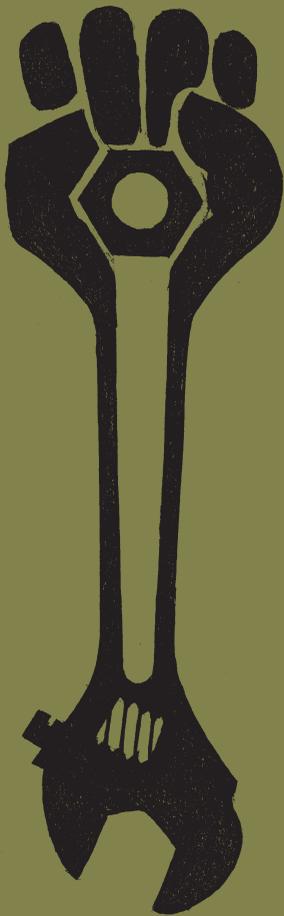


We Desmoi Are Full of Surprises

By Niels Nielsen



Bucket M'loy was the new Desmoi ambassador to the Galactic Council. A near miss for human, the Desmoi were nonetheless close enough to shop for clothes in much the same places that very large humans did. They could also eat and drink with ease in the same places that humans did; indeed, with great gusto—and in these attributes Bucket was a native son... but one with a problem. His stomach simply could not manage the heroism he expected of it.

Not unlike their human counterparts, the Desmoi handed out ambassador jobs according to the time-honored protocols of patronage, with dim regard for qualifications and so on. M'Loy the Ambassador was no exception here either. The Loy clan, from which civil servants and political functionaries were customarily drawn, was as pleased to be rid of Bucket as he was to be posted to the greener gustatory pastures and light workload of the Galactic Hub. The light workload was only slightly beyond his grasp, and the inevitable tensions this caused were naturally no aid to his failing digestion. In turn, as his digestion suffered, so did his performance as a diplomat. Bucket's problems thence expanded in rough proportion to his appetite.

The Desmoi were popular with the many restaurateurs who served the Hub and its countless off-world visitors, both for their legendary appetites and their tendency to pay in cash. In Bucket's case, however, opinion was split. Yes, he ate heartily. Yes, he always paid in platinum. He even tipped heavily, unlike most Desmoi, who had a reputation for being a little cheap when it came to tipping. M'Loy's stomach was his problem— in fact, his own worst enemy. The consequences of this were at times quite dramatic, and not good for business.

“Oh yes you see, p-p-pardon me please” he stammered out one evening in the middle of the second course at the House of Desm, one of his habitual haunts. !Hrappi cuisine was featured that evening, and his second forkful of !Hrap fromage had elicited a series of moaning gurgles from deep within his ample midsection which were clearly audible several tables away. Conversation in the salon halted, then resumed slowly. The Maitre'd scowled from the foyer.

“Your Excellency, whatever is the matter?” intoned M'Loy's guest for the evening, which happened to be the !Hrappi Minister of Trade. “Are you of ill health tonight?”

“Oh well, it is just my stomach acting up again you see” replied a distressed Bucket, who had dropped his utensils on his brimming plate and was now viciously massaging his paunch. “My medication, just new today, and guaranteed by the Desmoi Prime Minister’s own private physician to prevent his, has apparently reacted with the... ouch... the drinks we had at your hotel before dinner. Unforeseen and regrettable, of course.” Also the wrong signal to send to a !Hrap, who stiffened visibly in his chair, set down all three of his forks, and narrowed his central eye in the classic !Hrap expression of suspected effrontery.

He said, “I seek new markets for !Hrappi agricultural products at the Hub, and specifically on Desm. If you are any example, it would seem that my travel here is a waste.” At this, M’Loy sensed an impending diplomatic gaffe with his name on it and backpedaled furiously in the only way he could think of at the moment- which was to ignore the protestations of his stomach and instead to cram his jowls solid with the fruits of !Hrappi agriculture.

“Oh, no no no NO, esteemed Mister !Hrolgol” mumbled M’loy around heroic mouthfuls of alien foodstuff. “Look! You see? I t-truly love this! It is bound to be immensely popular back home on Desm! No need to (gulp, smack) become... alarmed...” He trailed off, aware of three !Hrap eyes intently triangulating on his belly- which was in the throes of vigorous reverse peristalsis, easily visible through his tunic. The party at the next table (which included the communications officer from the Earth Embassy, a friend of M’Loy’s) were also watching in frank astonishment. And in the back of the dining hall, the Maitre’d hissed frantic instructions to his staff. Two busboys bolted for the rear service doors and swung them wide as M’Loy, jowls bulging, sped through them on his way to the mop closet and its knee-high sink. They followed him in and swung the doors shut. On cue, the trio of !Hrap musicians leapt into action at the small stage near the foyer and managed to almost (but not quite) cover the sharp, groaning barks issuing from the inner recesses of the kitchen.

Amidst the resulting hubbub, the communications officer excused herself and stepped over to soothe the !Hrap Trade Minister who was ramrod-straight and immobile in his chair, his central eye shut tightly in the classic !Hrap expression of mortification. Trust Bucket to skip his homework in !Hrappi etiquette, she thought, as she righted Bucket’s overturned chair and retrieved his napkin from the floor. Then facing !Hrolgol, she stretched her arms out to tap his shoulders lightly with her fingertips (twice) in the classic !Hrap expression of shared embarrassment. In response, he opened his central eye halfway and uncoiled himself a bit. With that done, she headed for the swinging doors, walked through them and followed her ears to the mop closet.

“Not again, Bucket?” she asked, handing him a towel from the rack on the wall. He was done now and took it gratefully. Months of practice meant not a drop spilled on his clothing, but his chin needed some work. Visibly shaken, he blotted away as the woman from Earth knelt down beside him and put a hand on his round shoulder.

“Oh yes, I am afraid so Miss Janet, and it is ever so thoughtful of you to come to my aid, so kind, how can I ever thank you?”

“Oh Bucket. It’s nothing really. You see-“ she pinched her nose with one hand, jammed the other thumb in her ear, and puffed out her cheeks, then jerked out her thumb as if expelled by air pressure. M’Loy was puzzled.

“What is it you are doing?” he asked.

“That was an ancient and obscure !Hrappi gesture signifying insignificance, which I just made up for you. Come on- let’s get back on the track.” She helped him to his feet and steered him out to the corridor. “I’ve got !Hrolgol calmed down and I’d guess your third course must be on its way- but you’re not going to try eating any more tonight, are you?”

M'Loy gazed balefully at his friend, who had once again happened to be close at hand at a time of need. "No more tonight, I promise. I-I haven't the stomach for it."

The Elders of Desm were none too satisfied with the outcome of M'Loy's bungled liaison with the !Hrappi functionary, who had subsequently issued a predictably scathing commentary on the manners and deportment of the Desmoi. Unbeknownst to M'Loy, leaving the table with one's hands covering one's mouth was yet another of the classic !Hrappi gestures, capable of loose translation as "you have a hygiene problem which renders you unfit as a partner either in commerce or procreation." Overall, it was hardly the best basis for establishing a trading link between Desm and !Hrap, a point the Elders were quick to make with Bucket. Thus stressed, his stomach continued its downward trend.

M'Loy's natural response to adversity was to eat more, but his human friend Janet managed to curb this tendency by encouraging him to go shopping with her instead. One day, while they were trying to find a suit in M'Loy's favorite shade of shiny green (size 46 xtra full cut), M'Loy fainted dead away amidst the clearance racks in the back of Xenos's Big & Tall Shop. Once again, Janet came to the rescue.

"Bucket! Bucket! What's wrong?" She knelt beside the stricken Desmoi and lifted his head. His eyes, half closed, wandered independently but presently converged on her and it was then that she realized just how serious M'Loy's condition had become; at close range, it was plain that he was very ill. "Bucket. Aren't you eating ANYTHING?"

"Oh... oh yes, my dear Janet... but it has now come to this, that my... ah, my liver you call it, yes? My liver and my digestive system, they are no longer, how would I explain it? They are, shall I say, no longer cooperating, you see?" M'Loy struggled to his feet, aided by the sturdy Janet.

"But...but that's a metabolic disorder you're describing, Bucket! Shouldn't you see a physician about it?" She brushed the floor lint off his orange sport coat. "Wait a minute! I'll take you to the Earth Embassy, we've got a wonderful-"

"Oh yes but no no no no NO! PLEASE! interrupted a suddenly terror-stricken Bucket. "Our customs and systems, they are, ah, you see, they are... ah... substantially different! Oh yes but no, we Desmoi heal ourselves through the... the strength of one's will, you see, and... and... and... the f-force of the personality..." M'Loy trailed off, clutched at a clothes rack for support and leaned face-first into a brace of blue green sharkskin suits, xtra wide. "...Oh my goodness, here is a very nice one indeed, and in my favorite color..." he mumbled absently and began to sink again. Janet, exhibiting surprising strength and reflexes, grabbed him before his knees went out and hauled him out of the store and right into a Paad news team which had been waiting for them on the sidewalk outside.

The Paad were another near miss for human. The males looked like viciously grinning, lipless 13-year-olds with terminal acne, and no one knew or wished to know what the females looked like. Paad culture was heavily shame-oriented; this particular camera crew was from the number-one prime-time Paad language holoprogram, "It's All Your Fault." Word had gotten out about M'Loy's most recent blunder and they were out trailing him for some easy follow-up dirt with their high-intensity camera lights blazing. Paad reporters preferred the antique lights not because their cameras needed the photons, but because of their interrogational aspect. With them you could simulate shame on camera by forcing your subject to wince and cover his face, which made for much better programming. And now they had Bucket in their lights, apparently falling-down drunk- and consorting with a plump young female Earthling who worked at the Earth Embassy!

Dazzled by the lights, Janet and Bucket obligingly put their hands up in front of their faces and fought their way through the street masses to their vehicle, a huge electric limo she had checked out from the Embassy motor pool. Janet stuffed a still-groggy Bucket into the rear compartment and jumped into the cab up front as the Paad, snickering maliciously into their microphones, closed in for some through-the-window shots. But Janet quickly blacked the side windows, eased the big car off the curb, and maxed the motors, showering the crew and their cameras and damned lights with flying gravel and road dirt. As the limo merged into the traffic flow, Janet rolled down the glass partition and inspected her cargo through the rear-view mirror.

“Hey Bucket! You all right back there?” she asked. Bucket had shaken some pills out of a bottle and was groping about in the liquor cabinet for a little something to wash them down with.

“Oh yes Janet, oh yes, pay no mind to me. I have some, ah, some medication here which the Prime Minister’s own personal physician is now recommending for my stomach upset. I am afraid I shall have to swallow them dry, since... Oh wait a moment! Here are some refreshing spirits. Now we shall see.” M’Loy jammed several tablets into his mouth with eyes badly crossed, hammered down a third of the bottle of Old Earth Scotch. The violent contortions of his abdomen ceased, and he relaxed amongst the deep cushions. “Ooh yes, much better, much better indeed. This medicine, you see, it is especially helpful when one’s stomach is acting up, and also helps re-establish a certain, ah, a certain co-operation between the internal organs. Very beneficial, yes no?”

Janet was puzzled. “Wait a minute. I thought that your... customs and systems, isn’t that what you called them? They prevented the use of medicines, no?”

“Oh yes, you see, but actually no...” replied M’Loy, his eyes still crossed badly enough to give Janet the beginnings of a headache just looking at him. He was energetically slapping the right side of his face with his left hand and blinking his eyelids one at a time. “...Ah... you see, sometimes the use of medicines... enhances the control of the mind over all the different parts of the body. It is only permissible in extreme cases, oops!”

Janet had jammed on the brakes and swerved suddenly to avoid another Paad camera crew, this one from the number two prime time Paad holoprogram, “Shame On You.” Its host and chief investigative reporter, Zit Rictus, was sticking his pointed, pimply nose into the business of a !Hrap who had just left the sidewalk to engage in a ritual duel with the robot traffic controller, whose mechanical hand gestures he had interpreted as a mortal insult of one type or another. On came the lights, up came the hands. Janet returned to her lane and M’Loy got up off the floor and began picking spilled pills out of the thick carpet.

Janet said, “Jeez, Bucket, why the hell don’t they do anything about these Paad assholes? That was Zit Rictus I almost ran over back there, right in the middle of the street!”

“We Desmoi have the most simple of solutions, dear Janet. The Patriarch of Immigration simply refuses entry visas to anyone resembling a human adolescent with a complexion problem.”

A disbelieving Janet looked sharply into the rear-view mirror, then burst out laughing. There sat a grinning Bucket, with an almost-empty bottle of Old Earth Scotch in his ample lap, holding his nose, one thumb in his ear, cheeks puffed out. His eyes were still out of whack.

After dropping M’Loy at the Desmoi embassy, Janet returned the limo to the motor pool garage and plugged it back in to recharge. She entered the situation room to find her case officer watching the evening holos. There in the air above the console was a disheveled Bucket, supported by a grim Janet, a curve of her dark glossy hair

partly hiding his face. On came the lights, up went the hands. A Paad commentator gabbled hysterically in the background.

“Oh great, Colonel. I never knew you watched ‘It’s All Your Fault,’” remarked Janet as she watched the action.

“Only when I’m the one who tipped the Paad on to the story, Janet.” The holo was suddenly engulfed in cloud; the camera swung around crazily to reveal a knot of Paad technicians brushing sand off their tunics and rubbing their eyes. A large black car disappeared into traffic. “Cute stunt, that.”

The Colonel straightened his cuffs and tapped the side of his almost-empty drink glass twice with his heavy gold class ring. The holo froze, then faded out.

Janet flopped into a couch and put her feet up. “Better watch those hand movements, Colonel. If I were a !Hrap, now I’d have to strip naked and pogo my way into the nearest bed on my center leg- provided, of course, that you and I were registered as a breeding pair. Otherwise I’d be obliged to dismember you.”

The Colonel ignored the comment. A lanky but stooped embassy staffer shambled up in a rumpled white uniform and leaned heavily against the door frame. “Ah, dinner in oh, say about forty-five minutes, main dining room. Another, well, ah, drink for you Colonel? And, uh, Janet, yes?”

“Yes and...”

“Yes, whatever the Colonel’s drinking will be fine for me. Thanks, Perkins.” Perkins nodded absently and retreated to the kitchen, shaking his hands as if they were wet. The Colonel watched him with a not-entirely-pleased-with-things expression on his face and paused a moment before getting back to business with Janet.

“So! Janet. What did you get us from today’s activity?”

Janet pulled a white-and-pink capsule from her sleeve pocket and held it up to the light. “M’Loy pops Tramazine number Fours for his stomach, three at a time, and washes them down with great big slugs of your own Old Earth Scotch.” She flipped him the capsule and he plucked it out of the air and scowled at it while Janet continued. “The Desm metabolism can’t be human, Colonel, that’s for damn sure. If I ate three Tram Fours I’d be catatonic. With a scotch chaser, out cold. With a half-bottle like M’Loy drank, comatose and possibly dying. But Bucket was not only alert, he was brimming with good cheer.”

“What else?”

“Well on top of his bum stomach which we already knew about, he’s now got something metabolic wrong with him, sounds like his liver, and he’s trying to tough it out. It’s not working. This guy is one sick chicken. Won’t see a doctor, not one of ours anyway- the very suggestion made him flip out, in fact.” Perkins came back with the drink tray and put a generously-filled glass in front of Janet, which she promptly half-emptied in one generous gulp. “Oh boy. That’s what I’ve been waiting for all day. So anyway, what have we got? I make it that M’Loy’s gonna blow the grain deal with the BweBwe next week unless he gets help. We’ll have to prop him up again, which is OK since it might give me another crack at the inside of the Desmoi embassy if I can be there when he loses it.”

“Mm hmm, mm hmm, gulp. Trams are tranquilizers, Janet. What’s M’loy doing eating tranks for his stomach? And why would they actually work on his metabolism?” Dobson rolled the capsule around in one hand and swirled the ice around in his glass with the other. He looked into the glass and muttered, “and why should that lush Bucket find my own private stock of Old Earth Scotch so damn appealing? Well anyway Janet, it... it all

makes no sense at all.”

Janet finished her drink in another gulp and got up. “Maybe Trams are stomach medicine, in a Desmoi stomach. You’re the doctor, Colonel. You figure it out.”

The grain deal with the BweBwe was set up to be closed at a formal dinner at the Desmoi embassy. Janet got the invitation she expected from M’Loy, much to Colonel Dobson’s relief, and on the night of the event she stayed as close as possible to the Desmoi Plenipotentiary. He wined and dined with typical Desmoi gusto, discreetly dropping a Tram Four into his scotch about twice an hour. By rights he should have been flatlining on full life support but instead was cheerful and bubbly, if a bit pale. Janet was astounded at Bucket’s capacity for food, booze, and dope, considering his condition the week before.

The BweBwe were another near miss for human. They were blue-black fungus eaters from an almost sunless planet, who mated once- for life- and stayed that way (so they didn’t have to keep looking for each other in the dark, or so the old joke went). The females were enormous and globular; the males, miniscule. After pairing up, the male shrank down to nothing more than a pair of gonads, shortly becoming a discreetly concealable appendage. The details of all this were something you didn’t usually discuss with a female BweBwe, certainly not with the head of the BweBwe delegation to the Hub. But then, M’Loy probably had not been briefed.

“Oh yes, most convenient I am sure, you see” bubbled Bucket upon having BweBwe courtship procedures described in detail for him by the spherical, jewel-bedecked BweBwe ambassador. Janet noted with a tiny twinge of jealousy that the BweBwe seemed to be flirting with Bucket, augmenting her descriptions of BweBwe whoopee with what Janet thought were overly-suggestive hand gestures (which, luckily, there were no !Hrappi nearby to misinterpret).

The party then moved off to the great hall for the signing ceremony, and to Janet’s horror she watched M’Loy run out of Trams halfway through the BweBwe’s rambling speech. She had none of it with her, and could easily guess at the consequences. Janet was wired for the occasion and transmitted this news back to Colonel Dobson at the embassy. Bucket took the podium almost one hour after his final dose and was struggling through his introductory platitudes when he stopped dead in mid-sentence, crossed his eyes, fell heavily to his knees, arched his back and erupted.

Janet ducked. Bucket’s guests on the stage found themselves showered with exotic ejecta. A few seconds later, as shouts of surprise were giving way to shrill screams of BweBwe distress, a maniacally giggling Paad camera team crashed through the iron gates and stormed in for a live broadcast with lights set to stun. Hands went up, and M’Loy’s last conscious act before being carried off the stage in a dead faint by a pair of Desmoi functionaries was to take careful aim and wipe out Zit Rictus and his entire camera team with a direct hit from the second wave.

“Cute stunt, that” muttered Colonel Dobson to himself, watching the live broadcast dissolve in a splattered sea of multicolored sludge. He had to admire the speed with which the Paad acted on tips; it had been less than an hour since he got off the phone to Rictus with the news from Janet that Bucket’s Trams were gone. Here now was Janet’s chance, and he had to focus on that. “Where the hell is she, anyway?” he asked aloud.

“Right here, Colonel,” replied Janet, subvocalizing from M’Loy’s side. “I’m following Bucket upstairs. He’s in really bad shape from running out of Trams- I presume you watched the result?”

“And the BweBwe?”

“In shock, in the ladies’ room with the rest of her entourage. No one can get them to come out. I got them some towels. The grain deal, by the way, is unsigned.”

This was not good news for the Colonel, because it could ruin a certain highly-leveraged gig he had running on the side in grain futures. He considered this for a bit with his last bottle of Old Earth, now mostly empty from Bucket’s earlier assault on it, in his lap. He caught himself wishing for a roll of Tram Fours to go with it... but now, about Janet...

“Janet, head back down now to the BweBwe and stall until I can run backup over there with some more tranks for Bucket-“

“Nope. I’m all the way into the Desmoi staff compound now. Use the backup for the BweBwe- and bring some clothes. Pull Fat Martha’s wardrobe-“

The Colonel fought back, heated by the scotch: “Piss and derision, Hamilton! Don’t dork around with me on this! I need- that is, I mean we ALL need the BweBwe signatures! The Number Two Desmoi can sign the grain deal and to HELL with that fat slob M’Loy! (pause, gulp) And what the hell do you want with Fat Marth- that is, Miss Kugelschreiber’s WARDROBE, of all things?”

“It’s for the BweBwe, SIR” shot back Janet. “Most of them do wear clothes and I’ll bet they’d be much obliged to have some clean ones right now. Besides, you know that package from Desm that went through customs last week with diplomatic seals all over it? Well, guess what they’re bringing back to M’Loy’s room right now? I’ll bet you a bottle of Old Earth scotch that it’s full of medical supplies. You’d like some of that to pore over, wouldn’t you? Back me up on this, Colonel. I promise you won’t be disappointed. I’m going in now to watch them work on Bucket and I’ll be back on the air when I’ve got something. ‘Bye.”

The carrier went dead, leaving Colonel Dobson staring into space, tight-lipped, with a very empty Old Earth bottle in his lap. He tapped the bottle with his class ring three times, and a moment later Perkins’ voice emerged from the holobox. Perkins struggled to shake the sleep out of it. “Aah... aah, well, ah, Perkins up here, Colonel, yes?” Collecting his composure, Dobson put on his best laconic drawl.

“Right, OK now Perkins, we need backup at the Desmoi embassy like pronto, someone who speaks BweBwe if possible. I’ll brief ‘em from here while you drive ‘em over, can do?”

“Yeah well, aah, see... It, it’s like, I’m the only one on station this weekend who can do BweBwe, ah, sort of, Colonel...”

Dobson was not overjoyed. “Well, if you’re sure, Perkins. Oh and one other thing- pull Fat Marth- that is, Miss Kugelschreiber’s wardrobe and take it along, would you? Don’t ask, Perkins- just do, OK? And fast. Got it?”

“Ah, well, sure, Colonel, I mean, if you say so...” was the still-sleepy reply. Dobson wished he were somewhere else, where Old Earth wasn’t a month’s salary a case, somewhere his ass wasn’t in such a highly leveraged sling. The Trams sounded better by the minute...

THE BOX. Janet was sitting right next to it in Bucket’s quarters. It was still covered by its diplomatic seals and special customs stamps, accumulated on its long journey from Desm. Motors hummed softly inside it and a

small readout on the lid glowed faintly in the dim room. Bucket was prone on his bed, his breathing rapid and shallow. About once a minute he was convulsed with dry heaves. Tears ran from his eyes. His attendants had admitted Janet and then left the compound on his orders, so the two of them were now quite alone.

Janet had monitored the progress of the box all the way up to its delivery to the Desm embassy complex. There, Dobson's inside people had no idea what it contained, although every one of them guessed it had something to do with the ailing Charge d'Affaires. For her part, Janet had guessed medicine all along. And she was right about the potential value of a sample or two, as far as Colonel Dobson was concerned, and she knew it. She didn't think it would be too difficult to set aside a capsule or a few drops of liquid, seeing how out of it Bucket was at the moment...

"Janet..." moaned M'Loy, "...are you here to minister to me, or to watch that box of mine?"

Janet pulled her eyes off the box guiltily- M'Loy had been watching her. She turned to face him. "I-I'm sorry, Bucket. But am I correct in guessing that... what's in that box... will restore your health?"

"It will save my life, dear Janet. And am I correct in guessing that your interest in what's inside that box... is perhaps proprietary in nature?"

"Why, Bucket... that's an unfair way to put it..." She reached for his hand, but he withdrew it and began struggling up off the bed.

"Oh come come, my dear. Your Colonel Dobson has half my staff on his payroll, yes no? You are here to find out what they cannot or will not tell." He shuffled past her into the bathroom, turned on the lights, turned on the hot water tap full force and began scrubbing his hands with soap. "Well, come on, Janet. The curtain is going up, the lights are on and you wish to see some magic show, do you not? Very well then. You will be my trusted assistant on this stage. Bring in that box. You will see some good magic... if you have the heart, mind, and stomach for it.'

As he dried off his hands, Janet dragged the box over to the doorway. "Bucket... I'm here because I'm worried about you." As he dry-heaved into the sink, Bucket looked up to meet her gaze.

"Of course you are, Janet. Excuse me... gulp. Of course you are. I know this too. So you must do a good job helping me, because if we fail, I will die soon. Now, open the box. Pull the handles out, then twist first left, then right, then pull out hard." She did so and the lid hissed open to reveal a shallow tray holding several vials and a wicked hypodermic syringe with a needle on it six inches long. More stuff was below. M'Loy reached in, snapped one of the vials into the syringe, squirted the air out like an expert, yanked his cummerbund down and his tux up and plunged the needle straight into his pale belly. Just as he began to squeeze the plunger in, his abdomen began to churn violently. Quickly he handed the syringe back to Janet and bent over the sink for more heaves. This time he brought up blood, lots of it. "Now the... the yellow vial, Janet. Load it into the syringe and give it to me, arrrgh."

Janet slapped the loaded syringe back into Bucket's trembling hand and watched in amazement as he plunged it again deep into his paunch. The churning halted and M'Loy swung around to face the tub and got down on his knees, handing Janet back the empty syringe. He then arched his back and threw back his head; Janet flinched for cover behind a rack of towels. "Do... not... worry..." he gasped. "The... stomach... is... empty..."

Then, Bucket opened his mouth wider than Janet thought even remotely possible, jammed his thumbs down his throat, hooked them up and jerked them out again violently. With a horrible sucking and tearing he hauled forth a pink section of esophagus and with a hand-over-hand motion proceeded to pull out more and more.

The loose end coiled and twisted. It widened out into a bag-like shape but then, halfway out of M'Loy's mouth, it suddenly began to convulse and stiffen. He could pull it out no further. His eyes wild, M'Loy let go with one hand and gestured frantically for the syringe tray where one vial of liquid remained. "Nngh...NNGH!" he managed to choke out.

Janet grabbed the vial and slammed it home into the syringe, and then pulled M'Loy's shirt up but he grabbed the syringe out of her hand and plunged it viciously into the veined sac emerging from his mouth. It gave one sudden spasm, shooting bloody fluid out the loose end all over the bathtub and walls, and then he threw down the syringe and with one last two-handed yank pulled the sac free, out and into the tub with a splatter of juice.

There in the tub lay a huge, bulging bag covered with a thin transparent membrane. Veins were plainly visible, as were several large tubular members which oozed blood from their pinched ends. The bag ended in another short section of coiling hose with what Janet quickly recognized as a sphincter in its end. Bucket lay slumped on the floor like a deflated balloon, eyes crossed behind half-closed lids. He clutched at the box for support and tried to focus on Janet. "Is this not good magic?" he whispered.

Janet stared in disbelief. "Oh yes. Yes indeed. You are performing a complete digestive system transplant on yourself using three hypodermic injections and you two bare hands."

"This one was... dramatic. Yes. Dramatic. You see... it did not want to leave." M'Loy chuckled dryly, then with unsteady hands began removing more things from the next compartment down in the box: more vials, and there in a clear plastic bag filled with pale liquid, another object like the one in the tub.

Janet turned back to look into the tub again. The thing in it was still twitching disgustingly in a spreading pool of fluids, but when she looked closer her revulsion turned to puzzlement, the disbelief, then raw panic. For it had legs. Tiny vestigial nubs, two more where arms might be- and two tiny black eyes almost invisible behind the membrane. As she watched in horror, the eyes rotated back and forth slightly in their deep sockets. And then it belched, an oddly familiar sound to Janet, who had dined regularly with Bucket in those last few months. Shocked beyond words, she turned back to face M'Loy again.

Oblivious to Janet, he was grimly absorbed in his own tasks: uncapping vials, reloading the syringe and readying an odd-looking selection of tools. He snapped a plastic bib around his neck and pulled on a pair of surgeon's gloves. Thus prepared, he picked up the syringe and this time drove it straight through the plastic bag and into the slithering mound inside. It thrashed once and went limp. Bucket poked at it with his finger, no response. Next he shut off a recirculating pump inside the box and pinched off a pair of soft hoses leading into the bag from the pump. Then he peeled the bag open and pulled the thing in it free from the hose ends.

Bucket leaned back again, hoisted his new "stomach" high, and swallowed it, sphincter-first. He then unselfconsciously dropped his pants, bent over with a pair of curved tongs from the box and fished out the sphincter. (That small part of Janet's mind which was by that time still capable of focusing on immediate events registered the fact that even with his pants down, Bucket could still pass for human. A male human.) Bucket pulled down on the sphincter end until the esophagus was properly seated, then pushed in the excess sphincter. Done!

"Red syringe please, Janet" said Bucket. She dumbly complied and watched as the Desmoi impaled himself one last time with the long needle. "Thank you, dear Janet, we are almost through. Now please, that pouch."

Janet handed him a translucent pouch of amber fluid from the box. M'Loy unclipped a tube from its side, put the end of it in his mouth and sucked down the contents. Then he moved to the toilet. "A safety precaution,

dear Janet. For just five minutes. Rarely necessary, however. Well now, what do you think? Good magic, yes no?"

Janet looked from Bucket to the now-empty box and back again. "Bucket... what are you?" she asked. Bucket fairly twinkled in response.

"Oh Janet, that is such a good question! I will tell you this: we Desmoi are chock full of surprises!" He patted his abdomen contentedly. "I can feel that this is a good one. Very, very good."

His humor wasted on her, she turned back to the tub. The reject item was stretching and squirming its way towards the drain like an enormous worm. "Bucket!" she cried out. "That thing is headed for the drain! It's still alive!"

"Oh yes Janet, but you see, he knows what will happen next. Do not worry. He cannot escape." Bucket hitched up his pants and shuffled over to the tub. "Hello hello you" he said into the tub. "I am afraid your mission has failed. Do not go away so soon, for I have something specially for you!" Chuckling, he picked up the syringe and loaded another vial into it, then crouched down again next to the tub, leaned in and stabbed the thing one last time. It reared up, belching and farting, spurted juice from both ends and collapsed, immobile. Its tiny black eyes wiggled madly. Shortly, Bucket had it bagged, plumbed in, and stashed in the box, into which also went all the hardware, empty vials and whatnot. He closed, latched and locked the lid, and that was that.

While Janet- white as death and gasping- bent over the toilet, a now placid M'Loy washed his hands, then offered her a towel. "You see, dear Janet? Now it is my turn to help you clean up!" With this, he returned to the bedroom, sucking down his second pouch of amber fluid. Then he stretched out in a reclining easy chair. "Aah, oh yes (gulp smack). Much, much better indeed." He smiled with satisfaction as Janet made her way unsteadily into the bedroom, wiping at her smeared makeup with the towel. She sat down opposite M'Loy without a word.

"My dear Janet. Do not tell me that you also lack the stomach for this kind of work? But there is unfortunately not much I can do for you, as we are now, how might I say it, fresh out of stomachs, yes no?"

Janet favored Bucket with an expression of pained resignation. "Aw come on, Bucket. Have a heart, will you?"

"No thank you, Janet. My current one works fine."

The second bag was now empty. Bucket, chuckling absently over his little joke, tossed it aside and clapped his hands together twice. A tinny voice, perhaps with a little sleep in it, responded from out of nowhere. "Yazdo, dem M'Loy."

"Ay da BweBwe, hoh?" asked Bucket staring into space.

The voice responded, "Da slussis m'BweBwe, dem M'Loy."

At this, Bucket glanced significantly at Janet. "This is good, Janet. The BweBwe maiden is still hiding in the bathroom with her attendants." He rose from his chair, hale and hearty, and again clapped twice. The tinny voice muttered a response. M'Loy extended a hand to Janet. "Come come, Janet. Let us get back on the track, shall we?"

Janet took his hand and got up, still pale, and looking not quite so fashionable with most of her makeup gone. "I... what..."

“But Janet! We must return to the main hall and attend to the BweBwe’s urgent needs. I think you and I both will have a most helpful part to contribute there, yes no? Besides, I also have a grain deal to sign so your Colonel Dobson can become rich- or so he thinks!” Janet stared blankly at Bucket, still miles behind him and not gaining. He smiled enigmatically and rubbed his paunch, which responded to him by gurgling a contented sort of gurgle.

M’Loy held Janet’s elbow as they strode through the corridor, he with a distinct spring in his step and she without. “For you see, dear Janet, my, ah, my ‘original’ stomach or whatever you want to call it died suddenly just before I was posted here. We always suspect foul play in such cases but no one had any proof, nor the time to go forth and dig for evidence. The replacement organ was most uncooperative. Probably selected that way on purpose... you saw how many tight spots it put me in, yes no?” Janet nodded, still silent, but by now the silence of shock was being replaced by the silence of cogitation.

For as she strode along at Bucket’s side, half-listening to him rattle on, several things became quite clear to her: one, that her guess about the contents of the box had been correct in general (if totally wrong in the specifics); and two, that M’Loy’s revelation might have implications for human medicine- assuming some yet-to-be-determined level of compatibility between Desmoi and human “customs and systems,” as Bucket put it once. This meant that the Desmoi were no longer just another race of overweight, diplomatically inept grain hybridizers: they now had potential as a source of commercial organ transplant material. Lungs, livers, hearts, whole digestive systems, and who knew what else? This was now a secret that Bucket had shared with her, and the Colonel was still out of the loop on this one. If she played her cards right, this could be big- really, really big. For her, and for Bucket too. A team- and to hell with Dobson...

They were now almost back to the grand hall. “So you see, dear Janet,” summed up Bucket, “the Tramazines were a stroke of good luck, however short-lived. Of course my stomach quickly became hopelessly addicted, so to keep it under control I had to furnish it with bigger and bigger doses. Too much Tram and it shut down, not good. Not enough, and it woke up and went back to its old tricks. Not good either. Veddy embarrassing, teddible, teddible indeed... oh yes, embarrassing...” Bucket trailed off as they reached the ladies’ room.

Here in the hallway was a solid mass of panicked dignitaries. Over in one corner, a team of embassy guards was industriously beating a vomit-covered Paad camera crew into bloody oblivion. Perkins was there, leaning heavily against the wall to the ladies’ room with a double armload of very large, brightly colored clothing. He roused himself when he spotted Janet, who broke from M’Loy and forced her way through the crowd to his side. The crowd parted for M’Loy a moment later.

Just then, Zit Rictus, shrieking with ecstatic fervor and with murderous revenge in his eyes, chose that instant to get in M’Loy’s face with his camera and high-wattage lights. Perkins handed off the voluminous tent dresses to Janet and displayed uncharacteristic speed in coming to M’Loy’s rescue. Perkins chopped whole-heartedly at the Paad camera until it was driven back into Rictus’ oily face and thence to the floor. Emboldened by Perkins’ decisive action, a number of the otherwise distinguished guests raised a ragged cheer and converged on the disarmed Paad to indulge in a bit of highly undiplomatic payback. A stiffly-tuxedoed !Hrolgol saw his chance and shouldered his way in through the crowd to plant several triplet kicks in the coiling form on the floor.

Over the hubbub, Bucket rapidly took charge. “Mister Perkins!” he shouted. “So glad you could come! And with selections from the wardrobe of Miss Kugelschreiber, I presume? My sincere thanks!” (another cheer, more !Hrap triple kicks and grunting from the floor). “Your timing is impeccable! Now Janet, take the clothing in, dress them cleanly and clear the room of all but the principal BweBwe. I will then personally enter in five minutes to furnish my part. Now go!” Janet disappeared through the doorway, from which emanated more falsetto sobs. M’Loy then addressed the crowd from atop an upended trash receptacle that Perkins had procured.

“Friends! Friends! My most sincere and abject apologies for this regrettable happenstance! All will be set right in merely fifteen minutes, when I will personally escort the BweBwe Plenipotentiary back to the grand hall for the signing of the grain pact!” (More cheers. Meanwhile, Rictus, trussed with power cables and slung from below one of his own spotlight tripods, was carried out a side exit by two large Desmoi guards, followed by a still-offended !Hrolgol, who managed to get a swift kick in every third step or so.) “Friends! My staff will escort you back to your positions in the grand hall with utmost decorum! Fifteen minutes- ample time for a round of Desmoi champagne from my own private stock, yes no?”

On this cue, the crowd eagerly boiled out of the hallway and back into the grand hall for a drink on Bucket as the small !Hrap orchestra in the back of the hall launched into an unsteady but spirited rendition of the BweBwe national anthem, “It Is So Dark And I Am So Lonely.” Janet re-emerged four minutes and a few seconds later leading a train of immense BweBwes, now dressed in violently-colored baglike garments, and favored Bucket with an unreadable look on her way past. Bucket smiled and patted her arm.

Now alone except for a bemused but stoic Perkins, Bucket smoothed back his hair and adjusted his bow tie and cummerbund. He flashed Perkins a knowing smile and winked, once with each eye in turn, and then nudged Perkins in the ribs and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb at the door behind him- beyond which the biggest BweBwe now awaited. In conspiratorial tones he said, “Time for my part now! Wish us luck!” He chuckled and swept suavely into the ladies’ room. The door swung solidly shut behind him.

Right on schedule, the door swung open and out came a rotund pair: M’Loy, wreathed in smiles, with crooked bow tie, skewed cummerbund and smears of the green lipstick favored by the BweBwe on his tux. On his arm was the dazed and disheveled BweBwe in a fluorescent magenta tent dress. Her waddling gait seemed particularly uncertain, her beatific gaze fixed in the middle distance, her focus on something... else... entirely. As they entered the great hall, a huge wave of applause rose and broke over them; Janet exited the hall right after and rejoined Perkins.

“Oh, uh, hi Janet.” Perkins shrugged his shoulders and waved his thin hands around a bit. “So, like, uh, do I want to know what all this is about, or...”

Janet looked away. “I’ll tell you what I’ve figured out on the way home.” She headed for the door and Perkins followed.

Once outside and in the embassy limo, Perkins threaded them past the flattened egg-shaped cars that the BweBwe preferred and the boxy jobs that the !Hrap drove. He short-cutted them out a poorly controlled entrance and merged with traffic. In the darkened rear compartment, Janet pushed her heavy black hair back and hit the intercom to Perkins. “No need to hurry home, Ed- why not just take the long way, OK? I need some time to drink.”

“Ah, was that, uh, ‘think’?”

She could imagine his eyebrows working themselves into interesting shapes as he waited for her reply, which was delayed by her efforts in pulling bottles forth from the cabinet beside her. “Negative on ‘think’, Perkins- that was ‘drink’ with a capital ‘D’”, as in ‘I’m raiding the Colonel’s private stock in search of anything that two-timing lush Bucket hasn’t already cleaned out’. Oh good, here’s something...”

Several days later, Janet accompanied Bucket to the farewell ceremony for the departing BweBwe contingent. Bucket had dropped out of sight in the interim, as had the chief BweBwe (whose name was a vowel-less string of m's and w's which Janet found unpronounceable but which Bucket seemed to have little trouble with). "Probably, ah, forging, uh, uh, new linkages between their, ah, between their respective cultures or something of the sort like that" was Perkins' speculation. For her part, Janet sullenly refused to speculate.

A rolling staircase lifted the BweBwe one by one up to the cargo door of the shuttle, the passenger boarding hatch being just a bit too narrow for the purpose. Last to board was Mwmwmw, who turned at the top of the stairs to give Bucket a coy wave and a shy smile. She blew him a kiss before being assisted inside. Bucket, all features a-twinkle, returned her gestures in kind. (Luckily for both of them, no !Hrap were present, for their silent exchange could be loosely misinterpreted into !Hrappi as "I command you to provide me a varnished doorknob".)

As they strolled back towards the observation bunker, Janet began mulling over how to go about gauging the level of compatibility between Desmoi and human "customs and systems" without arousing Dobson's curiosity, and without underestimating Bucket's resourcefulness. M'Loy's network was at least as extensive as the Colonel's and a lot more effective. Who could she trust? For a paranoid moment she thought of Perkins and his tics. Was he a !Hrap mole, communicating secrets via his twists and turns? Don't go there, she thought to herself. Plenty to plan for without any of that.

"So tell me, Bucket," she ventured, giving in to an uncouth whim, "did you manage to um, forge any new linkages between your respective cultures, or something of the sort like that?"

"Oh my goodness yes, dearest Janet, but of course I did," replied an effusive Bucket. But gallantly linking his arm with hers, he then said, "but do not worry, you will always be my favorite shopping partner and dining companion!"

They entered the bunker just as the lift alarm began to sound. Moments later the chemical boosters lit off and the BweBwe's shuttle was gone in a cloud of smoke. A dull rumble filtered in through the thick walls as Bucket and Janet rode the elevator down to the garage.

"Will Mwmwmw be back for another visit anytime soon? asked Janet, just to be asking something.

"Oh, but you see, not likely, dearest Janet" replied Bucket, growing serious. "her journey to the BweBwe planet will require months, and there is much business for her to attend to there. She will not return for... for one year. That is the sad thing of it."

They stopped at the curb, arms still linked. Perkins, slumming in a nearby no-parking zone, spotted the pair and started up the limo, then threaded his way cautiously through the traffic, stopped, and hopped out to hold a door open for them. "Ah, uh, all aboard, Hello Mister Ambassador" he said, grinning his wan grin and brushing his palms against the legs of his pants. Once inside, Bucket went straight for Dobson's liquor cabinet, got out two nice big glasses, and proceeded to fix them up with his signature cocktail- what Janet called the M'Loy Special: a full glass of anything expensive that had been paid for by someone else. "Ooh, but see here, dear Janet? Very little left in here. Time for Colonel Dobson to replenish his supplies of refreshing spirits, yes no?"

"Well, funny you should mention that," replied Janet, taking a good pull off her brimming glass. "The Colonel has suffered certain... ahem... losses in the commodities market this week. Something having to do with grain? Anyway, you better go easy on his Old Earth stock, Bucket. It's going to be a while before the next case comes in, unless you and I can find a way to finance such luxuries ourselves."

Perkins broke in over the intercom. "So, uh, like, where to today, Janet? Or, ah, how about you Mister Ambassador? Shopping or something of the sort like that?"

Janet replied, "You're one hundred per cent, Perkins. Shopping it is. I presume you know the route." Bucket drained his glass and gazed wistfully out the window at the smoke trail left by the departing BweBwe. He then unabashedly uncorked another of the Colonel's bottles for a second round. "Mmmm, but dearest Janet these are not luxuries," he pronounced, brandishing the current bottle. "They are necessities, you see? For the good Colonel, as well as for ourselves."

"Well of course, Bucket. But the good Colonel's own personal physician is also demanding that he lay off the Old Earth. His liver is, uh... on its 'last legs', you might say." There's the bait, Bucket. Come on, come on... you're almost there...

Bucket smiled a sly smile, and raised his glass. "Ooh yes but dearest Janet, I have every confidence that between the two of us, we can find a mutually satisfactory solution to this vexing conundrum. A toast, Janet: to success!"

"Success indeed!" replied Janet, and they drank. Now to set the hook...

"Bucket, wouldn't you agree that this solution- our solution- will require some... experimentation, delicate experimentation shall we say, to gauge the compatibilities between Desmoi and human... customs and systems?" She shifted over a little bit closer to the beaming Bucket.

"All in due course, dearest Janet, replied a suave M'Loy, patting her plump knee. "All in due course".

Feeling the hearty abundance of the Colonel's scotch, Janet put on a pout. "Now Bucket. Am I not correct that you have developed a certain affinity for a certain BweBwe Plenipotentiary?"

"Oh yes, dear Janet, but this... liaison, it is in some ways much more than that, we are in fact quite attached- but this degree of attachment, it was necessitated by the vicissitudes, the need to guarantee the grain deal, yes no? Nothing more than diplomacy."

"And you won't be seeing her for at least a year," Janet coyly continued, moving a little bit closer still. Bucket shifted his arm up and around her shoulder. They touched glasses again and drank. The scotch was wonderful.

"Oh yes, but that is so true, dear Janet, at least a year," bubbled a very contented Bucket. "But you see, even though we are far apart, I feel... that there is a part of me which will be with Mwmwmw always."

What was it about BweBwe marriage customs- and systems? Janet froze in mid-drink and blushed and flushed all the way down her neckline. She did not lose her drink, but came perilously close. Bucket saw his opening and pressed home for the extra point with a triumphant grin. "But, dear Janet, I admit that I am of two minds on this matter!"

"Cut it out, Bucket! I c-can't stomach this! "

"Done, dear Janet. Care to try one of mine?"