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The Search

“I’m afraid there aren’t any Chefs available at such short notice” said the restaurant manager to the eager gentleman.

“Not even one?” he asked dejectedly.

“I’m sorry, Sir. Not even one.”

“But I’m desperate! I really need a chef for my book!”

“Pardon me, did you say you needed one for your book?”

“Yeah, I’m writing a book – a novel if you please, which takes an in-depth look into a chef’s life gone awry. It’s gonna make me millions! Since I don’t know anything about chefs, I thought it would be nice to do a bit of research on them. You know how any writer worth his salt is supposed to research his characters to make his writing more believable? It’s called 'getting under the skin of the character' …”

“Get out!” screamed the manager.

“Excuse me?”

“You want to hire a ‘Grandioso’ chef- one who is sought after by the elitist of the elite, for some lousy two-bit book! It’s preposterous!”

“What? It’s not like I won’t pay him. In fact, he can have one percent of the royalties from the book sales…and an honourable mention in the book…although I can’t guarantee that I’ll use his real name – makes it seem more mysterious, you know?”

“Security!”

“I’m going! I’m going!”

As he walked away, Vikram was still as determined as ever to get his writing career off the ground. He believed that he had found the easiest gimmick to get rich quickly – a writer was always only one best-seller away from becoming a billionaire, after all. And even though he didn’t know much about writing, he believed that 'researching the character’ was absolutely essential. And since he was writing a mystery trilogy with a chef as its protagonist, he needed a chef!

Vikram looked around as he prodded on towards the bus stop. The street was chock-a-block with fancy restaurants with glass windows. His eyes lit up as he saw a sign on one such window.

“Kitchen Help Wanted” it said.

That amounts to a front row seat to a Chef’s performance, he thought. What better place to observe a chef than in his kitchen.

“I hope you have the requisite experience for the position?” the manager asked him after the preliminaries were complete.

“I can boil eggs.” Vikram ventured.

“You’ve studied cooking at college, of course?”

“I boiled eggs when I was at college.” replied Vikram earnestly.

“I’m sorry but you’re unsuitable….” the manager was interrupted midway by a voice from behind the kitchen door.

”Send him in.” the voice said.

“But Caesar, he doesn’t have the skills or the expe….” the manager began, but was

stopped yet again.

“Just send him in!”

“You heard the boss.” The manager shook his head and pointed Vikram towards the kitchen.

Vikram opened the kitchen door and walked in to see a man in a Chef's hat chopping some vegetables on a slab. He strode out towards him and stuck out his hand in greeting.

“Hi, I'm Vikram. I saw you want ad outside and...”

“Tell me Vikram, can you boil eggs?”

“Done it all my life.”

“You’re hired.” Caesar said quickly.

Vikram scrutinised the kitchen. It was rectangular in shape and had cabinets, for appliances and dishes, at one end and wash-basins at the other. There was a large rectangular marble slab, built around a pillar, in the centre of the room where the major cooking related activities seemed to take place. A bunch of wires were plugged into a switchboard near the wash-basins. The other end of the wires vanished under a door to the side.

“Where is the rest of the staff?” Vikram enquired, looking around at the empty kitchen.

“What staff?” Caesar said distantly. He seemed to be busy scribbling in a small notebook he had just taken out.

“The cooking staff. You couldn’t possibly run a restaurant kitchen with just two people, can you?”

“Oh, we manage to get by.” His scribbling intensified.

“How?” asked a bewildered Vikram.

“I suppose I’d better tell you all.”

Caesar walked across the room to the door and opened it. Vikram followed him and peered inside with anticipation.

Vikram tried to make sense of what Caesar was pointing at, but all he could see in the room was a bed. A pretty bed. A pretty pink bed covered with yellow polka dots. A pretty pink bed covered with yellow polka dots that was nailed to the ceiling. He was about to utter a bunch of words in Caesar's direction, mostly beginning with 'wh-', but he had to stop himself. It had come to his sudden notice that the bed had turned into a human form and had floated down to face him. Caesar thought for a moment, decided that no answer from Caesar would be good enough for him at this point, and promptly fainted.

When Vikram came to, he found himself lying on a bed in an unfamiliar room. He tried to recollect how he got there. He looked down at the bed and thought that it reminded him of something but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He shrugged his shoulders and closed his eyes to go back to sleep. After all, he was tired and the bed was really comfortable. It wasn't just comfortable, he thought, it was in fact the most comfortable bed he had ever slept on. He was making a mental note to go and seek out the owner post-nap and find out where he could buy himself one, when he remembered.

Caesar heard the loud shriek followed by the even louder banging on the guest room door. He allowed himself a little smile before turning to his companion. “He's up. Let's get ourselves introduced.”

His companion floated mistily to the drawing room door and waited patiently as Caesar opened the door and asked Vikram to calm down. **He wondered if Vikram would be able to help Caesar out. But then he remembered the others that had come before him. This would end the same way too, he thought. Horribly.**

“Morphy, meet Vikram. Vikram, meet Morphy.” Caesar said with every bit of nonchalance that he could muster. He always enjoyed these first meetings.

“What is tha-that thing?” squeaked Vikram, as he pointed an accusing finger at Morphy.

“He's an alien. And stop pointing, it's rude.” Caesar slapped Vikram's hand down.

“Nice to meet you, Vikram” said Morphy.

“Uh...likewise...” was all Vikram could manage to splutter out.

"Maybe you should sit down."

Vikram looked at the bed nervously.

"Don't worry, that one's just a plain old regular bed." chuckled Caesar.

Vikram sat on the bed reluctantly. He wouldn't be able to trust any beds for a while, he thought, but was immediately conscious of what an absurd fear that was and tried to compose himself. He looked up at the alien and studied him properly for the first time. Morphy wasn't very tall, in fact he was probably a few inches shorter than him. He had an almost perfectly round face and an even more perfectly spherical nose to complement it. The other 'human' features were pretty run-of-the-mill too. He was smartly but simply dressed in a striped t-shirt and long oxymoronic shorts. Morphy could almost have passed as one of them, Vikram thought, if he didn't have just one eye. Of course, there was also the small matter of his skin being pink and yellow polka dotted and the fact that he could float in air.

Vikram was trying to sift through his limited encounters with science-fiction novels to remember whether Martians were supposed to be green or pink, when his thoughts were interrupted by Caesar.

“Let me try to tell you all...again. And please try not to pass out this time.”

“It all started on April 20th, 2013. It was a bright and stormy night...with a full moon...which was also the cause of the brightness. And I think I also saw a shooting star or two go by. Great set up right?” Caesar began.

Vikram nodded resignedly.

“Yes, it was. I should have known that something big was going to happen to me that night. I was engrossed in perfecting my signature recipes, when I heard something crash... wait...this doesn't feel right! A story like this deserves to be told...nay experienced... better! Morphy, prepare the time machine! We'll let Vikram see the events as they transpired that night in their full glory – in person!”

“I'm afraid the Sinetransmorgodor, or what you call the 'time machine', did not survive the milkshake incident. And since I cannot contact my planet anymore, the only recourse for us is to wait until your people invent inter-planetary travel so that I can ask the manufacturers to deliver the spare parts here.”

“How long will it take for us to invent it again?” Caesar asked with hopeful eyes.

“The same time as when I told you last. Five hundred and twenty four more years.” Morphy said bluntly as he glowered at Caesar. Vikram couldn't help but think that it was an impressive feat to do that so effectively with his solitary eye.

“Don't look at me like that! How was I to know that your alien technology is so susceptible to milk based drinks? And why don't they have a service centre in this part of the solar system? They're the people you should be mad at!” said Caesar defiantly.

“You guys have a time machine?” Vikram asked.

“Where were we?” said Caesar, quickly changing the subject. “Ah yes, the crash. It wasn't very loud actually. I don't think anyone except me would even have heard it. I went to the back of the restaurant to investigate anyway. I opened the rear door to a sight was something out of a science-fiction movie. The entire area was covered in smoke and there was a small crater in the backyard. In the middle of that crater, lay what looked like a spaceship – black, orb shaped, with smoke coming out of various crevices.”

“It was a spaceship.” Morphy interjected.

“I'm telling it. Let me tell it my way!”

“All right. Go ahead.”

“In the middle of the crater was a spaceship” continued Caesar while scowling at Morphy “and before I could do anything, a small door slid open on one side noiselessly, and a mysterious misty figure stumbled out of it.” Caesar paused for effect.

“It was me.” said Morphy.

“Why did you have to ruin it? Why??” thundered Caesar.

“It's okay. I kinda guessed it was him anyway. Please continue.” Vikram tried to calm him down.

“Anyone else in my position might have been scared on seeing an alien walk up to them, but I stood my ground. He looked and walked kind of funny, in a sinister manner.” Caesar continued grumpily.

“I had just crash landed on an alien planet after travelling for days, maybe even months. I was tired and disoriented.” said Morthy defensively.

“Yeah, yeah. Don't get your antennae in a bunch.”

“I don't have antennae. Are you blind? I've warned you about the stereotyping before. If you do that again, I'll...”

“What happened next?” Vikram intervened before the argument could escalate any further.

“I asked E.T. here where he came from. At which point he mumbled something incoherent and passed out. I had to drag his scrawny alien body inside and wait for him to come to. I kept expecting a knock on the restaurant door from someone in the government or the neighbouring establishments but no one came. Luckily it was almost closing time and I didn't have any customers to worry about.”

“By that logic, it's always closing time here.” Morphy winked at Caesar, or he may have just blinked his eye, it was hard for Vikram to tell.

Caesar pretended not to hear the jibe and continued, “When he finally came to, after zoning out for a few hours, I tried to find out where he was from and what he was doing here. I was surprised to find that he could understand and speak English pretty well..”

“It's not that hard. My planet's language had one million, five hundred and twenty eight thousand, three hundred and twenty eight consonants and vowels at last count. And I'm sure a few hundred thousand must have been added since I've lost contact. I was easily able to master hundreds of your languages, if you can call them that, during the journey.” Morphy said smugly. “Oh, and I wasn't mumbling incoherently before I passed out, that was Kannada – I was very well prepared.”

“You learnt English and Kannada and hundreds of other languages during the journey. Riiight. That is, if you remember that part of the journey correctly. And I doubt that you do.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Vikram.

“He says that because he's a jerk, and also because I seem to be suffering from what you call short-term memory loss. I suspect it may be because of something that happened during the journey, but I can't be sure.”

“Oh, how bad is it?” asked Vikram.

“He can't even remember why he came to our planet.”

“All I remember is that I'm on an extremely confidential mission and my presence must not be detected at any cost. At any cost whatsoever.”

Vikram felt a small shiver down his spine as he heard that even though there wasn't a hint of malice evident on Morphy's face.

“You still haven't answered my original question.” Vikram turned to Caesar.

“Ah yes. How do we manage without any staff, you ask? We manage because no customer has set foot in this restaurant for weeks. Not since that cretin, Lilly Legume wrote that scathing review of my restaurant in her 'Bestaurant Guide'.”

“Oh, how I despise that woman.” Caesar added after a pause.

“But...if there aren't any customers, why did you hire me? How do I fit into all this?”

“Very snugly Vikram. Very snugly.”

The Mission

“Send him in.” Goloxinout said to his secretary.

Goloxinout was in a cranky mood. Konnit's elections were due in another millennium, which meant that he had been forced to do some actual work again. He had twenty meetings lined up in the day and wasn't looking forward to any of them.

“Good afternoon, Mr President.” the visitor said as he threw in a well practiced bow of courtesy.

“What is this about Xylon?” Goloxinout gestured him to sit.

“We still haven't been able to establish contact with General Wingo.”

“Ah yes, General Wingo...uh...where is he again?”

“It's been a year minus five minutes since he set out on his mission to Earth.”

“Right. Right. Th-aaat general Wingo. Of course. How does General Wingo like the place?”

“We don't know. We lost contact with him as soon as he left our atmosphere.”

“Ah. Hate it when that happens. So you want me to name a day after him? General Wingo day? It kinda rolls off the tongue, you have to admit. Ooh maybe a parade too..”

“All in good time Mr. President. But first, we must bring his mission to closure.”

Goloxinout groaned and braced himself. This was generally the point where Xylon gave him a long-winded 'briefing' and asked him to make a decision. Oh how he hated making decisions. He had become the president by religiously avoiding making them at every turn. They historically had a knack of coming back to bite him in the behind.

“General Wingo's was no ordinary mission.” Xylon paused suddenly.

“Go on Xylon, I'm listening. What was the mission about?”

“Unfortunately, that's almost all we really know about the mission.”

“All we know about the mission is that it wasn't ordinary and that it involved General Wingo going to Earth?”

“You must understand that this mission was commissioned during the Wizium administration, Mr. President. Most of the relevant records were a casualty of the Great Digitizing Fiasco of last year.”

“The one where they shredded all the documents before scanning them?”

“That was the year before last, Mr. President.”

“Ah yes, this was the one with the Unicorn, the barrel of gunpowder and the firefly.”

“And the banjo.” added Xylon.

“Yes, the banjo. Of course. I still don't understand why we're talking about this mission Xylon.”

“Well, there *is* one more thing that we've been able to find out. I've double-checked the information and there's no doubt about it.” Xylon added.

“What's that?”

“The only mission guideline that we could find explicitly states that if Captain Wingo doesn't return or contact us in another...”, he looked at his watch and continued, “...ninety seconds, we are supposed to destroy Earth immediately.”

Their eyes darted to the clock on the desk simultaneously.

“Well, hold on a minute there, Xylon. Surely there must be someone who was part of the original mission planning that should be able to tell us what the mission is about?”

“They were all a casualty of the military coup that immediately followed the Great Digitizing Fiasco.”

“The one that I led?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Well, at least I guessed that one right.” Goloxinout said with a sheepish grin.

Their eyes darted back to the clock.

“Well, it looks like he isn't back Mr. President.” Xylon said as the clocks hands ticked over the dreaded mark in an almost casual manner.

Goloxinout furrowed his only brow in deep thought. He liked to think of himself as a man of peace and wiping out an entire civilization always made him feel uneasy. On the other hand, if he acted quickly, he would be able to take a quick afternoon nap before the next meeting.

“Who can take care of this for us?”

“It sounds like a job for the Uranians.”

“Where do I sign?” Goloxinout asked.

“There, there and there.” Xylon said as he pushed an official looking piece of paper towards him.

“One more thing, Mr. President.”

“There's more?” asked an exasperated Goloxinout.

“The deadline for nominating the Lifetime Award For Excellence In Galactic Science is almost upon us. I've scrutinized the contributions and careers of all our eminent scientists and one name stands out – that of Kintonx Goulin.”

“Nominate whoever you please Xylon. I couldn't care less. Hang on...isn't he the time machine guy?”

“He called it the Sinetransmorgodor – after his pet dinosaur, I'm told.”

“I've read about him. Did he ever remember how to make another one of those contraptions? Anyone who lays their hands on one of those would have access to insurmountable power.”

“I'm afraid the memory loss caused by his journey to the future was quite permanent. He was only ever able to create one. And the whereabouts of that machine, despite extensive search operations that have been carried out in the last few centuries, are still unknown.”

What a pity that was, sighed Goloxinout, as he stared out to the mesmerizing view of the galaxy that his cabin afforded him. He could have used it to go back and cancel all those meetings. And there were those few years when he had tried to make it as 'Golo –the mime who talked' that kept cropping up from time to time. Yes, he could definitely have found good use for the device.

The Proposition

Vikram couldn't get himself to fall asleep. The events that had transpired during the day seemed like a distant dream. He had landed a new job, met a being from another planet, and most importantly, had prevented himself from making the biggest mistake of his life – making the chef the protagonist of his impending bestseller. The market was obviously ripe for the epic saga of a stranded alien with amnesia, fighting his way back to his home planet against the odds. He was surprised he hadn't thought of it earlier. Even though Caesar had been very mysterious about what his actual duties would be, Vikram couldn't wait for the next morning.

He was jarred out of his thoughts by the loud cry of the doorbell, followed by a deluge of impatient knocks. It could only be that infernal interfering neighbour of his coming to complain about his exercising in the midnight again, Vikram thought. His indignation grew in harmony with the knocking and he opened the door determined to give the man a piece of his mind.

“It's not even exercise night, you ignorant...” Vikram began.

“Hello Vikram. We need to talk. Can I come in?” Caesar said.

“Uh...sure. Please come in.” Vikram said.

Caesar made his way into the drawing room and sat on the sofa. The room, like the entire house, screamed bachelor-pad from every nook and cranny. It was minimally furnished with the bachelor's essentials – a recliner, a beanbag, a large television screen and a table to place the junk food on(there were three empty pizza boxes containing the remnants of a thick chewy crust lying on top).

“Please excuse my tone back there, Caesar. I thought you were someone else.” Vikram apologised as he plonked himself on the beanbag.

“It's all right. I must apologize too – for paying you a visit at this late hour. But I have no choice. I have to talk to you about something that I cannot bring up when Morphy is lurking around.”

“Go on. I'm listening.” said Vikram, intrigued.

“That alien is my chance at redemption, Vikram.”

Caesar paused for dramatic effect.

“Uh...redemption?” Vikram finally asked, just milliseconds before the silence could enter the realm of awkwardness.

Buoyed by his subtly coerced admission of interest, Caesar continued “I have to get back at Lilly and show to her that I have the skills to run a successful restaurant. Do you know what I did the day the review was published?”

“Cried yourself to sleep?” ventured Vikram.

“I fired my entire staff.”

“A tad harsh, perhaps?”

“How was I to know that I wouldn't be able to hire any replacements? Every chef in the city I've approached has refused to join my restaurant at the wages I can offer them. And believe me, I've approached everybody. Even the guy who listed lego doughnuts as his speciality. I was about to shut shop and resort to adopting a writing career, when I found my saviour.”

“Now look here Caesar, I don't know what you overheard in the afternoon, but my skills are kind of limited to boiling eggs and microwaving...”

“I meant Morphy.”

“Oh. Right. He cooks well, does he?”

“What? I don't know. I mean, it doesn't matter. That's not what I meant! Just hear me out, will you?”

Vikram looked a bit hurt by the outburst. Caesar took a moment to regroup and continued.

“You see Vikram, that crash I heard that night – it wasn't just the sound of an alien spacecraft crash-landing.”

“It wasn't? I thought you just said it was!”

“It was also the sound of opportunity knocking, Vikram. Opportunity.” Caesar added with a glint in his eyes. It was hard to tell whether it was the glint of a person with a dream in his heart, or of a maniac with homicide on his mind.

“Oh. I see what you did there. Metaphors – such tricky little devils they can be.” Vikram blurted. He had chosen to play it safe until he figured out which one it was.

“Do you know how many alien encounters Earth has had in its entire existence, Vikram?”

“None! That's how many.” Caesar announced emphatically before Vikram could take a stab at it.

Vikram did know the answer to this one – his favourite cartoon strip had carried a series of gags on that last week. He had been amused to learn that the people of Earth had suspected alien handiwork in the creation of the Stonehenge, Easter Island and someplace called Area 51, until it was revealed recently that they were just elaborate hoaxes planted by the Mermaids. They were notorious for this kind of humour, and also, they lived for hundreds of years and got bored very easily.

“I could have told the government about Morphy. But what would that get me? A firm handshake from the President's secretary? No, I knew that someone would be willing to pay through their nose for a genuine certified alien in relatively mint condition. And that's when I decided to approach the biggest gangster in the city – Michael Smith a.k.a. KorqueScrew. Getting to him wasn't easy either – I now owe a lot of shady people a lot of shady favours. KorqueScrew jumped at the chance and I've negotiated a deal with him that will help put my restaurant back on the culinary map. He's promised me a lot of money. A lot. Not only that, he's guaranteed me that he'll 'convince' any chef I want, to join my restaurant's staff. It's an offer that can change my life. ”

“You've sold Morphy to the mafia? But what would they do with him? To him?”

“He seemed to be torn between having his scientists perform medical experiments on him, and adopting him as the alien son he never had. I believe having him stuffed and mounted over his fireplace was also an option in the running. Ah well, who really cares?”

“But how can you do that to him?” Vikram asked incredulously.

“What? Do you think that alien wasn't planning to do something similar to us? He's not our friend, Vikram. Why else would he have instructions to prevent being detected 'at any cost'? It's just blind luck that he lost his memory and couldn't remember what he was actually sent here for, otherwise we'd all be enslaved and having our crevices probed by prickly little things at this point. Do you want to let them do that to us once he regains his memory? Is that the kind of world you want to leave your children?”

“I still don't understand why you're telling me this, Caesar. What does this have to do with me?”

“I like how you get straight to the point Vikram. Very admirable trait. Very.” Caesar moved closer and lowered his voice for effect.

“I want you to do the exchange for me.”

“The exchange?”

“I want you to help me immobilize Morphy and then go and deliver him to KorqueScrew's people in return for the money. And a written IOU for the chef convincing.”

“Why don't you do it yourself?”

“I'm a prominent restauranteur Vikram. I was voted 'Most likely to be yelled at by a celebrity chef in a reality show', at college. Imagine what'll happen to my reputation if word gets out of my involvement with the mafia. I can't afford to take the risk.”

“I don't think I'd want to be involved either. It sounds dangerous and I don't like the idea of shoving Morphy under the Blueline bus for money.”

“You're a writer Vikram, aren't you?”

“Yes. How'd you know? Have you read my line of coloring books?”

“The guy you approached to hire a chef called and warned every restaurant in the neighbourhood about you.”

“What a grouch!”

“Do you know what's common between the last four books on the NYT bestsellers list? They were all crime novels. And for a writer who likes to get under the skin of the character, this would be an opportunity of a lifetime. Picture this – you reach the drop-off point in the dark of the night in your...in your?”

“Auto-rickshaw.”

“You reach the drop-off point in the dark of the night in my pickup-truck. Maybe it's been raining. Maybe the bike skids on the puddle as you screech it to a halt. You gesture his henchmen to take Morphy's limp drugged body from the back. You take the briefcases of cash from KorqueScrew. Maybe you smile at him. Maybe he smiles back. Maybe you become friends. Maybe he invites you to one of his famous parties later. Maybe you meet all his mafia buddies there. Maybe you get in their inner circle. Maybe they give you an in-depth account of their lives, their crimes, their escapes, their triumphs, their failures. You'll be so deep in the skin of a criminal that it'll take a very fine pair of tweezers to get you out. Can you see it? Can you afford to lose such an opportunity? Will you?”

Vikram had a dazed look on his face. Caesar did paint a very vivid and enticing picture.

“It's getting very late, Vikram.” Caesar said as he looked down at his watch. “Why don't you sleep on it and let me know?”

Vikram nodded instinctively and followed Caesar to the front door.

“Oh and one more thing. The standard disclaimer, as is customary in these kind of dealings, applies. Before you think about refusing my offer or telling anyone about what I spoke about tonight, remember that the head of the Mafia wants something I have, which means my requests to him for tiny favours, however gruesome, will not be refused. So choose wisely. Unlike the three who came before you.”

Vikram was conflicted. On the one hand he would have access to enough material for at least a trilogy of crime novels, with room for a couple of prequels to be thrown in later. And then there was the money. But what about Morphy? Could he do this to him? Was he really a potential prober of humans? Maybe he'd be doing mankind a favour by turning him in to the mafia. Lost in these thoughts, Vikram hadn't noticed the figure that had shimmied up to his bedside in the meantime.

“Hello.” it said.

Vikram leaped up like an eager student's hand on hearing a question he finally knows the answer to.

“Relax, Vikram. It's just me, Morphy.” the figure chuckled.

“Why would you do something like that?!” Vikram shouted once he had managed to gather his wits again.

“I have something very important to discuss with you.”

“Why couldn't this wait until tomorrow?”

“Because Caesar cannot come to know about it at any cost.”

“At any cost?”

“At any cost.” Morphy replied expressionlessly.

There's that shiver up the spine again, Vikram thought.

“Go on then. Tell me what this is about.”

“You remember when Caesar and I told you about me suffering from memory loss? It's not true. It's a lie I tell Caesar to keep him from suspecting anything.”

“What is there to suspect?”

“Lots. I was sent to Earth by my people for a very important mission. And I need your help to complete it successfully.”

“You'll have to tell me more.”

“Let me start at the beginning. I'm from Konnit, a planet in the Zimmer galaxy, which is about four thousand light years away from Earth. I was part of the...” Morphy suddenly broke into a coughing fit.

“Would you like a drink of water?” asked Vikram.

“That would be great.” Morphy managed to eke out between his loud coughs.

Vikram got up to make his way towards the kitchen. He stayed in the kind of apartment people tend to describe as 'small but cosy'. It had two bedrooms, a small kitchenette, two even smaller bathrooms and paper thin walls. So thin that the neighbours could actually listen to each other's conversations in the quiet of the night, if they really put their mind to it. In fact, Ramesh, his neighbour, was awoken by the loud thud even though he was in pretty deep sleep. He attributed it to his peculiar neighbour's usual midnightly exercise routine and went right back to getting his eight hours. Vikram did not have the liberty to hear the thud, of course. He was unconscious long before his body slumped to the floor and made the noise. Morphy was trained to kill a man in fifty different ways and to render him senseless in seventy. Vikram never stood a chance.

The Hired Help

“Earth? But we've always had a very cordial relationship with them!”

She was expecting some resistance from Walter. He had a reputation for being a pacifist – a trait which was probably undesirable in a member of a race of contract killers.

“And what could be more cordial than that? Have you seen what they've done to their half of the solar system? It's mighty considerate of them to have overlooked us.”

“The only reason they don't know of our existence is because our elders had the foresight to install those communication barriers, hundreds of years ago. I don't have time for your nonsense today, Walter. You have your orders, which I should add, have been issued personally by the President. Just go and execute them.” Anusha walked away without giving Walter a chance to reply.

Walter read through the orders on his communicator.

“Earth? But we've always had a very cordial relationship with them. Haven't we?”

“Aren't you romanticising our situation a bit, Walter? They don't even know we exist.” Golus retorted.

“And what could be more cordial than that? Have you seen what they've done to their half of the solar system? It's mighty considerate of them to have overlooked us.”

“The only reason they don't know of our existence is because our elders had the foresight to install those communication barriers, hundreds of years ago. Otherwise, they would have made their parasitic presence felt on Uranus eons ago.”

Walter ho-hummed non-committally and went back to staring at the orders on his comm. Device intently.

“But, do you know what's funny, Golus?” he finally said in a grim voice.

“What? Is there something wrong with the orders?”

“Potatoes that look like Mr. Potato head.”

“No I meant...wait, don't all potatoes look like Mr. Potatohead?”

“Yeah. They're all hilarious.” chuckled Walter.

*I walked into that gem*, thought Golus. She had been Walter's chief advisor for almost half a decade now, and should have known better than to take Walter's troll-bait so easily.

“If you're done scrutinizing the Konnit president's request, *and making juvenile jokes*, I advise that we should start the mission immediately. You know how busy we are.”

Election season was always busy for the Uranians. A lot of politicians found the services of a race of contract killers to be invaluable to settle political as well as personal issues just in time for the elections. Since it was always election season in some part of the galaxy, and they were the only race of contract killers in the known universe, they were always busy.

Walter, or Walteronthumus Rheuzon Gintux the twentieth, had inherited the presidentship from his father. Uranus wasn't always a monarchy. The original Walteronthumus Rheuzon Gintux had set up the first Uranian agency of hit-men and had single-handedly taken the planet out of the Fifteenth Great Depression, caused by the government's decision of putting all its money into backing the sport of Curling. The agency was a runaway success and pretty soon the populace of Uranus decided that this was the only profession that a Uranian should aspire to. A few generations later, it had got to the stage where the entire populace was employed by the agency in some form or the other, and it had remained that way since.

Walter stretched six of his ten arms as he lifted up his short but muscular frame to face Golus.

“You're right Golus. We should get to it. Like they say– a moment lost is a moment that you can only get back with a time machine. And we all know that there is no such thing as a time machine.”

Golus nodded. “Konnit's explicitly mentioned that they want our finest hit-men to be put on this job. And they've agreed to compensate us for it suitably.” he added.

“Tell Dharma to prepare her fleet then. I think it's time she was given the reins.”

“But she's still so young, Walter! Do we want to repeat...”

“I think she's ready.” said Walter firmly and went back to playing Uranian Tetris on his comm. device.

Golus nodded in resignation and made a move towards the door of the chamber.

Dharma was in the middle of her strenuous training schedule when Golus conveyed Walter's decision to her. On hearing this, she decapitated her robotic fencing partner with a precisely directed swish to the head and let out a cry of jubilation - she had waited for this moment all her life. She thanked Golus and ran out of the gym to convey the news to the fleet, 'her fleet'.

Golus watched her leave with a tinge of sadness. Walter had developed a fascination with thrusting promising youngsters to the biggest platforms after he'd read that article in 'Dictatorship Today' about how the greatest leaders had a knack of spotting and nurturing young talent. Unfortunately, all the talent he had spotted so far had met a brutal end. A couple of them hadn't even been able to get their fleet off the planet without dismembering themselves, their crew, and three pizza delivery guys. Golus let out a resigned shrug and walked to the communication center. He had other things to worry about - like thinking up an official reason why they were declaring war on Earth. He thought hard for a moment, and then suddenly, inspiration struck. Golus leaned over the microphone confidently, tuned into the Galactic War Declaration frequency, and started speaking.

This is War

Morphy carried Vikram into the spaceship and carefully lowered him into the co-pilot seat. He took the pilot's seat himself, closed the door and started to prepare the ship for the flight back home. He couldn't help but let out a wide smile – he was finally going home. As he flicked the various switches deftly, his eyes darted to the communication radio. It indicated an incoming transmission on the Galactic War Declaration Frequency. He tuned in reflexively.

“...in order to comply with section ABN485 of the Galactic Code of Conduct for War dealing with full disclosure, we would like to announce that Uranus has declared war on Earth for reasons that are...personal in nature. If any Galactic Council member planets currently have their citizens stationed on Earth, please let us know immediately and we'll try to ensure that they are evacuated safely. The attack will commence at 1500 Universal Galactic Time – that's 15 minutes from now. I repeat...”

Morphy's brows furrowed as the message slowly sunk in. Besides him, Vikram stirred. *This was bad*, Morphy thought. They would never be able to make it out of Earth's orbit in time. The radio transmitter had fallen given up on him midway through the previous journey and there was no way that he could contact his home planet to request evacuation. Meanwhile, Vikram had graduated to mumbling random syllables at annoyingly irregular intervals. And then suddenly, Vikram sat up, found himself staring Morphy straight in the eye, remembered what had happened, let out a muffled scream and threw himself on Morphy; all in a matter of a brief second. Morphy was startled for a moment by the assault, but soon had Vikram pinned down securely by virtue of having grown six new arms to help him with the endeavour.

“Let me go! I will not allow myself to be probed! I have very sensitive nether-regions! ” Vikram screamed as he flailed in Morphy's unrelenting grip.

“Simmer down, Vikram.” Morphy said agitatedly. “I have no intention of causing you any harm. And I assure you, your 'nethers' couldn't be in safer hands...I mean...no one's going to do anything to hurt you!”

As Vikram continued to struggle, Morphy decided to change his tone to a more soothing tenor. “I apologise for bringing you here like this, but you may not have agreed to come with me willingly – and that's a risk that I...the galaxy could not have taken. Please try to understand Vikram. The fate of the galaxy lies in your tiny human hands.”

Vikram stopped to consider Morphy's words for a moment and then blurted “A variation of that cheesy line has been said in every science-fiction movie or book I've read. Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“If you settle down for a moment, I can prove it to you.”

“All right. But, no tricks.” Vikram said defeatedly after a small pause. He didn't really have any other options.

Morphy loosened his grip and his residual arms melded back into his body as he helped Vikram up.

He gestured Vikram to sit down with the remaining two.

“Not until you tell me what you want with me.”

“You'll probably wan't to sit down for this. It's a rather long story.”

“I'd prefer to...what was that!”

Vikram had just been interrupted mid-sentence by series of gunshots. Someone was firing at the spaceship from outside. And they were trapped inside like sitting ducks.