

# TABLE ETIQUETTE FOR DIPLOMATIC PERSONNEL, IN SEVENTEEN SCENES

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**Suzanne is, as of this writing, staying home like so many others because of the Plague Time. She wishes this meant she was cooking many excellent meals and experimenting with new cuisines, but the fun of food is so often in the sharing of it with friends. Here's hoping we all have good people at our table again soon.**

“Did you know,” the Ijt Ambassador said, as she sipped gently at her soup with her long, blue, curling tongue, “that your predecessor, in an act of *yofishi*—” the translator choked on the word, but Station Commander Ennie Niagara knew that it meant *self-destructive behavior that nevertheless brings great satisfaction*—“served the Ponkian delegation something called ghost peppers?”

“I read the incident report when I took this post,” Ennie said. “The Ponkians believed it to be an assassination attempt and panicked. There are sections of corridor nine that still smell, and the dining hall had to be permanently relocated to another portion of the station.”

The ambassador fluttered several of her leaf-like wings. “The new dining hall is much nicer,” she said, “though too large a space for us to be comfortable.”

One of many reasons, Ennie thought, for having dinner in her private quarters. “The new hall was just being finished when I arrived on Kemon Station,” she said. Had it been a whole standard year already? And that was several months after the infamous ghost pepper incident. “What I never understood is why Beville, who by all accounts was a sensible, stable officer for his entire career up until that moment, would do that to the Ponkians. They are one of the more agreeable peoples, other

than their tendency to emit clouds of foul gas when startled or upset, and I cannot guess what he might have had against them."

"Ah," the ambassador said. "It is a mystery we have long thought on, those of us who knew Beville and were here when it happened. Have you considered the possibility that it was not about the Ponkians at all?"

"I can't believe it was an accident," Ennie said. "The head cook at the time reported that Beville had insisted on taking a direct hand in meal prep that afternoon, having never done so before."

"No, not an accident. Beville was a human of deliberate, thoughtful action," the Ijt said. "Consider, instead, who else was on the station."

"The Joxto?" Ennie said. There were others, but none so notable.

"The Joxto," the ambassador agreed. "They function almost entirely by their sense of smell. It is their most powerful sense, other than hunger and outrage. Have you met them?"

"No," Ennie said. She finished her own soup and set her bowl aside. Her kitchen staff would have a sandwich ready for her afterward, knowing she would still be hungry, but the Ijt only consumed liquid foods, so for the sake of politeness, soup it was. There would be subtle but significant compositional differences between their two bowls, and the Ijt would surely know that, but the station cook was good enough to make sure no differences were apparent, nothing to disrupt the illusion of a shared experience. Diplomacy was often in the details, and with Kemon Station far enough out from Earth, and not hosting embassies of much (or any) strategic importance, Ennie was typically pressed to do dual duty as both station commander and senior Alliance Diplomacy Corps representative. *The Sharing of Food* was one of the better sections of the thin guide she'd been given in lieu of formal training, right after the much less informative *No You Won't Be Eaten By Aliens\**, whose titular footnote held statistics that undercut the reassuring solidity of its own premise.

"We have the necessity of occasional dealings with the Joxto," the Ijt said. "I would suggest that the idea of triggering a roomful of innocent Ponkians to de-gas, even if it would effectively be the end of one's career, might be tempting in the face of the Joxto's far greater odiousness."

"They were expected to remain on the station for several months, pressing for a land grant on one of our newer agricultural colonies, but left within an hour of the ghost pepper incident."

"Yes," the Ijt said. She finished her soup, her tongue retracting between her mandibles, and fluttered herself more upright on her perch at the table, the bright yellow-orange quills on her back rattling into the new position. "It is how they negotiate deals—show up and be unpleasant until your opponent gives in to all demands just to be rid of you. They are tenacious, relentless, and often unwelcome guests."

"A potential motive involving a connection to the Joxto was not in any of the analyses," Ennie said.

"The incident was an embarrassment to your entire Alliance Diplomacy Corps as it was, even when just seen as an ill-considered prank against the Ponkians," the Ijt said. "How much more damage would it do, if it was clear it was a hostile action against two sentient species?"

"That's a valid point," Ennie said. "Why do you bring this up, though? Was your soup too spicy?"

"Oh, no, the soup was delightful," the Ijt said. "I enjoy our dinners very much."

So did Ennie. "It is my pleasure," she said.

"Thank you very much for an excellent meal. Forgive me for leaving early, but I have tasks that I must see to before I can retire to my nest," the Ijt said. She rose up

into the air, the brilliantly colored streamers of her tail undulating beneath her as she glided gracefully toward the door. Once there, she turned—more a roll—midair to look at Ennie again with her three large, iridescent eyes. “I have received intelligence—and I share this with you unofficially, just between you and me—that the Joxto are on their way here again.”

“What?” Ennie said. She had stood up to see the ambassador out, but now took an involuntary half-step back. “I haven’t been informed of any such visit.”

“The Joxto are not known for their adherence to social or diplomatic norms such as waiting on invitations or sending word ahead,” the Ijt said. “I tell you only because we have become friends, and I have hopes that you will remain here for a while longer, and not succumb to a *yofishi* of your own.”

Ennie spread her hands. “I have no Ponkians. Or ghost peppers.”

“If there is anything I have learned about humans over my many years among you, it is an appreciation for your extraordinary ability to improvise,” the Ijt said. “And perhaps an equally impressive lack of wisdom for when one should do so, versus when one should not.”

“I’ll do my best,” Ennie said.

The Ijt nodded, spread her wings, and left.

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“Something is afoot,” Qasi said. “Commander Niagara has been stressed and anxious for several days, but there is nothing noteworthy on the talks schedule nor on the incoming arrivals list. Or at least not on the public ones; since we have no formal treaty with the human worlds, thus rendering me a representative only in the name of courtesy, I have no access to the sector council feeds.”

“Nor do I,” Bako said, “in my capacity as an unapprehended stowaway on board the station. But I have also noticed that the usual rhythms have become unsettled.” Ey stood up on eir very last pair of legs and peered over the counter, eir fur immediately shifting colors to match it. “Speaking of anxieties, what are you doing?”

“It is a human thing I have just learned of, called *fondue*,” Qasi said. She tapped the pot on its stand with one claw. “I have filled this portion with a nutritive broth, and I have a selection of protein solids and *dipping sauces*. You place the solid on a sharp, pronged stick and boil it in the broth. Everyone has their own, with a colored handle to identify it as theirs.”

She demonstrated, pressing one of the protein cubes onto the end of a stick, and setting it in the pot so that the stick handle leaned out over the side. “I believe it is tradition to race to see whose solid reaches optimum temperature first, while also simultaneously trying to knock the others’ pieces off their sticks into the broth without being caught at it. It should be delightful! Do you wish to try?”

“The Dzenni people’s fascination with all things human is a bafflement to the rest of us. But I am willing to be delighted, if it is possible.” Bako tipped eir head sideways and blinked at the pot, stick, and protein cubes. “The broth is not boiling, though. Not nearly so.”

“That is because I have not yet added the heat source,” Qasi said. “I wished to test my understanding of the processes and equipment, and also refine my selection of sauces, before I invite an entire party to participate in the experience. I will even invite the commander!”

“What is the heat source, though?” Bako asked. Ey rotated eir head upside down so ey could peer at the underside of the pot, long whiskers bent back. “Some sort of thermal pod?”

“No!” Qasi said, her long tail twitching behind her from the excitement. “This is the very best part.”

She pulled out a small metal can, took the lid off, and slipped it between the legs of

the stand under the pot. Then she grasped the small pull-tab on the side between two claws and pulled.

Flame jetted out of the top of the can, engulfing the pot. Bako skittered away on all her two dozen legs, screeching in alarm. "It's supposed to be able to be modulated," Qasi said, trying to get close enough to see without burning her own whiskers. "I probably should have read the instructions."

"Fire!" Bako shouted. "You made a fire! On a space station! This was a terrible idea, Qasi!"

"No, no, this will all be fine," she said, just as the sector alarms went off, and they were both suddenly doused with jets of foam from above. "My dinner!" she cried, trying to shield the array of small bowls from the deluge.

Finally, she gave up, as she could hear the sounds of the emergency personnel racing down the hallway toward her quarters. Bako had melted away into hiding, no doubt picking a dry, dark corner where he could blend himself in until the danger of discovery had passed; no one would likely see him again for days.

The fire, majestic and triumphant as it had briefly been, was out, smothered in foam. Her fur was matted and sticky with the stuff, and it would take hours to groom it out. She pulled out her stick, studied the protein cube for a moment, then shrugged and popped it into her mouth, using her fangs to pull it free.

"Not bad," she said to no one in particular, though company was certainly, from the sounds in the hall, imminent. "But it would have been far better with sauce."

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There was a particular strategic advantage to the impossibility of having a genuinely private conversation in the station food court, and both Commander Niagara and Captain Vincente knew it. They also both knew the value of having that conversation—likely to be repeated, with copious but varying contextual details, across an equitable swath of casual and professional listeners—over a seemingly informal meal. And since Vincente's ship, the *Hermit's Lantern*, had arrived with too little warning for her staff to prepare a formal reception, grabbing a quick bite to eat was not particularly suspicious.

Vincente had dressed down for the occasion in slacks and a neatly pressed civilian shirt. He was still wearing his cap, as if forgotten upon his mostly hairless head, but Ennie knew him well enough to know otherwise. Each of them had brought their assistant, and after introductions the two juniors, Gao and Alli, sat together a table away, trying to relax and enjoy their Martian ramen while also remaining attentive for any call to duty.

"As I was telling you, Commander Niagara," the captain said, while stuffing a forkful of noodles in his mouth, "the Joxto are expected to arrive in the next eight to ten standard days. The estimate is our own; they have not been communicative about their specific intentions or purpose, but then, they never are."

Ennie nodded, though the captain had been telling her no such thing. Thanks to the Ijt Ambassador, at least she didn't have to cover any surprise at this news. "I haven't met the Joxto myself," she answered, brushing a few crumbs from her jacket, "but we are of course prepared to receive them."

Vincente leaned back in his chair and pointed at her with his fork, a stray noodle still impaled on one tine. "As it happens, we were already in the area, and my crew is due for a break, so this gives me the opportunity to provide what advisory assistance I can," he said. "Assuming you'd want that?"

The *Hermit's Lantern* had been nowhere nearby and must have burnt through a crap ton of energy reserves getting here as quickly as they had.

"I'd be grateful, of course," Ennie said. "Do we have an agenda yet?" *Do we have any idea why they are coming?*

“Our diplomats are working out the details,” Vincente said. *We have no fucking clue.*

Ennie nodded, finished the last forkful of her noodles, then leaned back in her chair. “So how are things on Earth?” she asked. “Some hubbub on the Alliance chat channels recently?”

“Contractor woes at one of our research facilities,” Vincente said. “I wish I’d ordered a beer.”

“It’s not too late,” Ennie said. “You’re off-duty, after all. We import a nice dark berry stout from Beenjai that I expect you’d enjoy.”

Vincente smiled, took off his hat, and placed it on the empty seat next to him. “You’ve convinced me,” he said. “Will you join me in it?”

Ennie laughed. “Unfortunately for me, I *am* still on duty,” she said, “but—”

At the table next to them, she heard Gao’s handpad chime; her own was off, since he could and would handle almost anything without interrupting her and the captain. She was surprised when he scrambled to his feet, nearly knocking his tray off the table, and approached.

“Sir, and ma’am,” Gao said. “My apologies. Security reports they’ve got a body down in electrical. Looks like murder.”

Vincente put his hat back on.

Chief Mackie, Ennie’s head of security, met them at the lift entrance and led them over to where a man in station maintenance overalls was sprawled facedown in the open doorway to the electricians’ workroom. Tomas and Kreag, the custodians who had found the body, stood back as Mackie’s second-in-command, Digby, crouched beside the body. When the commander and captain stepped near, Digby pointed with one gloved hand to where something protruded from the victim’s swollen neck. Ennie leaned in to look closer, afraid she already recognized it: an orange quill. “Well,” she said. “Who is it?”

“Other than checking for signs of life, we haven’t touched the body,” Mackie said. They pointed up to where a bob hovered near the ceiling. “We swept and took a full holo of the scene.”

“Okay,” Ennie said. She pointed to the quill. “Bag that.”

Digby dutifully and carefully tugged it loose and dropped in an evidence bag, then Tomas helped him roll the body gently over.

“Garrow,” Ennie said. “Damn. He’s only been here a couple of months.”

Behind her, the captain made a surprised grunt, and she glanced back at him. “I don’t know who Garrow is,” Vincente said, “but I know who *that* is. That’s former Commander Beville.”

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Digby reached over and stole half of Dr. Chessa Reed’s sandwich off her plate while she was distracted, and took a big bite out of it before she could notice and demand it back. “So you think the Ijt did it?” he asked.

“Oh, hell no,” Chessa said. “Signs of head trauma, and a needle trace in the back of the neck near where the quill was. Someone knocked him out, stuck him with something, then planted the quill. Bit obvious, really. Still running blood analysis on what was injected.” She lifted up her goggles, glanced at her plate, then at Digby, and scowled. “If you don’t want me to feed your living body into the post-mortem disassembler, you are going to fetch me a whole new sandwich.”

Digby shrugged. “I’ll think about it. So who do you think did it?”

“We currently have, what? Five ambassadors, six representatives, and all their retines aboard, not to mention nearly forty human crew. Could have been anyone.”

“But who do you think? Who seems likely?”

“Honestly? None of them. I dunno. It makes no sense. Who do you think?”

Digby pursed his lips. “No idea. I mean, Perks in cargo is the biggest jerk on the

station, and he cheats at cards, but I still don't think he'd kill anybody. And more than that, what the hell was he even doing here?"

"Perks? Oh, Beville, you mean. Not a clue. I hear the Ijt Ambassador admitted she knew he was here, though, had recognized him but hadn't told anyone. I'm surprised the commander isn't ripping this station apart looking centimeter by centimeter for who did this."

"Looking for who or what, though? And anyway, I've got enough extra work with the Joxto coming our way, so let's hope it doesn't come down to that."

"But then maybe you'd finally find your ghost, too."

"Hey, don't give me shit about that," he said. "I'm telling you, there's something else on board the station, something alien that can disappear through fucking walls. Maybe that's what killed Beville."

"Can ghosts bash people on the head, though? If they're not corporeal? Seems a stretch."

"Did you see the Dzenni Representative's apartment after the fire the other day? Two place settings at the table. The aliens are all in on this, I'm telling you."

"Why me? Why aren't you telling your boss instead?" Chessa said. "I'm just the med chief, trying to eat my very late, very insufficient dinner that you stole while I'm dutifully monitoring a high-priority autopsy."

"Because I already did. Mackie just shrugged it off."

"Maybe they know something you don't."

"Probably," Digby said. He slid down in his chair, then kicked the empty chair at the side. "Fine, I'll go get you another sandwich. But you have to tell me if you find anything interesting. For once I wanna know something before everybody else."

"That would be a first," Chessa said, as Digby grumped off out of her lab to the service kitchen.

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Ennie sat on the edge of Mackie's desk, watching as they filled a bowl with kibbles for their dog, Omnivore. Lately her security head had been trending masc, and the scruffy beginnings of the beard they were currently sporting reminded her of her late brother, with all the conflicted feelings that brought. "So, how did he get on board?" she asked.

Mackie finished rehydrating the dog food and set the bowl down on the floor. They both watched as the elderly corgi waddled over and sniffed at it with great disdain. After a few more minutes' contemplation and glances at the two humans who were unforthcoming with anything better, the dog began wearily to eat.

Mackie sat down in their chair and put their boots up on the other end of the desk. "Cleared by service security," they said, "and you and I both know we couldn't squeak a dirty flea past them. From what I know about Beville, bribery would be a significant departure in character. And since even Vincente was surprised, you know it wasn't regular Diplomacy Corps who put him here."

"So you're thinking EarthInt," she said.

"I'm thinking EarthInt," Mackie confirmed. "But again, why?"

"I've got a lot of why questions, and no damned answers," Ennie said. "Nothing at all in his quarters?"

"Nothing inconsistent with Garrow, senior electrician," Mackie said. "Nothing more from the Ijt Ambassador?"

"She's upset enough to have started an off-season molt. They were friends, back when he was the commander here," she said. "She says she only had one brief opportunity to speak with him, but he wouldn't tell her why he came back. I trust that's true, at least on the face of it. If she has guesses, she's not sharing them with me yet."

"Something to do with the Joxto, though."

"Too much of a coincidence not to be," Ennie said. "Though that would mean he knew

they were coming long before any of the rest of us did, to get here ahead of them.”

“Do we know why they’re coming?”

“Because they want something,” Ennie said. “Usually it’s an attempt to bully resources out of either us or the sector council. Last time, they wanted an entire continent on one of our colonies, and what they offered in return was their ‘benevolent gratitude.’ I don’t know if you’ve ever seen vid of what they do to their worlds, but old Earth strip-mining’s got nothing on how they chew a planet down to dead rock.”

“So why give them anything?”

Ennie sighed. “Because we’re trying to be a force for peace in this sector, so they don’t all go back to sniping at each other, pirating each other’s ships, dropping mines in shipping lanes, shit like that. And diplomacy only works long-term if you include everyone, even the ones you don’t like. So we try to set a good example, when we can.”

“I get that,” Mackie said. “I just don’t get ‘can’ and ‘Joxto’ in the same sentence. You know whatever they want is going to be too much.”

She was silent for a while, kicking her feet gently. “This is not public knowledge, but about half a standard year ago, one of the independent deep survey ships, the *Archaeopteryx*, reported back to Earth that it had found a decent system with a lot of ice and a habitable planet with a very young ecosystem, way the hell out in the ass-end of nowhere, up-spinward from here. Arcx-127C is outside our official territory, but also everyone else’s. We have right of discovery, as long as there’s no indication of sentient or sentience-trajectory life, and there’s already an official science mission on the ground to determine that. It’s supposed to be secret, but, well, whatever really is? So it’s possible that the Joxto got wind of this, and they—” She paused, made a face. “Did your dog just fart?”

Mackie shrugged. “Maybe. He—whoa, yeah.” They got up from their chair and turned up the air handlers for the room, then hesitated for a second before coming back, looking puzzled.

“What?” Ennie asked.

“Thought I heard something in the ducts,” Mackie said. “I’m as bad as Digby, chasing his ghost around the station in his spare time.”

Ennie laughed. “Some ghosts are more real than others,” she said. “Just don’t spoil it and tell Digby.”

“Wait. There’s something really in here?”

“Yep. I’ve even seen it once or twice, out of the corner of my eye. I’m pretending I don’t know, for a lot of reasons, but at the top of the list is, it’s harmless. Don’t go looking for it, okay? I know you’re going to want to, but in deep survey circles they’re considered good luck, as long as you don’t scare them away.”

“‘And a good south wind sprung up behind; the Wihliwah did follow, and every day, for food or play, came to the mariner’s hollo,’” Mackie recited.

“Coleridge,” Ennie said. “Though I don’t think the bad luck runs as deep as the ancient mariner’s. Or at least I hope not.”

“I didn’t think Wihliwah were real,” Mackie admitted. “You know how the deepers like to yank everyone’s air lines about stuff they claim they’ve seen out there.”

“In fact, I do,” Ennie said. “Deep survey is where I started my service. But the Wihliwah are real. I do wish I knew what it’s seen, though, and how it got *here*. One more mystery that has to wait. I’m going off to bed because it’s really late now and I’ve got a long day tomorrow; it’s the Okgon Feast of Guug, and while the Okgono Ambassador is pleasant enough company, the feast itself is . . . sticky. Very sticky. And undignified, at least from a human perspective. I have a formal uniform made out of low-tac plastic just for this event.”

“I don’t want to know, do I?”

“No, you don’t,” Ennie said. She got up, and straightened her uniform. “Good night,

Chief.”

“Good night, Commander,” Mackie said. “Sweet dreams.”

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The Okgono Ambassador was an impressively not-at-all-humanoid alien. Over her two decades of service, Ennie had concluded that most aliens had at least something about them that you could look at and say, *well, that's not too different from us*, but it was more akin to an enormous, yellow-and-red striped sea cucumber, whose surface was lined with rows of eyes, interspersed with rows of tiny sucker-like mouths.

Each embassy suite had its own dedicated environmental systems for the well-being and comfort of its inhabitants, and while the Okgono atmosphere was breathable to humans, it was kept at such high humidity that there were wisps of mist trailing along the floor, which was currently covered in a vast array of fruits and fruit-like sweets from over thirty worlds, many outside Ennie's own experience. She had brought a basket of persimmons, goji berries, and plums as a gift, and had carefully wrapped her shoes in plastic covers with a nubby, high-friction sole. It was going to get slippery.

The Dzenni Representative, Qasi, was already there, and though the distinctly panther-like alien did not generally tolerate shoes, she wore a similar type of booties for the occasion. The Aobri Representative, festive colors painted onto its exoskeleton with scented paints, was hopping excitedly up and down on its trio of legs, while the Gwobi Duet lurked in the corner anxiously, their perpetually intertwined arms fluttering back and forth like they were having a tug-of-war with themselves. The Ijt Ambassador had, as always, sent her apologies; high humidity and sticky flecks of fruit flying everywhere were a poor mix with feathers. The other ambassadors and representatives had either not been invited or not replied, and Ennie did not ask who was which.

The Okgono began to speak, by clicks and whistles from its hundred mouths, and Ennie listened intently to the translation in her earpiece. “Welcome, galaxy friends!” the ambassador was saying. “Thank you for celebrating the bounty of Guug with me today. Guug travels all the life-bearing worlds and the proof of Guug's blessings is before us.” The ambassador shuffled forward, and gently rolled some round, Okgono fruit across the floor. “All the worlds have foods of Guug, whether they grow on trees or vines or on the spines of the pleasant Yorgogim. We reaffirm our gratitude!”

The ambassador smashed the fruit in front of them with its face, then rolled atop it, back and forth until the pulp and juice of it clung to its body.

“I present you with gifts of Guug from Earth,” Ennie said, and as the small speaker clipped to her shoulder translated that to the appropriate clicks, she placed the plums on the floor in front of the Okgono.

The ambassador lumbered forward and squashed the plums as it had the others, adding to the mess accumulating on its skin, and splattering a line of reddish juice across Ennie's legs. *Oh well*, she thought, *that didn't take long*.

The squashing of fruit took about an hour, and by the end all of them were thoroughly sticky and covered in a sickly sweet goo. One by one the other ambassadors and representatives made their excuses and left, until only Ennie remained. After they were all gone, the ambassador would exude polyps into the fruit on its skin, where they would grow into larval Okgono and in a few months be shipped home to be raised on Okgon, and the ambassador's suite would be thoroughly cleaned while it cocooned itself on the ceiling and shed its outer layers. It was, thankfully, a largely private sequence.

As she retrieved her basket from a corner, picking it up carefully with as few fingers as possible while wondering how long it would take before her hair stopped smelling of fruit, the Okgono Ambassador spoke again. “I understand the Joxto are returning,” it said.

“Yes,” Ennie said. “We expect them in about a week.”

“We will not greet them,” the ambassador said. “You will make polite apologies for us?”

“Of course,” Ennie said. “I’m sure they will understand.”

“Understanding does not matter,” the Okgono said. “They are a terrible, greedy, contrary people, and it is a further blessing of Guug that I will not have to be in their presence. Thank you for your understanding of our practical circumstances, and your excellent diplomacy in wishing them my best, when no civilized peoples would wish them any such thing.”

“I’m sorry that the Joxto have been such trouble for you, and I will convey your apologies,” Ennie said.

“It is to our benefit that humans lie so easily and so well on our behalf,” the Okgono Ambassador said. “May the Blessings of Guug go with you and your viable spawn for generations, Commander Niagara; Guug has certainly withdrawn its love from the Joxto. You may now depart.”

Ennie left, wondering if, when the Joxto arrived, she could possibly build a cocoon of her own and refuse to leave it until they had departed again.

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Three long showers and a fitful nap later, Ennie reluctantly left her quarters and headed down to the kitchen. She was not in a mood to eat with others, and the idea of even *seeing* something sweet-looking made her feel borderline ill. Most of the station crew did not have unfettered access to the kitchens, but the commander was an exception, not just because of her rank but also because she’d made it clear that she would not get in their way, mistreat or lose equipment, or make off with anything without checking that it was okay first.

The coffee machine was, in one of humanity’s oldest and most sacred covenants, fair game, with the caveat that if you finished the pot, you set it to make another.

Once that was done, she settled down at one of the prep stations, mug of hot black coffee in front of her, and let out a long, exhausted sigh. It was early afternoon, lunch had been done without her, and other than the hum of the autowash and gentle murmurs of something simmering several stations away, the kitchen was quiet. *If only*, she thought, just as she heard one of the doors on the far side of the kitchen open, *it could have stayed like this a while longer.*

It was Fred from gardening, along with Leize, the station’s head chef; Fred was—as he almost always was, every time she saw him outside of the garden ring itself—carrying a crate. Most of their produce was imported from nearby ag worlds like Beenjai and Moritau, but they supplemented as they could with home-grown, more as a matter of pride than practicality. “. . . not ripe yet,” Fred was saying. “I had to rearrange some growboxes about a month ago when number six failed, and the tomatoes took the move badly. Got the replacement unit in a few days ago, and once I’ve got it running things should be back to normal. I hope.”

“Great, just in time for the damned Joxto to stuff their faces with all our best food,” Leize said.

“Do the Joxto even like tomatoes?” Fred asked.

“Does it matter? They eat constantly. They’d eat everything in front of them even if it made them sick just to make sure no one else got any,” Leize said. “Of all the species we’ve ever had to deal with, they’re the fucking wor—”

Leize stopped mid-word as she spotted Ennie sitting at the counter, both her hands still wrapped around her coffee mug. “Commander,” she said, blushing. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Enjoying the quiet,” Ennie said.

“Sorry, Commander. Let me make it up to you,” Leize said. She went to one of the

fridges and pulled out a bowl, throwing it in the warmer, as Fred stowed the vegetables. When it beeped thirty seconds later, she carried over the hot bowl and set it in front of Ennie.

"I'm really not hungry," Ennie said, the texture and odor of squashed fruit still far too fresh in her mind.

"Yes, you are. I can tell by how cranky you are," Leize said. She popped open the bowl to reveal yellow rice with a subtle, spicy aroma. "It's the opposite of sweet. Saffron, worth ten thousand times its weight in water out here."

Ennie had to admit it smelled good. She took the fork Leize held out to her, scooped out a tiny amount of rice, and stuck it dutifully in her mouth.

All of a sudden, she was starving and had stuffed several more forkfuls in her mouth before she realized how undignified that must look, and caught the grin on Leize's face. She swallowed. "Pretty good," she said. "Sorry for snapping at you."

"Apology accepted. Want more? You should have more."

Ennie looked down at her bowl, and the bits of rice scattered embarrassingly around it on the counter. "Uh . . . I'm going to finish this in my office," she said. "If you wouldn't mind . . . ?"

"I'd be happy to bring up more, and fresh coffee," Leize said.

"Thank you," Ennie breathed out. Almost guiltily she picked up the remains of her coffee and hustled herself away before she could cry at the poor woman for her calm thinking and kindness, which would definitely be awkward for everyone.

No one was in the lift, and she bypassed the hallway past station ops to her private office and pressed her free hand against the doorplate. The lights automatically brightened as she stepped in, and stopped in her tracks in horror. Sitting next to her desk console, there was a *fruit*. Something bluish purple and mottled, about the size of an orange, with a bumpier exterior. It was not any kind she'd seen before, but it didn't matter, it was *on her desk*.

She turned just as Leize arrived outside her office with a tray of more rice and a steaming carafe. "Okay," she said. "I'm sorry I was cranky, and tomorrow I might think this is funny, or probably the day after tomorrow, but this was too soon."

"What are you talking about?" Leize asked.

"*That*," Ennie said, and stepped back, gesturing sharply at the unwanted thing.

Leize set down the tray and picked up the fruit. "I didn't put this here, and none of the rest of my people even have access to your office. And anyway, I don't even know what this is. I've never seen anything like it," she said. She sniffed it. "Smells great, though. You want to . . . ? No, sorry."

Ennie sat down wearily behind her desk and poured hot coffee into the cold dregs in her mug, then tapped her console. "Station systems, who has accessed my office?"

"You are the first today," the station's computer system responded.

"Okay, who was in here between when I left last night and when I entered just now?"

"No one has accessed your office in the interim," the station said.

"Then how did this fruit get here?" Ennie asked. "And what even is it?"

"There is no information about how it came to be in your office," the station replied. "Also, I find no match for it in the local datasphere. No record of it exists."

That last seemed as unlikely as the fruit appearing by magic without someone opening the door. "Keep searching. Drop a query out to SolNet if you have to," she said. "If it got here, someone knows what it is."

"May I take it?" Leize asked.

"Oh, please, yes, take it away," Ennie said.

"While you eat your rice—all of it, because I'll be mad if you waste my saffron—I'll see if I can find out what this is, and if I can't, I'm gonna take it down to the science lab and get it scanned and sequenced. If it's not toxic, it could be tasty," Leize said,

then added, “not tasty tomorrow, though. Maybe tasty the day after tomorrow. Still too soon?”

Ennie shook her head. “Still too soon.”

Leize stuck the fruit in one of her pockets. “Hey, I have an idea how it got here. Maybe the Great Guug itself has blessed you with this miraculous gift, and you should devote the rest of your life to its daily worship.”

“Please get out,” Ennie begged. Leize grinned and took off.

\* \* \*

On its way through the ducts from the station commander’s private office, Bako found a crawly thing. Ey attempted to greet it, but it pinched em with snappy mouth pieces, and concerned it might be one of the crawly things that chews indiscriminately on mechanical and electronic vitals, ey ate it.

It was crunchy and sour and full of wiggly pokey bits and not at all good, and ey were certain that even Qasi’s sauces would not have made it any better. Ey considered it best thought of as a small act in compensation to a station unwittingly acting as eir host, and determined to just not notice any more crawly things for a while, and thus not feel responsible for them.

Ey did hope, however, that the commander appreciated the gift ey’d left behind. Some things were hard to drag through the tiny cracks and spaces, and harder still not to eat along the way.

\* \* \*

Captain Vincente was down in the *Hermit’s Lantern’s* officers’ lounge catching up on the last three Marsball games he’d missed while in jumpspace. He held a bottle of the Beenjai stout that Commander Niagara had sent over, while on his lap he had a plate and the last third or so of a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich on wonderful sourdough. Though his mission had been to provide backup support for the imminent arrival of the Joxto, not to enjoy himself, he had to admit he liked it here. So did his crew, though they were generally happy for any change of scenery.

Six more days until things got harder for everyone, and without knowing what the Joxto wanted, it was impossible to fully prepare. *A few more of these stouts, he thought, and I won’t care.*

The Titan Moonshots’ designated hitter had just knocked one so far out of the park the ball got caught in a slug field when Vincente heard the door open behind him, and he paused the game with deep regret.

It was Alli, his assistant. “You have a call,” she said.

Vincente was going to ask if it was important, but Alli wouldn’t have interrupted him if it wasn’t. “Who from?” he asked.

“EarthInt,” she answered.

Vincente handed her the half-empty bottle of stout and his plate, then brushed the crumbs from his shirt and put his cap back on.

“Ship, put the call through to the lounge screen,” he ordered, and the ship’s mindsystem flickered from the ballgame over to a nondescript Earth white guy with nondescript hair and a nondescript uniform that lacked any meaningful insignia.

“Captain Vincente,” the man said.

“Sir,” Vincente said. It was, lacking other information, a reasonably safe address.

“I am responding to your inquiry off the record, Captain. Is that a problem for you?”

“No, sir,” Vincente said.

“We are saddened to hear of the loss of Willion Beville. He was an excellent commander and a genuinely kind man,” the agent said. “As you likely anticipated, I cannot confirm or deny whether we had a hand in placing him back on Kemon Station under a false identity. As to his previous dismissal . . . you are aware of the details of the incident with the Ponkian delegation?”

"I am," Vincente said.

"Commander Beville had a source, unknown to us but which he considered absolutely trustworthy, that there was going to be an assassination attempt by someone on the station against the Joxto."

"The Joxto? Not the Ponkians?"

"No, Captain," the agent said. "The Ponkians were, unfortunately for both them and Beville's career, the most expedient method in getting the Joxto to immediately withdraw from the station. A more direct approach would have been seen by the Joxto as an obvious ploy; as you might imagine, they are accustomed to other species going to great lengths and fabrications to drive them away."

"So the fact that the Joxto are returning is not a coincidence with Beville being here," Vincente said. Not that he'd ever expected it would be.

"No," the agent said. "Beville's original source is also currently on the station. We don't know their identity, except that they're not one of ours, and may very well be one of the ambassadors or in their retinue. Also, if I was to conjecture, absent any knowledge about it which I can't share with you, so is the original assassin. Or assassins. I trust you will assist Commander Niagara in negotiating an incident-free and not too expensive visit from the Joxto, and if you can also find out who murdered Beville—even though we cannot of course confirm or deny he was working for us—we would be greatly interested in that information."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Vincente said.

The EarthInt agent disconnected.

"Well, fut-nuckers," Vincente said, who made a point of never swearing while wearing his hat. Alli handed him back his sandwich and beer. "Better call the station," he said. "The commander and I need to arrange an opportunity to talk privately."

\* \* \*

Ennie had been born and raised on a sequence of stations and long-run starships, and although she'd had several stints of service planetside before she was reassigned to Kemon Station, she didn't think of planets or moons as places one would desire to spend one's free time. When she was younger she imagined that her take on planets must have been the same as Earthers looking up at their own moon occasionally as a comforting but dismissible accessory to one's life-sustaining home, but of generally little interest. However, the more time she'd spent with the planetborn, the more she found they were fascinated by planets and moons and rocks and small undistinguished chunks of space grit, and would make a point of somehow managing to plant their feet on any they ran across with often the flimsiest of excuses.

The shuttle from the *Hermit's Lantern* was perched on a slight rise on the planet Kemon's sterile, airless regolith, as the captain trudged—if one could use trudge, given his obvious enthusiasm for the task and the minimal gravity—away carrying a large, awkward, octagonal box, from which a thin umbilical connected to the shuttle unspooled behind him.

She followed, carrying the picnic basket and the two beach chairs he'd insisted on, because dirtsidiers were all insane.

Shortly before the umbilical ran out, he stopped in a flat area, turned slowly in place as if critically surveying the view, then dumped the octagon down in a cloud of slow-settling dust. "Here," he said, over their suit comm channel, and Ennie set down the chairs and the picnic basket.

Vincente leaned over the octagon, pressed some buttons, then stepped back. It began to vibrate, the dust that had newly fallen on it shimmying off the sides.

"What is that?" Ennie asked.

"An automatic gazebo," Vincente answered.

"A gazebo?" she asked, confused. "What's it doing?"

“Watch,” he said.

The octagon unfolded itself like a weird origami thing, until it was about four times its original size. Then it began to expand upward, and about five minutes later a clear-walled octagonal hut structure stood in front of them. Vincente unsealed the door and ushered Ennie in; she picked up the basket and chairs again and stepped inside.

Vincente sealed the door from the inside, then tapped the control panels, and the gazebo began to pressurize and fill with air from the shuttle’s reserves. As Ennie watched him with some incredulity, he set up the two beach chairs and then popped open his face shield and sat.

“Uh,” Ennie said. “Are you sure that’s safe?”

“The walls are gel,” he said. “If a meteorite hits us, we’re squashed like bugs, but little particles shouldn’t be a problem.”

Gel canopies—or walls, she supposed, though she’d never seen them used as such—always left a mild distortion to incoming light, a faint blurriness that was constant reassurance. “This looks awfully clear,” she said.

“New technology!” Vincente said. He unsealed the basket and pulled out two bottles of an infamous Tanduou brew, and held one out to her. At her hesitation, he added, “It’s a special polymer that, when stimulated with a certain frequency, goes rigid and clear. If a particle hits, its own kinetic energy disrupts the default structure, and the gel returns to its more viscous form, slowing down the particle and then trapping it when it goes solid again. If you watch carefully, you can sometimes catch it happening. Like raindrops on a windshield.”

As the captain of an Alliance starship, Vincente would have access to much newer technologies than her remote, relatively unimportant, station would. *Hermit’s Lantern* mostly did patrol and relief missions, but could conceivably end up in combat; she didn’t think the captain would tolerate untested technologies on board with that possibility always looming.

*A gazebo, though, is not a weapon of war*, she thought, as she took the bottle and opened her own face shield and folded her hood back to take a long sip. As reputed, the brew—*Kaiju’s Uncle*—was potent enough that she had to suppress a coughing fit.

“So,” she said. “A picnic, huh? Is this what you do for fun?”

Vincente reached into the basket again and pulled out a small box, which when opened proved to have cupcakes in it. “I’m off-duty,” he said. “And you’re off-duty. And there is no one else on this entire planet, so it affords us an opportunity for conversations it is difficult to have any other way. Also, I happened to note that by the local calendar, it’s my birthday. Or it just was. Or it will be. Time is a nightmare when you’re always running around FTL-ing the hell out of everything, so don’t ask how old I am. Too old to do the math. Anyway. Here we are. Cheers.”

She clinked her bottle with his, and took another sip of the noxiously strong brew. “Cheers,” she said.

“So, since we’re out here in private and off duty and everything, tell me, who on the station would want to, say, murder the Joxto?”

Ennie laughed. “Who wouldn’t, is the better question. I haven’t even met them yet and I’m starting to feel aggrieved.”

“Okay, let me rephrase the question: of everyone who might *want* to kill the Joxto, who would actually try it?”

She set down the bottle and leaned forward. “That’s a better question,” she said. “I assume this is about Beville.”

Vincente filled her in on the information he’d gotten from EarthInt, both directly and what he inferred from what carefully wasn’t said, and Ennie thought for several long minutes before picking up the bottle again.

"About a third of my crew has been on board since before the incident with Beville and the Ponkians," she said. "Of the ambassadors and Reps? The Ijt, the Okgono, and the Aobri. Veirak retains assignment of an ambassadorial suite, but they've never actually shown up here. No one wants to offend them by taking it away, so it sits ready but empty. We do very occasionally use it as short-term storage, mostly for dead equipment, completely off the books, but I'm digressing."

"And you don't think the Ijt did it? There was the quill."

"There was the quill, yes. The Ijt do shed them, though not often," Ennie said.

"You trust the Ijt Ambassador?"

"I do," she said. "I have spent the last several days trying to figure out if I lack objectivity because of our friendship, or if that friendship itself is a valid datapoint supporting my gut feeling that she didn't do it."

"She knew Beville was here."

"Yes. She could have lied about that, but she didn't. Also, it would have been physically impossible for her to have injected him via needle, since the Ijt don't really have hands. Chessa—Dr. Reed, my chief medical officer—has determined the Ijt quill toxin didn't spread, meaning Beville was already dead when he was stuck with it."

"Do we know what the real toxin was?"

"None of the common ones. We're still working on it."

"Okay. So let's assume for the moment it wasn't the Ijt. The Okgono?"

"Again, there's a physical difficulty angle, but the hate is certainly there. I looked into it, and it seems it dates back to competing claims between the Okgono and Joxto over a planet in a system between their two borders. During their conflict over it, the planet was rendered uninhabitable. They blame each other. But it was over a standard century ago."

"The Joxto live for two to three hundred years," Vincente said. "The Okgono, we think maybe fifty. They would have mismatched perceptions of how recent an outrage that was. And the Aobri?"

"There are currently four hundred and ninety-three nations on Aobri Home, and in their millennia of recorded history, there has never been what we would think of as a war. Individuals move freely between nations, changing their citizenship at will, and each nation is really more of a club of shared interests or personality characteristics. There are cultural and genetic differences that tend to have clusters in particular nations, but little or no apparent discrimination between them, and new citizens are welcomed. Our ambassador is currently from the Kbakiskbo nation, whose name translates roughly to *introverts who enjoy brief exercises in extroverting*."

"If I was Aobri, I would apparently belong to the nation of *eats dessert before one's main meal*," Vincente said. He reached into the basket and pulled out two wrapped packages of sandwiches, and handed one to Ennie. "Chickenish salad. If you're not full from the cupcake?"

She took it. "Not hardly. I'd be from the nation of *always hungry when worried, and also always worried*," she said. "Needless to say, there is no Aobri nation of *murders neighboring aliens who annoy everybody*."

"And your staff?"

"To the extent that I know them, I trust them. There's not one who has come across as capable of murder, but to be fair there are a lot of staff I just don't know well enough to say," Ennie said. "There are a couple who still resent how Beville was kicked out of his job, but that doesn't fit with also wanting him dead."

Vincente leaned back in his chair and finished his stout. "Maybe there's no connection between the original incident and Beville's death here now."

"I don't buy that," Ennie said.

“Me either,” Vincente said.

Ennie’s handpad chimed. She tapped it, then nodded to herself as she read. “Well, there’s definitely a connection, even if we don’t see it yet,” she said, when she’d finished. At Vincente’s look, she added, “Chessa finally got an analysis on what was injected into Beville’s neck. A lot of air bubbles, and ghost pepper sauce.”

\* \* \*

“What are you doing now?” Bako asked, peering cautiously over the edge of the counter at Qasi, who was using a blade to poke apart an oddly shaped lump on a board.

“Ah!” Qasi said. “Another human thing!”

“That’s . . . not a piece of human, is it?” Bako asked, drawing back, eyes wide.

“No, of course not!” Qasi said, and stuck out her tongue at em. “There is an Earth rare delicacy called fugu, which is a fish with internal elements that are deeply toxic to humans. I had it chemically replicated, and structurally . . . well, not too far off, I think.” She poked the lump with a knife. “I’m going to try to prepare it according to the traditional ways, very skillfully separating the deadly from the delicious. Proof of my success or failure will be in the eating!”

“Oooowah,” Bako said. “Is it toxic to Dzenni?”

“Oh, very probably not, but I don’t actually know,” Qasi said. “The element of danger is, I think, an essential part of the experience.”

“This does not seem a good idea to me,” Bako said. “You were not planning on inviting humans to share?”

Qasi squinted at the lump of replicated fish, wrinkling up her nose as her whiskers twitched. “Perhaps if the first try is a success?”

“No, no no no no,” Bako said. “This is definitely a bad idea, Qasi. If you sicken the humans, you will make great trouble.”

“And you’re one to advise on avoiding trouble?” Qasi asked. “Security came around here asking me questions, saying they’d heard you in the ducts, did I know anything, and so on. You losing your touch?”

“I am not,” Bako said. “I make no sounds.”

“They heard you, though.”

“Not me,” Bako said. Ey tilted eir head to the side and flattened eir tufted ears back, as ey often did while thinking. “I must go check something. Please do not bad fish the commander.”

Bako dropped out of sight on the other side of the counter, and was gone without a sound.

“I would not ‘bad fish’ the commander,” Qasi protested, outraged, though it was clearly already too late for a rebuttal. “It is perfectly good fish!”

She picked up a piece between her claws, and with all the proud defiance a two-meter-tall catlike alien could muster, popped it in her mouth.

\* \* \*

“Chessa!” Leize strode into the med office. “I need your scanners!”

Chessa was sitting with her feet up on her desk and half a burrito clutched in both hands, as screens around her displayed raw data and spectrum analyses. She blinked at Leize, in a way that distinctly said *this better be good*, and Leize thumped the weird bluish fruit from the commander’s office down on the desk as if throwing down a gauntlet.

“I have gone through every single food database there is over the last three days, checked every horticulture and xenobiology source out there, for every single planet and moon and rock colony anyone has ever even *thought* might exist, and I can’t find this *anywhere*,” Leize said. “I want you to scan it, so maybe we can at least figure out if it’s related to something, or get any clue at all. Whatever it takes, I need to know

what it is."

"That is easy," said a smooth voice from behind Leize, and she whirled around to find the Dzenni representative lying on one of the med beds, looking distinctly not herself.

"What do you mean, 'that's easy'?" Leize demanded.

"That's a cholosfefia," the Dzenni said.

"Yeah? Then how come it wasn't in any of the databases?" Leize asked.

"That is also easy," the Dzenni said. "It is because it is extinct."

Leize spread out her hands over the fruit, presenting it as evidence. "Clearly not," she said.

The Dzenni shrugged, then grimaced. "That one I don't know. Two out of three seems quite decent, though. They were reputed to be one of the most universally delicious foods in the galaxy, from a planet called Tysfe that was destroyed in some pointless territorial squabble. Although I also have to say, that wrap food you are eating, Dr. Reed, also smells very compelling."

"Are you going to give in and tell me what you ate that made you sick?" Chessa asked.

The Dzenni sighed and put her head back down on the bed. "No," she said.

"Then no burrito for you," Chessa said, and took an extra-large bite out of it for emphasis, losing a small cluster of beans down onto her lab coat. "You've still got another twenty minutes at least before the chemistry sim finishes and I can fab a remedy for you, and you're gonna have to watch me eat this whole thing. And maybe one more."

"Humans," the Dzenni said, and rolled over to face the other way on the bed.

"Tysfe, huh?" Leize said. She picked up the fruit again. "Guess I can start over with that."

"Let me know what you find out," Chessa said. "It must have come from one of the ambassadors, I guess? If it's extinct, maybe we can get seeds or some sort of generative component from it, grow some of our own. You could ask Fred in gardening."

"He's busy assembling yet another replacement plant incubator, but when he's done I'll ask," Leize said. "Thanks, Representative Qasi."

The Dzenni waved one clawed hand in recognition, groaned, and curled up further on the bed as she pulled the privacy curtain closed around her.

\* \* \*

"Four days," Digby said. He stuck a piece of popcorn on the end of one of the long forks his boss had confiscated from the Dzenni Representative, and dipped it in the pot full of cheese sauce. "This is going to be a disaster."

"That's what the Joxto count on, I think," Mackie said. "Technologically they're behind everyone else, so they use brute force of personality. We just got some extra chaos of our own on top of whatever they're bringing."

"You think the commander can handle this?" Digby asked. "I mean, I know you two have a thing for each other—"

"Do not," Mackie protested, their cheeks turning red as they stabbed their own fork into the pot and immediately lost their piece.

"—do *too*, which is fine and none of my business, but I'm asking from an objective, administrative standpoint," Digby said. "I just want to know we're as solid as we can be."

"Yeah," Mackie said. "The commander can handle it, if it can be handled at all. She's not as methodical or as unflappable as Beville was, obviously not counting the Ponkian thing, but she's better at improvising on the fly in more constructive ways, and she's a lot more tenacious than she lets on. And we've got Vincente to ride backup. Having a warship parked off station has to carry some extra weight."

"Okay," Digby said. He dipped another piece of popcorn into the pot. "This is kind of gross."

“Yeah,” Mackie said. “I like the forks, though. We could duel! En garde, you foul plebian wretch! I shall—”

Digby had paused halfway through knocking Mackie’s next piece into the pot. “Ssssh,” he said. “You hear that?”

Mackie turned their head and listened intently. “In the ducts,” they said.

“My ghost!” Digby whispered joyfully, and stood up, carefully and quietly picking up his chair and carrying it toward the far wall.

“Digby, you should let it be. It’s . . .” Mackie trailed off, as the faint scuffling amplified by the ducts grew louder and more frantic, and there was a high-pitched keening wail from inside. “That’s not right. Get that vent open!”

Digby was taller, so he stood up on his chair and released the filter module from the front of the vent plate, and handed it down to Mackie’s waiting hands. Then he reached in, feeling around in the dark. “Something sticky,” he said, then drew his breath in sharply before pressing himself up against the opening until he could get his entire arm up to his shoulder in. “Get a towel or something!” he yelled.

Mackie grabbed a folded tablecloth from the cupboard and held it up, and Digby deposited something long and furry and oozing a clear, sap-like liquid from deep gouges in its head and sides. “Is that . . . ?” Digby asked, as Mackie gently folded the tablecloth around it and took off for the door.

“Wihliwah,” Mackie confirmed. They tapped their badge comm as they ran, and Digby tried his best to keep up; he might be taller, but his boss was faster. “Medical, this is Chief Mackie. Emergency incoming!”

\* \* \*

“You all know Captain Vincente of the *Hermit’s Lantern* already, I’m sure, but he’s joining us this evening for our senior staff meeting. I apologize for the late hour, but we’ve got three days before the Joxto arrive, and a lot to cover,” Ennie said. “First, Dr. Reed, how is our unexpected patient?”

Chessa snorted. “When is one ever expected?” she said. “But the Wihliwah is stable. Representative Qasi’s help and knowledge has been invaluable; she tells me the Wihliwah’s name is Bako, and ey come and go on the station by a means she’s not aware of, but they have been friends for a long time. When she last saw em, ey were concerned about Digby’s ‘ghost noises’ in the ducts, which ey insisted ey were not responsible for.”

“I would have disregarded that, except that clearly something else is in the ducts, too,” Mackie said. “Immediately after transporting the injured Wihliwah to med, I dispatched three dozen security bobs into the duct systems. So far we have located signs of passage, and the likely site of the encounter between the Wihliwah and air assailant, but no actual hostile or hostiles have been located yet. I’ve got Digby checking all the ductwork vents, while Filo here’s got his ops team checking engineering to make sure there’s no compromise there. Who or what it is, or what they want, is a mystery. If—”

They paused as Leize came into the room and set a large tray of mini tacos down in the center of the table. “Sorry I’m late,” she said, then reached into her pocket and set the blue fruit, a little more bruised and worse for wear, down on the table beside it. “Speaking of mysteries, this is a cholosfefia, from the planet Tysfe. It is, according to multiple sources, extinct. I can’t tell you how it came to be here, but—”

“Leize . . . ?” Ennie interrupted gently.

“Hang on, Commander. Here is what I’ve learned about Tysfe so far. It was a small planet with a thriving native ecosystem about which remarkably few specific details are available beyond that it was a source of what was considered some of the most delicious, almost universally edible, utterly irresistible, and possibly addictive fruit in the galaxy. Said fruit—*this* fruit—was coveted jealously by two different

spacefaring species whose expanding territories came to overlap Tysfe at about the same time, resulting in competing discovery claims and, eventually, the destruction of the planet in a battle over its possession. Those two species? The Okgono and the Joxto."

"Huh," Ennie said.

Chessa pointed to the fruit. "Can I borrow that?" she asked.

Leize shrugged. "I think technically it's the commander's," she said.

Ennie grimaced and shook her head. "Do what you want, Dr. Reed. I'm still off fruit for a while, no matter the reputation."

Chessa stood up and snagged the fruit and three of the mini tacos from the table. "Give me twenty minutes," she said, and left.

"Okay, in the meantime, what do you have on Beville's movements since he got here?" Ennie asked.

Filo, head of facilities and operations, spoke up. He was a thickset man with a ridiculously long, blond moustache with curled ends dyed pink. "Garrow—Beville—was a perfectly competent electrician, did some first-rate work on the communications relay upgrade project not long after he arrived, was quick about work tickets, and in between was working hard on inspecting all our current station systems. I don't know why that didn't raise my suspicions."

"Aren't those what he was supposed to be doing?" Ennie asked.

"Certainly, Commander. But it is tedious work, and not something most people are enthusiastic about," Filo said.

"We think he was using it as cover to search the station," Mackie added. "He'd done most of the maintenance and common areas and was just starting to work his way into the embassy rings before his death. The day before he'd done the Okgono suite."

"The Okgono Ambassador didn't recognize him?" Ennie asked.

"Apparently he wore a hat. And fake glasses," Mackie said. Ennie blinked at them, and they added, "I mean, if you're a giant space slug-squash, how easy is it to tell individual humans apart anyway?"

"So you're saying next year I could just lend one of you my uniform and send you to the Feast of Guug?" she asked.

Every single person at the table gave her the enormous satisfaction of being suddenly very uncomfortable-looking. "I am *joking*," she said. "Probably. Now what do we know about the thing that attacked the Wihliwah in the ducts, and do we think that's what Beville was looking for?"

Mackie shrugged, palms up. "Whatever it is, it seems at least as adept at hiding and sneaking around as the Wihliwah was. It's gone to ground somewhere. I *will* find it; it's just a matter of time."

"Time is not something we have an awful lot of," Captain Vincente chimed in. "I can loan you some of my ship's bots if you'd like."

"Yes, please," Mackie said. "That would speed things up."

"Okay. I'd like a live holo map of the bot movement, and overlay onto that everywhere on the station that Beville went during his putative search," Ennie said. "Anything that helps us start connecting the dots is vital at this point. We're running out of time before the Joxto arrive, and if we haven't found anything by then—"

The conference system chimed to indicate an incoming connection. "Commander," Chessa's voice spoke, somewhat urgently. "Most growing things intake gases from the air of their environment, which leaves a chemical imprint. I know where this fruit came from. There's only one space on this station where the internal environment matches: the Veirakan suite."

"That's not impossibly far from where we think the Wihliwah was attacked," Mackie said, already rising to their feet.

“There’s more,” Chessa said. “Not as urgent, but still something you should know.”

“Meet us at the Veirakan suite and tell me then,” Ennie said. “Station, seal those rooms. Use biohazard containment protocols: not so much as a molecule of air in or out until we get there.”

“Yes, Commander,” the station computer answered. “And it is done.”

“Mackie, call Digby and have him meet us there, and get the rest of your team on alert. Filo, you come too. Let’s go,” Ennie said, and paused halfway out the door to look back at Filo, who had picked up the entire plate of remaining mini tacos. At her glare, he set them down, and glumly followed the rest out.

\* \* \*

Digby arrived outside the Veirakan suite breathing heavily, having nearly run into a half-dozen people on his dash up from the security offices, and causing poor Fred from gardening to drop a crate when he skidded around a corner and nearly flattened the man against the corridor wall by surprise.

The commander and his boss were there, along with Captain Vincente and Filo, and before he could catch his breath to speak, Dr. Reed came pounding around the corner and skidded into him.

“Everybody armed?” the commander asked. Only Chessa wasn’t, which seemed fine by both of them. “Then let’s go. Station, release the door lock.”

The door opened, and Mackie and Digby went in first. The suite was filled with a soft yellow glow from rows of growing beds, filled with twisty, curling purple vines laden with familiar blue, bumpy fruit nearly reaching the ceiling. In one small corner, a trio of green plants dangling bright red peppers was nestled among them.

“Filo, how many defective beds have we replaced in the past two years?” the commander asked.

“Four,” Filo said. “But there were more before then, plus Fred talked me into ordering three more spares last year when it was clear—reportedly clear—that they were unreliable and we should have extras on hand in case of an emergency.”

“I nearly hit Fred in the hallway,” Digby said. “He could have been coming from here.”

“Station, where is Fred right now?”

“Fred turned off his lapel locator approximately four minutes ago,” the station answered.

“Awesome. Station, wake up my assistant, Gao, and tell him to go get someone from security for backup. Find and detain Fred. Tell him to take a weapon,” Ennie said.

“Yes, Commander,” the station answered.

It was impossible to see very far into the room with the vast tangle of plants filling it. “Chessa and Digby, go to the left,” Ennie said. “Captain, you and Filo go right. Mackie, you’re with me.”

“Always,” Mackie answered.

“Station, lock the door behind us,” Ennie said. “I have no idea what we’re looking for in here, but I know Fred doesn’t fit in the ducts.”

Digby and Chessa headed to the left, Chessa a half step behind him and occasionally kicking the vines trailing onto the floor out of her way. “What are these things?” Digby whispered.

“They’re called cholosfefia,” Chessa answered back, under her breath. “Supposedly one of the most delicious things in the entire galaxy, except—”

“Seriously?” Digby said. He gently tugged one of the fruit free and bit into it, and let out an involuntary, muffled groan of pleasure.

—Except they’ve been modified to be poisonous,” Chessa hissed at him.

Digby opened his mouth and let the half-chewed piece of fruit fall off his tongue to the floor, inexpressibly sad to see it go. “Ew,” Chessa said. “Really?”

“You said it was poisonous!”

Chessa rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Two separate poisons, no less, both deadly. But specifically, and only, to the Okgono and the Joxto respectively. They do say revenge is sweet."

Digby stared at the rest of the fruit in his hand, paralyzed between wanting to take another bite and also drop it into the bed medium. In the end, dropping it just barely won out, and out of a need to reinforce to himself his decisiveness, he threw it through the vines into the heart of the bed.

There was a flurry of movement, and something leapt out at him, wrapping itself around his face and eyes before he could get more than a glimpse of purplish scales. "Aaaaah!" he yelled, grabbing it with his free hand and trying to pull it away as it scratched at his head and neck.

Chessa grabbed his weapon out of his other hand. "You, stop! Let him go!" she shouted, and whatever the thing was it stopped tightening around his head, and he felt it moving and uncoiling. Not enough for him to see again, though now at least he could breathe. He could hear the others running their way.

It was Commander Niagara who spoke next. "Whoever you are," she said, "if you want to talk, I need you to let my officer go first."

The thing wrapped around his head quivered for a moment, then in a raspy but distinct voice, asked, "What is there to talk about?"

"Tysfe, for starters," Ennie said, and suddenly the thing let him go and slipped to the floor. Digby stepped back and away as quickly as he could.

The alien was purplish blue and serpentine, with several small pairs of clawed arms along the upper part of its body, and a single large, reptilian eye. It swayed side to side in an almost hypnotic rhythm. "What do you know of Tysfe?" it asked.

"Not much," Ennie said. "But I'm listening."

"Why? You shelter our murderers here," the alien said.

"And you murdered one of my crew and assaulted our Wihliwah guest," Ennie said.

"And this fruit is all poisoned," Chessa added, and Digby saw Filo drop one back into the bed behind him in alarm. "You were going to murder the Okgono and Joxto."

"I did not kill any of your crew," the alien said. "I have the right to seek justice."

"Retribution is not justice."

"It is when it is all you have left," the Tysfi said.

"Are you the last of your kind?" Chessa asked. She still had her energy pistol pointed at it, as did Mackie and Vincente.

"Does it matter?" the alien asked. "We are a handful of exiles with no planet, no home. We were gardeners and we were happy, and we were happy to share, and those two . . . one insisted their god gave them the right to take our world, the other insisted their insatiable appetite did, and in fighting one another, we were destroyed. Two years I have been here, planning for our final justice, and only two *days* away from success you destroy us again."

"We never would have known if you hadn't killed Beville," Mackie said.

"I killed no one here," the alien said.

"What about the Wihliwah?" Chessa asked. "You almost killed it."

The alien quivered for a moment. "It discovered me," it said. "I was afraid. We are gardeners, not soldiers."

"And Fred? You're working with him?" Ennie said. "He set up these beds for you?"

"He expects to make himself richest among all humans," the Tysfi said. "That is all he cares for. Any mayhem he has caused is to protect his interests in my crop."

Digby sighed, the glorious taste still lingering on his lips. "This alien here—sorry, whatever your name is, I don't know—with those little arms? I don't think he could have taken down Beville any more than the Ijt could have."

"I agree," Chessa said. "Though it could be stronger than it looks."

“Fred believed the Ijt and Beville were working together,” the alien said. “He called them his enemies.”

Mackie tapped their comm. “Station, wake up Levi, apologize for calling him up off-shift, and get him up to the ambassadorial ring. No one in or out, whatever force is necessary.”

“Yes, Chief,” the station answered.

The commander glanced at Captain Vincente. “Can I consult with you for a moment?” she asked.

He nodded, and they walked some distance away so that their voices were too low to make out over the hum of the grow box ventilators. When they returned, nearly ten minutes later, they both looked somehow . . . smug? Satisfied, anyhow.

“You admit you were planning on killing the Okgono and Joxto ambassadors?” Ennie asked the alien.

“Yes,” it answered. “I have no regrets for what I intended to do, nor would I cease to continue as planned if you had not intervened. Whatever ‘justice’ you intend for me, there is no greater punishment than my failure here.”

“I will address the matter of justice for your actions when you return,” Ennie said. “Captain Vincente wishes to discuss the matter with your people, and if you want any hope for justice *for* your people, you will need to help him.”

Everyone stared, until the alien seemed to deflate, curling down onto the floor. “Whatever you wish,” it said.

“Great,” the Commander said. “Now the rest of you—go find Fred, before—”

The station alarms went off. “Commander,” the station said, “there is an emergency in the medical facility.”

\* \* \*

The human was screaming. Qasi thought that was very unpleasant of him, considering he had started all the trouble in the first place, and would very much like to have said so except it was hard to speak when she had her fangs deeply embedded in his shoulder.

Bako, who was being clutched by the neck in the man’s fist, was awake and staring at him. Ey had shifted eir fur through colors until ey reached a pseudo-transparency, but with several large medical patches covering eir wounds, and a hand holding em, it was not a very effective defense mechanism. “Qasi would like you to put me down,” ey said, as loudly as ey could.

The human was still holding the long knife he had taken out of his crate of produce, but his hand was shaking so badly Qasi wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep a hold of either it or Bako. “Get off me,” he squeaked out, “or I’ll cut it. Or I’ll snap its neck.”

Qasi was considering the diplomatic and functional implications of just tearing the human’s arm off at the shoulder, which would certainly remove the knife as a threat, when Commander Niagara, Chief Mackie, and Digby burst through the door, weapons pointed toward her and the human and Bako.

“Put your weapons down, or else!” the human shouted.

“You first. You’re losing a lot of blood, Fred,” the commander said.

“I know the sup—superstitions about the Wihliwah. Spacers everywhere—not just humans, but all over this side of the galaxy—will believe this station and everyone in it is cursed. It’ll be the end of your command, the end of this place,” Fred said.

“You murdered Garrow,” Ennie said.

“Beville, you mean. Yes, of course I did,” Fred said. “He was here to ruin everything, *again*. I had to shut down our whole operation when you came on board, inspecting everything, like the busybody you are. One more shutdown and maybe the Tysfi would give up and leave and take the plumps with it, and I’d have nothing.”

“Plumps?” Mackie asked.

"Like plum? Plump? Better-sounding than cholofuckitwhatever it's called. Hell, none of you people know shit about marketing anyway," Fred babbled. His face was going pale and the shaking was growing worse. "I wanted the Ijt, who was conspiring with Beville, but this will do better."

"The Ijt was not conspiring," Bako said. "I was helping the human, Beville."

"What?" Fred exclaimed. "You? How can you possibly have been helping him?"

"I listen, in the walls and ceilings," Bako said. "But it is hard to hear where words come from, sometimes, and the crawly bugs distract me."

"I can't fucking believe it," Fred said. "A fucking alien caterpillar-squirrel? I swear—"

Qasi growled, warning him to drop Bako now, because she still wasn't feeling entirely well herself, and if he tried to hurt em she was going to have to do something drastic that neither of them would enjoy. At nearly the same moment, Bako squirmed around in his loosening grip and bit his hand.

Fred screamed and dropped Bako. Qasi let go of him with her teeth and slammed him to the floor in a puddle of his own blood, holding him down with one foot, and then to her own surprise and presumably his, barfed on him.

"Sorry," she said, to the humans in the doorway. "Bad tummy."

Fred was still screaming, clutching his hand. Where Bako had bit him, black raised lines were spreading up his arm, like fractals of frost on glass. Commander Niagara stepped forward and kicked the knife away, and then Dr. Reed knelt down next to Fred. "Venom?" she asked.

"It will subside," Bako said.

"It will, however, leave a permanent mark," Qasi said.

"And it will always hurt some. I am sorry," Bako added. "I was frightened."

Dr. Reed jabbed Fred with a sedative, then when he went still, cut away his shirt to reveal the deep, ragged punctures Qasi had left in his shoulder.

"Enough people will know what Bako's mark means," Ennie said. "I wouldn't want to be him. Good job stopping him, Qasi."

Qasi made a face. "He came in looking for a hostage, but no one else was here but us. He didn't know I was behind the curtain. I pressed the alarm and then . . . I snuck up behind him and bit him. It was all I could think of, in the moment."

"It's okay," Ennie said.

Qasi shook her head. "Humans don't taste nearly as good as I always thought they would," she lamented. "May I get some water?"

\* \* \*

"The Joxto have arrived," Mackie informed Ennie. "Their ship should be in dock in about thirty-five minutes, and they are already making demands about their accommodations and food provisions."

"Excellent. When they arrive, please explain that because we did not know they were arriving, we have not had time to prepare food or quarters for them, but are working on it as quickly as we are able," Ennie said. She checked her handpad for the time. "Escort them to the main conference room, as we discussed. Probably best if we get the Okgono Ambassador there first."

"The ambassador has raised strenuous objections," Mackie said.

"As expected. You may inform the ambassador that this meeting is mandatory in order for them to retain their assigned space on this station and in the sector council."

"Oh, I wish I could be there for this," Mackie said wistfully.

Ennie laughed. "You can watch remotely, just in case I've underestimated how angry everyone is going to be. And then, when this is all done, you and me are going to have a nice cold victory beer. Or total failure beer, I suppose. Something strong, and more than one of them, either way."

"Your office or mine?"

“Either one,” Ennie said. “Wear something off-duty for me.”

Mackie laughed. “I am on it, Commander,” they said, and disconnected.

She made one more pass through her reports, authorizing documents from the Diplomacy Corps HQ, and Captain Vincente’s latest communications. When she got the alert that the Joxto were on their way to the conference room, she checked her formal dress uniform one last time to make sure it was spotless and wrinkle-free, then gathered up her things and headed there herself.

The Okgono Ambassador was already in the room, on top of a mobile cart that misted water on its body, and spoke up the instant Ennie was through the door. “I object,” it said. “I thought we had an understanding.”

“We did, but new information has come to light,” Ennie said.

“What new information?” the ambassador asked.

“That will be a matter for discussion when everyone is present,” Ennie said. She took her chair at the head of the table and placed her things at her feet, and waited.

Five minutes later, her assistant Gao—also in full dress uniform, which she was not sure she’d seen him wear since the day he came aboard—opened the door and stepped in. “Commander, may I present the Joxto Delegation, Emissary Atuf, and their secondaries Gell and Ulk.”

The Joxto swept into the room.

Swept wasn’t a bad word for it, either; they moved with an eerie grace, almost as if being rolled in by unseen servants. They were tall, an attenuated form in soft, almost glowing gold, with long fingers and a mane of golden fur that ran from the top of their slightly pointy heads down to where, if they were equally humanoid from the back as the front, their butts would be. Each wore a scarf of blue and gold, and it was the third one to enter whose scarf was the longest. It stopped in the doorway as its retinue also stopped abruptly, and all three Joxto stared with their small, beady, bright blue eyes at the Okgono Ambassador.

“We object to this company,” the third Joxto said.

“As you should,” the Okgono said. “You are not fit for it.”

“Ambassadors,” Ennie said. “May I politely request that the hostilities between your peoples, which are your own business with each other and not for me to address or judge, are best set aside for this meeting?”

One of the secondary Joxto gestured at the table. “If we are to feel welcomed here despite that . . . presence, where is the welcoming feast and drink? Your table is bare, Commander.”

“It is, indeed,” Ennie said. “Perhaps next time you should let us know you are coming so we may adequately prepare. Will you sit? Or, if it is unsatisfactory to you, I will not take offense at your departure from my station.”

The Okgono made a sound that the translation device refused to render.

Whatever the Joxto had come all this way to demand, they were clearly not going to be easily deterred from it. All three sat, in order of short-scarf to long-scarf, on the far side of the table from the Okgono’s cart. “We came to discuss a matter,” long-scarf Joxto said.

“Emissary Atuf,” Ennie said, taking her own seat. “We are happy to hear you out.”

The Joxto grinned, or possibly grimaced, and the glimpse of razor-point crimson teeth nearly sent Ennie scrambling out of her seat. *Whoa*, she thought, *someone should have warned me about that*. Though maybe no one had seen a Joxto smile before.

“We are glad for your submissive ears,” the Joxto said. “It has come to our attention that a promising new world has been found, outside your territory, and we—”

“Arcx-127C?” Ennie interrupted.

“Yes,” Atuf snapped. “We—”

"How fortunate!" Ennie interrupted again. "That was exactly the same matter that I was hoping to discuss with you."

The Joxto stared.

"I have no interest in this new world," the Okgono said. "May I now leave?"

"No," Ennie said sharply, not taking her eyes off the Joxto Emissary. When it blinked, she smiled, and tapped at the blank screen of her handpad. "It so happens that I wanted to extend a proposal to both of your peoples regarding this planet. The Alliance would like to see the Joxto and the Okgono together fund the establishment and support of a new colony on this world."

"We also wished to propose a colony," the Joxto said, "but we will not share it with *them*." Atuf pointed at the Okgono.

"Even if we wished a new colony, we would not debase ourselves to live with Joxto filth," the Okgono Ambassador replied.

"You both misunderstand me, I'm afraid," Ennie said. "My proposal is for you to jointly fund the colony, not for either of your people to live there. In fact, it would be a requirement that neither of you ever visit that system."

"Why would we do that?!" the Joxto demanded.

"For once, I agree: why?" the Okgono Ambassador said.

"Because of Tysfe," Ennie said, and the room was very, very silent for several long minutes. When the Joxto began fidgeting under her stare, she smiled again. "The two of your peoples destroyed an entire world with a sentient civilization on it, and then both conspired to cover the crime up."

"There was no life of any sort on Tysfe," the Joxto said. "It was a barren world."

"The Joxto is correct. There was certainly not life," the Okgono said. "Our people, at least, would never commit such an atrocity."

"But if there was? And if you did? Surely the consequences would be an ejection of both your species from the sector council, and a suspension of all treaties, trade, and mutual aid," Ennie said. "Unless . . ."

"It is a moot, and offensive, point," Emissary Atuf said. "Tysfe had nothing and no one upon it, and you cannot prove otherwise."

"Indeed, the entire argument you put to us is specious and without any merit or purpose except to cast aspersions upon the honor of both our peoples," the Okgono Ambassador said. "We will demand a formal apology from the Alliance, from your superiors, Commander Niagara, for this ambush of lies you have put to us."

"We will also demand the same!" the Joxto said.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Ennie said. "So that's a no on my request?" She reached down under the table and brought out a beautiful, ripe cholosfefia, picked just before the Joxto arrived, and set it on the table directly in front of her.

The aliens in the room stared at her, then at it.

"What would Guug want?" she asked, as the Okgono Ambassador began to shake. She turned to the Joxto. "And you—what would your people do without the support of our agricultural outreach? You were starving when we found you."

She picked up the fruit and took a giant, mouth-watering bite out of it. She had not been especially thrilled with this part of her plan, and had intended to over-act it for effect, but as the most glorious, sweet-but-not-too-sweet, tart-but-not-too-tart, smooth flavor filled her mouth, she couldn't help but utter a small gasp of surprise. She had never in her life tasted anything this . . . this . . . *perfect*, the best thing she'd ever eaten, no contest, and enjoying it in front of the nonplussed and raptly silent Joxto and Okgono only added to the pleasure of it all.

Ennie swallowed, and shook her head appreciatively. "Holy shit—pardon me—but holy *shit* that's good. You were saying about Tysfe? Nothing living there at all, no proof? How tragic for us all."

“As I stated, the Okgono peoples are fully committed to making amends, if the Joxto are, for our shared catastrophic error,” the ambassador said, “under the terms of the Earth Alliance’s wisdom in the matter.”

“Yes. We—Yes, we agree. Are . . .” the Joxto asked. All three looked as if they were barely resisting reaching across the table to pluck the half-eaten fruit right out of her hand. “Are there more of those?”

In the back corner of the room, something caught her eye, something small and almost invisible, but she was pretty sure she saw a brief dozen-legged thumbs up before it vanished again. Ennie smiled. “I will have the formal agreements sent to each of you, for your certification and signatures,” she said. “In time, if the displaced refugees of Tysfe successfully reestablish themselves and their gardens, there may be many more where this one came from.”

Picking up her handpad, the purple fruit still in her other hand, she stood. “Thank you both for your cooperation,” she said. She turned and left the conference room, satisfied that she had not lied to either of them. There would be plenty. That they were now deadly to both species . . . well, they hadn’t asked, had they? And the Tysfi still deserved at least a taste of revenge, after all.

For now, she had beer and her best friend waiting.