One Man’s Meat

Lawrence Watt-Evans

The household guard peered over the parapet, not really expecting to see anything but mud and mudweed, and froze.

Someone was out there!

Someone was outside the household, and approaching.

None of the regular traders or embassies were due, but someone was undeniably out there, someone in a long red cloak trimmed with orange, walking calmly down the path from the akher thickets. The cloak billowed slightly in the breeze, and dangling orange feathers brushed the mudweed on either side.

Red and orange? The guard didn’t recognize those colors. His neck-ruff bristled with excitement.

It might be a challenge; this stranger might have come to challenge Lord Khwistikhir. The traveler hardly had the look of a mere supplicant.

The guard stamped on the signal panel, hard; the metal sheet flexed and boomed. That would undoubtedly rouse half the household. If the stranger wanted to make a public challenge, the guard was sure he’d have a fine audience.

He leaned over the rail and watched as half a dozen eager defenders tumbled out the great front door, spears gripped tightly, and confronted the stranger.

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“They don’t look very friendly,” Amal Kish-Murphy remarked. The image of the spear-wielding natives was coming through just fine; he could see every detail of the gleaming spearheads.

“Good workmanship on those weapons,” he added.

Beth tin Carson-Chiang nodded, but Kish-Murphy was unsure whether she was agreeing about the metal-working or the hostility.

“It’d be sort of embarrassing if they disemboweled that robot your people built for us,” Kish-Murphy said.

“They won’t disembowel it,” tin Carson-Chiang replied. “The robot’s programmed with everything it needs to know.” She grimaced. “At least for this part.”

“With everything our experts know it needs to know, you mean,” Kish-Murphy corrected her. “We could have it wrong, somehow—we don’t have the same senses the fi-Shhekh do. For all we know, it may have already screwed up—it might smell wrong, or be radiating something offensive in the infrared. This confrontation is all ritualized, and the slightest mistake could be fatal.” Remembering that he was discussing a robot, to which the term “fatal “ could not be applied with any great accuracy, he added, “So to speak.”

“Well,” tin Carson-Chiang said, “if it has screwed up, at least you’ll get to watch what happens, and maybe we’ll get it right next time.”

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The stranger’s plea for mercy was in the correct form, but his voice was oddly thin and weak, lacking the normal overtones. And he smelled funny.

But the words and gestures were correct, so he was admitted to the Outer Hall.

The guard, watching from above, was disappointed. The stranger was just a wanderer seeking shelter, not a challenger. Old Khwistikhir would remain the household patriarch without a fight for at least a little longer. With a sigh, the sentry returned to his weary march, back and forth along the parapet and stairs between the Northwest Shrine and the Black Tower.

In the Outer Hall, the six spearmen formed a circle about the stranger, all staring away from him, as ritual demanded. They waited.

The doorkeeper was slow in arriving, but at last he appeared in the archway and called out, “What is this? One of you is a stranger to me!”

The first spearman called, “Do you know me?”

“That I do, good Shiskhorith,” the doorkeeper replied.

“Do you know me?” the second called.

“That I do, good Tchessin.”

The ritual proceeded around the circle, until each of the six faced the doorkeeper.

The stranger hesitated longer than was entirely correct, and the doorkeeper began to grow nervous, but at last he called, “Do you know me?”

“I know you not, stranger,” the doorkeeper called back. “By what name are you known?”

“I am called Robot, of the Erthumoi,” the stranger replied.

The doorkeeper blinked, which was not strictly according to form. He had never heard of a household called “Erthumoi,” and “Robot “—that name didn’t parse at all. And if the fellow was still part of a household, what in all the lands was he doing here? Was he so new to wandering that he didn’t know any better than to name his former household?

No, nobody could be so ignorant as that.

Still, there was a formula for everything. “Begone, then,” the doorkeeper cried, “for this house is not that of the Erthumoi.”

“I beg you, do not...” Robot of the Erthumoi hesitated, and the doorkeeper’s neck-ruff bristled, feathers spiking out over the collar of his cloak.

Didn’t this oaf know any ritual?

“I beg you, do not cast me out,” Robot said at last, “for I have come on behalf of my lords, the Erthumoi, to treat with your house.”

The doorkeeper’s ruff did not go down, and his nostrils narrowed appreciably. “Lords,” plural? “Treat,” when this was the first anyone here had heard of Erthumoi? The hosting house left unnamed?

“Do you seek to insult my Lord Khwistikhir?” the doorkeeper thundered.

Robot immediately dropped back onto his haunches and lowered his head, his cloak and tail dragging in the dust, the feathers of his ruff parted by the curvature of his neck, exposing the great blood vessels to attack.

The doorkeeper’s own ruff settled back with satisfaction. At least the stranger knew how to do a proper submission, in apology!

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“Do you have any idea what it did wrong?” tin Carson-Chiang asked.

“No,” Kish-Murphy said. “But I never trusted those damn xenosociologists for a minute.”

“Damn these primitives,” tin Carson-Chiang said. “Why can’t we just walk in and say hello, and get down to business? All we want are those artifacts we tracked here from Innini; we aren’t trying to marry anybody. Why do we need all this silly rigmarole?”

“Because it’s basic to their culture,” Kish-Murphy replied mildly. “The Crotonites tried that, you know, just walking in and saying hello. Except, of course, being Crotonites, they probably said something a good bit less polite than hello, like demanding that the artifacts be handed over on the spot. And they certainly didn’t try to perform any of the local rituals.”

“The Crotonites were here?” tin Carson-Chiang asked, startled.

“Oh, sure, didn’t you know?” Kish-Murphy answered, equally startled by her ignorance. “They sold us the planet—at least, they sold us everything they knew about it. They’d had two scouts and four ambassadors killed by then, and they decided it just wasn’t worth the trouble, artifacts or no artifacts.”

Tin Carson-Chiang absorbed this, and then asked, “Is that why you Guild people got my crew out here? Because the Crotonites got themselves killed?”

Kish-Murphy nodded, then thought better of it.

“Not exactly,” he said. “We did try a few human ambassadors first, before we brought in you roboticists. We tried three times, in all. Not around this neighborhood, but across those mountains in mid-continent.”

“And?”

“Well, we did better than the Crotonites. We got two of ours out alive, and one of the two didn’t need much more than a few bandages and a stomach pump.”

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The doorkeeper could scarcely believe his ears. The stranger, Robot of Erthumoi, claimed to be an ambassador, from someplace so distant and isolated that it had ties with no known household! So distant, that the rituals themselves were different! And he had been sent to Khwistikhir, of all the households in the lands, purely at random—Lord Erthumoi had no particular interest in any of Khwistikhir’s females, no ties of blood or lirk claims. He sought some objects that had been seen to fall from the sky, for religious reasons.

The doorkeeper knew about those objects; useless things, though rather pretty. If Lord Erthumoi wanted them, he was sure Lord Khwistikhir would be willing to give them up—but of course, it wasn’t his place as doorkeeper to say any of that. His job was only to see that anyone who was admitted to the household went through the proper ceremonial and was assigned the proper role once inside.

And ambassadors were properly introduced by intermediaries before being admitted.

There was, Robot claimed, no one who could act as a proper intermediary in introducing him as ambassador; he had had to approach as if he were a mere landless wanderer because he had no local sponsor.

This was all quite startling, and not in accordance with custom—but it was not exactly an offense, either. It was an entirely new situation, one not covered by tradition.

That was very hard to imagine, but the doorkeeper accepted it finally.

Still, he felt it important to impress upon the stranger that this was a proper, civilized household. “In the household of Khwistikhir,” the doorkeeper told Robot sternly, “you must abide by the customs of Khwistikhir.”

“And I wish to, very much,” Robot replied, head still lowered, “but I do not know them all. Correct me when I err, and I shall do my best to adhere to your every tradition.”

The doorkeeper let out a satisfied hiss.

“Come, then,” he said, “and you will feast with Lord Khwistikhir tonight, and share his food.”

“Gladly,” Robot said. “Gladly, indeed.”

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“Now, that,” Kish-Murphy told tin Carson-Chiang, “is where we ran into trouble before. See, nobody here can do anything at all that isn’t a part of the daily rituals unless it’s approved by the lord householder, or whatever you want to call him—the alpha male. And you can’t speak with this patriarch at all unless you’ve sat through a formal dinner with him, enjoyed his hospitality, and shared his food.”

Tin Carson-Chiang nodded. “And the food’s toxic.”

“Deadly,” Kish-Murphy agreed. “The whole damn planet’s laced with heavy metals, the plant-life’s based on arsenic, the meat animals produce some sort of cyanogen that the locals use for gravy, and all the fungi are full of killer alkaloids. We’d even have trouble breathing here, let alone eating—at first glance the gas mix is just about Erthuma standard, but the trace elements...well, if you ever go down to the surface, wear a filter, at the very least. Wonderful place the Seventh Race’s gadgets found to hide.”

Tin Carson-Chiang nodded. “We got all that about the toxins explained in the specifications for the robot. We had to be very careful about corrosion.” She watched the robot’s transmissions for a moment, then asked, “So what did your ambassadors do?”

“Well, the first one died,” Kish-Murphy said. “He actually tried to eat something at the formal dinner. I guess he figured he could vomit it up later and get himself fixed up—but he didn’t make it that far. Hell, I don’t think he managed to leave the table.”

Tin Carson-Chiang grimaced.

“The second one,” Kish-Murphy said, “brought his own food with him—which turned out to be a deadly insult. He spent three weeks in medical, being rebuilt.” He sighed. “We thought we had it with the third one—he was a prestidigitator, and faked eating. All the food went up his sleeve or down his pants instead of into his mouth. He made it all the way through the meal, and then he found out, right at the end, that the final sign of acceptance is when the patriarch himself places a...well, a sort of a hormone candy, in your mouth. He puts it there with his own fingers—even this illusionist we sent couldn’t send it up his sleeve instead. You’re supposed to suck on it, then swallow the hard center, while the alpha male watches. After that, you’re his good friend, and can talk to him as one nestling to another. Except our man didn’t swallow it; he spat it out. The locals were so utterly shocked that he got a pretty good head start on them, and he was heavily armed, as well. He was out of medical and on his way home just a day later.”

Tin Carson-Chiang commented, “I notice you always sent men; I know it’s a male-dominant culture, the sort of place that makes me glad we’re more like chimps than baboons, but what if you’d sent a woman?”

Kish-Murphy frowned. “We thought of that. We even tried it—I didn’t mention her, did I? Shier Sin-Tyler was her name. She wasn’t an official ambassador, just a volunteer from the crew of the ship that charted the planet for us after the artifacts landed. We’d thought that the fi-Shhekh might not even know the difference, since our species hardly has the same secondary sexual characteristics as theirs, but it was obvious they knew instantly—probably by smell. And we’d thought that maybe, since all the rituals are designed to let competitive males deal with each other without fighting, that a woman wouldn’t need to go through any rituals.” He sighed. “Well, she didn’t, except one. To the locals, females are property, and there’s a very simple and obvious way of claiming them. And there are dozens of bachelor males in every household, each of them ready to grab any opportunity to claim a virgin female and set up a new household of his own.”

Tin Carson-Chiang blinked. “But we aren’t the same species...”

“No, we aren’t,” Kish-Murphy agreed. “We aren’t even close. And at first that deterred them. But the minute she spoke, and showed that she was a person and not an animal—well, we think they just assumed she was deformed. And they aren’t particularly xenophobic, as I said. She was heavily armed, like the last ambassador, and she got out unhurt, but three locals were killed. If she’d done something to offend them as a group, instead of individually, we might not have been that lucky.” He sighed.

“So after that,” tin Carson-Chiang said, “you resorted to robots.”

“That’s right, we resorted to robots. It’s not unheard of.” He turned to the video. “And it had damn well better work!”

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Lord Khwistikhir smiled at the stranger—though among offworlders only an expert or a Naxian would have recognized the expression, which consisted of letting the lower jaw hang slack while the lower eyelids rose halfway. To unschooled Erthumoi the effect more closely resembled the onset of a fit than it did a smile.

Robot of Erthumoi tried to smile back, but the engineers who built it, not aware of the niceties of social intercourse among the fi-Shhekh, had not made the lower eyelids capable of independent movement. As a result, its eyes narrowed to slits, so the expression was closer to a yawn than a smile.

Lord Khwistikhir kindly overlooked this little slip. The stranger was eating with an excellent appetite, which was a very good sign—tastes varied from one household to the next, and similar tastes traditionally meant compatible temperaments.

When Lord Khwistikhir was pleased, the household of Khwistikhir was pleased. Half a dozen subordinate males let their own displays of wariness subside, and a few of the females watching from the gallery even ventured smiles of their own in Robot’s direction.

But not everyone was pleased.

Farther down the table, a dozen places farther from Lord Khwistikhir than was Robot, sat Zukhishi of Khurrish, his neck-ruff stiffly flared. He bared his fangs, then quickly hid them again.

Zukhishi was not happy at all about the sudden appearance of this stranger in unfamiliar colors, and was even less happy about the stranger’s quick acceptance at Khwistikhir’s table. Lord Khurrish had sent Zukhishi here to arrange trading terms with Khwistikhir, and had promised Zukhishi that if he won a sufficiently favorable agreement, Lord Khurrish would grant him a female of his own.

That would mean an end to his useless existence as a surplus subordinate male, and a chance to create his own household. He was still young and strong; if he acquired a female who was sufficiently fertile, perhaps he would live to see a Household Zukhishi that was the equal of Khurrish or Khwistikhir.

But first, he needed a sufficiently favorable trade agreement.

And so far, despite bribery, threats, promises, and every other maneuver he could think of, he hadn’t been able to reach any agreement. He had built up an entire network of agents of varying degrees of trustworthiness in the Khwistikhir household, but the only person whose opinion mattered, Lord Khwistikhir himself, remained unconvinced and uninterested.

And now this new person, this Robot of Erthumoi, had walked in and gained Khwistikhir’s attention immediately, apparently by his very strangeness and naivete.

It was totally unfair, and not to be borne. Nor would Zukhishi bear it; he intended to do something about it. He reached into the pouch under his cloak.

The herbs therein came from the Gleaming Swamp, and were so thick with poison that they fairly crackled. Just a sprinkle in the stranger’s food would surely be enough to remove this annoyance.

The stranger wouldn’t notice the taste in this swill the people of Khwistikhir ate, and Lord Khwistikhir would not suspect a thing—everyone knew that people from one region often couldn’t safely eat food from another. This Robot was stuffing incredible amounts down his throat in an effort to impress his host and coax Lord Khwistikhir into bringing forth the Nestling’s Cud; what could be more natural than that he would choke? He was clearly from far away, after all.

A faint shadow of doubt crossed Zukhishi’s mind—how could such a stranger eat such prodigious quantities of the local foods?

Well, it didn’t matter. What mattered was finding a way to get the toxic herbs into this Robot.

The two visitors were not seated together—since their relationship to one another was unknown, thrusting them into each other’s presence would have violated hospitality rituals. Zukhishi could scarcely declare a connection now, having once accepted separate seats—besides, if he made any such claim the stranger would deny it, and that would force Lord Khwistikhir to choose which of his guests to believe. Zukhishi was not ready to force such a choice; it seemed all too likely that the newcomer would win out.

How, then, could he contrive to leave his seat and pass near the stranger? One did not leave one’s seat during a meal; that was against custom.

The fact that he was deliberately plotting murder didn’t trouble Zukhishi at all—the fi-Shhekh had no inhibitions, either cultural or genetic, that would interfere with killing either a subordinate male of another household, or a householdless male. Such killings were not against custom.

And killing an alpha male was very much a part of established custom, and a goal to be eagerly sought after—but only within the appropriate ritual framework, of course.

The only problem with killing the stranger was if Zukhishi was caught killing someone in someone else’s household without the lord’s permission. That was a serious violation of custom, and would mean either permanent exile from Khwistikhir or his own death.

And if he were exiled from Khwistikhir his mission would be a failure, which would make it certain he would be exiled from Khurrish as well, and condemned to life as a householdless, unmated wanderer.

Death would be preferable.

So if he were to carry out his poisoning successfully, he needed to get the herbs into the stranger without anyone else knowing he had done it.

He bared his fangs again as he considered the problem.

Well, there were ways. He did have his agents in the household, and not all of them were seated. His neck-ruff slowly settled as he considered possibilities.

A few minutes later an immature male was trotting by, a bowl of gorrip in his hands; Zukhishi yawned, and in doing so flung out his tail and tripped the youth.

The boy staggered, but did not fall; Zukhishi turned to apologize, lowering his head and arching his neck (though with the ruff down tight—his offense was not that great). This brought his mouth near the lad’s ears, and he whispered quickly, “I have an errand for you. A dozen crystals if you perform it without flaw.”

The boy smiled an acceptance.

When he had delivered the gorrip he returned to Zukhishi’s side, as if to make a quick ritual acknowledgment of peace—that wasn’t required after such an incident as the tripping, but it was reasonable.

Instead of the ritual, though, he asked, “What need I do?”

Zukhishi slipped the poisonous herbs into the youth’s hand. “See that the stranger Robot eats these,” he said. “All of them.”

The youth accepted the herbs and walked away.

A few minutes later, Zukhishi watched with satisfaction as Robot of Erthumoi slurped up a bowl of soup. Even from a dozen seats away, the Khurrish could see the herbs floating in the broth.

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“That young one put something in the robot’s soup,” tin Carson-Chiang remarked. “I didn’t see it in anyone else’s food; is it another silly ritual?”

Kish-Murphy shrugged. “I really don’t know,” he said. “I suppose it could be. Or maybe he’s just trying to ingratiate himself with this interesting foreigner. You know how hard it is to figure out motives for other intelligent species, even relatively primitive ones.”

“Should we tell the robot to do anything about it?”

Kish-Murphy considered that for several minutes before answering, “No.”

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Zukhishi watched in amazement as Robot and Lord Khwistikhir calmly exchanged smiles once again. They could not yet speak to each other, of course; the lord of a household could only speak directly to his own subordinates, and to foreigners after they had been adopted as nestlings. Robot would not be adopted until he had swallowed the Nestling’s Cud. Until then, the two could only speak through intermediaries, or communicate by gestures and facial expressions.

And they were doing a great deal of gesturing and smiling, and Zukhishi found it simply appalling.

How could Robot still be alive, let alone smiling?

Had the idiot boy put the wrong herbs in the soup?

At that thought, Zukhishi’s ruff bristled. Instantly, he devised a plan and took the first step in carrying it out by miming the finding of a slimecrawler in his bowl of fruit.

To announce such a find would be impolite, of course, so he did not have to actually tell a lie; holding the pinched fingers out, as if keeping the loathsome thing at arm’s length, was enough to convince everyone.

Quickly, one of the serving boys—a different one—ran up to dispose of the vermin.

Zukhishi whispered to him, and the youth departed with something in his hand—but it was no slimecrawler.

It was half the contents of Zukhishi’s poison pouch.

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“There’s more stuff being added to the food,” Kish-Murphy said. “Neither of the surviving ambassadors ever mentioned anything like this.” A note of worry had crept into his voice.

Tin Carson-Chiang shrugged.

“It can’t hurt the robot, whatever it is,” she said.

“No,” Kish-Murphy agreed. “Of course not. I’m just afraid we’re going to get some part of the ritual wrong.”

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Zukhishi’s eyelids were fully retracted and his shoulders cocked back in an expression of astonished disbelief.

He had seen the poison go into Robot’s mouth! Enough poison to kill an entire household!

And Robot was blithely smiling at Lord Khwistikhir, going through a ritual acceptance of honor tidbits from the household cooks. He showed no sign of discomfort at all.

How could this be?

Lord Khwistikhir’s gaze moved down the long table, and his smile vanished. He turned and whispered a few words to the subordinate at his right, who was serving as the steward for this particular meal.

A moment later the steward was at Zukhishi’s side, carefully not stepping within the radius of the Khurrish’s tail. Under the laws of hospitality, that little circle of pavement was currently outside Khwistikhir’s jurisdiction, and the steward was acting as Khwistikhir’s agent.

He made a formal ritual apology for troubling the honored guest, then a ritual expression of brotherhood with all who were welcome under Khwistikhir’s roof. Zukhishi waited impatiently, bringing his emotions under control. His shoulders folded back into resting position, his eyelids reappeared, his neck-ruff settled somewhat.

The ritual was calming, really, Zukhishi had to admit.

After all, that was what it was for.

Eventually the steward got to the point.

“My lord father saw you were disturbed, and expressed a certain curiosity to me as to the reason,” he said. “I confessed I did not know, and was shamed by this failure to please he whom I serve.”

Zukhishi pulled back his upper lip in polite acknowledgment, but said nothing. He was thinking hard about what he should do.

“I am here to tell my foreign brother that I wish to avoid another such failure, should my lord still be curious about the matter when I dare to return to his side,” the steward concluded.

“I will tell you why I am disturbed, then,” Zukhishi said, loudly. “I will tell everyone here, all my beloved brothers, who have accepted me into this home, though your father is not the male who impregnated the females of my nest.” He rose to his full height, ruff bristling. “I will speak in the presence of Lord Khwistikhir himself, and all the females he possesses, so that my brothers will hear me the sooner.”

The steward’s own ruff was up, shoulders cocked, eyelids withdrawn. Such a speech was not what he had expected.

It could be a deliberate affront, the first step leading up to a formal challenge—but that was hardly appropriate to a welcoming feast!

“I will warn you all,” Zukhishi said, “that there is a monster among us!”

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“Oh, damn,” Kish-Murphy said. “Now what’s gone wrong?”

“Who is that?” tin Carson-Chiang asked. “Why is he dressed differently from all the others? Is he the court jester, or something?”

Kish-Murphy shook his head. “No, they don’t have anything like that,” he said. “Those are the colors of some other household—I’ve seen them before, when we were doing remote reconnaissance. This fellow must be an ambassador of some kind.”

Tin Carson-Chiang stared at the image of the banquet hall, where several dozen of the large alien creatures called fi-Shhekh were squeaking and hissing incomprehensibly at each other, with tails and feather-ruffs flapping and rustling on all sides. It looked quite insane, by human standards, but she knew perfectly well that there was some sort of underlying logic to even the maddest of alien societies. “Why would he have anything against us, then?” she asked.

“How should I know?” Kish-Murphy shouted. “Maybe he’s working for the Locrians—there were rumors that they’d tracked the things from Innini to here, too.”

“That’s nonsense,” tin Carson-Chiang said. “The artifacts are less than a meter long each, and if there’d been a Locrian ship in range our people would have seen it. That’s just...” She realized Kish-Murphy wasn’t listening, and stopped.

Kish-Murphy frowned and leaned forward, bringing his face close to the video display. He studied the image, looking at the distance between the robot and its accuser.

“Hey, Beth,” he asked, “look at this and tell me something. How does he know it’s a monster?”

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The excited murmurs and flutters slowly died away; now the entire population of the hall was silent, and all eyes were focused on the daily steward and the Khurrish envoy. A few stole quick glances at Robot of Erthumoi, but then returned to the pair.

Robot, for his part, sat in polite, stolid silence, not interfering in the business of his hosts.

The steward, after much consideration, had arrived at the appropriate response. He looked quickly to Lord Khwistikhir, who motioned his assent, then turned back to Zukhishi and said, “My foreign brother has puzzled me. I will not be so impertinent as to impose my confusion upon him with questions, but if he should care to explain himself further, I am sure that I and my nestling brothers will be greatly and enjoyably educated thereby.”

Zukhishi bared fangs, then quickly covered them again.

“As my brother asks,” he said, “so I must do. This creature that dines at your table, this creature that calls itself by the meaningless noise Robot, of the nonexistent household of Erthumoi, is no Shhekh at all, but a monster—perhaps one of the legendary night-creatures that stalk the wilds and are said to disguise themselves, to fool their victims into not fleeing at their approach.” He thrust out a pointing hand in Robot’s direction.

No one looked very convinced.

The steward muttered to the floor, “A proclamation from a subordinate has no more significance than the babbling of a child or a female’s cooing, unless it be given weight and solidity by the authority of evidence, or the authority of the name of a household’s lord.”

Zukhishi snorted. “You mean, brother, that you will not take my word that that thing is a monster. Will you take the word of your own nephews? For at my behest, two of the youths of this house have fed that creature enough poison to slay us all, and yet it sits there as unconcerned as if those fatal drugs were no more than salts to season a bland dish!”

The steward blinked, and its ruff rippled in surprise. He turned to the serving lads.

Two of them bent in acknowledgment.

At the head of the table Lord Khwistikhir stirred. He glowered at the two boys, and then, slowly, he rose to his feet. His ceremonial robe—to the watching Erthumoi it appeared green and black, but to the eyes of the fi-Shhekh the household colors were a particular shade of extreme green and a color in the infrared that had no distinct name in any Erthumoi tongue—billowed out to either side, and the feathers of his ruff, long and graceful as only a mature alpha male’s could be, stirred and rustled dramatically.

“You, thing of Khurrish,” he demanded thunderously, “are you declaring that you attempted to poison my guest at my table, when I had not asked that it be done?”

Zukhishi fought against his instinctive urge—his instinctive need—to bend his neck and submit to the authority of Lord Khwistikhir. To defy an alpha male—that could end in only three ways: Instant submission, ritual challenge to combat, or death. Zukhishi was not on the hormonal high necessary for combat; so far as he could smell, not a single female in the entire household was in season, and with no female to fight over, a proper challenge and combat would be impossible for him. He was no rogue or desperate wanderer, ready to fight out of season.

That left submission or death. He had no wish to die—but to submit at this point might well mean his death as a poisoner.

Death for defiance, or death for breaking the rules of hospitality—or if he could fight the urge long enough to present his case, just possibly victory.

“Lord Khwistikhir,” he said, forcing the words out, “I ask your leave to speak.”

Puzzled, Khwistikhir studied the Khurrish. He stepped away from his seat and strode around the table, heedless of the subordinates desperately throwing themselves out of his path, to get a closer look and study this strange phenomenon more closely.

As lord householder he had no need to respect any rules about a tail’s radius of private space, and he did not. He stepped right up to Zukhishi, looming over him—Khwistikhir was a prime specimen of his species, some thirty centimeters taller than the Khurrish, and with over twice the mass—and looking him straight in the eye.

“Speak,” he commanded.

It was difficult, very difficult, to lie to an alpha male, but Zukhishi fought against his instincts and forced out each word of his lie.

“Lord Khwistikhir,” he said, trembling. “Noble protector, progenitor of glory, I knew the stranger for a monster before we ever took our places at this meal—at this splendid feast you have had spread before us. I sent him...no, I sent it poison to reveal its true nature to you! Only that!”

“You acted without my consent,” Khwistikhir stated—but Zukhishi knew it was a question and a command, not simply a statement.

“Undefiable master,” Zukhishi said, “I have not been given the honor of speaking to you directly, without much preparation, and I thought that you would refuse to hear me. Yet the fear that this monster might harm you was greater than my fear of death at your hands, and I acted—oh, honored lord, pardon such impudence—I acted, without being told to do so, in so many words. But, Lord Khwistikhir, my own father and master, Lord Khurrish, had commanded that I should place myself utterly at your service, and to prevent any harm from touching you, any illness of body, mind, or reputation from intruding past your gates. So I sought to defeat that creature, to prevent it from carrying out whatever evil ends it might intend!” He again thrust an accusing hand toward Robot.

“You know that your life has been mine, to give or take as I please, since you entered my gates,” Lord Khwistikhir said. “And by daring to act as you have, you have thrust that life between my jaws. Yet may I see fit to spit it out, if I decide that you have kept worse from my throat.” He turned, slowly and regally, to glare at Robot.

“You who call yourself Robot of Erthumoi,” he thundered, “I speak to you in defiance of ritual and custom, not as lord to underling, as is the natural order, but as if we were strangers met in the wild, with no hall to tell our stations and house our ceremonies. You have eaten at my table, eaten the meats and fruits from my kitchens, but for the moment we will set that aside. This son of Khurrish accuses you of being a night-creature, or some other false seeming, and says he fed you poisons. What do you say?”

Robot sat stupid and silent, his expression blank, for several long seconds.

\* \* \*

The glowing message in the corner of the video display read “Situation outside programming,” but neither the diplomat nor the roboticist needed to read it to know that.

“I’ve got the link ready,” tin Carson-Chiang said, “but what do I tell it? What should it do?”

“I don’t...” Kish-Murphy began. Then he snarled, “Oh, what the hell. Let me do it. How does it work?”

“Go ahead,” tin Carson-Chiang told him. “Just tell it; it’ll hear you.”

“Right. It’s time to wing it, I guess.” He grimaced. “After all, at worst we lose a robot, and you can build another, right?”

“That’s not the worst, and you know it,” tin Carson-Chiang retorted. “At worst, we convince the entire population of the planet that we’re demons and monsters, and lose any chance of ever getting those artifacts.”

“Yeah,” Kish-Murphy said, “that’s worse, all right. And I wish you hadn’t reminded me.”

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Robot lowered his head, not in a fully submissive posture, but in a respectful pose.

“Lord Khwistikhir,” he said, “glorious master of this household, am I really to be permitted to speak to you, under your own roof, while yet an unknown foreigner?”

“You are commanded to speak to me,” Khwistikhir told the stranger. “And quickly.”

“It is awe that has slowed my words,” Robot replied. “As for the accusations that this person has made against me, I am no monster, but as I told your gatekeeper, I come from very far indeed, from far beyond the horizon that can be seen from the highest watchtower. In my journeys I knew I might come to eat strange foods, and so I took medicines against poisons—not that I feared any poisons under the roof of the magnificent Khwistikhir, but I have been traveling many, many days and have eaten in many places. If this person has indeed fed me poisons, I am unaware of it—my medicines have protected me.”

Lord Khwistikhir frowned.

“He lies!” Zukhishi shouted.

Lord Khwistikhir turned an angry glare on the Khurrish, who quickly subsided—and this time he was unable to resist his instincts, and his neck curved, ruff spread, into a proper submission.

“One of you lies,” Khwistikhir announced. He growled, and several of those present shrank away in terror. Furious, the lord of the household bellowed, “One of you lies—but I have not determined which!”

\* \* \*

“Just how convincing is that robot?” Kish-Murphy asked as he watched the raging patriarch. His instructions to the robot had staved off disaster so far, but unfortunately, they hadn’t yet prevented it entirely.

Tin Carson-Chiang shrugged. “I don’t really know,” she admitted. “We did the best we could with the information you gave us. We averaged out the three VR images you gave us and worked with tolerances down to about eighty microns, but when you’re working with machines and living organisms together you never know just what can go wrong. We could have messed up one of the textures somewhere, and I won’t swear the color resolution’s perfect outside the part of the spectrum that’s visible to Erthumoi. Those things see from infrared through green, instead of red through violet, and we could have screwed up something in the infrared. But the only mistake I know of was in wiring the muscles that work the eyelids, and that won’t show unless it tries to do something it can’t.”

“So they can look at it up close, and touch it, and maybe stick something down its throat, and you don’t think they’ll see it’s a robot?”

“They shouldn’t,” tin Carson-Chiang said. “Not unless they...well, we did the throat down about half a meter; if they go poking any farther than that, we could have trouble. And we didn’t worry about the other end of the digestive tract much at all—only a few centimeters. And it doesn’t work at all, it’s just for appearance.”

Kish-Murphy nodded. “So they shouldn’t spot that it’s a robot unless they start cutting it open.”

“Right.”

“So we can go on denying that other guy’s claims, and he can’t prove it.”

“Well...”

“Well, what?”

“Well, what you just said—not unless they start cutting it open. You said these patriarchs are little tinpot gods—couldn’t this Lord Wishy-Ears decide to have the robot cut open, just on general principles?”

“Well, yeah, he could,” Kish-Murphy agreed. He sighed. “I guess we’ll just have to talk him out of it.”

\* \* \*

“I cannot bear longer the honor of addressing so great a lord directly,” Robot said, in a loud, clear voice that nonetheless maintained a deferential tone. “I beg that someone hear me, and perhaps whoever does so shall see fit to convey to mighty Lord Khwistikhir whatever might interest him.”

That put at least something back to normal at this strangest and most unorthodox of welcoming banquets—Kish-Murphy thought that might help to reduce tension, and had told Robot so.

Robot’s appointed interlocutor, a young adult named Hhikhuhi, made a gesture indicating readiness to listen.

“If anything is at fault at this table,” Robot said, “it cannot be the doing of any who are the sons of Khwistikhir, for they have spent all their lives in service to his glory, and surely must all know well what is expected of them. It is unthinkable that any of Lord Khwistikhir’s household could be in any way unsatisfactory to Lord Khwistikhir. Therefore, since ritual and custom have been disturbed, the error must arise from the outsiders present. There are two such, myself and this other, who is unknown to me but who accuses me of being something other than a true Shhekh. One or the other of us, or perhaps both, must be responsible for this disharmony I have unwillingly observed.”

Hhikhuhi bared thin, needle-sharp fangs. Lord Khwistikhir, who was not the ostensible audience for Robot’s speech, was nonetheless listening carefully.

Robot had paused while receiving further instruction from his Erthumoi master, but now he continued.

“I cannot say with certainty where the fault lies, with my accuser or with myself, for my own beliefs are as nothing before the omniscience of Lord Khwistikhir within his own gates,” Robot said. “But it is unthinkable that I should allow myself to cause disharmony at the table of Khwistikhir. Therefore, I beg that, if somehow word of my plight should reach Lord Khwistikhir’s ears, I should be turned out, as if I had disgraced myself at table, rather than that my presence should cause the slightest discomfort to the master of this household. All here is his to do with as he pleases, and if I have troubled him, such a blot upon his peaceful repose as myself should be removed forthwith.”

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“What a speech!” tin Carson-Chiang marveled.

“Thanks,” Kish-Murphy muttered. “Your robot prettied it up for me, you’ll notice.”

“Of course,” tin Carson-Chiang replied. “That’s what we programmed it to do!”

\* \* \*

Lord Khwistikhir turned toward Zukhishi.

“Robot of Erthumoi has spoken fairly, and in a proper fashion,” he said. “Zukhishi of Khurrish has admitted to attempted poisoning, and has made accusations with no evidence.”

Zukhishi’s four eyelids trembled as he said, “He lies. He is a monster, no true Shhekh—what medicines could protect him against poison herbs? Or perhaps he is a wanderer, seeking a place in your household without taking the risks of challenge—there is no household called Erthumoi!”

“Could a monster speak so well, and follow ritual?” Lord Khwistikhir mused, not directly addressing Zukhishi. “Would a lying wanderer offer to depart, rather than trouble me further, when he is but a step away from earning a place here? Does this envoy from Khurrish know the names of every household under the sun, that he can say with certainty that a particular one does not exist?”

After a moment of awkward silence, Zukhishi said, “I am distraught, and speak without proper planning—out of fear for Lord Khwistikhir.”

Lord Khwistikhir considered that carefully.

Everyone in the banquet hall awaited his decision in tense silence, and Zukhishi was easily the most worried of all present. It was plain that this dispute could easily mean his death. He struggled to think of something he could say that would better his chances of survival.

Robot of Erthumoi, sitting a few meters away, was incapable of worry, and was not doing any independent thinking at all just now. He was leaving that to his distant masters. Most of his interior was devoted to the equipment that allowed him to simulate life—false lungs, false stomach, motors and pumps and wires. That had not left all that much space for brains, and much of his data processing capacity was occupied with running and maintaining his body, so that, as robots went, he was not terribly bright. Events had long since passed the point at which his built-in intelligence could handle them.

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“So why did that one try to poison the robot in the first place?” tin Carson-Chiang asked. “It wasn’t the Locrians, I’m sure.”

Kish-Murphy shrugged. “Fear of the competition, I suppose,” he said. “Whatever he was sent to do at Khwistikhir, he must think having another ambassador around will make it more difficult.”

“Will it?”

Startled, Kish-Murphy considered that for a moment, then admitted, “I don’t see why it should, really. We can’t be after the same things he is; why would his household want Seventh Race artifacts?”

“Why do we want them?” tin Carson-Chiang countered.

“So we can go on trying to analyze them, just as we did on Innini before they took off, and just the way we’ve done with all the other junk the Seventh Race left scattered around the Galaxy. And these primitives can’t possibly know what the artifacts are, or have any use for them.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Oh, absolutely; whatever he was after, whatever he thinks we’d keep from him, it’s got to be something else.”

“Then all this is for nothing, from his point of view—but he doesn’t know that yet?”

“I guess so,” Kish-Murphy agreed.

“What’s going to happen to him?”

“Oh, they’ll kill him,” Kish-Murphy said.

“What?” Tin Carson-Chiang stared. “They’ll kill him?”

“Well, yes,” Kish-Murphy said. “After all, he did try to poison someone. And these folks are pretty barbaric, when you get right down to it; they’ll kill each other over much less than attempted murder.”

“But he didn’t poison someone, he poisoned our silly robot!” tin Carson-Chiang protested.

“Well, he didn’t know that,” Kish-Murphy pointed out. “He thought he was poisoning someone.”

“Still, he...are you going to let him die for nothing?”

“It’s not up to me,” Kish-Murphy said with a shrug. “It’s up to Lord Khwistikhir.”

“Well, you could do something, couldn’t you?” tin Carson-Chiang demanded.

Kish-Murphy considered that, and admitted, “I suppose I could.”

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“Oh, that my words might reach the right ears,” Robot said quietly, to nobody in particular.

In the anticipatory silence the words carried wonderfully, and more than a dozen pairs of eyes turned toward him.

“I fear,” Robot said, addressing an empty bowl, “that all this unpleasantness has resulted from a misunderstanding, not on the part of any of the household of Khwistikhir, who could scarcely err beneath their own roof, but on the part of the two others they have graciously permitted within their walls.”

He had everyone’s attention now, even Lord Khwistikhir’s.

The patriarch was surprised by this interruption of his thoughts; he had believed it was clear enough that he intended to side with the Erthumoi, rather than the Khurrish, yet here the fool was, breaking into the deliberations in this annoying fashion. Did he want to be cast out?

Zukhishi was even more surprised; he had thought his best hope was exile, and was expecting death, but now the stranger’s voice might yet bring a reprieve, if only by angering Lord Khwistikhir—or redirecting his anger.

“I think that this other guest must have misunderstood my place here,” Robot said. “He must have feared that I sought the same things he sought, and that to allow me to usurp his place in the warmth of Lord Khwistikhir’s presence would mean that he must be forced out into the cold, his own ends unmet, his duty to his lord failed. But did he not realize that I would scarcely come as far as I have for any ordinary purpose, and that we cannot in truth be competitors? And that Lord Khwistikhir’s glory is great enough to encompass any number of envoys? That there is no need for us to be foes, and that I would, if I dared, beg Lord Khwistikhir to forgive him his folly?”

Robot finished his speech, and for a moment the hall was silent again.

Then Lord Khwistikhir let out a roar; heads fell in submission on all sides.

“Listen to him!” Lord Khwistikhir bellowed. “He would beg me for your life, creature of Khurrish!”

Zukhishi, in full submission, could not acknowledge this save by trembling, which he was doing anyway. He was baffled by this turn of events—but not displeased.

“Ghorrush,” Lord Khwistikhir called, “bring me the Nestling Cud, that I may make our new infant, Robot, welcome here! And as a gift to please him, a toy for his bedding, I will let the Khurrish stay on—if he will swear to never again attempt to harm my other guests!”

The subordinate hurried to fetch the cud, and an excited murmur drove away the last of the nervous silence that had obtained a moment earlier.

And five minutes later, Lord Khwistikhir thrust the gooey Nestling Cud with his own fingers into the mouth of Robot of Erthumoi.

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“There,” Kish-Murphy said, leaning back in his chair. “We have our embassy! Now that robot can bring in others, and we can take our time about finding those artifacts. Nobody else is going to get in ahead of us.”

Tin Carson-Chiang nodded. “None of the other starfaring races could build a robot like that,” she agreed. “As long as the hospitality customs are what they are, we’ve got an unbeatable edge.”

“And they aren’t about to change,” Kish-Murphy said. “Gods, this time we almost blew it because our ambassador didn’t get sick from eating with them! What a place! All this trouble, just because the food’s toxic!”

“Could be worse,” tin Carson-Chiang said.

Kish-Murphy snorted. “How?” he asked.

“Well,” tin Carson-Chiang said, “if we had this much trouble with the food, just think if their hospitality customs were based on wife-swapping!”