of space, there was something rather long and large drifting perhaps several kilometers off to port.

“Holy moly!” exclaimed one of the pilots.

“Stop gaping and give me a status report!” snapped the captain. “I want to know why the sensors had not alerted us to this obstacle. Magnify!”

The ship's computer obeyed and magnified the scene. When it became bigger, everyone continued to gape. I had the presence of mind to activate the holographic recorder that I had already strapped to my shoulder. It was there because Mot was scheduled to do a small monologue about the last episode in the ship's observation deck. Vik wasn't doing it because he had decided to take the day off. I made sure that I had closeups of everyone's surprise. Too bad that Mot wasn't there. He would have had another meltdown for sure.

“It...it looks like a whale,” stammered Lieutenant Mahler.

“A space whale,” confirmed Commander Tautu.

“Space whale?” said the captain. “What is that supposed to mean? I always thought that whales were Terran creatures that were supposed to live in the oceans. Not some thing floating around in space.”

“Space whales aren't really related to Terran whales at all,” Commander Tautu said. “They're just called that because they both have a superficial resemblance. The space whale, however, is an alien creature that somehow swims from one system to another, searching for planets where they can feed. They like feeding on the magnetic radiation that some planets emit.”

“But space is so vast,” said the captain. “How can they travel from planet to planet floating like that as if they are hardly moving? Space doesn't have currents like an ocean where one could simply drift from one destination to another. This kind of alien creature would have to propel itself. And I can't imagine such a creature actually having some sort of biological hyperdrive.”

Commander Tautu shrugged. "I will have to admit that I am not sure, Captain. My knowledge is limited only to rumors to space whales as they are seen very rarely. Perhaps a biological hyperdrive is possible. Who knows."

The ship continued to remain at a respectable distance away from the space whale which according to the view screen, really did look like a whale, all the way down to the color of its hide and the bumps on its skin. Its tail fin gently waved in space, propelling it forward. It did not appear to notice the ship which was continuing to monitor the anomaly, per the captain's orders.

It was actually Vyne who finally had an answer to the biological hyperdrive question. There had been one observance by a lone scientist working in the Alpha Quadrant who had seen the space whale going into hyperdrive. It was described as very similar to quanting as one moment, the whale was there and then another, it wasn't. The only indication that it had been a jump into hyperspace and not actual quanting was the trail of peculiar exotic subatomic particles that had been left behind in its wake when it went into hyperspace.

And then it was Mot who proposed the brilliant idea of trying to get space whale cheese. "I had heard from some friends of mine, in their messages that had been forwarded to me by my assistant, that space whale cheese is a really rare delicacy! We should go get some!"

Everyone expressed their doubts.

"Although no one has observed aggressive behavior in any space whales," said the cyborg, "that doesn't mean that it doesn't happen. If you try to milk the whale, I'm sure it will notice you doing so."

"Oh come on," said Mot. "We should really try! What do we have to lose?"

"Your life?" I suggested.

"Don't listen to Euphie," Mot said even as for once, everyone looked to me.

But in the end, Mot's persistence was what made everyone (except Vik) pile into one of the shuttles to take a closer look. One of the ship's pilots came along with the documentary crew and managed to maneuver the shuttle alongside the whale. Even as this close range, the whale still ignored us.

"I'm going to go milk the whale!" Mot exclaimed. "Who's coming with me?"

Everyone just stared at him.

"I think I'll just be fine in here," said Annette. "I can direct you via the ear comm."

"I can send you directions via the eye screen," the cyborg added.

Mot headed toward the back of the shuttle where the space suits were stored. He began pulling one of the suits on. When he had almost everything on, except for the helmet, he gestured toward me. "I need someone to film me doing this! This will be a once of a lifetime opportunity! No one has done this before! We can just add this onto our last episode and probably double our ratings alone because this is being filmed for the first time."

"Oh for blue's sake, I am not doing the fucking filming out there," I pointed out. "I can do it just fine in here. I can maneuver the shuttle's feeds and adjust for magnification..."

Mot stared at me. "Euphie, you're coming out here with me. Or else."

And that was why I ended up suiting up as well. As I attached my holographic recording equipment on my shoulder, the cyborg handed me my helmet.

"Make sure you attach the safety line," he said. "You have no idea what may happen out there. No one's been able to study the space whale in depth."

"No kidding," I replied.

The jerboa, which was sitting on a ledge along the shuttle wall, gave me an encouraging chirp.

Mot ignored all of this, even as I double checked the latches on my helmet and sighed in resignation. I had done a space walk several times before, of course. Most of my experiences were in holographic simulations during school. And there was one time, when I was still in university, where I did an actual space walk. But that space walk had been in orbit around a planet. I had felt relatively safe doing it there even though technically it was the real thing.

But now, we were still a ways away from the nearest planet, New Haven. Mot had said that he had done the space walk "millions" of times, but who knows what that meant. He could be just exaggerating. Maybe all of his experience was on holographic simulations too. But he seemed particularly fearless as he went out the airlock with a metal, pressurized canister that supposed was where the whale milk was going to go.

I waved to the rest of the film crew who looked at me with solemn expressions as if I was about to go to my funeral. I double checked my safety line and there I went, out of the airlock. On my eye screen, I blocked pretty much every transmission except for the messages from the crew back at the shuttle and my

environmental suit status. So far, so good. I took hold of the safety line and pressed the button on my wrist for the small rocket booster that was attached to my back. Slowly, I moved toward Mot who was already well on his way toward the whale.

For a moment, I wondered what the space whale was thinking of us. It wasn't reacting at all. Perhaps it truly did not notice us. Or more probably, it did notice us, but it did not care. Or maybe hoped that we would go away soon, like some pesky mosquito.

Mot was now next to the whale. The pilot had maneuvered the shuttle so that we were already near the end of the whale where the teat was supposed to be located. We had double checked the location with magnified feeds. But of course, that didn't mean that one could actually find it in real life. But Mot didn't seem to have any trouble. Once alongside the whale, Mot tested his luck by poking at the whale's skin. The whale's skin did not give away. Nor did the whale react. Mot poked again. Still nothing.

"Do you have any experience milking anything at all?" I asked into the ear comm. "You know, a cow or a goat or even a Terran elephant?"

"Nope," Mot responded cheerfully. I totally did not get his attitude. Shouldn't he be frightened to death at this point? The space whale could simply swipe its tail and he'd be a gonner. But then again, so would I. "I'm a city boy, not a farm boy. But I've done some milking simulations during my education on some holographic simulators. How hard can it be?"

"You don't know what you're getting into," I said, even as I adjusted the controls to the holographic recording equipment and made sure that the focus was in place. "You know you could die at any moment."

"But that's exactly why this whole thing is thrilling!" Mot exclaimed. "We could die at any moment. And what a way to go. It's like what George was like when he ended up in that duel on Totoro. If we died right now, we'd have one hell of an epitaph."

"Maybe for you, but I'd rather keep living, thank you very much," I replied. "I'd rather die peacefully in my sleep like any respectable old person. Not get sideswiped by an angry space whale."

"Euphie, have you had your happy pills today?"

"Why would I need happy pills? I'm perfectly happy right now."

Mot sighed into his ear comm and then got into position. He hooked the milking canister to his knee and then attached the opening of the canister to the teat that he had found. Then he activated the suction and massaged the area around the teat to get the fluid flowing. I went for a closeup. On my eye screen, I saw the light on the canister blinking green. The milk was flowing and it appeared that the whole endeavor was in fact looking to be quite successful.

But just as the canister was full and Mot began to detach the canister from the teat, the space whale began to move.

At first, I only saw it as a flicker in my peripheral vision. But that was enough for me to shout a warning into my ear comm. My warning made Mot move quicker. He hugged the precious cargo of the milk canister to his chest and pressed a button on his wrist. The rocket on his back activated and he moved toward me. The space whale's tail waved downward, heading straight toward Mot's head. In a panic, I yanked on the safety line, hoping that I could pull Mot toward me faster. I even pressed the button to my own jet pack, hoping the increased momentum from me would increase his speed.

Mot neared me, his face a mixture of exhilaration and horror as he looked up at the whale's tail coming at him. The holographic recorder at my shoulder, of course, caught every nuance in his expression. He's not going to make it, the thought went through my mind. The host of Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant was going to meet his end before we could even properly film the last episode. All this effort to get milk from the space whale was going to cost us somebody's life.

The tail came down. And narrowly missed Mot by a centimeter. Mot still had that expression on his face as if he was staring at Death. Mot was close enough now that I managed to grab his arm. I triggered my fingers to indicate to the shuttle crew that we were ready to be reeled back in. It was when the safety line itself started moving that I allowed myself for a tiny breath of relief. The space whale next to us was moving its tail again, upward, and slowly propelling itself away from the shuttle.

The both of us got into the airlock and crashed into the floor. Mot was a nerveless puddle, except for his arms which were in a death grip around the milking canister. I staggered to my feet and managed to unhook the clasps for the helmet. The suit depressurized with a hiss and I took a deep breath of air as I handed the helmet to the nearest person—Annette—who looked at me with an expression that was partly of glee and partly of relief.

"That was a freakishly close call," remarked George. "Good job, kid."

"I saw everything on the feed," said the director as she put my helmet on a hook in the suit storage area. "That was some good work there. If the nature film makers don't recognize that as genius, they're all blind."

"I'm glad you didn't get flattened like a pancake out there," said the cyborg.

Indignant, I said, "Pancake! What sort of fool do you take me for? I wasn't the one who volunteered to go out there."

But instead of arguing with me, the cyborg dragged me into a hug even though I had yet to take off the rest of my suit. I heard the jerboa chirping excitedly as the cyborg kissed me yet again. Dammit. The pilot of the shuttle made an abrupt turn as the space whale also decided to change direction at the same time and the shuttle itself veered at a sudden angle, making everyone lose their balance. The cyborg and I rammed against the side of the shuttle. The cyborg, damn him, did not simply release me. Instead, he hugged me closer to him and whispered in my ear, once we were settled to the floor, "Are you all right?"

"Sorry about that!" the pilot yelled back at us. "That space whale was going to make us into cheese danishes if I didn't move our asses pronto!"

I began to struggle in the cyborg's arms. "You crazy lug. I'm not some kind of breakable porcelain. Let me go at once."

From behind me, I could hear Mot moan. "My head, my head. And why isn't anyone kissing my boobos away?"

"Your mother isn't here," George supplied. "Besides, you don't have any fangirls, remember? Or rather, you do have some, but they'd rather see you obtain some boobos than to kiss them away."

"I'm sure you can find some proper fangirls on New Haven," Annette said in a soothing voice. "I just got notification today from GBC headquarters that they showed the latest episode to the Delta Quadrant last night. The ratings were simply through the roof. And everyone was talking about you on the transmission boards."

"Really?" Mot brightened as he sat up and finally put down the milking canister and removed his helmet. "That's good news! I'm looking forward to fangirls. Or rather people adoring me, period."

"I don't know about that," I said as I finally disentangled myself from Vyne. "Have you even read the message boards? All of your new fans....mmpf." The cyborg had put a palm over my mouth.

"Never mind Euphie," Vyne said. "She's just a little rattled after that close brush with the space whale."

"Anyone would be," agreed Annette, a little too readily. "You were awesome in the latest episode, Nigel. The fans loved it."

"I knew it!" crowed Mot.

I need to tell Mot the truth! I triggered with my fingers, even though I could not move my mouth.

No you don't, the cyborg sent back. *We need to keep him happy at the moment. Otherwise, he would be no good at the last episode.*

What do you mean, no good? It's the last episode. He has to be relieved no matter what.

Maybe. But it's always good to make sure that the boss is happy, right?

If that's the case, I triggered by with a sour expression, maybe we should just drug his coffee with some happy pills.

That solution would be too easy.

Through our silent exchange, Mot was crooning to the milking canister.

"What's he going to do with that anyway?" George whispered to Annette as they stepped away from the host of the documentary show. The sensory technician and the director were now both looking at Mot with slightly worried expressions.

"He said that he was going to make cheese with it," she whispered back.

"I thought he was just joking."

"Me, too. But after seeing him like this, I'm beginning to think that he wasn't."

"That's not promising."

Overhearing this conversation, I cut in, "Maybe since you guys were so worried, you should have stopped him from going out there in the first place. We wouldn't have risked our necks filming something so unknown."

"You can't stop Nigel," said Annette. "He's the star of the show. Besides, he came up with the concept. And it's in his ship we're traveling in. He's pretty much the boss. And you just have to follow what the boss says."

"That doesn't mean that you have to follow him like programmable automatons," I replied.

George shook his head. "But look on the bright side, Euphie. You got the footage. It's going to make this season. Mot is right on one account. This is going to make the ratings shoot through the metaphorical roof."

"Whatever." I began peeling myself out of my space suit and hanging it up in the storage area. "What I'm wondering now is why Vik declined to come down with us to do this. I know it's his day off and all, but he's a rather hard worker. He wouldn't pass up an opportunity if it presented itself."

"I don't know about that," Vyne countered. "It could very well be that Vik probably had the same thoughts as most of us, that this expedition with the space whale was going to come to naught at the very best. And disaster at the very worst. But at any rate, you should be excited, Euphie."

I looked at the cyborg suspiciously. "Excited? I was scared shitless. You don't know what a space whale looks like until you're up close to it."

"Oh come on. You know that once Vik finds out that you got the shot of a lifetime, he's going to be extremely jealous that an assistant holographic projectionist got it and not him."

"Maybe. But life isn't about just getting the perfect shot."

At that moment, Mot meandered up to our little group, clutching the milking canister again. He was stroking it in a slightly disturbing way. I wondered if the experience really had rattled him. I thought about suggesting him to one of the psychiatrists on the lists that my mother kept sending me in her persistent messages.

Mot cocked his head as if examining me like an insect under the microscope. "You know, Euphie, you sound like a sage. That saying is so profound. Perhaps you should apply to some monastery or nunnery somewhere. I heard that Alpha Regulus has a nunnery that has a couple openings for sages."

The rest of us looked at each other after Mot's pronouncement. And then we promptly tackled to him to the floor as he yowled and frothed. Mot ended up tied up to one of the shuttle seats with synthetic plastic rope as the shuttle pilot steered us back to *The Bacchus*.

Rocket Fuel Redux

Doctor Holst came out to meet the rest of the crew in the waiting room in the sick bay with a solemn expression. From inside the sick bay, we could still hear Mot ranting. Except that this time, he had moved on from muttering about monasteries to pontificating on cherry pies. Well, at least that was somewhat on topic considering the episode that we were about to make. *The Bacchus* was now only a few hours away from coming into orbit to New Haven. We were already in direct transmission with the minder for New Haven at the moment, but Annette had managed to stall the minder's meeting with Mot until we were actually in orbit and on the ground.

"I'm afraid I have bad news," said the doctor. He had a diagnostics pad in one hand. Something on the screen of the diagnostics pad was blinking. "Mr. Mot has contracted RIV."

"RIV?" said Vik. "What does that mean?"

"Random Incoherency Virus."

"That sounds like a band name," I said.

Everyone else stared at me as if I had lost my mind. I scowled back. Really, it did sound like a band name. But I suppose the diagnosis was too serious for anyone to find any humor in it. So I decided not to say anything else.

"Random Incoherency Virus causes symptoms that are very similar to schizophrenia," the doctor continued. "Once the virus gets into the system, it targets nerve cells via their dopamine receptors. Once they enter into the cell, it preferentially inserts itself into certain sequences in the cell's genome. These sequences encode the control regions of genes that are responsible for making various neurotransmitters. Usually, the virus stays latent for a while and is virtually undetectable if you aren't specifically looking for it."

"If it's latent," said Annette, "then why did it show up just now?"

George sighed, rolling his eyes. "Did you not take any elementary biology classes? Even a child could understand what the doctor is saying."

The director crossed her arms. "I never was very good with biology. If you're so smart, then what is the doctor saying?"

"It was the stress of the encounter with the space whale that did it," said George. "It's obvious."

Annette still looked blank.

"Mr. Zero is right," the doctor cut in, before George could strangle her. "It was the stress that did

it. A fair number of viruses do come out of latency when the host experiences stress. My theory is that the encounter with the space whale made Mr. Mot's nerve cells go under a lot of stress. The virus came out of latency. And as a result, Mr. Mot's neurotransmitter levels have gone out of whack, resulting in his odd behavior. Fortunately, the virus itself is treatable. I am having my assistant manufacture the vaccine right now. Unfortunately, we will also have to let the symptoms of the disease run its course. It will take a while for Mr. Mot's fluctuating neurotransmitter levels to become stabilized."

"How long?" asked Annette.

"I don't know. It will vary from person to person. It could be anywhere from a few hours to a couple weeks."

The director frowned. "We don't have a couple weeks."

"I've been reading some articles from the latest medical journals. There is a new, experimental treatment for sufferers of RIV, but it has only been tested on a couple of patients. Results so far have seemed mixed."

"We have to try it," said Annette. "We can't afford the delay."

"What I want to know is, is RIV contagious?" said Vik. "I wasn't there when everyone got him tied up and hauled to the sick bay. It's supposed to be my day off. Did he get it from the space whale or something different? If it was the space whale, do we have to worry about Euphie?"

Everyone looked at me again.

"Hey," I said, gesturing with my open palms, "I wasn't the one who touched the space whale." The jerboa on my shoulder chirped in agreement.

"It probably wasn't the space whale," the doctor said, fortunately agreeing with me. "Mr. Mot probably caught the virus earlier, elsewhere. So far, it's known that the virus can be caught by getting bitten by Rillan snakes, drinking swamp water from Omicron Tau Six, and consuming Paranian carbide. As far as anyone knows, it is not contagious."

After a bit of silence, digesting this fact, Vyne said, "During our first meeting on Kraken, Mr. Mot was the only one of us who ate some Paranian carbide."

"Yes, that's right," said George. "I remember that too. It was that weird rocket fuel food thing. Nigel collapsed after eating it, but he seemed fine afterward when he got treated by some of the emergency personnel. No one except me thought anything about it since they figured that it was just a bit of bad luck. No one listened to me that it could be a conspiracy!"

"I could still be bad luck," said Vik. "But at any rate, I'm glad it's not contagious. And that the rest of us didn't eat that stuff. Could you imagine the entire crew coming down with the Random Incoherency Virus? We'd be doing, I don't know, interpretive dancing rather than making the documentary we are supposed to be doing. And we'd all be fired."

"Oh come, now, you don't know that," said Annette. "All the same, I suppose this is a wake up call that all of us will have to be vigilant in our own health. If you feel anything different, come down to the sick bay at once. And Doctor Holst, please notify me immediately if you see a change in Nigel's behavior."

"I will, Ms. Bakkar."

The comm in the sick bay waiting room beeped. The jerboa perked up, sensing something.

The doctor frowned. "Yes?"

"Doctor Holst," came the captain's voice over the intercom. "Is Ms. Bakkar there?"

"Yes, Captain," Annette spoke up. "What can I do for you?"

"We have a highly unusual situation here," said the captain. "Normally I would ask Mr. Mot, but since he is out of commission, I will have to ask you. A shuttle from New Haven has arrived to meet us while we head to the planet. It has hailed the ship and there is someone named Rosalind Hect who claims to be from the GBC. She wants to meet with Mr. Mot."

"Rosalind Hect!" Annette exclaimed. "She's Nigel's assistant back at the GBC headquarters and the Program Director for his department. Why is she all the way here?"

"I do not know," said the captain. "She is requesting to come onto the ship along with another guest of hers. What do you wish for me to do?"

"Let her on, of course!" the director said. "She will have to be briefed about Nigel's condition. And she may have some idea about what to do for the next episode if Doctor Holst's therapy does not work. But I don't want to take her directly to the sick bay. I want to have an opportunity to stall her a bit, if possible."

"Very well, Ms. Bakkar," the captain replied. "I will have her quarantined aboard. I'll have one of the

ensigns escort her to the conference room on deck five.”

“If find it extremely suspicious that the program director is visiting us now,” said George.

Annette had gone ahead to meet Rosalind Hect at the transport room and to escort her to the conference room on deck five. Annette had opted to have a private meeting with Hect to tell her about our current progress and Mot's condition. “It's not that I don't trust you guys,” she had told us, “but some of you are a little too blunt in your opinions. We need to break Ms. Hect in gently.”

“What do you mean break her in gently?” Vik had demanded as we had been standing just outside of the sick bay. “She's the program director. She's seen all of the footage. She knows how we're like.”

“She hasn't seen the latest footage.”

And that was that. Annette had gone on to the transport room while telling us to chill out while we waited until we were summoned like good little school children. I personally didn't like it one bit. If Mot was ill, sure, Rosalind Hect should know about it. It wasn't like Mot was in some kind of critical condition. We just needed some extra time. Besides, it was a wonder that none of us had gotten seriously ill before with all of the planet hopping that we've been doing. Who knows what sort of weird and exotic microbes we had picked up in all of the various locations in the previous filmed episodes.

But it was not our health under discussion. It was Mot's.

We were currently in one of the other conference rooms on the same deck, waiting until Annette was finished with her conference with Rosalind Hect. But even after that, we would still have a few hours before we arrived in orbit around New Haven. So in the meantime, we were, well, killing time. George was seated at one end of the conference table attempting to configure one of his recorders with a new program that he had downloaded the last time he was connected to the galactic net. Vik was seated across from George with his head tilted back and his eyes closed, probably sleeping. Or maybe listening to something. He had noise-reduction audiophones plugged into his ears.

And I, well, was watching a game of 3D chess between the jerboa and the cyborg. I wasn't quite sure how that came about. The chessboard was stashed in one of the storage cabinets in the room and the jerboa had unerringly gone to it, insisting that I take it out. But once everything had been set up on the table, George had said something about it being an exercise in boredom since everyone knew who was going to win in a match-up between me and the gerbil. But the jerboa had already made the opening move. And since I had been dawdling about what to do, Vyne had merely shooed me into the next seat and moved the pawn.

“I thought you didn't want to lose to a gerbil,” I said as he stared at the board, contemplating the jerboa's latest move. The rodent was chirping smugly as if it had just figured out a strategy to crush the cyborg. In one paw, it held a half-eaten vegetable snack as a taunt. For some reason, I felt a little sorry for the cyborg. His enhancements with nanobots was not going to do him any good.

“Since I figured that I wasn't going to get to take you out to dinner, I might as well go the whole way and lose to a rodent as well,” he said. His expression and tone didn't change when he said that which made me unsure of whether he was joking with a deadpan voice or if he was really serious.

“Why are you still hung up on that?”

He shrugged. “Who says that I am?” He moved one of the chess pieces and then he grinned.

“And what if I say I was?”

I grabbed one of the chess pieces that the gerbil had checkmated already and threw it at his head. “You idiot! If you try to falsely play on my sympathies, I'm going to strangle you.” It bounced and smacked Vik in the forehead before landing on the floor. The head holographic projectionist snorted in his sleep, squirmed a little in his chair, and then yawned as he blinked his eyes.

“What was that?” Vik asked after another yawn.

“A lover's spat,” George said, without looking up from his program.

The cyborg shook his head. “No, it's Euphie's version of foreplay.”

I threw another chess piece. It bounced harmlessly off the cyborg and hit Vik again.

“Ow!”

“If I had that revolver, I'd shoot you dead, bolt-bucket.”

Vyne didn't even look up from his concentration on the chessboard. “Euphie, you wouldn't know how to handle a revolver even if you had practiced.”

“Oh yeah? You might want to ask Annette about my skills.”

Vik looked from me to Vyne and back again. “You two need to get laid.”

I glared at the head holographic projectionist. “And you need to shut up.”

“Man, see? My assistants never have any respect for me. I'm going back to sleep.” Vik leaned

back in his chair, closed his eyes and let out a snore.

I turned back to Vyne with a raised fist. The cyborg grabbed my wrist before I could slam my hand into his face. “You’re going to hurt yourself, Euphie.”

“Thanks for the memo.” I shook my hand out of his grasp. “Maybe I’ll go slit my wrists now.”

“That sounds more like George’s m.o.”

Finally George looked up, with a narrowed gaze. “I am not suicidal. Pessimistic and paranoid, yes. But not suicidal.”

“You could have fooled us,” said the cyborg. Then he said, “I thought you had taken some of the drink samples from Ecstasy Seven and sent them to the medical bay to have it analyzed. Did you get any results?”

Temporarily thrown by the change in topic, it took me a moment to gather my thoughts. Then I triggered my fingers to bring up the results in question on my eye screen. “Yeah, I did. I didn’t get anything that I wasn’t expecting.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” George put down his data pad and looked at me with a frown.

“Well, the analysis said that there was alcohol in the drink, about forty percent. And then there was some flavoring. And then there was a stimulant in it that goes by the name of The Vision. It’s supposed to be a mild hallucinogen as well. According to the database, the stimulant is used mostly by artists and writers in the Gamma Sector of the Beta Quadrant to help stimulate their talents. The stimulant in itself or even in combination with alcohol wouldn’t affect the human body in any way other than loosening some inhibitions and activating the creative modules in the brain.”

The sensory technician shook his head. “That sounds really boring, especially for Ecstasy Seven. But I hear you hesitating.”

“There’s a compounding effect if it is taken with another drug that is only known by its code number four-two-four-two. The side effects include more severe hallucinations and physical collapse. Unfortunately, the second drug is extremely difficult to detect using current methods.”

“Is that what you think what happened when you fainted back on Ecstasy Seven?” said the cyborg as he moved another chess piece on the board. The move made the jerboa extremely excited. After a few moments of scurrying back and forth, the rodent moved one of its pieces and declared another checkmate. Vyne did not look fazed, but he did say, “How the hell did that happen? I thought that was a fool-proof move.”

“I warned you that the jerboa is a genius,” I said.

“So you did.” He paused and then said, “Let’s make a bet. If I win, I won’t take you to dinner.”

I opened my mouth. Then closed it again. The jerboa was looking at me. The rodent put a paw to its mouth. Was it laughing? “That’s a stupid bet. You are not taking me to dinner whether you win or lose.”

“Well, I tried.”

I sighed and tried to close my eyes. I tried to ignore everyone in the room by triggering my fingers to look at my message queue. There were some messages from my parents. Particularly my mother. With slight hesitation, I opened it. In the missive, my mother was complaining that my message must have been intercepted by a malicious hacker because the message she received was that I had no boyfriend. But before I could trigger another message to her to let her know that my previous message was correct and that it had not been intercepted by a hacker, the doors to the conference room hissed open.

Two women entered the room. One was Annette. The other I assumed to be Rosalind Hect. The programming director and assistant to Mot was a tall and rather muscular woman dressed in a power business suit that was an eye-straining red. She was also wearing synth-leather boots that were dyed a matching red. She had a rather square face, but it wasn’t unattractive. Rather, it was striking. She was wearing a fair amount of makeup—not surprising considering her position—with a bright aquamarine eyeshadow emphasizing her blue eyes. Her hair was as black as space and her hair was arranged in a towering do that probably added at least a foot to her height. Her perfume smelled of raspberries.

There were brief introductions around the table before Hect took the seat at the head of the table where Mot usually sat. Vyne was about to put the chessboard away, but the programming director waved a hand, indicating that it did not bother her. The jerboa momentarily stared at Hect with an unusual expression, even for a gerbil, and then scampered back into my pocket even with the game only half finished. Apparently the rodent did not like Mot’s assistant even though it did not appear that she even noticed it.

“Here’s the deal,” Hect said as she brought the flat of her hand down on the table. The slap made

everyone jerk in their chairs, including Vik who was already falling asleep again. “We're going to go ahead on the filming of the final episode. We'll bring out Mr. Mot even if we have to sedate him.” Her voice was deep and no nonsense. I decided that she would have been quite frightening, if she had decided to teach small children.

“But wouldn't the audience notice that Nigel isn't his normal self if we do that?” said George. “People tend to notice if someone in the group appears brain dead.”

“No they won't,” Hect disagreed. “Audiences don't notice anything unless you set something on fire or blow something up. Even if Mr. Mot is incapacitated, they'll just think that he's putting on an act in a desperate bid for higher ratings. And that in itself will guarantee higher ratings. People like humiliation.”

Man, and I thought I was a critical one. With just a few words, the programming director made mincemeat of everything.

“I have told Ms. Bakkar that I have had everything arranged on New Haven for the last episode.”

The rest of us looked at each other and then to Annette. Annette just shrugged. “Oh sure, there was the schedule that Nigel and I hammered out before we got here, but Ms. Hect has convinced me that her modified schedule may be better, especially if we have no idea when Nigel will be getting better.”

Vik just shrugged. “So what are we doing now?”

“We will be going into orbit around New Haven in a couple of hours, according to your captain,” said Hect. “And we will be quanting onto the surface shortly after that. We will have to bring Mr. Mot with us. We will have to arrange with the good doctor to keep Mr. Mot sedated. We will then meet with one of the minders that I have had contact with. His name is Mr. Pocky Red. He is a native to New Haven and has worked in the confectionery industry for twenty-five standard years. He knows everything about everything on the planet and can talk on length about a variety of topics. From my contact with Mr. Red, we have arranged accommodations for everyone on planet. We are fortunate that Mr. Red has many influential connections on the planet because we have been invited to stay at the Garden Palace in the capital city. It is within walking distance to many confectionery shops in the city.”

“That sounds quite good, actually,” said Vik.

“Or original plan, as I recall, was that we meet the minder, find accommodations, and then visit the cheesecake factory where we will see whale cheese incorporated into the most expensive cake currently known to man,” said the cyborg. “Will we still be doing that scene?”

“You will have to get back to me on that,” said Hect. “We will have to figure out various logistics on whether or not that will be possible considering Mr. Mot's condition. Meanwhile, I have a list of possible locations to film that will not require Mr. Mot's presence. I am sending them to you now,” she said, triggering her own fingers.

I watched as the message scroll down my eye screen. There were a list of locations, but at that moment, these locations meant nothing to me since I had never been to New Haven and frankly, had not done much research on the planet itself. And honestly, I hadn't done much research on any of the locations that I had visited before, only relying on gut feeling and improvisation to film everything. It was a skill that I had honed during my time working for reality shows. I saw no reason to change my research habits now. Not even for some programming director who was taking over the whole thing as if she had owned the entire production from the very beginning.

“How does the change in schedule look to you?”

Change? It was more like a complete rewrite. Although I had no opinion on any of the locations that were listed, one thing that I did notice was that none of the locations were the ones that Mot and Annette had originally planned on. The others seemed to echo my opinion, because the corner of Vik's eye started twitching, and it was not because he was reading his own eye screen.

“I have no idea,” George said bluntly. “I've never heard of any of these places. I will have to check up on them. And then recalibrate my instruments all over again. I don't know if you've worked with sensory technicians before, Ms. Hect, but I like to be meticulous in my work. I need to do research in all of these locations so I know ahead of time what settings to use on my equipment. Recording is not the same in all locations.”

“I understand.” But Hect waved a hand dismissively. “But you will have to work on your recalibrations more quickly. We will soon be on New Haven and we will have to begin filming immediately if we're to send the footage on time to the editors for the airing date of the next episode.”

There was a signaling beep in the conference room. “Yes?” Annette called out.

It was Captain Avery again. “Mr. Kameel has requested transfer of a particular comestible aboard The Bacchus. I wanted to run this through you first. I thought that you would be doing all of your filming

on planet.”

“Kameel?” said Vik as he sat up. “I thought he was still back on that planet a ways back visiting his friend...”

“I’ve been told that Mr. Kameel is Mr. Mot’s friend,” said Hect. “He happened to be traveling to New Haven on vacation and we bumped into each other. Since I am Mr. Mot’s assistant, he graciously offered his help on the final episode. I decided that it would be beneficial to have another helper on board, especially since he’s volunteering rather than getting paid.”

“Actually, Kameel struck me more as a professional moocher rather than a volunteer,” I said.

Hect ignored me as she tilted her head up to the ceiling and said, “Captain Avery, please allow Mr. Kameel aboard with his package. It is for our filming preparations.”

“Very well, Ms. Hect.”

It wasn’t long before Kameel made his appearance in the conference room with an extremely large black box in his arms, similar to the box that George had bought at the way station that had the whale pheromones and extra memory modules. He greeted everyone with a, “Well, what do you know? Here we meet again!” Although no one actually got up to actually hug him or greet him back. I suppose it was because the rest of us didn’t really know what to make of Mot’s friend. Perhaps everyone else secretly agreed with my assessment that Kameel was really just a mooch.

But the black box that he carried wasn’t full of backups. Instead, it contained a very large cake frosted in what looked like pink buttercream. It was decorated rather elaborately, too, with lacework flourishes that made one think of trellises and puffy dresses. Hect claimed that the cake came from one of the bakeries from her changed list and that this was supposed to be a preview of all of the desserts that we would be filming once we got on planet. She went ahead and cut into the cake and served the filming crew herself, claiming that the cake was simply divine.

The jerboa poked its head once to sniff at the slice of cake that had been allocated to me, but it made no move to eat it as it had done with any other previous food that we had come across on our travels. Instead, the small rodent hid back in my pocket. No one else at the table seemed to have any qualms about eating the confection, so I tried it myself. It was sweet, extremely so, but there was just something about it that made me finish the cake.

The cyborg asked Hect about the composition of the cake. She had merely shrugged and said, “All that the New Capital Bakery told me was that this is one of its finest creations which it makes for various celebratory occasions on New Haven, or elsewhere if you tell them ahead of time. I couldn’t tell you the ingredients, but I do know that it has been sweetened by the honey made from specially modified New Haven bees fed from the wildflowers in the New Haven countryside on the Isle of North Bering.”

For a brief moment there, I thought the cyborg’s eyes glowed red, but then they turned back to their normal color again and I thought that maybe I was imagining it. Vyne shook his head slowly as if he was trying to get the taste of the cake out of his mouth. Perhaps the sweetness was too much for him, because unlike the rest of the crew, he only ate half of the cake.

There’s something in this cake, the message came on my eye screen. I’m not quite sure what it is or exactly what it will do. Something is happening to my nanobots.

With a bit of alarm, I hid my hand on my thigh, underneath the table and triggered back, *What is it? Is it some sort of drug? I don’t feel particularly different.*

It may be because your body hasn’t yet started processing what’s in the cake yet, he replied. My nanobots, however, run on a fast metabolism. And any drug that they cannot detoxify usually affects them first.

Hect chatted a little more about her plans on what we should do on New Haven before taking her leave to “get back to some GBC bureaucracy” as she put it. Kameel also left a little bit after Hect, citing that he had some other appointments that he had to make and then we were alone again in the conference room. Annette gave an audible sigh and reached over to slice herself another piece of the cake.

“She steamrolled you, didn’t she?” said Vik.

“Yeah.” The director took another bite of the cake and chewed carefully. “I was all set to tell her about how we would film the original schedule as planned and how we would do the work around Nigel if we needed to, but she said that she knew Nigel very well and had an alternate plan that he would approve of. I have no idea how I got from what I wanted to do to what she wanted to do. I don’t really care what she thinks she knows, but I know that Nigel would be really skeptical about this change in plans. He likes to be in charge.”

“I have to agree with you there, Annette,” said George. “I mean, after all, we’ve probably spent

the most time with Nigel than any other person in the past couple of months. We should know what Nigel is about. Or at least expect what he might do. Not that he's all that predictable in the first place."

I thought about the incident with the space whale that precipitated all of this. Yep, Mot was pretty reckless when it came down to it. But at least we knew about his recklessness. Not some glorified secretary who only saw Mot under the constraints of the GBC offices. Even if she had watched any of the previous episodes, she would have an inkling that Mot wouldn't like this sudden change in plans. Or at least I didn't think he would. I reached out to get another piece of the cake, but suddenly, the jerboa jumped out, chattering at me.

I stared at the rodent for one moment and then withdrew my arm. Satisfied with my change in behavior, the jerboa went back into my pocket to munch on one of his ubiquitous vegetable snacks. "Is that your way of telling me that I shouldn't eat too much or I'll get fat?" I said to the jerboa.

The rodent didn't deign to answer me.

Vyne, however, wasn't so closemouthed. "Killer is right. You probably don't need another piece of cake."

"Are you saying that I'm fat?"

"Uh oh," murmured Vik, even as he was forking another bite of cake into his mouth.

Annette waved her fork around, "Vyne, you should know that you should never hint about a woman's weight. You're going to be in big trouble to insinuate something like that."

Vyne's quick reflexes had him grabbing my wrist before I could jam my fork into his nanobot-enhanced eyes. "I'm beginning to learn that."

"You are so going to die," I said. "And it's not just about that remark either. It's everything. That was just one straw too many."

The cyborg seemed amused by my threats. "Oh yeah? Well, if you want to challenge me to a death match, then we'd better get ourselves to the sparring mat in the exercise room right away." He tugged on my wrist and managed to yank me out of my chair.

"What? Let go of me! I never agreed to some death match! You'll completely pulverize me!" I tugged on my hand, but to no avail. I was being dragged inexorably out of the conference room. "You guys, you're witnesses. Tell bucket head here that I said no such thing!"

"A death match sounds interesting," said George as he swallowed some cake. "And I would be at the front seat to see one if I didn't want to finish this cake first. But kid, I'm afraid it's going to be quite one-sided considering what sort of opponent you've chosen."

"That's the whole point, George! You guys have got to save me from this hare-brained scheme!"

"Maybe," suggested Vik, "You could prevent yourself from getting clobbered if you agree to have dinner with him."

"I'm going to remember that," I said as I pointed a finger at the head holographic projectionist with my free hand. "You are totally going to regret it!" The cyborg pulled me over the threshold and the doors to the conference room hissed shut in my face before I could say anything else.

Out in the ship's corridor, it was empty. Vyne pulled me around a corner and then backed me against a wall. "Before we get into that death match, there's one thing I'd like to..."

"Exactly," I said, interrupting him as I was afraid of what he was going to say, "you've read my mind. We should have one more slice of that cake before we beat each other to a pulp. You have to hand it to Hect, she did pick a really good bakery."

"That's not what I'm trying to say and you know it," said the cyborg. "And we're not really going to be having a death match, are we?"

I slumped back against the wall. "I suppose not. That would be stupid. But I wasn't kidding about the cake."

"And I wasn't kidding when you shouldn't be eating more of it. The nanobots in my system are still trying to analyze the unknown substance in the dessert, but I suspect that it may be some sort of drug that is a bit addictive."

"If that's what you suspect, then shouldn't we be warning the rest of the crew?"

"They'll eat the cake and maybe fight over the last piece, but I am fairly certain that after they sleep it off, they will be fine. I'm not sure it would be fair to them if you were left with the cake, though."

"Oh right, like that's a convincing line of reasoning."

Vyne shook his head and then let go of me. "Come on, I've managed to snag a bit of the cake for analysis. I was planning on going to sick bay to have Doctor Holst analyze it for me. And, of course, to check up on Mr. Mot. I have a feeling that the host of *Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant* will pull out

of it yet.”

Death Match

“So what was the verdict on the death match?” Vik asked me as we were walking down the corridor to the lift. We were heading to the transport room to quant down to the surface of New Haven. We were both each carrying two bags, one with our equipment, the other with our traveling clothes. “I see you aren’t bruised and bleeding. Did you win? Or did you decide to change the venue of the death match to somewhere more comfortable, like a bed?”

I gave a disgusted sign as Vik waggled his eyebrows. “You know, with all that talk about getting laid, maybe you should take your own advice. I’m sure there are plenty of single women down in New Haven who would be happy to get together with some weirdo off-worlder like you.”

“Aw, Euphie, I was just playing with you. Besides, you should cut Vyne some slack. He really is hung up on you.”

The previous evening, after we had gone back to sick bay to hand over the cake sample for Doctor Holst for analysis and to check up on Mot—who was fortunately sleeping at the time instead of spouting off inanities—the cyborg had insisted on walking me back to my quarters. And then kissing me senseless before departing for his own quarters. I had the uneasy feeling that that was as far as he would go, unless I took the next step. I hated next steps. Because despite my big talk and violent tendencies, I was a total coward.

“We really should be concentrating on the next episode,” I said as we stepped out of the lift and went down the corridor to the large double doors that slid open to reveal the transport room. “It’s the finale for the viewing season and the higher ups all want big ratings.”

“Big ratings are all in the crazy things that we film,” said Vik. “And we can’t control for that.” He waved at the people already in the transport room. “Hey Nigel! Don’t look so bummed. We’re almost at the end!”

Mot groaned. Earlier that morning, the brief fever that he had developed in the middle of the night had finally broke and his illness rapidly became cleared. But that didn’t mean that he was already at a hundred percent. His body, according to Doctor Holst, was still trying to get back to normal. Mot shook his head as if he was trying to get water out of his ears. “I feel like I’ve got the galaxy’s biggest hangover. We need to find a makeup person to make me look semi-normal, stat.”

“Make-up person?” said George. “We never had a make-up person in the previous episodes so why would you want one now?”

“Because I look shitty.”

George rolled his eyes. “Yeah right. You look better than me on my best days. I mean, what about that episode on toga planet? I had to look like some hideous monster from Omicron Delta Gangin. You have no cause to complain.”

After that byplay, we all quanted to the surface of New Haven where Kameel greeted us since he had arrived on planet ahead of time. Rosalind Hect, however, was not present. Kameel explained that she had been called away on some sort of long transmission meeting with the GBC headquarters. Most of the crew shrugged it off although Mot was slightly disappointed because he wanted to talk to her immediately about the change in filming plans.

“You look like shit,” I heard Kameel tell Mot as we headed out of the main transport room to the rest of the terra port in the capital city of New Haven. “Did you not take your meds or something?”

“No, I took my meds,” Mot growled to his friend. “I took plenty of them. That’s why I look like this. Is there a make-up person around?”

“You could go to a beauty parlour,” Kameel suggested. “I saw one just around the corner at the hotel where the crew is supposed to be staying. Ms. Hect says that you don’t have to start filming until tomorrow, so I think you’ll have plenty of time to get there.”

“Great.”

Kameel rubbed his hands at Mot’s acquiescence. “Excellent. Then all we need is one of the holographic projectionists to tag along too because what more could your viewing audience want than a real time transformation of their host of *Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant* from monster to beauty.”

“Oh hell no,” said Mot. “This is no reality show.”

“But Mr. Kameel is right, the audience would love it,” Annette interjected. “Come on, Nigel, I’m

sure plenty of people watching the show will want to know what you're up to."

"But I don't have any fans. Hell, the gerbil has more fans than I do."

"Don't blame a rodent for your unpopularity," I said. The jerboa in my pocket chirped in agreement.

Despite Mot's protestations, the entire crew ended up following him to the beauty salon located across the street from the Garden Palace, the hotel that Ms. Hect had arranged for us to live in during our stay on New Haven, after we had made sure that all of our equipment had been transported properly. Even on the short walk to the salon, one could see several confectionary shops along the row with familiar names. Pulling up the list on my eye screen, I saw that many of them were on the list that Hect had prepared for us.

The salon was located in a modern gray metal building built in the latest New Haven neoclassical style. It blended in seamlessly with the other shops with only a sign on the front being the only indication that it was a salon of any sort. The New Haven Hive was staffed with tall, attractive employees dressed in a fashionable uniform wrap of bronze brown and sporting hairstyles that advertised the salon's services.

As the head holographic projectionist, Vik was in charge of filming Mot being greeted by the head of the salon who introduced himself as Heinrick who immediately suggested a pedicure and a facial by the latest beauty technology known to man.

"I hope this doesn't involve peeling the skin from my face," Mot remarked.

"Of course not!" exclaimed Heinrick. "We're far more civilized than some ancient Terran backwater. Come, follow me. I'll show you our room with our latest facial technology."

As Mot, Vik, and Kameel—who was spouting reassuring platitudes to soothe the doubtful Mot—followed Heinrick to the back of the salon, the rest of the crew stayed near the front of the establishment looking for other background filler. Annette and Vyne were talking to some of the other employees in the salon who weren't currently working with other customers to get a feel for what sort of services the salon ran. I was busy filming some of the action going on at the front of the salon—one was of a hair stylist doing laser treatments on one woman's hair. Another was of a stylist shaping one man's beard into the latest fashion. The customers were seated at the front of the shop so that I had a view of the front window and the street in front. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two young women in halter tops and leather skirts searching the ground in front of them with some sort of long device. It was odd, but I did not pay much attention to it.

And George, well, I assumed George was attempting to record some of the ambient sensory input at the salon. It was only when he gave a surprised yelp that I triggered my fingers to activate the automatic recording on my equipment and turned to see what was the matter. George had one of his recorders out—the olfactory one, I noticed—and was rummaging through one of drawers where the salon kept their potions, lotions, and shampoos. George pulled out a scrap of blue silk that looked suspiciously like a lady's undergarments.

"Woah, George," said Annette as she came by to see what was the matter. "Did you just raid a panty store?"

"I did not such thing!" the rotund sensory technician exclaimed. "And before anyone says anything, I am not a pervert!" he said, looking pointedly at me.

"What? I didn't say anything," I replied. "I just heard you screaming like a girl so I assumed you got a finger sliced off by one of those laser hair removal tools."

The door to the salon slid open, admitting the two women I had seen earlier just outside the establishment. They looked around and briefly spoke with the receptionist at the front of the store.

"I do not scream like a girl," George argued. "Besides, I accidentally found that in there. I didn't do anything other than that."

"Maybe someone had a little fun after hours," suggested Vyne. "Salon people seem like the type to do so."

"Whatever the case," said Annette, "I suggest you just leave it there. We should get back to work."

"And pretend it was never there?" said George. "I was told that the lotions they will be using on Nigel were contained in this drawer."

Exasperated, the director said, "Then find the lotion and ignore whatever else you might find in there."

"Ah, there it is!" It was one of the women who had just entered. She and her companion strode past us and straight to George. She snatched the blue silk panty from his fingers and stuffed it into a gray

bag that was dangling from one arm. “One down, seventy-six more to go!”

“To go?” Now poor George looked extremely confused.

“It looks like the next one is south from here,” said the other woman who was scrutinizing a data pad in her hand. Then she looked up at George and informed him, “We’re doing a panty geocaching contest. The team that finds the most panties stashed around the city will win six billion credits.”

George’s jaw dropped.

“Six billion credits is quite a bit of money,” remarked the cyborg. “I don’t really need the money, but maybe I should enter this contest just for kicks.”

“That is seriously creepy,” I said.

“Why? Is it because you donated some underwear for the event?”

“The next time I get my hand on the pistol George gave me, you are going to be so dead.”

“No I’m not.”

“Ah, I’ve pinned it down,” the woman with the data pad said. “We need to go three hundred meters south from here. We better get going if we want to find all of these before the end of the day.”

“Great. Let’s go,” said her companion with the bag. And they both retraced their steps and headed back out of the salon.

George managed to close his mouth and blubber, “Did you see that?”

“Yeah,” said Annette. “And now they’re gone. I think it’s back to work.” There was a yell that came from the back of the salon. It sounded suspiciously like Mot. “We better get back there. It sounds like something exciting is happening.”

“Vik’s already getting it,” said George. “I think I’m going to find out more about this contest. Hey, wait for me!” And the rotund sensory technician waddled out the door, leaving the drawer with the lotions and shampoo open.

I adjusted the recorder on my shoulder. “And George said that he wasn’t a pervert.”

* * *

“They said that they wouldn’t rip off the skin on my face, but it feels like they ripped off the skin on my face,” Mot declared when we finally exited the salon, minus George who had run off to find the team doing the panty geocaching event. Annette had threatened to tell Mot about George’s abrupt departure, but Mot seemed so out of sorts after his beautifying treatment from the salon that it seemed to be pointless to tell him about something that would be resolved by the next day—if what the women said about the contest ending in a day was true.

Besides, Mot didn’t even notice George’s absence. Or anyone else, really. He kept touching his face gingerly as if he expected it to fall off at any moment and moaning about the treatment. He said nothing about his hair, which the stylists had shaped into a towering mass that looked like he had an ancient ziggurat stapled to his scalp. And with Mot’s moaning, Kameel shrugging and shaking his head about how he didn’t notice the salon advertising such services and Ms. Hect not being present at all, Annette made an executive decision for everyone to go back to the Garden Palace to retire until the next day. Which was fine by me. While it was possible for the film crew to function without George, it was not an ideal situation.

The rooms that Hect had reserved for the film crew were all located on the top floor of the Garden Palace that contained rooms of any sort. On the floor above ours was the actual roof garden that gave the Garden Palace its name. Once I checked back into my room—a large suite that I actually had all to myself—and the jerboa jumped out of my pocket to rummage around in my belongings for yet another packet of vegetable snacks to munch on for its tenth or twelfth meal of the day, I unloaded all of my recording equipment and headed back out, intent on exploring this garden that supposedly made the hotel famous throughout New Haven.

Instead of taking the lift, I found the back stair and climbed up to the roof which was glassed in like a greenhouse. The noonday sun was right overhead, making the garden feel hot and steamy like a tropical jungle even though the capital city of New Haven was located at a higher latitude. A fair number of native plants grew on the roof, planted in beds of dark hummus and soil. They were tall leafy trees which shadowed over a small pathway created out of cemented pebbles which made one’s footsteps sound like scratches on sand. I felt my stomach cramp slightly. I should probably be eating lunch about now, but I convinced myself that I could order a room service dinner and make up for my hunger later.

I walked out on the pathway and slowly took in the strange greenery.

The pathway wound around some of the native trees until it ended in a small roundabout surrounding a small pond filled with stepping stones in the center of the roof. On the sides of the roundabout were several benches. And on one of the benches sat the cyborg. Standing at the intersection where the path branched into the roundabout, I watched Vyne sitting there with his gaze steady on the still pond. While he was not looking at me, he was probably aware that I was there. My footsteps were probably loud enough for a deaf man to hear me from a hundred meters away.

“Why am I not surprised to find you here?”

Vyne finally turned his head to look at me. His expression was unreadable. “I noticed that you were heading up here. I figured you would reach this place in the gardens eventually.”

“Sure, that’s a reasonable deduction. If you’ve planted a tracking device on me.”

“There was no need to plant a tracking device on you. Especially since you own an eye screen. All I have to do is to monitor the signals from it and see where you are.”

“That’s seriously creepy.” And it was. But I wasn’t particularly surprised by this fact or even disturbed. The cyborg probably did it to everyone on the documentary team. I wasn’t particularly special in that respect. “Is that what they taught you in cyborg school? To hack people’s feeds and find out where they are?”

“Among other things.” His hand made a slight gesture. “This seat’s open.”

The reasonable part of me said that it was a bad idea. But I found my feet moving and soon, I was standing next to the bench and sitting next to him. We were close enough that I could simply reach out and touch him. But I didn’t. I looked out at the still pond in the middle of the garden and wondered what he saw there. Or if he was just looking at it because it was there and was thinking about other things.

Searching my mind for something to say, I finally remarked, “The list of locations that Rosalind Hect wants to be filmed for the final episode does not match with any of the locations that Nigel and Annette had planned on earlier. While all of the dessert dishes could very well be found at the alternate locations, it just seems rather strange somehow.”

“It’s because Ms. Hect is Mr. Mot’s assistant even though she is the program director at the GBC,” said Vyne. “Technically, Ms. Hect cannot usurp Mr. Mot’s plans since he is the CEO and she is not. But she must have given some sort of reason to the boss because ever since he came out of the fever and looked over the alternate plans, he has done nothing to change it.”

“He may still be a little out of it from his illness,” I said. “Perhaps he doesn’t think that it’s worth the effort to argue with Rosalind Hect.”

“Perhaps so. But it is probably not a good idea to have this precedent set. If you have underlings, you shouldn’t give them the impression that they have any power over you. Especially if the ratings for this latest episode is sufficient to justify the GBC to commission another series.”

“I suppose that’s true. I’ve never been in a position where I had to give orders to underlings, so I wouldn’t know. I’m usually the one who’s the underling.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. Maybe you’ll be promoted after the run of this series. If you’ve been in any of the discussion chats that the fans of the series have over the galactic network, you’ll see that the scenes they talk about the most are the ones that you’ve filmed. I’m sure the higher ups in the Galactic Broadcasting Corporation will notice that and reward you appropriately.”

“Or fire me to preemptively prevent me from asking for a raise.”

“You’re such a pessimist.”

“I have to be if I ever want to be pleasantly surprised.”

“Hm.”

I continued to look out at the pond. It was completely still, like the stepping stones that had been placed in it. I wondered what would happen if I picked up a pebble and threw it into the pond. There would be ripples, surely. And then those ripples would hit the stepping stones and disappear. And soon, the pond would be still again. Unless there was something lurking beneath the waters.

Slowly, I became aware that someone was looking at me. It was the cyborg, of course. And I had the impression that he was trying to memorize me. As if in response to my silent wondering, he said, “If this is truly the final episode and the GBC doesn’t commission another similar series with Nigel Mot to host, you will probably leave for another job.”

“Probably.” I turned and put my hands flat on the bench. My fingertips were only a few centimeters away from him. “As a researcher, I’m sure you’ll have no problem finding a job wherever you wish to go. Or if you so wish, go back to the black ops or whatever it was that you had done in the imperial military.”

“The things I’ve done in the imperial military got old after awhile.” He didn’t move when he said, “I’m quite single minded when I find something that I want.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“You didn’t say that you were going to kill me.”

“I don’t carry weapons with me every time I go out.”

“Where’s Killer?”

“Back in my room, probably stuffing his cheeks with food. Ninety percent of the time, the jerboa thinks about food. And rest of the time, I think it just wants to show off how smart it is.” And then I got up my courage and finally said what I had been wondering for a while. “Why me?”

“A lot of things in the universe run on logic and rational laws. And some things, I’ve found, also don’t. You’re one of those things.”

“Are you calling me irrational?”

“If I am, are you going to kill me?”

“That’s a rhetorical question, isn’t it?” I leaned closer, his faint, irresistible scent teasing my nose. I put my mouth on his. For a moment, he allowed me to take the lead. And then I felt him tense and snap. He took control as if he couldn’t help himself and hauled me into his lap.

After a moment, I finally tore my mouth away from him. He pulled me closer and strung kisses along my throat. I tugged at his hair, but he didn’t let up. Maybe cyborgs couldn’t feel pain. “Someone’s going to see.”

“No.” His hand somehow found its way underneath my shirt. Rough fingers stroked my skin.

“What do you mean, no? This garden is a public place. Anyone wandering up here will soon stumble on this spot.”

“If they do, does it matter? Why should you care? It will be obvious that we’re a little busy. And they’ll leave if they don’t want me to kill them.”

“I care because I have a reputation as a hardass to maintain.”

“I don’t know about that. I’m pretty sure everyone wouldn’t be very surprised even if they found us like this.”

“Even so, I’m not the sort of person to do this in public. I wasn’t raised on Rilla, you know.”

He finally raised his head to look at me. “I wasn’t raised on Rilla either. But if it calms your mind, I had made arrangements with the managers to make sure that we wouldn’t be disturbed.”

“You jerk! You knew this would happen.”

His expression was unashamed. “Yes. I think I know you well enough to predict how you would react. Now give me a kiss.”

“So you think I’m predictable now?”

“Euphie. What do you think you’re doing?”

I had wiggled out of his grasp and kneeled on the ground between his legs. I reached up to undo the clasp on his pants. I gave him an evil grin. “I’m going to give you a kiss you’re not going to forget.”

* * *

The headquarters for the National New Haven Confectionary Factory was located on the main street in the capital city. Earlier that morning, the documentary crew had visited the headquarters where Mot interviewed the owner of the factory about the different products that they produced. Most of the desserts made by the factory were sold to the natives on New Haven, but there were a few popular products that were also shipped off world.

The headquarters itself looked like any other office building with most of the white-collared personnel worked. The president of the company gave Mot the tour—with the rest of us crew following behind—around the building. Dutifully, I filmed everything although I was quite sure that none of this would make the editorial cut.

Kameel was tagging along, making humorous side remarks which made Mot laugh and the president of the National New Haven Confectionary make strange faces as if Mot’s friends was being rude, but at least he didn’t kick him out. Or the rest of us, come to think of it. Perhaps the president of the company thought that the publicity that Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant would bring to his business was worth the strange comments.

As for Rosalind Hect, according to Mot, she had met with him the previous night to convince him further about the soundness of her alternate filming plan before she had disappeared elsewhere to “run

errands for the GBC.” This morning, she had sent a message to the crew regretting that she could not be with us during our filming of the headquarters, but that she would meet us at the confectionary’s factory right before lunch to give us the latest updates on where we would be filming later in the afternoon.

I’m glad that he didn’t actually give us a tour of the accounting department, Vyne later sent to me on a private transmission on my eye screen. Otherwise, I think I would have started cracking heads, just to get some excitement.

I think that’s probably what the entire crew was thinking, I replied.

I thought about the revolver in my jacket pocket. If I wanted to take it out and use it, I would have to somehow pull the jerboa off it first. The rodent had an unholy love for the weapon.

“And here is the executive personnel break room,” the president of the confectionary company droned on. Mot’s nodding, I noticed, was becoming rather automatic. Vik gave a cursory sweep of the room that we had now entered. The break room was a pristine white, broken only by the dark coffee and tea maker in the corner.

“A lot of our final decisions about what to put out to the public is decided here,” our guide continued. “Let’s see what’s on offer today.” The president walked to the corner of the room to a storage cabinet. He pressed a button. A door slid down and a shelf slid out with several desserts on silver platters. Everyone in the crew automatically stepped closer because we noticed that one of the desserts was the cake that we had been offered on the ship by Hect and Kameel. It had the same pink buttercream frosting and same style of decoration. Next to the cake were several different kinds of pies, other cakes, and small confectionaries.

“What do you mean the final decisions are made here?” asked Mot. “Do you mean that your chefs make the final versions of the desserts and then your staff tries them out?”

“Exactly. The desserts with the most positive votes from the executive staff will eventually be made to be sold to the public. That’s why we have a company guarantee on everything that we put out. Let’s see.” The president peered at the small placards next to each of the desserts. “We have a new green mint chip cake and a new version of our caramel forest cake. We’re also trying to develop a line of traditional pies made from recipes that the ancients wrote. We’ve had pecan pie, cherry pie, and peach pie so far. All of them have been hits. This one right here is the apple pie. One of the first traditional pies that we made was the mincemeat. But that didn’t go over so well.”

“Why not?” said Mot. Since the host of the show did not have a chance to taste the cake that Kameel had taken aboard *The Bacchus*, he had ignored the pink buttercream cake. George and Annette, however, were already standing next to the cake, staring at it. To be honest, I was staring at it as well, but at least I kept half an eye on the recording feeds and another quarter of an eye on my messages scrolling down on my eye screen. Most of the messages were from Vyne telling me not to succumb to temptation.

It’s not that you don’t, I silently triggered back.

If I had not been paying attention, I would not have seen the fleeting grin that crossed his face. *You are my temptation, not the cake. If I succumbed to temptation, you would be in a very embarrassing situation right now.*

I felt my face heat, but fortunately, the president of the company and the rest of the filming crew were not paying any attention to me. *The next time you find yourself alone with me, you are going to die. And what an absolutely divine death that would be.*

I turned back to the conversation that Vik was recording between Mot and our present guide after sending Vyne another message that made him audibly splutter.

“The mincemeat pie, in the original recipe, called for the organ meat of quite a few creatures that no longer exist,” said the president of the confectionary company. “Of course, there was the idea that we could simply genetically engineer animals that would be similar to the ones from the past, but that would take more effort, time, and money than to just substitute it with the animal meat that we have on hand now. That, however, was a bad idea. No one liked the pie.”

“That’s too bad.”

“It is. We were hoping to offer it to the traditionalists and historical reenactment groups as a specialty. But if we were to go back to the drawing board and do the whole genetic engineering thing, it would probably not be very cost effective. So unfortunately, we’ve scrapped that idea.”

“So what is your company’s research team working on now?”

The president smiled with a grin that nearly split his face. “I am so glad that you asked that. I was going to take you to the company research labs to give you a tour of our latest desserts in development. Let’s go now. It’s not that far.”

“Can we not try some of these new desserts?” Kameel spoke up. Annette, George and Vik echoed his sentiments enthusiastically.

The president made another face at Kameel, probably unconsciously as Vik still had his recording equipment trained on him, but finally said, “Of course. But I won’t make any guarantee about how good any of these experimental desserts are. They haven’t been approved yet.”

Kameel seemed quite eager to try a slice of the caramel forest cake while everyone else made a beeline for the buttercream cake. The cyborg decided to follow Kameel’s lead and also opted for the caramel forest.

Don’t you want to try this? Vyne sent me. You already tried that other cake which probably isn’t very good for you anyway.

Who says I have to eat anything that’s good for me? Besides, there’s something mesmerizing about the buttercream.

But it’s pink. I thought you didn’t like pink.

It doesn’t matter if it tastes good.

“I have no idea why all of you are so obsessed with this,” Mot muttered. “But what the heck, I’ll try this, too, even if it looks like an explosion of lace. If a lot of people like it, they can’t be wrong, can they?”

The cake seemed even better the second time around. I was not sure if the slight wooziness I experienced after eating the buttercream was from the sugar rush or maybe some kind of drug that the pastry chefs had slipped into the confection to make the diners addicted to it. Whatever it was, I could hardly restrain myself from asking for another piece. Mot made noises about how the cake made him feel like he was going on a bender, in a good way.

Vyne and Kameel seemed to have no such symptoms after consuming their portions of the caramel forest cake. Kameel gushed about how good the cake was, but his eyes were slightly bored as if he was just reciting a line. Vyne simply nodded when asked if he liked it. Then again, no one seemed particularly bothered by his reaction. Probably because cyborgs in general had the reputation of being poker faced about almost everything.

It was when everyone was busy disposing their eating utensils when Kameel’s ear comm started blinking in a strobe blue light that mimicked the blue sequins on his shirt. Mot’s friend soon regretfully excused himself as he mentioned that he had gotten notice that an acquaintance of his had just landed at the transport hub in New Haven and that there were a small misunderstanding with the authorities that he hoped his presence would clear up for his friend. The president of the company seemed much relieved when Kameel finally left the room.

Despite the rest of the crew looking longingly at the buttercream cake, we knew that it was there supposedly for the taste test of the executives, so we regretfully had to leave the executive break room to go down to the first floor and out to the foyer where we waited for transport.

At the edge of the foyer was a track where a bullet train arrived. The train itself consisted of an automated conductor android at the head. The subsequent compartments of the train were big enough for visitors to sit in pairs. The president and Mot took the first two seats with Vik sitting in the compartment directly behind them so that he could film their interaction. George and Annette took the next seats and then I was stuck with the cyborg. I busied myself with arranging my equipment and programming a hover recorder when Vyne squeezed into the seat beside me. When the train started up, I launched the hover recorder so that it followed the train from behind.

My ear comm picked up the sound from the recorder that Vik had wired onto Mot’s ear comm so that I could hear the conversation between him and the president as clearly as if they were sitting beside me rather than the cyborg.

“The research labs are not that far from the offices then?” asked Mot.

The president laughed. “Oh, relatively speaking. It will take us five minutes to get there, but it’s because this train will be going about a hundred kilometers per hour once we get into the underground tunnel.”

The train slowly moved out of the foyer of the headquarters and quickly moved into a gray lit tunnel at the back of the building. The train took a turn and headed down underground. I had a poor sense of direction as the train picked up speed, but I quickly triggered my fingers to access the location network on my eye screen. We were heading north toward the edge of the capital city where some of the company’s major factories lay. This was definitely not on the itinerary. According to Mot, and Hect for that matter, all the shots were supposed to be in the New Haven capital city.

But what could go wrong during an impromptu detour?

After five minutes, the train slowed down and we stopped in an empty bay where several people in clean suits were already waiting for us. They greeted the president of the company first with crisp salutes that would probably even impress those in the imperial army and then proceeded to follow the entire filming crew as we entered the factory research laboratory.

“If I didn’t know any better, it feels as if I’m being escorted into enemy territory,” Mot joked.

The president smiled, but the smile did not reach his eyes. “It is just a precaution, Mr. Mot. While I think it would be great publicity for our company to be included in your documentary, we, of course, are cautious. We wouldn’t want to have any of our secrets being leaked out to our rivals.”

“Of course not,” said Mot. “You have a right to be cautious.”

I heard the jerboa chirp in my pocket as we entered the laboratory and came to the first part where there were several food scientists working with several unnamable apparatus and liquid chemicals with unnatural colors. The president launched into a technical explanation which I tuned out. Instead, I looked down at the jerboa and whispered, “No, you can’t go out. You’ll give these guys a heart attack.”

The jerboa gave a doubtful squeak, but fortunately it did not decide to jump out of my pocket just to spite me.

I kept half an eye on the hover recorder which had followed us. It floated above everyone’s heads so that the company president’s flunkies were not even aware of its existence. The feed from the recorder gave me a bird’s eye view of the entire place which looked like one enormous lab, starting from the front with all of the lab benches and chemicals to the end where the desserts were actually being made, baked, and “tested”.

Slowly, the crew was taken through the lab until we reached the end where several food scientists were testing the integrity of some new desserts by blasting them with lasers. What this accomplished, I had no idea. Mot voiced a similar complaint and the company president directed him to one of the scientists who gave a complicated answer that I couldn’t decipher. Judging from Mot’s confused expression, he couldn’t either.

“Well, I don’t think most of your consumers will really care if your latest cake actually stands up to a firing squad or not,” Mot said finally. “And frankly, I’m pretty sure that most of your consumers will hope that the desserts don’t hold up to being fried by lasers. Because if it can, then something, intuitively is very wrong.”

The scientist just stared at Mot. “But sir, that’s not the point of the test. We do this test simply because we can. And because we can use the results to say that our New Haven desserts have gone through the most rigorous testing possible.”

“There is such a thing as going too far.” Mot rubbed his temples with his fingers as if he was trying to fight an oncoming headache. When he dropped his hand back to his side, I could see that he was slightly sweating. Which wasn’t surprising. The factory did feel a little warm. “The reason I came here in the first place was because of my ancestor’s banquet menu. My ancestor, if you don’t know, was the forty-second emperor of the Andromeda Galaxy. During his coronation banquet, he died. The doctors had declared it of natural causes, but some claim that he may have been deliberately poisoned.”

“I agree with the latter theory,” George proclaimed even as he was busy scanning one of the destroyed cakes that was splattered at the end of the testing platform.

“No one asked you, George,” replied Mot. Then he continued on as the scientist and the company president looked on, seemingly humoring him. “Throughout my journey in the Delta Quadrant, I’ve encountered many different kinds of foods. Some of them turned out to be quite dangerous as well. But all of these were served at the coronation banquet and it was apparent that my ancestor ate all of this without ill effect. But then there were the desserts.”

“You think someone poisoned your ancestor with a New Haven dessert?” said the company president doubtfully. “If so, the culprit is long gone now since that has happened centuries ago. And it might not even be the dessert itself that was the problem. If your ancestor didn’t die naturally, perhaps some nefarious person or persons put poison into the dessert.”

“That’s quite possible,” said Mot. “But nonetheless, I want to see what my ancestor might have last ate before he keeled over. On the banquet menu, there was a mention of a kind of pie. It was called a coconut and pearberry cream pie. From my research, I know it came from New Haven, but apparently it is not made any more.”

“We do have several cream pies in development,” said the president. “I’m not quite sure what the chefs are currently working on, but we can ask them.” He motioned for Mot to follow him to the next

section of the lab where there were several chefs in white smocks similar in style to what the scientists were wearing. The closest chef was putting several pies into what looked like a high tech oven. The president asked the chef if they were working on anything similar to the coconut and pearberry cream pie.

The chef brightened when he mentioned it. "In fact, we are working exactly on that thing! In our latest surveys on what traditional flavors people wanted us to bring back, a disproportionate number of people wanted the coconut and pearberry."

"Really?" the president frowned. "Why wasn't I informed?"

"Well, we wanted to do some tests first," the chef confessed. "Our latest batch has just come out of the oven. They're over here." He pointed to several pies sitting on a nearby counter labeled for future testing. The pies looked like small pieces of cloud served on silver tins.

"Wow, so these are it?" exclaimed Mot. "Over here, Vik. I want a shot of me with these things that could have possibly done in my ancestor."

"Right on, boss," the head holographic projectionist said as he moved into position in front of Mot who had walked over to the counter to sniff at the pies.

"We haven't tested them yet, but I'm sure it's safe for human consumption," said the chef. "We can cut a piece for you as soon as we find a pie knife around here somewhere."

"No thanks," Mot said. He lifted up an arm to wipe the sweat beading on his forehead. "I'm actually not feeling all that hungry right now. And I just survived the virus from hell so maybe it's not such a good idea to eat too much at once. And is it a bit hot in here?"

"A little," remarked Vik. "Maybe it's the ovens here."

The chef shrugged. "I don't feel any different, but I work here, so I'm used to it. Are you sure you don't want to try a taste of it?"

"I've got a spoon!" announced another chef.

Mot shook his head again.

"Well, I don't blame you," the president said. "After all, it hasn't gone through all of the regular testing yet. Perhaps you can try some once it reaches our executive suite for the final tasting."

"Oh, I think the waiting may be a little too much, my dear president."

The chefs yelped in surprise and the crowd of flunkies that had surrounded us before parted quickly as if someone had simply brushed them aside. And in one way, somebody had. The voice belonged to Rosalind Hect. The tall program director for the GBC was wearing an ordinary gray business suit. But in her hand was something very extraordinary. From a trig of my fingers, I brought up a matching search from a weapons database on my eye screen. It was a semi-automatic neutron disruptor. Which was pretty much a fancy name for a laser pistol which made its targets go boom.

Hect motioned with the pistol in a casual manner which made everyone else in the room twitch. "You and your employees should clear out of here now. This little matter is between me and Nigel Mot. And I suppose his documentary crew, too. They're loose ends I need to tie up."

As the employees of the New Haven confectionary shop began to edge away from the GBC program director in self preservation, the president of the company spoke up without any hesitation as if he had dealt with crazed women with semi-automatic neutron disruptors before.

"Who are you? Why hasn't security stopped you at the front door?"

"Bribery goes a long way." She motioned toward the president with her free hand. "Go now. This is between me and Nigel Mot."

"Now see here. This is on my property. I simply cannot allow any of this to happen on my factory floor! If you have a disagreement with Mr. Mot, you should take this elsewhere and not in the middle of my factory!" The president of the confectionary company took a step forward.

Hect pressed the trigger and a sharp red beam erupted from the neutron disruptor and hit the president square in the chest. The top half of the president blew up in a shower of sparks and smoke and some of the employees started screaming. What was left were two leg stumps with singed wires smoking. Apparently the president was a robot or android of some sort.

"Oops," said Hect. "My finger was a little itchy. All of you workers should clear out now before I get that itch again."

The factory workers did not have to be told twice. They cleared out of the factory floor in less than thirty seconds leaving us, the documentary crew, with Hect.

"And don't you try anything, Mr. Vyne," Hect said without moving her head, even when the cyborg made an almost imperceptible movement to his right. "Your cyborg reflexes have nothing on me." The program director gave us a cold smile. "I think it might interest you that before I was hired by the

Galactic Broadcasting Company, I worked for the Imperial military secret operations branch in the Omega Sector of the Gamma Quadrant. I have been outfitted with certain implants that make me superior to most cyborgs created more than a decade ago.”

Holy shit. Hect was not kidding. Now that she had said that, I could see from my vantage point that her eyes were glowing red. She might not be a cyborg in the conventional sense, but she had been modified. And that included ocular implants.

“That’s interesting,” said Vyne. “Because from my data banks, many of the cybernetically enhanced operatives in the Omega Sector of the Gamma Quadrant have been decommissioned due to the high rate of insanity that the operatives developed. The doctors and scientists working on them discovered that it was due to some faulty wiring from a neural implant in the amygdala. It was supposed to suppress fear, but as a side effect it also suppressed rational thought.”

“I am not insane.”

“Sure sounds like it to me,” Vik muttered.

“I am not insane,” Hect repeated in a slightly louder voice. She moved her disruptor so that now it was pointed directly at Mot who was rubbing his temples as if he had a huge headache. “I have a perfectly acceptable reason for doing this. Mr. Mot needs to be eliminated.”

“Well, he is a pain in the ass sometimes,” remarked George, “but that’s no cause for getting killed off.”

“He has come dangerously close to the truth,” Hect continued as if George had not spoken at all. “The forty-second emperor of the Andromeda Galaxy was in fact murdered. That fact cannot be allowed to get out.”

I thought about the holographic recorder that I had launched earlier that was hovering above our heads. At the moment, the program director was not looking up. Since her attention was on Mot, I discretely triggered my fingers to move the recorder to a more sheltered spot slightly behind a beam on the ceiling. And then I activated the feed to be live streamed to the galaxy at large.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mot said. “I thought my ancestor died from plain old food poisoning.”

“You lie.” Hect’s eyes flashed. “I have hacked into your private journals. You’re coming perilously close to the truth. In your latest entry, you said that you were going to reveal all in the last episode so that the show would have its highest ratings yet. That cannot be allowed to happen.”

“Even if I were to do that,” said Mot, “What is it to you? This happened centuries ago. You won’t be persecuted for the death of an emperor who lived before you were born.”

“That may be so, but I am the descendant of one of the conspirators. The truth cannot get out because that would jeopardize my family’s standing.”

Mot frowned, but a moment later, his expression cleared. “The members of the Hect family were advisors to the forty-second emperor. They were one of the few advisors who were allowed to continue on with the new emperor. The rest of the advisors were all eliminated under mysterious circumstances.”

“Exactly. So don’t any of you try anything. I know what all of you have been doing in the past couple of days. While Mot was formulating his theories, you, Ms. Bakkar, was making a deal with the GBC to continue with the series.”

Annette rolled her eyes. “Like that’s a big deal. We all want to keep our jobs, don’t we?”

The rest of us nodded.

“And you, Mr. Zero, have been frittering your time away on a panty geocaching contest that you didn’t win.”

“It depends on your definition of winning,” George replied. “I got second place even though I started late. It pays to be a closet pervert. I got five hundred thousand credits out of the deal.”

“Way to go, George!” Vik exclaimed.

“And Mr. Assam, you’re pathetic. If only your parents could see the things you’re up to in your spare time. You’re a veritable peeping Tom.”

Vik shrugged, even as he continued filming according to the feed continuing to come in to my eye screen. I wondered why Hect was not attempting to jam the signals of all of the recorders if she was so aware of what we were doing, but I was not going to be the one to inform her of her oversight. “I have to be,” said Vik. “Isn’t that like a prerequisite for being a holographic projectionist?”

Hect snorted in disgust. But she didn’t forget about me. “And you, Ms. Tanaka-Teng. Fraternizing with Mr. Vyne. On the hotel roof of all places.”

“Is that what they call it now?” I said with a voice that sounded surprisingly calm to my ears. “I

always called it f--."

"And you call Mr. Assam a peeping Tom," Vyne interrupted before I could finish my sentence. "The pot should not call the kettle black."

"I can call whoever whatever I like," Hect retorted. "But I am digressing. I need to end this now. The GBC will get its highest rated episode of all time, but it won't be because Mr. Mot will reveal the truth. It will be because he will die. The same exact way his ancestor will. Go on, eat the pie."

Mot glanced at the pies cooling on the counter and then back at Hect. "You're right. I figured it out. My ancestor had a genetic abnormality that rendered him allergic to a particular combination of foods. It all ended with the pie. I suspect you had bribed someone to add everything else to the buttercream cake and so that is why I am still alive, although slightly ill, after ingesting it. If you think I'm going to eat the pie, too, you are sadly mistaken."

"Eat the pie. Or you will die an even more horrible death than food poisoning."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Death by semi-automatic neutron disruptor is pretty quick."

"Then maybe I should start killing off the people that you care about. Like Ms. Bakkar."

Annette suddenly squawked when the disruptor was pointed at her.

"No!" Mot yelled. He moved.

Time seemed to stretch as adrenaline pumped through my veins. I seemed to be seeing everything at once as all the recording feeds were being streamed to my eye screen. Mot was pushing Annette away just as Hect raised her disruptor and pressed the trigger. Vik dropped his holographic projector and grabbed one of the pies. George was already throwing a three-tiered cake frosted with blue cream that he had found elsewhere. The jerboa leaped out of my pocket with a kamikaze shriek and Vyne rushed toward Hect just as her attention was trained elsewhere.

The cake crashed into Hect's shoulder, throwing her aim wide. The red beam erupted from her weapon and blasted a light fixture, sending sparks raining down. Something from the ceiling pinged onto some of the factory machinery and a conveyor belt above suddenly started moving at a faster rate. The pie that Vik threw was more accurate and it landed on Hect's face. The tin slid down her face and Hect blinked and attempted to wipe her face with her free hand. She screamed, making her look like the mythical abominable snowman.

"You are going to die. Now!"

I grabbed the nearest pie, a crusty one filled with some sort of red fruit. I threw it and it fell short from Hect's face. Instead, it landed on her chest. "That's my line, bitch!" I yelled. Then I ducked and rolled when she aimed the disruptor in my direction. An oven behind me exploded in flames.

Sitting behind a thick stone counter, I put my hand in my jacket pocket and discovered that the revolver that I had gotten from George was gone. Cursing, I peeked over the edge of the counter and saw Vyne tackling Hect from behind. Another volley of neutron beams scattered across the factory floor. The rest of the documentary crew dove for cover. I ducked again. I glanced beside me and saw several plex-wood containers marked with the New Haven Confectionary logo. I opened one and saw several pies stacked inside. I stuck a finger in one and licked it. Mm. Chocolate. Too bad it was going to be used as ammunition.

With pie in hand, I looked over the counter again, to see that Hect had somehow overpowered Vyne and threw his body over a series of gleaming metal machinery that looked like gigantic dough mixers.

Are you all right? I triggered.

I could be better, came the reply. *I think my arm's broken. It will take the nanobots about half an hour to repair it on maximum setting.*

That did it. Psycho cyborg bitch was totally going to get it. Hect was now stalking toward a different counter, where Mot was hiding. On my ear comm, I heard him praying to every deity known to man. And then some. I threw the pie. After the chocolate pie landed on her head, another pie from elsewhere landed on her backside. It was yellow. A pie with a pink filling slammed into her neck. Unfortunately, it did no decapitation. It just made her angrier as she started firing randomly in the factory.

"Stop this childishness right now or all of you will be very sorry!" Hect screamed. She aimed her disruptor over head and shot something that sent another shower of sparks raining down on everyone below. But it was not another light fixture. This time her aim was deliberate as she had hit some sort of control panel and some of the machines in the other part of the factor started whirring on in high speed, spitting out confections every which way. Alarms started blaring.

I grabbed another pie and watched warily as Hect kicked over an oven as if it was nothing but a

child's tinker toy. She was still aiming toward Mot, probably deeming the rest of the documentary crew as nothing but a bunch of pesky flies to be dealt with later after her main target was eliminated. I quickly stood up and threw the pie. It landed on her head again, but she did nothing. I was about to throw another pie when the oven next to me erupted and I was drenched in something that tasted suspiciously like peach cobbler. I tried to take a step forward and slipped, falling on my ass.

As I tried to get back up, I heard George, Annette and Vik yelling at Hect, probably attempting to get her attention away from Mot.

"Mot says that he has a secret weapon in hand."

I turned to see that Vyne had somehow crawled over to my location. He was covered in a variety of different colored frosting and his right arm was at an odd angle. I looked at the pie in my hand and then back at Vyne whose eyes were glinting red. "What weapon? If he has a pie of some sort, even if it's made out of Rallan squid parts, I don't think it's going to do any good."

"I don't think it's Rallan squid."

At that moment, Mot suddenly leaped from his hiding place with something in his hands.

"Freeze!"

For a moment, Hect followed the command. But then she gave a harsh bark of laughter. Mot wasn't holding a weapon in his hands. He was holding the jerboa. The jerboa, however, was grasping the revolver I had gotten from George with its entire body.

"This is ridiculous," Hect exclaimed. "A rodent won't save you. Prepare to die, Nigel Mot."

The jerboa pulled the trigger.

It all happened in a split second. Hect stepped to the side and the bullet whizzed past her. She swung up her arm with the disruptor. And since Vyne and I were closest to Mot, we careened out from behind the counter and tackled Mot and dragged him back behind the counter with us.

"Fuck!" Mot was pounding his fists on the pie-slick floor. "I thought for sure that would work. The next time I get my hands on that gerbil..."

The jerboa was sitting on top of the counter with the revolver, chittering. Hect was still laughing. "You missed!"

In reply to the woman's taunt, the jerboa fired off another round and flew backwards from the recoil. The second bullet hit something critical and something within the factory groaned. Hect was screaming when the jerboa finally reappeared, climbing out of a box of New Haven Confectionary pies.

"What is that?" Mot finally said as he struggled to sit up and peek behind the counter.

Vyne used his good arm to restrain him. "Don't give her an opening."

"Yeah, sure. But you'd think that if she had all the enhancements that she had been bragging about, we'd all be dead by now."

"That's true. But you also have to take into account that she's a bit mentally unhinged."

"Well, if you say... holy hell." Mot stopped in mid-sentence as something caught his eye. We followed his gaze and saw that Hect had been grabbed by an enormous robotic hand that was normally used to move packages. Hect had lost her disruptor during her struggles and now she was wailing about getting help.

No one moved to do anything. Except for the jerboa who scampered up my arm to take a sniff of the chocolate pie. It grabbed a chunk of it and started munching as it watched the goings on as if it was movie night at the rodent corral.

The robotic hand took Hect across the factory and then suddenly released her. She fell screaming into a vat of steaming liquid candy hardener.

After a moment where the only noise was the sound of machines and conveyor belts hissing, Mot raked his pastry-encrusted hair out of his eyes and said, "What goes around, comes around, doesn't it?"

Part X: Digestif

The buzz of a sonic toothbrush woke me at an obscenely early hour in the morning. I knew it was an obscenely early hour because the time was blinking on my eye screen when I activated it. But when I tried to get out of bed, something dragged me back into the covers and snuggled against my backside as if I was some sort of teddy bear.

"What the hell?" I twisted around and was met with a sleepy smile and a chest that would make even rock pulverizers weep in shame. "Oh, it's you."

“Is that how you greet all of your lovers in the morning?”

“Yeah. That’s why I suck at relationships.” I tried to wriggle out of his grasp. This was going to be a little tricky since we were both still naked. “Are you going to let me go?”

“Let me think about that.”

The sonic toothbrush buzzed again. It sounded like it was coming from the bathroom. “Well, hurry up. Someone could be decapitating themselves in the shower right now.”

“That’s impossible. The only people who entered this suite are you and me.”

After the debacle at the confectionary factory in New Haven, the emergency personnel and the local authorities had been alerted, of course. Since the president of the company had been revealed as an android, the vice president (after a thorough medical exam) had been promoted by the board of directors and had immediately taken charge thereafter. Fortunately for the documentary team and the GBC, we were not held liable for the berserker actions of a sole person. Hect had been fished out of the vat of liquid candy hardener by the emergency personnel. The crazy cyborg had been shipped off to the nearest penitentiary just as she was—trapped in a thick shell of pure sugar.

The lawyers at the GBC had quickly suggested that the documentary team lay low for the next couple of weeks as they tried to disentangle the mess at New Haven as well as all of the subterfuge and unauthorized hacking that Hect had done to the GBC system in order to spy on Mot. So the team took *The Bacchus* off to the relative backwaters of the Delta Quadrant. Captain Avery had suggested the mining planet D89F-37A4 which was currently attempting to rebrand itself as a tourist destination by calling itself Ironside. When we arrived on the planet, the inhabitants were still in the process of changing all of the welcome signs. But at least we managed to find a hotel to take some R and R. And as a bonus, none of the inhabitants seemed to have heard of the show *Dining with Style* in the Delta Quadrant, let alone the GBC. Backwater, indeed.

I wiggled again and Vyne sighed. He got up and dragged me out of bed with him. I snagged a robe draped over a nearby chair and wrapped myself with it. He gave me a disappointed look but went with me to the bathroom. I slapped the switch on the side of the wall and the door slid open, revealing the lit room. On the counter was the jerboa sitting on a small soap dish that appeared to be rigged to the motor that had been stripped from a sonic toothbrush. There were other enhancements to the contraption, probably from other gadgets that the rodent had commandeered but I did not recognize. The soap dish buzzed and began to levitate. The jerboa chattered excitedly as it pressed a small lever as the dish zoomed up and whizzed around our heads.

“Is this what I woke up for?” I demanded.

The jerboa ignored me as it steered its new contraption out into the rest of the suite.

“Maybe it’s just a warm-up,” remarked Vyne. “Perhaps Killer is working on a bigger problem. And soon he will save the entire universe.”

“His name is not Killer. The gerbil has not killed anyone.”

“Technically.”

“Whatever.” I stepped back into the rest of the suite. That was when I became aware of all of the messages now scrolling down my eye screen. Some of them were notices from the GBC. Others were from acquaintances that I had met before I started working for the GBC or from what appeared to be fans wondering where the documentary team was heading next. One of the messages was even from my brother. But most of them were from my parents. I triggered my fingers to direct all of the messages into a holding partition, but I already felt exasperated even when the day had hardly begun. “This is a ridiculous hour. But I don’t feel like I can go back to sleep.”

Vyne tugged me closer to him. The robe slipped off my shoulder. His eyes gleamed. “Well, if you’re not sleepy, I know something that might keep you busy until breakfast.”

* * *

“Is that a spice worm, or are you just happy to see me?” Annette said just as Vyne and I entered the breakfast room on the first floor of the hotel on the ex-mining planet.

“It’s a spice worm,” said Mot as he shifted a clear cage under his arm. Inside the cage was a long worm with many rows of teeth. It was attempting to gnaw its way out but so far, it was being unsuccessful. The jerboa, sitting on my shoulder, caught sight of the worm and squeaked in alarm. “I got it from this nice old lady I met this morning from my way out of the exercise room. She said it was a present for me for all the work I’ve done on the show.”

“This planet doesn’t get transmissions from the GBC,” said George. The rotund sensory technician was already seated at the breakfast table with a plate towering high with waffles drenched in syrup. “It’s a trap.”

As Vyne and I took our seats, the cyborg said, “In this case, George is right. The spice worm produces a chemical that is used in making an addictive drug.”

“Damn.” Mot flopped down in his seat and set the cage on the table next to his plate. “I thought it might bring me fame and fortune.”

“Maybe if you want to be a drug dealer,” said Annette.

The director signaled for a waiter android and placed an order for scrambled eggs. I asked for some rice porridge. And Vyne asked for pancakes. I jabbed him in the ribs, but he only grinned.

“Guess what I’ve found!” exclaimed Vik as he swaggered toward us. He was carrying a tray with three bowls and a cup. The cup looked like it contained tea or coffee. The bowls looked like they contained colorful bits of wood chips. He set his tray at the remaining empty place at the table and sat down before spooning whatever it was into his mouth. It crunched. He swallowed and exclaimed, “Cereal!”

“That does not look like any cereal I’ve ever seen,” I said.

“It’s imported from Epsilon Vega,” the head holographic projectionist told me. “It’s made of this genetically modified grain that had been spliced with the genome of a local flowering plant. That’s why it’s purple and red. Want to try some?”

“No thanks.”

Mot sighed. “That’s the whole problem, isn’t it? After New Haven, well, the show’s pretty much over. I kind of liked visiting all those places. Being your average CEO is boring.”

“Yeah, it was interesting,” Vik agreed as he continued to crunch on his breakfast. “I suppose we’ll all get transferred to different departments now that the show has ended.”

“Or get fired,” I said. “I need to update my resume.”

“Oh come now, kid,” said George in between mouthfuls of his waffles. “You weren’t all that bad. Maybe they’ll send you to that reality show about the current emperor’s family.”

“You know, George, I think that’s probably worse than being unemployed.”

Annette shook her head. “You guys, chill. Our jobs are not in jeopardy. In fact, I just got a transmission from the GBC headquarters.”

“Maybe it’s a mass firing,” I said.

This time, Vyne was the one who gently poked me in the ribs. “Don’t be so pessimistic.”

“Nothing of the sort,” Annette declared. “Apparently, they’ve discovered that Euphie had left one of the holographic recorders on to live feed mode.”

“I wasn’t an accident,” I cut in.

Annette ignored me. “The lawyers have put it out that it was an accident. The GBC news, of course, took it up and had it broadcast to as many places as they could. Viewership shot up beyond their wildest dreams. The editors, of course, eventually cut the whole thing so that it could fit in our usual time slot, but our last episode has turned out to be our highest rated ever, even if the majority of it wasn’t planned at all.”

“Huh.” Mot contemplated Annette’s news even as the android waiter came back with everyone’s food. “I would not have expected that.”

“On the message boards on the galactic net, all of the fans are calling us heroes. And they’re asking that Euphie’s pet be elevated to god status.”

The jerboa chirped proudly.

“That’s only because he had the gun and knew how to aim it,” I said.

The director gave me an admonishing glare. “You should be grateful. Because of the high ratings, the GBC has decided that Dining with Style in the Delta Quadrant has been a success. We’re being renewed for another season.”

There was a moment of stunned silence at Annette’s announcement. And then suddenly, there was noise. George was pumping his fists into the air as Vik hollered in glee and tossed one of the cereal bowls into the air, causing several cleaning robots lurking in the periphery of the dining room to activate. I uttered an expletive, but Vyne kissed me before I could blister the air with more of them.

And then, when we all finally settled back down and the cleaning robots had cleared away all of the cereal on the floor, Vyne asked, “Since we’ve finished going through your ancestor’s banquet menu, do you have any ideas on what we might be doing for the next season?”

“In fact, I do,” said Mot. He patted the glass cage next to him. The worm in the cage lashed about, obviously not happy with the disruption. “Who’s up for a bit of sand-shoeing?”

THE END