

THE ANDROID'S DREAM

JOHN SCALZI



The Android's Dream

NOVELS BY JOHN SCALZI

Agent to the Stars

Old Man's War

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The Android's Dream

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John Scalzi

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THE ANDROID'S DREAM

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This book is dedicated to Kevin Stampfl, one of my best friends for years, and a good man to know before and after the collapse of civilization.

Also to Cory Doctorow, Justine Larbalestier, Nick Sagan, Charlie Stross, and Scott Westerfeld, my first live audience as a science fiction writer. Thanks for your attendance then, and your friendship now.

The Android's Dream

chapter 1

Dirk Moeller didn't know if he could fart his way into a major diplomatic incident. But he was ready to find out.

Moeller nodded absentmindedly at his assistant, who placed the schedule of today's negotiations in front of him, and shifted again in his chair. The tissue surrounding the apparatus itched, but there's no getting around the fact that a ten-centimeter tube of metal and electronics positioned inside your colon, a mere inch or two inside your rectum, is going to cause some discomfort.

This much was made clear to Moeller when he was presented with the apparatus by Fixer. "The principle is simple," Fixer said, handing the slightly curved thing to Moeller. "You pass gas like you normally do, but instead of leaving your body, the gas enters into that forward compartment. The compartment closes off, passes the gas into second department, where additional chemical components are added, depending on the message you're trying to send. Then it's shunted into the third compartment, where the whole mess waits for your signal. Pop the cork, off it goes. You interact with it through a wireless interface. Everything's there. All you have to do is install it."

"Does it hurt?" Moeller asked. "The installation, I mean."

Fixer rolled his eyes. "You're shoving a miniature chemistry lab up your ass, Mr. Moeller," Fixer said. "Of course it's going to hurt." And it did.

Despite that fact, it was an impressive piece of technology. Fixer had created it by adapting it from blueprints he found in the National Archives, dating to when the Nidu and humans made first contact decades back. The original inventor was a chemical engineer with ideas of bringing the two races together in a concert that featured humans, with the original versions of the apparatus placed near their tracheas, belching out scented messages of friendship.

The plan fell apart because no reputable human chorus wanted to be associated with the concert; something about the combination of sustained vocal outgassing and the throat surgery required to install the apparatuses made it rather less than appealing. Shortly thereafter the chemical engineer found himself occupied with a federal investigation into the nonprofit he had created to organize the concert, and then with a term in minimum security prison for fraud and tax evasion. The apparatus got lost in the shuffle and slid into obscurity, awaiting someone with a clear purpose for its use.

"You okay, sir?" said Moeller's aide, Alan. "You look a little preoccupied. Are you feeling better?" Alan knew his boss had been out yesterday with a stomach flu; he'd taken his briefings for the today's slate of negotiations by conference call.

"I'm fine, Alan," Moeller said. "A little stomach pain, that's all. Maybe something I had for breakfast."

"I can see if anyone has got some Tums," Alan said.

"That's the last thing I need right now," Moeller said.

"Maybe some water, then," Alan said.

"No water," Moeller said. "I wouldn't mind a small glass of milk, though. I think that might settle my stomach."

“I’ll see if they have anything at the commissary,” Alan said. “We’ve still got a few minutes before everything begins.” Moeller nodded to Alan, who set off. Nice kid, Moeller thought. Not especially bright, and new to the trade delegation, but those were two of the reasons he had him as his aide for these negotiations. An aide who was more observant and had been around Moeller longer might have remembered that he was lactose intolerant. Even a small amount of milk would inevitably lead to a gastric event.

“Lactose intolerant? Swell,” Fixer had said, after the installation. “Have a glass of milk, wait for an hour or so. You’ll be good to go. You can also try the usual gas-producing foods: beans, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, raw onions, potatoes. Apples and apricots also do the trick. Prunes too, but that’s probably more firepower than you’ll really want. Have a good vegetable medley for breakfast and then stand back.”

“Any meats?” Moeller had asked. He was still a little breathless from the pain of having the apparatus sent up his tailpipe and grafted to his intestine wall.

“Sure, anything fatty will work,” Fixer said. “Bacon, some well-marbled red meat. Corned beef and cabbage will give you a little bit of everything. What, you don’t like vegetables?”

“My dad was a butcher,” Moeller said. “I ate a lot of meat as a kid. Still like it.”

More than liked it, really. Dirk Moeller came from a long line of carnivores and proudly ate animal flesh at every meal. Most people didn’t do that anymore. And when they *did* eat meat, they picked out a tube of vatted meat product, made from cultivated tissue that never required the butchering of an animal, or even the participation of any sort of animal outside of the purely mythical. The best-selling vatted meat product on the market was something called Kingston’s Bison Boar™, some godforsaken agglomeration of bovine and pig genes stretched across a cartilaginous scaffolding and immersed in nutrient broth until it grew into something that was meatlike without being meaty, paler than veal, lean as a lizard, and so animal friendly that even strict vegetarians didn’t mind tucking in a Bison Boar Burger™ or two when the mood struck them. Kingston’s corporate mascot was a pig with a bison shag and horns, frying up burgers on a hibachi, winking at the customer in third-quarter profile, licking its lips in anticipation of devouring its own fictional flesh. The thing was damned creepy.

Moeller would have rather roasted his own tongue on a skewer than eat vatted meat. Good butchers were hard to come by these days, but Moeller found one outside of Washington, in the suburb of Leesburg. Ted was a boutique entrepreneur, like all butchers these days. His day job was as a mechanic. But he knew his way around a carving chart, which is more than most people in his line of work could say. Once a year in October, Ted damn near filled up a walk-in freezer in Moeller’s basement with beef, pork, venison, and four kinds of bird: chicken, turkey, ostrich, and goose.

Because Moeller was his best customer, occasionally Ted would throw in something more exotic—usually a reptile of some kind—he got a lot of alligator now that Florida had declared a year-round hunting season on that fast-breeding hybrid species that the EPA introduced to repopulate the Everglades—but also an occasional mammal or two whose provenance was often left prudent and unattributed. There was that one year when Ted provided ten pounds of steaks and a note scrawled on the butcher paper: “Don’t ask.” Moeller served those at a barbecue with former associates from the American Institute for Colonization. Everyone loved them. Several months later, another butcher—*not* Ted—had been arrested for trafficking in meat taken from Zhang-Zhang, a panda on loan to the National Zoo. The panda had disappeared roughly the time Ted made his yearly meat drop. The next year, Ted was back to alligator. It was probably better that way for everyone, except possibly the alligator.

“It all starts with meat,” Moeller’s father told him often, and as Alan returned with a coffee mug

filled with 2%, Moeller reflected on the truth of that simple statement. His current course of action was the one that had him accumulating gas in his intestinal tract, indeed began with meat. Specifically, the meat in Moeller's Meats, the third-generation butcher shop Dirk's father owned. It was into this shop nearly 40 years ago now, that Faj-win-Getag, the Nidu ambassador, came bursting through the door trailing an entourage of Nidu and human diplomats behind him. "Something smells really good," the Nidu ambassador said.

The ambassador's pronouncement was notable in itself. The Nidu, among their many physical qualities, were possessed of a sense of smell several orders of magnitude more fine than the poor human nose. For this reason, and for reasons relating to the Nidu caste structure, which is rigid enough to make 16th-century Japan appear the very model of let-it-all-hang-out egalitarianism, the high diplomatic and political Nidu castes had developed a "language" of scents not at all unlike the way the European nobles of Earth developed a "language" of flowers.

Like the noble language of flowers, the Nidu diplomatic scent language was not true speech, in that one couldn't actually carry on a conversation through smells. Also, humans couldn't take much advantage of this language; the human sense of smell was so crude that Nidu trying to send a scent signal would get the same reaction from their intended recipient as they would get by singing an aria to a turtle. But among the Nidu themselves, one could make a compelling opening statement, sent in a subtle way (inasmuch as smells are subtle) and presenting an underpinning for all discourse to follow.

When a Nidu ambassador bursts through one's shop door proclaiming something smells good, that's a statement that works on several different levels. One, something probably just smells good. But two, something in the shop has a smell that carries with it certain positive scent identifications for the Nidu. James Moeller, proprietor of Moeller's Meats, Dirk's father, was not an especially worldly man, but he knew enough to know that getting on the Nidu ambassador's good side could mean the difference between his shop's success and its failure. It was hard enough running a dedicated butcher shop in a largely vegetarian world. But now that more of the relatively few meat enthusiasts remained ate the newly arrived vatted meat—which James vehemently refused to stock, to the point of chasing Kingston's Vatted Meat wholesaler from his store with a cleaver—things were getting precarious. The Nidu, James Moeller knew, were committed carnivores. They had to get their vittles from somewhere, and James Moeller was a man of business. Everybody's money was equal in his eyes.

"I smelled it down the street," Faj-win-Getag continued, approaching the counter display. "It smelled fresh. It smelled different."

"The ambassador has a good nose," James Moeller said. "In the back of the shop I've got venison arrived just today from Michigan. It's deer meat."

"I know deer," Faj-win-Getag said. "Large animals. They fling themselves at vehicles with great frequency."

"That's them," James Moeller said.

"They don't smell like what I smell when they're on the side of the road," Faj-win-Getag said.

"They sure don't!" James Moeller said. "Would you like a better smell of the venison?" Faj-win-Getag nodded his assent; James told his son Dirk to bring out some. James presented it to the Nidu ambassador.

"That smells wonderful," Faj-win-Getag said. "It's very much like a scent that in our culture equates with sexual potency. This meat would be very popular with our young men."

James Moeller cracked a grin wide as the Potomac. "It would honor me to present the ambassador with some venison, with my compliments," he said, shooing Dirk into the back to bring out more of the meat. "And I'll be happy to serve any of your people who would want some of their own. We have

quite a bit in stock.”

“I’ll be sure to let my staff know,” Faj-win-Getag said. “You say you get your stock from Michigan?”

“Sure do,” James said. “There’s a large preserve in central Michigan run by the Nugentians. They harvest deer and other animals through ritual bow hunting. Legend has it the cult’s founder bow hunted one of every species of North American mammal before he died. They have his body on display at the preserve. He’s in a loincloth. It’s a religious thing. Not the sort of people you want to spend a lot of time with on a *personal* basis, but their meat is the best in the country. It costs a little more, but it’s worth it. And they have the right attitude about meat—it’s the cornerstone of any truly healthy diet.”

“Most humans we meet don’t eat much meat,” Faj-win-Getag said. “What I read in your newspapers and magazines suggests most people find it unhealthy.”

“Don’t believe it,” James Moeller said. “I eat meat at every meal. I have more energy physically and mentally than most men half my age. I’ve got nothing against vegetarians; if they want to eat beans all the time, that’s fine with me. But long after they’re asleep in their bed, I’m still going strong. That’s meat for you. It all starts with meat—that’s what I tell my customers. That’s what I’ll tell you.” Dirk returned from the back with several large packages of meat; James put them in a heavy-duty bag and placed it on the low counter on the side. “All yours, sir. You enjoy that.”

“You are too generous,” Faj-win-Getag said, as a flunky took the bag. “We are always warmed by such hospitality from your race, who is always so giving. It makes us happy that we’ll soon be in the neighborhood.”

“How do you mean?” James Moeller said.

“The Nidu have entered into a number of new treaties and trade agreements with your government, which requires us to greatly expand our presence here,” the ambassador said. “We’ll be building out new mission grounds in this neighborhood.”

“That’s great,” James Moeller said. “Will the embassy be close by?”

“Oh, very close,” Faj-win-Getag said, and nodded his goodbyes, taking his venison and his entourage with him.

James Moeller didn’t waste time. Over the next week he tripled his order of venison from the Nugentians and sent Dirk to the library to find out anything he could about Nidu and their culinary preferences. This led to James ordering rabbit, Kobe beef, imported haggis from Scotland, and, for the very first time in the three-generation history shop, stocking Spam. “It’s not vatted meat,” he said to Dirk. “Just meat in a can.”

Within a week, James Moeller had transformed his butcher shop into a Nidu-friendly meat store. Indeed, the enlarged shipment of Nugentian venison arrived the very same day that James Moeller received his notice via certified mail that the building that housed Moeller Meats was being seized by the government under eminent domain, along with every other building on the block, to make way for the new and enlarged Nidu embassy. James Moeller’s receipt of this letter was also neatly coincident with a massive heart attack that killed him so fast that he was dead before he hit the floor, letter still in his hand, venison still unbutchered in the cold room in the back.

Dr. Atkinson tried to assure Dirk that the shock of the letter in itself would not have been enough to kill his father. James’s aorta, he explained, was like a cannoli solidly packed with lard, the end result of 53 years of uninterrupted meat consumption. Dr. Atkinson had warned James for years to eat a more balanced diet or at least to allow him to snake out his arteries with an injection of plaque ’bot but James always refused; he felt fine, he liked his meat, and he wasn’t going to sign off on any

medical procedure that would give his insurance company the ammunition it needed to raise his rate. James had been a heart attack waiting to happen. If it wasn't now, it would have been soon. Very soon.

Dirk heard none of this. He knew who was responsible. He had found his father's body, had read the note, and had learned later that the day after the Nidu visited Moeller's Meats, a Nidu representative flew to the Nugentian preserve in Michigan to seal a direct venison distribution deal with the curator, using the information James Moeller innocently supplied in conversation. The Nidu ambassador knew when it came through the shop door that Moeller's Meats would be out of business in a matter of days, and he let Dirk's father give him free meat and information without so much of a hint of what was coming down the road.

It was just as well his dad had the heart attack when he did, Dirk thought to himself. Seeing his grandfather's shop torn down would have killed him otherwise.

History and literature are filled with heroes called upon to revenge the deaths of their fathers. Dirk took to this same task with a grim methodical drive, over a span of time that would have made Hamlet, the very archetype of obsessive-compulsive deliberation, utterly insane with impatience. With the compensation provided by the government for the Moeller's Meats property, Dirk enrolled at Johns Hopkins, down the road in Baltimore, majoring in interplanetary relations. Hopkins's program was one of the top three in the nation, along with Chicago and Georgetown.

Moeller did his graduate work at the latter, gaining access to the intensely competitive program by agreeing to specialize in the Gardá, a seasonally-intelligent race of tube worms whose recent mission to Earth was housed on the former grounds of the Naval Observatory. However, shortly after Moeller began his study, the Gardá began their Incompetence, a period of engorgement, mating, and lessened brain activity coinciding with the onset of Uuuchi, an autumnal season on Gardá which would last for three years and seven months on Earth. Because Moeller was able to work with the Gardá for only a limited period of time, he was allowed to pursue a secondary track of research as well. He chose the Nidu.

It was after Moeller's first major paper on the Nidu, analyzing their role in helping the United Nations of Earth gain a representative seat in the Common Confederation, that Moeller came in contact with Anton Schroeder, the UNE's observer and later first full-fledged representative to the C. He'd left that behind to become the current chairman of the American Institute for Colonization, a think tank based out of Arlington committed to the expansion of the Earth's colonization of planets, with or without the consent of the Common Confederation.

"I read your paper, Mr. Moeller," Schroeder said, without introduction, when Moeller picked up his office communicator; Schroeder assumed (correctly) that Moeller would recognize the voice made famous by thousands of speeches, news reports, and Sunday morning talk shows. "It is remarkably full of shit, but it is remarkably full of shit in a number of interesting ways, some of which—and entirely coincidentally, I'm sure—get close to the truth of our situation with the Nidu and the Common Confederation. Would you like to know which those are?"

"Yes, sir," Moeller said.

"I'm sending a car over now," Schroeder said. "It'll be there in half an hour to bring you here. Wear a tie."

An hour later Moeller was drinking from the informational and ideological fire hose that was Anton Schroeder, the one man who knew the Nidu better than any other human being. In the course of his decades of dealing with the Nidu, Schroeder had come to the following conclusion: The Nidu are fucking with us. It's time we start fucking back. Moeller didn't need to be asked twice to join in.

"Here come the Nidu," said Alan, rising from his seat. Moeller gulped the last of his milk and rose

just in time to have a bubble of gas twist his intestine like a sailor knotting a Sheepshank. Moeller bit his cheek and did his best to ignore the cramp. It wouldn't do to have the Nidu delegation aware of his gastric distress.

The Nidu filed into the conference room as they always did, lowest in the pecking order first, heading to their assigned seats and nodding to their opposite human number on the other side of the table. Nobody moved to shake hands; the Nidu, intensely socially stratified as they were, weren't the sort of race to enjoy wanton familiar person contact. The chairs were filled, from the outside in, until only two people remained standing; at the middle seats on opposite sides, were Moeller and the senior-most Nidu trade delegate in the room, Lars-win-Getag.

Who was, as it happened, son of Faj-win-Getag, the Nidu ambassador who walked through the door of Moeller's Meats four decades earlier. This was not entirely coincidence; all Nidu diplomats of any rank on Earth hailed from the win-Getag clan, a minor, distaff relation to the current royal clan of au-Getag. Faj-win-Getag was famously fecund, even for a Nidu, so his children littered the diplomatic corps on Earth.

But it was both satisfying and convenient for Moeller regardless—fitting, he thought, that the son of James Moeller would return the favor of failure to the son of Faj-win-Getag. Moeller didn't believe in karma, but he believed in its idiot cousin, the idea that “what goes around, comes around.” The Moellers were coming around at last.

Ironic in another way, Moeller thought, as he waited for Lars-win-Getag to speak in greeting. This round of trade negotiations between the Nidu and Earth was supposed to have broken down long before this level. Moeller and his compatriots had quietly planned and maneuvered for years to guide Nidu-human relations to a breaking point; this was supposed to be the year trade relationships would implode, alliances dissolve, anti-Nidu demonstrations swell, and the human planets start their path to true independence outside the Common Confederation.

A new president and his Nidu-friendly administration had screwed it up; the new Secretary of Trade had replaced too many delegates and the new delegates had been too willing to give up diplomatic real estate in the quest to renormalize Nidu relations. Now negotiations were too far down the road to manufacture a diplomatic objection; all those had been hammered out two or three levels down. Something else was needed to bring negotiations to standstill. Preferably something that made the Nidu look bad.

“Dirk,” Lars-win-Getag said, and bowed, briefly. “A good morning to you. Are we ready to begin today's thumb twisting?” He smiled, which on a Nidu is sort of a ghastly thing, amused at his own inside joke. Lars-win-Getag fancied himself a bit of a wit, and his specialty was creating malapropisms based on English slang. He had seen an alien do it once in a pre-Encounter movie, and thought it was cute. It was the sort of joke that got old fast.

“By all means, Lars,” Moeller said, and returned the bow, risking a small cramp to do so. “Our thumbs are at ready.”

“Excellent.” Lars-win-Getag sat and reached for his negotiation schedule. “Are we still working on agricultural quotas?”

Moeller glanced over to Alan, who had made up the schedule. “We're talking bananas and plantains until ten, and then we tackle wine and table grapes until lunch,” Alan said. “Then in afternoon we start on livestock quotas. We begin with sheep.”

“Do ewe think that's a good idea?” Lars-win-Getag said, turning to Moeller to dispense another ghastly grin. Lars-win-Getag was also inordinately fond of puns.

“That's quite amusing, sir,” Alan said, gamely.

From down the table, one of the Nidu piped up. “We have some small concerns about the percentage of bananas the treaty requires come from Ecuador. We were led to understand a banana virus had destroyed much of the crop this last year.” From down the table, a member of the human delegation responded. The negotiations would continue to burble on for the next hour at the far ends of the table. Alan and his opposite number with the Nidu would ride herd on the others. Lars-win-Getag was already bored and scanning his tablet for sport scores. Moeller satisfied himself that his active participation would not be required for a long period of time and then tapped his own tablet to boot up the apparatus.

It was Lars-win-Getag himself who inspired the apparatus. Lars-win-Getag was, to put it mildly, an underachiever; he was a mid-level trade negotiator while most of his siblings had gone on to better things. It had been suggested that the only reason Lars-win-Getag was even a mid-level trade negotiator was that his family was too important for him to be anything less; it would be an insult to his clan to have him fail.

To that end Lars-win-Getag was policed by assistants who were notably smarter than he was, and was never given anything critical to work on. Largely predetermined agricultural and livestock quotas for example, were just about his speed. Fortunately for Lars-win-Getag, he wasn’t really smart enough to realize he was being handled by his own government. So it worked out well for everyone.

Nevertheless, like intellectually limited mid-rangers of most sentient species, Lars-win-Getag was acutely sensitive to matters of personal status. He also had a temper. If it weren’t for diplomatic immunity, Lars-win-Getag’s rap sheet would include assault, aggravated assault, battery, and on at least one occasion, attempted homicide. It was the last of these that caught the eye of Jean Schroeder, the son of the late Anton Schroeder and his successor as the head of the American Institute for Colonization.

“Listen to this,” Jean said, reading from a report his assistant had compiled, as Moeller grilled steaks for them on his deck. “Six years ago, Lars was at a Capitals game and had to be restrained from choking another spectator to death in the stadium bathroom. Other guys in the bathroom literally had to tackle him and sit on his big reptilian ass until the police came.”

“Why was he choking that guy?” Moeller asked.

“The guy was standing at the sink next to Lars and used some breath spray,” Schroeder said. “Lars smelled it and got crazy. He told the police the scent of the breath spray suggested that he enjoyed cornholing his mother. He felt honor bound to avenge the insult.”

Moeller stabbed the steaks and flipped them. “He should have known better. Most humans don’t know anything about what smells mean to the Nidu elites.”

“Should know better, but doesn’t,” Jean said, riffing through the report. “Or just doesn’t care, which is more likely. He’s got diplomatic immunity. He doesn’t have to worry about restraining himself. Two of his other near-arrests involve arguments about smells. Here, this one’s good: He apparently assaulted a flower vendor on the mall because one of the bouquets was telling him he kicked babies. That was just last year.”

“It probably had daisies in it,” Moeller said, poking at the steaks again. “Daisies have a smell that signifies offspring. Where are you going with this, Jean?”

“You start negotiations with Lars next week,” Jean said. “It’s too late to change the substance of the negotiations. But you’re negotiating with someone who is neither terribly bright nor terribly stable and has a documented tendency to fly into a rage when he thinks he’s being insulted by an oddball. There’s got to be a way to work with that.”

“I don’t see how,” Moeller said. He speared the steaks and put them on a serving plate. “It’s polic-

at Trade to be respectful of Nidu sensitivities. Negotiations take place in rooms with special air filters. ~~We don't wear cologne or perfumes—we're not even supposed to use scented underarm deodorant.~~ Hell, we're even issued special soap to use in the shower. We're serious about it, too. The first year I was at Trade, I saw a negotiator sent home because he used Zest that morning. He actually received a reprimand."

"Well, obviously you're not going to walk in with a squirt bottle with Essence of Fuck You in it," Jean said. "But there's got to be some way it make it happen."

"Look," Moeller said. "Lars's dad gave my dad a heart attack. Nothing would make me happier than to derail the bastard. But there's no way to secretly stink him into a rage."

Two days later Jean sent him a message: *Something smells interesting*, it read.

Back at the negotiating table, the Nidu had gotten the Earth delegation to take out the Ecuadorian bananas in exchange for the same percentage of bananas to be shipped from Philos colony. This made everyone happy since Philos was closer to Nidu than Earth, and the Philos plantation owners would accept a lower price for their bananas, and the Earth wanted to promote colonial trade anyway. Moeller nodded his approval, Lars-win-Getag grunted his assent, and the negotiations moved on to Brazilian bananas.

Moeller opened the window for the apparatus software on his tablet and tapped on the "message" toolbar command. The window immediately listed four categories: Mild insults, Sexualrelated insults, Competence insults, and Grave insults. Fixer, who had designed the apparatus and adapted the off-the-shelf software to run it, found a chemical dictionary for the Nidu smell language from the science library at UCLA. He dispensed with everything but the insults, of course; Moeller wasn't planning to tell Lars-win-Getag that he looked pretty, or that it was time for his puberty rites. Moeller also immediately discounted insults about competence, as the incompetent never question their competence about anything. *Let's start small*, Moeller thought, and selected the "Mild insults" option. Another window opened with 40 suggested insults; Moeller picked the one at the top of the list, which read, simply, *You stink*.

The touch screen presented an hourglass, and in his colon Moeller felt a tiny vibration as the apparatus moved elements around. Then a dialog window popped up. *Processing enabled*, it read. *Finish when ready*.

Moeller was ready almost instantly; the combination of the milk and the vegetables and bacon breakfast had worked their wonders in the gastrointestinal tract. Carefully so as not to attract attention, Moeller shifted in his seat to help the process along. He felt the gas travel the few centimeters into the apparatus chamber. The dialog box changed: *Processing*, it read. Moeller felt a second small vibration in the apparatus as the middle chamber worked its magic. After about five seconds the vibration stopped and the dialog box changed again. *Ready. Choose automatic or manual release*. Moeller chose the automatic release. The dialog box began a countdown.

Ten seconds later the lightly compressed gas exited the apparatus and moved toward the final exit. Moeller was not especially worried about it making noise; one doesn't work for decades in the diplomatic corps and its endless meetings and negotiations without learning how to silently depressurize. Moeller leaned forward ever so slightly and let it out. It smelled vaguely like parsley.

About 20 seconds later Lars-win-Getag, who had been giving every appearance of drifting off to sleep, jolted himself straight up in his chair, alarming his aides on either side. One of them leaned in close to find out what had disturbed her boss; Lars-win-Getag hissed quietly but emphatically at her. She listened to him for a few minutes, then arched her nose up and gave a brief but notable sniff. Then she looked at Lars-win-Getag and gave the Nidu equivalent of a shrug, as if to say, *I don't smell anything*.

anything. Lars-win-Getag glared and glanced over at Moeller, who had all this time stared down the table toward the banana discussion with an expression of polite boredom. The air scrubbers were already dissipating the odor. Eventually Lars-win-Getag calmed down.

A few minutes later Moeller let fly *You mate with the unclean*. Lars-win-Getag let out a grunt and slammed down a fist hard enough to rattle the entire table. Negotiations came to a halt as everyone at the table looked toward Lars-win-Getag, who was by now out of his seat and whispering fiercely to the rather nervous-looking aide to his right.

“Everything okay?” Moeller asked the second aide, to Lars-win-Getag’s left.

The second aide barely twitched. “The trade representative is clearly troubled by the quality of Brazilian bananas,” he said.

Lars-win-Getag had managed to sit himself back down. “My apologies,” he said swiveling his head up and down the table. “Something caught me by surprise.”

“We can discuss changing the percentage of Brazilian bananas if you feel strongly about it,” Moeller said, mildly. “I’m sure the Panamanians would be happy to increase their percentage, and we can make it up to the Brazilians in other categories.” He reached for his tablet as if to make a note of the change and in fact gave the order to process *You bathe in vomit*.

“That is acceptable,” Lars-win-Getag said, in a low growl. Moeller nudged Alan to get the discussions going again, and in doing so maneuvered just enough to let the latest missive slip out. Twenty seconds later, Moeller noted Lars-win-Getag breathing heavily and struggling not to explode. His aide was patting his hand, only a little frantically.

The next hour was the most fun Moeller could remember having just about ever. He taunted Lars-win-Getag mercilessly, safe in his own appearance of bland disinterest in the minutiae of the negotiations, the visible absence of a scent-emitting object anywhere in the room, and the Nidus assumption that humans, with their primitive sense of smell, could not possibly be intentionally goading them. Except for Lars-win-Getag, the Nidus were of the wrong caste to know anything more than the basics of the scent language and so could not share their boss’s outrage. Except for Moeller, the human delegation was utterly ignorant of the cause of Lars-win-Getag’s behavior. They could tell something was making the Nidus twitchy, but had no idea what it could be. The only person who noticed anything unusual was Alan, who by sheer proximity could tell his boss was gassy. But Moeller knew that the ambitious little squirt wouldn’t dream of saying anything about it.

In this garden of ignorance, Moeller savaged Lars-win-Getag with intolerable insults about his sexual performance, his personal grooming, and his family, often in combinations of all three. Fixer’s apparatus was filled with enough of the trace chemical compounds needed to combine with Moeller’s own tract emanations that he could theoretically emit coherent gaseous statements for days. Moeller experimented to discover which statements enraged Lars-win-Getag the most; as expected, insults about job competence barely caused a rise in respiratory rates, but suggestions of sexual inadequacy really seemed to get him hot. Moeller thought Lars-win-Getag was going to pop when *Your mate laugh at your lack of seed* wafted over to him, but he managed to hold it in, primarily by gripping the table hard enough that Moeller thought he might break part of it off.

Moeller had just released *You feast on shit* and just punched in *Your mother fucks algae* before processing when Lars-win-Getag finally lost it, and gave himself to the negotiation-halting rage that Moeller was hoping for. “That is enough!” he bellowed, and lunged across the table at Alan, who, for his part, was shocked into immobility at a large, sentient lizardlike creature launching itself at him.

“Is it you?” Lars-win-Getag demanded, as his assistants grabbed at his legs, trying to haul him back to his side of the table.

“Is *what* me?” Alan managed to spurt out, torn now between the urge to get away from this snapping angry creature and the desire not to endanger his young diplomatic career by accidentally scratching the Nidu trade delegate in his rush to avoid getting killed.

Lars-win-Getag pushed Alan back onto the floor and kicked himself free of his assistants. “One of you humans has been insulting me for over an hour! I can *smell* it.”

The humans stared agog at Lars-win-Getag for ten full seconds. Then Alan broke the silence. “All right, guys,” he said, looking up and down the table. “Who’s wearing the scented deodorant?”

“I’m not smelling *deodorant*, you little shit,” Lars-win-Getag snarled. “I know one of you is speaking to me. *Insulting* me. I will not *tolerate* it.”

“Sir,” Alan said. “If one of us have said something that offended you during the talks, I can promise you—”

“*Promise* me?” Lars-win-Getag bellowed. “I can promise *you* that every one of you is going to be working at a convenience store in twenty-four hours if you don’t—”

Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

Silence. Moeller was suddenly aware that the entire room was looking at him.

“Excuse me,” Moeller said. “That was rude.”

There was a little more silence after that.

“*You*,” Lars-win-Getag said, finally. “It was *you*. All this *time*.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Moeller said.

“I will have your job for this,” Lars-win-Getag exploded. “When I get through with you, you—” Lars-win-Getag stopped suddenly, distracted. Then he took a long, hard snort. Moeller’s final message had finally gotten across the room to him.

Lars-win-Getag took full receipt of the message, processed it, and decided to kill Dirk Moeller right there, with his own hands. Fortunately, there was a Nidu ritual for justifiably killing a nemesis; it began with a violent, soul-shattering roar. Lars-win-Getag collected himself, drew in a deep, cleansing breath, focused his eyes on Dirk Moeller, and began his murderous yell.

One of the interesting things about alien life is that however alien it may be, certain physical features appear again and again, examples of parallel evolutionary paths on multiple worlds. For example, nearly every intelligent form of life has a brain—a central processor, of some sort, for whatever nervous and sensory system it may have evolved. The location of the brain varies, but it is most frequently located in a head of some sort. Likewise, nearly all life of a complex nature features a circulatory system to ferry oxygen and nutrients around the body.

The combination of these two common features means that certain medical phenomena are also universally known. Like strokes, caused when the vessels of whatever circulatory system a creature might have rupture violently in whatever brain structure that creature might possess. Just as they did in Lars-win-Getag, less than a second into his bellowing declaration. Lars-win-Getag was surprised at anyone when he cut short his bellow, replaced it with a wet gurgle, and then pitched forward dead following his center of gravity down to the floor. The Nidu immediately swarmed their fallen leader, the humans stared slack-jawed at their negotiating partners, who by now had begun a keening wail of despair as they attempted to revive Lars-win-Getag’s body.

Alan turned to Moeller, who was still sitting there, calmly, taking it all in. “Sir?” Alan said. “What just happened here, sir? What’s going on? Sir?”

Moeller turned to Alan, opened his mouth to provide some perfectly serviceable lie, and burst out laughing.

Another common feature among many species is a primary circulatory pump—a heart, in other

words. This pump is typically one of the strongest muscles in any creature, due to the need to keep circulatory fluid moving through the body. But like any muscle it is prone to damage, especially when the creature to whom the pump belongs takes rather bad care of it. And, say, eats a lot of fatty, plaque-inducing meat, which causes the circulatory vessels to cut off, suffocating the muscle itself.

Just as they did in Dirk Moeller.

Dirk Moeller collapsed on the floor, still laughing, joining Lars-win-Getag in a fatally prone sprawl. He was dimly aware of Alan shouting his name and then placing his hands on his chest and pumping down furiously, in a valiant but fruitless attempt to squeeze blood through his boss's body.

As Moeller lost consciousness for the last time, he had time for a single, final request for absolution. *Jesus, forgive me*, he thought. *I really shouldn't have eaten that panda.*

The rest is darkness, two dead bodies on the floor, and, as hoped, a major diplomatic incident.

chapter 2

Secretary of State Jim Heffer regarded the tube on his desk. “So this is it?” he asked his aide, Ben Javna.

“That’s it,” Javna said. “Fresh from the schmuck’s large intestine.”

Heffer shook his head. “What an asshole,” he said.

“An apt description, considering,” Javna said.

Heffer sighed, reached for the tube, then stopped. “This isn’t *fresh*, is it?”

Javna grinned. “It’s been sanitized for your protection, Mr. Secretary. It had been grafted onto Moeller’s colon. All the organic bits have been removed. Inside and out.”

“Who knows this exists?”

“Aside from whoever helped Moeller put it in? You, me, and the medical examiner. The ME is content to keep quiet for now, although he wants State to bring a cousin over from Pakistan. Also suspects something, of course. That’s why he called me right after it happened.”

“A former intern turns out to be useful for a change,” Heffer said. He picked up the tube, turned around in his hands. “Have we figured out where this thing has come from yet?”

“No, sir,” Javna said. “We haven’t started a search because, officially, it doesn’t exist. So far as anyone knows officially, Moeller and the Nidu trade representative rather coincidentally collapsed simultaneously for unrelated health reasons. Which *is* true, as far as it goes.”

It was Heffer’s turn to grin. “And just how long do we expect that story to hold up, Ben?”

“It’s already collapsing, of course,” Javna said. “But at this point the only thing anyone has to go on are rumors and speculations. We start searching for plans for *that*,”—Javna pointed to the tube—“and you know it’s going to get noticed.”

“I think we could keep the search out of the papers,” Heffer said.

“It’s not the papers we need to worry about,” Javna said. “You know Pope and his creeps at Defense are going to be all over this, and they’ll even find some way to try to make it seem like it’s the Nidu’s fault.”

“On one level, that’d be nice,” Heffer said.

“Sure, right until the part where we start shooting at the Nidu and then they kick our ass,” Javna said.

“There is that,” Heffer admitted.

“There is indeed that,” Javna said.

Heffer’s intercom switched on. “Mr. Secretary, Secretary Soram is here,” said Heffer’s scheduler Jane.

“Send him in, Jane,” Heffer said, stood up, then turned to Javna. “Well, here comes the idiot,” he said. Javna grinned.

Secretary of Trade Ted Soram came through the door, brisk and grinning and extending his hand. “Hello, Jim,” he said. “Missed you this weekend at the house.”

Heffer reached across the desk and shook Soram’s hand. “Hello, Ted,” Heffer said. “I was i

Switzerland this weekend. Middle East peace negotiations. You may have read something about them.”

“Ouch,” Soram said, good-naturedly, and off to the side, Heffer could see Javna roll his eyes. “Okay, I admit, a good excuse for your absence. This time. How did the negotiations go?”

“As they usually do,” Heffer said, motioning to Soram to sit. “Right down to obligatory suicide bomber in Haifa halfway through the session.”

“They never learn,” Soram said, nestling into an armchair.

“I guess not,” Heffer said, sitting himself. “But right now I’m less concerned about the peace negotiations in the Middle East than the Nidu trade negotiations here at home.”

“What about them?” Soram said.

Heffer glanced over at Javna, who subtly shrugged. “Ted,” Heffer said, “have you been in contact with your staff today?”

“I’ve been at Lansdowne since dawn,” Soram said. “With the Kanh ambassador. It loves to go there, and I have a membership. I’ve been trying to get them to agree to import more almonds. We’ve got a glut. So I thought I’d lobby it on the links. My staff knows better than to disturb me when I’m working on something like that. I almost chewed out your gal until I realized she was calling from your department, not mine.”

Heffer sat there for about a beat and wondered again at the political calculus that required President Webster to appoint Soram as trade secretary. The Kanh were violently allergic to nuts. The first state dinner ever held for the Kanh ended in disaster because kitchen inadvertently used peanut oil in one of the entrees; two-thirds of the Kanh guests ruptured their digestive sacs. The fact that Soram would lobby the Kanh to import almonds was a testament to his cluelessness, and the willingness of the Kanh ambassador (who was emphatically not clueless) to capitalize on his stupidity for a couple rounds of choice golf.

Well, we needed Philadelphia and he delivered, Heffer thought. *Too late to worry about it now.* “Ted,” Heffer said. “There’s been a development. A rather serious one. One of your trade representatives died today during negotiations. So did one of the Nidu representatives. And we think our guy killed the Nidu representative before he died.”

Soram smiled, uncertainly. “I’m not following you, Jim.”

Heffer slid the tube across the desk to Soram. “He used this,” Heffer said. “We’re pretty sure it’s a device used to send chemical signals the Nidu could smell and interpret through a code of theirs. We think your guy hid this until he got into the room, and then used it to enrage the Nidu negotiator into a stroke. He had a heart attack right after. He died laughing, Ted. It didn’t look very good.”

Soram took the tube. “Where was he hiding it?” he asked.

“In his ass,” Ben Javna said.

Soram jerked and dropped the thing on the floor, then smiled sheepishly and placed it back on the desk. “Sorry,” he said. “How do you know all this, Jim? This is a trade problem.”

Heffer took the tube and put it into his desk. “Ted, when one of your guys kills off a Nidu diplomat in trade or otherwise, it pretty much *becomes* my problem, now, doesn’t it? We here at State have a vested interest in making sure that trade negotiations with the Nidu run smoothly. And I know you’re not exactly the most ‘hands on’ of Trade secretaries. So we over here have been keeping tabs on how things have been going.”

“I see,” Soram said.

“Having said that,” Heffer said, “I have to admit this one took us by surprise. Trade is fairly packed with anti-Nidu negotiators and has been for years, even after this administration took over. But *this*

new. We expected some of your minor functionaries to put in a few roadblocks. We were ready for that. ~~We weren't ready for one of your people to attempt murder to gum up the works.~~

"We got rid of the biggest troublemakers," Soram said. "We went right down the list and pried them out."

"You missed one, Ted," Heffer said.

"Who was this guy?" Soram asked.

"Dirk Moeller," Javna said. "Came in during the Griffin administration. He was at the American Institute for Colonization before that."

"I've never heard of him," Soram said.

"Really," Javna said, dryly.

Even Soram couldn't miss that. "Look, don't try to pin this on me," he said. "We got most of them. But a few are going to get through the net."

"A spell at the AIC should have been a red flag," Heffer said. "That place is full of anti-Nidu nutbags."

The intercom flicked back on. "Sir, Secretary Pope is here," Jane said.

"Speaking of anti-Nidu nutbags," Javna said, under his breath.

"He says it's urgent," Jane continued.

"Send him in, Jane," Heffer said, then turned to Javna. "Behave, Ben."

"Yes, sir," Javna said.

Every administration crosses the aisle to appoint one secretary from the other side. Robert Pope, a war hero and popular former senator from Idaho, was the sop thrown to swing voters who needed convincing the Webster administration was strong on defense, and would stand up to Confederate pressure when necessary, particularly when it was applied by the Nidu. Pope played that part a little too enthusiastically for Heffer's taste.

"Bob," Heffer said, as Pope entered the room, trailing his aide, Dave Phipps. "Dropping by on your way back to the Pentagon?"

"You might say that," Pope said, and then glanced over at Soram. "I see you've got the brain trust here already."

"Missed you this weekend, Bob," Soram said.

"Ted, you know I wouldn't be caught dead at one of your parties," Pope said, "so let's not pretend we wouldn't be. I understand you hit a little roadblock in today's negotiations."

"Jim was just catching me up on that," Soram said.

"Well," Pope said. "Nice to see someone's minding the shop over there at Trade. Even if it is the State Department. Strange that two chief negotiators should die within seconds of each other, don't you think?"

"The universe is filled with disturbing coincidences, Bob," Heffer said.

"And you think coincidence is what this was."

"At the moment, that's the official line," Heffer said. "Although of course we'll let you know anything comes out. We're hoping to catch this while it's still a minor diplomatic issue, Bob. Nothing you folks at Defense need to worry about."

"That's reassuring to hear, Jim," Pope said. "Except that it may already be a little late for that." Pope nodded to Phipps, who pulled papers from a folder he was bearing and handed them to Heffer.

"What are these?" Heffer asked, taking the papers and reaching for his glasses.

"Intercepts from the Nidu Naval Attaché's office, dated thirty-six minutes after our respective trade representatives hit the floor," Pope said. "About two hours after that, we know two Nidu *Glar-cla*

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