

The Girl-Thing Who Went Out For Sushi  
by  
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Nine decs into her second hitch, Fry hit a berg in the Main ring and broke her leg. And she didn't just splinter the bone—compound fracture! Yow! What a mess! Fortunately, we'd finished servicing most of the eyes, a job that I thought was more busy-work than work-work. But those were the last decs before Okeke-Hightower hit and everybody had comet fever.

There hadn't been an observable impact on the Big J for almost three hundred (Dirt) years—Shoemaker-Somethingorother—and no one was close enough to get a good look back then. Now every news channel, research institute, and moneybags everywhere in the Solar System was paying Jovian Operations for a ringside view. Every JovOp crew was on the case, putting cameras on cameras and back-up cameras on the back-up cameras—visible, infrared, X-ray, and everything else. Fry was pretty excited about it herself, talking about how great it was she would get to see it live. Girl-thing should have been watching where she wasn't supposed to be going.

I was coated and I knew Fry's suit would hold but featherless bipeds are prone to vertigo when they're injured. So I blew a bubble big enough for both of us, cocooned her leg, pumped her full of drugs, and called an ambulance. The jellie with the rest of the crew was already on the other side of the Big J. I let them know we'd scrubbed and someone would have to finish the last few eyes in the radian for us. Girl-thing was one hell of a stiff two-stepper, staying just as calm as if we were unwinding end-of-shift. The only thing she seemed to have a little trouble with was the O. Fry picked up consensus orientation faster than any other two-stepper I'd ever worked with but she'd never done it on drugs. I tried to keep her distracted by telling her all the gossip I knew and when I ran out, I made shit up.

Then all of a sudden, she said, "Well, Arkae, that's it for me."

Her voice was so damned final, I thought she was quitting. And I deflated because I had taken quite a liking to our girl-thing. I said, "Aw, honey, we'll all miss you out here."

But she laughed. "No, no, no, I'm not leaving, I'm going out for sushi."

I gave her a pat on the shoulder, thinking it was the junk in her system talking. Fry was no ordinary girl-thing—she was great out here but she'd always been special. Back in the Dirt, she'd been a brain-box, top-level scholar *and* a beauty queen. That's right—a featherless biped genius beauty queen. Believe it or leave it, as Sheerluck says.

Fry'd been with us for three and half decs when she let on about being a beauty queen. The whole crew was unwinding end-of-shift—her, me, Dubonnet, Sheerluck, Aunt Chovie, Splat, Bait, Glynis, and Fred—and we all about lost the O.

"Wow," said Dubonnet, "did you ask for whirled peas, too?" I didn't understand the question but it sounded like a snipe. I triple-smacked him and suggested he respect someone else's culture.

But Fry said, "No, I don't blame any a youse asking. That stuff really is so silly. Why people still bother with such things, I sure don't know. We're supposed to be so advanced and enlightened and it still matters how a woman looks in a bathing suit. Excuse me, a biped woman," she added, laughing a little. "And no, the subject of whirled peas never came up."

"If that's how you really felt," Aunt Chovie said, big, serious eyes and all eight arms in curlicues, "why'd you go along with it?"

"It was the only way I could get out here," Fry said.

"Not really?" said Splat, a second before I woulda blurted out the same thing.

"Yes, really. I got heavy metal for personal appearances and product endorsements, plus a full scholarship, my choice of school." Fry smiled and I thought it was the way she musta smiled when she was crowned Queen of the Featherless Biped Lady Geniuses or whatever it was. It wasn't insincere but a two-stepper's face is just another muscle group; I could tell it was something she'd learned to do. "I saved as much as I could so I'd have enough for extra training after I graduated. Geology degree."

"Dirt geology though," said Sheerluck. It used to be Sherlock but Sheerluck'll be the first to admit she's got more luck than sense.

"That's why I saved for extra training," Fry said. "I had to do the best I could with the tools available. You know how that is. All-a-youse know."

We did.

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Fry had worked with some other JovOp crews before us, all of them mixed—two-steppers and sushi. I guess they all liked her and vice versa but she clicked right into place with us, which is pretty unusual for a biped and an all-octo crew. I liked her right away and that's saying something because it usually takes me a while to resonate even with sushi. I'm okay with featherless bipeds, I really am. Plenty of sushi—more than will admit to it—have a problem with the species just on general principle but I've always been able to get along with them. Still, they aren't my fave flave to crew with out here. Training them is harder, and not because they're stupid. Two-steppers just aren't made for this. Not like sushi. But they keep on coming and most of them tough it out for at least one square dec. It's as beautiful out here as it is dangerous. I see a few outdoors almost every day, clumsy starfish in suits.

That's not counting the ones in the clinics and hospitals. Doctors, nurses, nurse-practitioners, technicians, physiotherapists, paramedics—they're all your standard featherless biped. It's the law. Fact: you *cannot* legally practice any kind of medicine in any form other than basic human, not even if you're already a doctor, supposedly because all the equipment is made for two-steppers. Surgical instruments, operating rooms, sterile garments, even rubber gloves—the fingers are too short and there aren't enough of them. Ha, ha, a little sushi humour. Maybe it's not that funny to you but fresh catch laugh themselves sick.

I don't know how many two-steppers in total go out for sushi in a year (Dirt or Jovian), let alone how their reasons graph, but we're all over the place out here and Census isn't in my orbit, so for all I know half a dozen two-steppers apply every eight decs. Stranger things have happened.

In the old days, when I turned, nobody did it unless they had to. Most often, it was either terminal illness or permanent physical disability as determined by the biped standard: i.e., conditions at sea level on the third planet out. Sometimes, however, the disability was social, or more precisely, legal. Original Generation out here had convicts among the gimps, some on borrowed time.

Now, if you ask us, we say OG lasted six years but we're all supposed to use the Dirt calendar, even just to each other (everyone out here gets good at converting on the fly), which works out to a little over seventy by Dirt reckoning. The bipeds claim that's three generations not just one. We let them have that their way, too, because, damn can they argue. About *anything*. It's the way they're made. Bipeds are strictly binary, it's all they know: zero or one, yes or no, right or wrong.

But once you turn, that strictly binary thinking's the first thing to go, and fast. I never heard anyone say they miss it; I know I don't.

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Anyway, I go see Fry in one of the Gossamer ring clinics. A whole wing is closed off, no one gets in unless they're on The List. If that isn't weird enough for you, there's a two-stepper in a uniform stuck to the floor, whose only job is checking The List. I'm wondering if I'm in the wrong station but the two stepper finds me on The List and I may go in and see La Soledad y Godmundsdottir. It takes me a second to get who she means. How'd our girl-thing get Fry out of that? I go through an airlock-style portal and there's another two-stepper waiting to escort me. He uses two poles with sticky tips to move himself along and he does all right but I can see this is a new skill. Every so often, he manoeuvres so one foot touches floor so he can feel more like he's walking.

When you've been sushi as long as I have, two-steppers are pretty transparent. I don't mean that as condescending as it sounds. After all, I was a two-stepper once myself.

We all started out as featherless bipeds, none of us was born sushi. But a lot of us feel we were born to *be* sushi, a sentiment that doesn't go down too well with the two-steppers who run everything. Which doesn't make it any less true.

My pal the poler and I go a full radian before we get to another air-lock. "Through there," he says. "I'll take you back whenever you're ready."

I thank him and swim through, wondering what dim bulb thought he was a good idea, because he's what Aunt Chovie calls surplus to requirements. The few conduits off this tube are sealed and there's nothing to hide in or behind. I know Fry is so rich that she has to hire people to spend her money for her, but I'm thinking she should hire people smart enough to know the difference between spending and wasting.

There's our girl, stuck to the middle of a hospital bed almost as big as the ringberg that put her in it. She's got a whole ward to herself—all the walls are folded back to make one big private room. There are some nurses down at the far end, sitting around sipping coffee bulbs. When they hear me come in, they start unsticking and reaching for things but I give them a full eight-OK—*Social call, I'm nobody, don't look busy on my account*—and they all settle down again.

Sitting up in her nest of pillows, Fry looks good, if a little undercooked. There's about three centimetres of new growth on her head and it must be itchy because she keeps scratching it. In spite of the incubator around her leg, she insists I give her a full hug, four by four, then pats a spot beside her. "Make yourself to home, Arkae."

"Isn't there a rule about visitors sitting on the bed?" I say, curling a couple of arms around a nearby hitching-post. It's got a fold-out seat for biped visitors. This place has everything.

"Yeah. The rule is, it's okay if I say it's okay. Check it—this bed's bigger than a lot of apartments I've had. The whole crew could have a picnic here. In fact, I wish they would." She droops a little. "How is everyone, really busy?"

I settle down. "There's always another lab to build or hardware to service or data to harvest," I say, careful, "if that's what you mean." The way her face flexes, I know it isn't.

"You're the only one who's come to see me," she says.

"Maybe the rest of the crew weren't on The List."

"What list?" she says. So I tell her. Her jaw drops, and all at once two nurses appear on either side of the bed, nervous as hell, asking if she's all right. "I'm fine, I'm fine," she snaps at them. "Go away, gimme some privacy, will you?"

They obey a bit reluctantly, eyeing me like they're not too sure about how safe she is with me squatting on the bedspread.

"Don't yell at *them*," I say after a bit. "Something bad happens to you, it's their fault. They're just taking care of you the best way they know how." I uncurl two arms, one to gesture at the general surroundings and the other to point at the incubator, where a quadjillion nanorectics are mending her leg from the marrow out, which, I can tell you from personal experience, *itches*. A lot. No doubt that's contributing to her less-than-sparkly disposition—what the hell can you do about itchy *bone marrow*?—and what I just told her doesn't help.

"I should have known," she fumes, scratching her head. "it's the people I work for."

That doesn't make sense. JovOp couldn't afford anything like this. "I think you're a little confused, honey," I say. "If we even *thought* JovOp had metal that heavy, it'd be Sushi Bastille Day, heads would—"

"No, these people are back in the Dirt. My image is licensed for advertising and entertainment," she says, "I thought there'd be less demand after I came out here—out of sight, out of mind, you know? But apparently the novelty of a beauty queen in space has yet to wear off."

"So you're still rich," I say. "Is that so bad?"

She makes a pain face. "Would you agree to an indefinite contract just to be rich? Even *this* rich?"

"You couldn't get rich on an indefinite contract," I say gently, "and no union's stupid enough to let anybody take one."

She thinks for a few seconds. "All right, how about this: did you ever think you owned something and then you found out it owned you?"

"Oh..." Now I get it. "Can they make you go back?"

"They're trying," Fry says. "A court order arrived last night, demanding I hit the Dirt as soon as I can travel. The docs amended it so *they* decide when it's safe, but that won't hold them off forever. You know any good lawyers? Out here?" she added.

"Well, yeah. Of course, they're all sushi."

Fry lit up. "Perfect."

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Not every chambered Nautilus out here is a lawyer—the form is also a popular choice for librarians, researchers, and anyone else in a data-heavy line of work—but every lawyer in the Jovian system is a chambered Nautilus. It's not a legal restriction the way it is with bipeds and medicine, just something that took root and turned into tradition. According to Dove, who's a partner in the firm our union keeps on retainer, it's the sushi equivalent of powdered wigs and black robes, which we have actually seen out here from time to time when two-steppers from certain parts of the Dirt bring their own lawyers with them.

Dove says no matter how hard biped lawyers try to be professional, they all break out with some kind of weird around their sushi colleagues. The last time the union had to renegotiate terms with JovOp, the home office sent a canful of corporate lawyers out of the Dirt. Well, from Mars, actually, but they weren't Martian citizens and they went straight back to No. 3 afterwards. Dove wasn't involved but she kept us updated as much as she could without violating any regulations.

Dove's area is civil law and sushi rights, protecting our interests as citizens of the Jovian system. This includes not only sushi and sushi-in-transition but pre-ops as well. Any two-stepper who files a binding letter of intent for surgical conversion is legally sushi.

Pre-ops have all kinds of problems—angry relatives, *rich* angry relatives with injunctions from some Dirt supreme court, confused/troubled children, heartbroken parents and ex-spouses, lawsuits and contractual disputes. Dove handles all that and more—identity verification, transfer of money and property, biometric resets, as well as arranging mediation, psychological counselling (for anyone, including angry relatives), even religious guidance. Most bipeds would be surprised to know how many of those who go out for sushi find God, or something. Most of us, myself included, fall into the latter category but there are plenty of the organised religion persuasion. I guess you can't go through a change that drastic without discovering your spiritual side.

Fry wasn't officially a pre-op yet but I knew Dove would be the best person she could talk to about what she'd be facing if she decided to go through with it. Dove is good at figuring out what two-steppers want to hear and then telling them what they need to hear in a way that makes them listen. I thought it was psychology but Dove says it's closer to linguistics.

As Sheerluck would say, don't ask me, I just lurk here.

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The next day, I show up with Dove and List Checker looks like she's never seen anything like us before. She's got our names but she doesn't look too happy about it, which annoys me. List-checking isn't a job that requires any emotion from her.

"*You're* the attorney?" she says to Dove, who is eye-level with her, tentacles sedately furled.

"Scan me again if you need to," Dove says good-naturedly. "I'll wait. Mom always said, 'Measure twice, cut once.'"

List Checker can't decide what to do for a second or two, then scans us both again. "Yes, I have both your names here. It's just that—well, when she said an attorney, I was expecting—I thought you'd be...a...a..."

She hangs long enough to start twisting before Dove relents and says, "Biped." Dove still sounds good-natured but her tentacles are now undulating freely. "You're not from around here, are you?" she asks, syrupy-sweet, and I almost rupture with not laughing.

"No," List Checker says in a small voice. "I've never been farther than Mars before."

"If the biped on the other side of that portal is equally provincial, better warn 'em." Then as we go through, Dove adds, "Too late!"

It's the same guy with the poles but when Dove sees him, she gives this crazy whooping yell and pushes right into his face so her tentacles are splayed out on his skin.

"You son of a bitch!" she says, really happy.

And then the Poler says, "Hiya, Mom."

"Oh. Kay," I say, addressing anyone in the universe who might be listening. "I'm thinking about a brain enema. Is now a good time?"

"Relax," Dove says. "'Hiya Mom' is what you say when anyone calls you a son of a bitch."

"Or 'Hiya, Dad,'" says Poler, "depending."

"Aw, you all look alike to me," Dove says. "It's a small universe, Arkae. Florian and I got taken hostage together once, back in my two-stepper days."

"Really?" I'm surprised as hell. Dove never talks about her biped life; hardly any of us do. And I've never heard of anyone running into someone they knew pre-sushi purely by chance.

"I was a little kid," Poler says. "Ten Dirt-years. Dove held my hand. Good thing I met her when she still had one."

"He was a creepy little kid," Dove says as we head for Fry's room. "I only did it so he wouldn't scare our captors into killing all of us."

Poler chuckles. "Then why you let me keep in touch with you after it was all over?"

"I thought if I could help you be less creepy, you wouldn't inspire any more hostage-taking. Safer for everybody."

I can't remember ever hearing about anyone still being friends with a biped from before they were sushi. I'm still trying to get my mind around it as we go through the second portal.

When Fry sees us, there's a fraction of a second when she looks startled before she smiles. Actually, it's more like horrified. Which makes *me* horrified. I told her I was bringing a sushi lawyer. Girl-thing never got hiccups before, not even with the jellies, and that's saying something. Even when you know they're all Als, jellies can take some getting used to no matter what shape you're in, two-stepper or sushi.

"Too wormy?" Dove says and furls her tentacles as she settles down on the bed a respectful distance from Fry.

"I'm sorry," Fry says, making the pain face. "I don't mean to be rude or bigoted—"

"Forget about it," Dove says. "Lizard brain's got no shame."

*Dove's wormies bother her more than my suckers?* I think, amazed. *Lizard brain's not too logical, either.*

"Arkae tells me you want to go out for sushi," Dove goes on chattily. "How much do you know about it?"

"I know it's a lot of surgery, but I think I have enough money to cover most of it."

"Loan terms are extremely favourable. You could live well on that money and still make payments—"

"I'd like to cover as much of the cost as I can while my money's still liquid."

"You're worried about having your assets frozen?" Immediately Dove goes from chatty to brisk. "I can help you with that, whether you turn or not. Just say I'm your lawyer, the verbal agreement's enough."

"But the money's back in the Dirt—"

"And *you're* here. It's all about where *you* are. I'll zap you the data on loans and surgical options—if you're like most people, you probably already have a form in mind but it doesn't hurt to know about all the—"

Fry held up a hand. "Um, Arkae? You mind if I talk to my new lawyer alone?"

My feelings are getting ready to be hurt when Dove says, "Of course she doesn't. Because she knows that the presence of a third party screws up that confidentiality thing. Right, Arkae?"

I feel stupid and relieved at the same time. Then I see Fry's face and I know there's more to it.

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The following day the crew gets called up to weed and re-seed the Halo. Comet fever strikes again. We send Fry a silly cheer-up video to say we'll see her soon.

I personally think it's a waste of time sowing sensors in dust when we've already got eyes in the Main ring. Most of the sensors don't last as long as they're supposed to and the ones that do never tell us anything we don't already know. Weeding—picking up the dead sensors—is actually more interesting. When the dead sensors break down, they combine with the dust, taking on odd shapes and textures and even odder colorations. If something especially weird catches my eye, I'll ask to keep it. Usually, the answer's no. Recycling is the foundation of life out here—mass in, mass out; create, un-create, re-create,

all that. But once in a while, there's a surplus of something because nothing evens out exactly all the time, and I get to take a little good-luck charm home to my bunk.

We're almost at the Halo when the jellie tells us whichever crew seeded last time didn't weed out the dead ones. So much for mass in, mass out. We're all surprised; none of us ever got away with doing half a job. We have to hang in the jellie's belly high over the North Pole and scan the whole frigging Halo for materials markers. Which would be simple except a lot of what should be there isn't showing up. Fred makes us deep-scan three times but nothing shows on Metis and there's no sign that anything leaked into the Main ring.

"Musta all fell into the Big J," says Bait. He's watching the aurora flashing below us like he's hypnotised, which he probably is. Bait's got this thing about the polar hexagon anyway.

"But so many?" Splat says. "You know they're gonna say that's too many to be an accident."

"Do we know *why* the last crew didn't pick up the dead ones?" Aunt Chovie's already tensing up. If you tapped on her head, you'd hear high C-sharp.

"No," Fred says. "I don't even know which crew it was. Just that it wasn't us."

Dubonnet tells the jellie to ask. The jellie tells us it's put in a query, but because it's not crucial, we'll have to wait.

"Frigging tube-worms," Splat growls, tentacles almost knotting up. "They do that to feel important."

"Tube worms are AIs, they don't feel," the jellie says with the AI serenity that can get so maddening so fast. "Like jellies."

Then Glynis speaks up: "Scan Big J."

"Too much interference," I say. "The storms—"

"Just humour me," says Glynis. "Unless you're in a hurry?"

The jellie takes us down to just above the middle of the Main ring and we prograde double-time. And son of a bitch—is this crazy or is this the new order?—we get some hits in the atmosphere.

But we shouldn't. It's not just the interference from the storms—Big J gravitates the hell out of anything it swallows. Long before I went out for sushi (and that was quite a while ago), they'd stopped sending probes into Jupiter's atmosphere. They didn't just hang in the clouds and none of them ever lasted long enough to reach liquid metallic hydrogen. Which means the sensors should just be atoms, markers crushed out of existence. They can't still be in the clouds unless something is keeping them there.

"That's gotta be a technical fault," Splat says. "Or something."

"Yeah, I'm motion sick, I lost the O," says Aunt Chovie, which is the current crew code for *Semaphore only*.

Bipeds have sign language and old-school semaphore with flags, but octo-crew semaphore is something else entirely. Octo-sem changes as it goes, which means each crew speaks a different language not only from each other but also from one conversation to the next. It's not transcribable, either, not like spoken-word communication, because it works by consensus. It's not completely uncrackable but even the best decryption AI can't do it in less than half a dec. Five days to decode a conversation isn't exactly efficient.

To be honest, I'm kinda surprised the two-steppers who run JovOp are still letting us get away with it. They're not what you'd call big champions of privacy, especially on the job. It's not just sushi, either—all their two-stepper employees, in the Dirt or all the way out here, are under total surveillance when they're on the clock. That's total as in a/v everywhere: offices, hallways, closets, and toilets. Bait says that's why JovOp two-steppers always look so grim—they're all holding it in till quitting time.

But I guess as long we get the job done, they don't care how we wiggle our tentacles at each other or what colour we are when we do it. Besides, when you're on the job out here, you don't want to worry about who's watching you because they'd *better* be. You don't want to die in a bubble waiting for help that isn't coming because nobody caught the distress signal when your jellie blew out.

So anyway, we consider the missing matter and the markers we shouldn't have been picking up on in Big J's storm systems and we whittle it down to three possibilities: the previous crew returned to finish the job but someone forgot to enter it into the record; a bunch of scavengers blew through with a trawler and neutralised the markers so they can

re-sell the raw materials; or some dwarf star at JovOp is seeding the clouds in hope of getting an even closer look at the Okeke-Hightower impact.

Number three is the stupidest idea—even if some of the sensors actually survive till Okeke-Hightower hits, they're in the wrong place, and the storms will scramble whatever data they pick up—so we all agree that's probably it. After a little more discussion, we decide not to let on and when JovOp asks where all the missing sensors are, we'll say we don't know. Because the Jupe's honest truth is, we don't.

We pick up whatever we can find, which takes two J-days, seed the Halo with new ones, and go home. I call over to the clinic to check how Fry's doing and find out if she managed to get the rest of the crew on The List so we can have that picnic on her big fat bed. But I get Dove, who tells me that our girl-thing is in surgery.

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Dove says that, at Fry's own request, she's not allowed to tell anyone which sushi Fry's going out for, including us. I feel a little funny about that—until we get the first drone.

It's riding an in-out skeet, which can slip through a jellie double-wall without causing a blow-out. JovOp uses them to deliver messages they consider sensitive—whatever that means—and that's what we thought it was at first.

Then it lights up and we're looking at this image of a two-stepper dressed for broadcast. He's asking one question after another on a canned loop; in a panel on his right, instructions on how to record, pause, and playback are scrolling on repeat.

The jellie asks if we want to get rid of it. We toss the whole thing in the waste chute, skeet and all, and the jellie poops it out as a little ball of scrap, to become some scavenger's lucky find.

Later, Dubonnet files a report with JovOp about the unauthorised intrusion. JovOp gives him a receipt but no other response. We're all expecting a reprimand for failing to detect the skeet's rider before it got through. Doesn't happen.

"Somebody's drunk," Bait says. "Query it."

"No, don't," says Splat. "By the time they're sober, they'll have to cover it up or their job's down the chute. It never happened, everything's eight-by-eight."

"Until someone checks our records," Dubonnet says and tells the jellie to query, who assures him that's a wise thing to do. The jellie has been doing this sort of thing more often lately, making little comments. Personally, I like those little touches.

Splat, however, looks annoyed. "I was joking," he says, enunciating carefully. They can't touch you for joking, no matter how tasteless, but it has to be clear. We laugh, just to be on the safe side, except for Aunt Chovie, who says she doesn't think it was very funny because, she can't laugh unless she really feels it. Some people are like that.

Dubonnet gets an answer within a few minutes. It's a form message in legalese but this gist is, *We heard you the first time, go now and sin no more.*

"They *all* can't be drunk," Fred says. "Can they?"

"Can't they?" says Sheerluck. "You guys have crewed with me long enough to know how fortune smiles on me and mine."

"Spoken like a member of the Church of The Four-Leaf Horseshoe," Glynis says.

Fred perks right up. "Is that that new casino on Europa?" he asks. Fred loves casinos. Not gambling, just casinos. The jellie offers to look it up for him.

"Synchronicity is a real thing, it's got *math*," Sheerluck is saying. Her colour's starting to get a little bright; so is Glynis's. I'd rather they don't give each other ruby-red hell while we're all still in the jellie. "And the dictionary definition of serendipity is, 'Chance favours the prepared mind.'"

"I'm prepared to go home and log out, who's prepared to join me?" Dubonnet says before Glynis can sneer openly. I like Glynis, vinegar and all, but sometimes I think she should have been a crab instead of an octopus.

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Our private quarters are supposed to have no surveillance except for the standard safety monitoring.

Yeah, we don't believe that for a nano-second. But if JovOp ever got caught in the act, the unions would eat them alive and poop out the bones to fertilise Europa's germ farms. So either they're even better at it than any of us can imagine, or they're taking a calculated risk. Most sushi claim to believe the former; I'm in the latter camp. I mean, they watch us so much already, they've gotta want to look at something else for a change.

We share the typical octo-crew quarters—eight rooms around a large common area. When Fry was with us, we curtained off part of it for her, but somehow she was always spilling out of it. Her stuff, I mean—we'd find underwear bobbing around in the lavabo, shoes orbiting a lamp (good thing she only needed two), live-paper flapping around the room in the air currents. All the time she'd spent out here and she still couldn't get the hang of housekeeping in zero gee. It's the sort of thing that stops being cute pretty quickly when you've got full occupancy, plus one. I could tell she was trying but eventually we had to face the truth: much as we loved her, our resident girl-thing was a slob.

I thought that was gonna be a problem but she wasn't even gone a day before it felt like there was something missing. I'd look around expecting to see some item of clothing or jewellery cruising past, the latest escapee from one of her not-terribly-secure reticules.

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"So who wants to bet that Fry goes octo?" Splat says when we get home.

"Who'd want to bet she doesn't?" replies Sheerluck.

"Not me," says Glynis, so sour I can feel it in my crop. I'm thinking she's going to start again with the crab act, pinch, pinch, pinch, but she doesn't. Instead, she air-swims down to the grotto, sticks to the wall with two arms and folds the rest up so she's completely hidden. She misses our girl-thing and doesn't want to talk at the moment, but she also doesn't want to be completely alone, either. It's an octo thing—sometimes we want to be alone but not necessarily by ourselves.

Sheerluck joins me at the fridge and asks, "What do you think? Octo?"

"I dunno," I say, and I honestly don't. It never occurred to me to wonder, but I'm not sure if that's because I took it for granted she would. I grab a bag of kribble.

Aunt Chovie notices and gives me those big serious eyes. "You can't just live on crunchy krill, Arkae."

"I've got a craving," I tell her.

"Me, too," says Bait. He tries to reach around from behind me and I knot him.

"Message from Dove," says Dubonnet just before we start wrestling and puts it on the big screen.

There's not actually much about Fry, except that she's coming along nicely with another dec to go before she's done. Although it's not clear to any of us whether that means Fry'll be *all* done and good to go or if Dove's just referring to the surgery. Then we get distracted with all the rest of the stuff in the message.

It's full of clips from the Dirt, two-steppers talking about Fry like they all knew her and what it was like out here and what going out for sushi meant. Some two-steppers didn't seem to care much, but some of them were stark spinning bugfuck.

I mean, it's been a great big while since I was a biped and we live so long out here that we tend to morph along with the times. The two-stepper I was couldn't get a handle on me as I am now. But then neither could the octo I was when I finished rehab and met my first crew.

I didn't choose octo—back then, surgery wasn't as advanced and nanorectics weren't as commonplace or as programmable, so you got whatever the doctors thought gave you the best chance of a life worth living. I wasn't too happy at first but it's hard to be unhappy in a place this beautiful, especially when you feel so good physically all the time. It was somewhere between three and four J-years after I turned that people could finally choose what kind of sushi they went out for, but I got no regrets. Any more. I've got it smooth all over.

Only I don't feel too smooth listening to two-steppers chewing the air over things they don't know anything about and puking up words like *abominations*, *atrocities*, and *sub-human monsters*. One news program even runs clips from the most recent re-make of *The Goddam Island Of Fucking Dr. Moreau*. Like that's holy writ or something.

I can't stand more than a few minutes before I take my kribble into my bolthole, close the hatch, and hit sound-proof.

A little while later, Glynis beeps. "You know how 'way back in the extreme dead past, people in the Dirt thought everything in the universe revolved around them?" She pauses but I don't answer. "Then the scope of human knowledge expanded and we all know that was wrong."

"So?" I grunt.

"Not everybody got the memo," she says. She waits for me to say something. "Come on, Arkae—are *they* gonna get to see Okeke-Hightower?"

"I'd like to give them a ride on it," I say.

"None of them are gonna come out here with us abominations. They're all gonna cuddle up with each other in the Dirt and drown in each other's shit. Until they all do the one thing they were pooped into this universe to do, which is become extinct."

I open the door. "You're really baiting them, you know that?"

"Baiting who? There's nobody listening. Nobody here except us sushi," she says, managing to sound sour and utterly innocent both at the same time. Only Glynis.

#

I message Dove to say we'll be Down Under for at least two J-days, on loan to OuterComm. Population in the outer part of the system, especially around Saturn, has doubled in the last couple of J-years, and will probably double again in less time. The civil communication network runs below the plane of the solar disk and it's completely dedicated—no governments, no military, just small business, entertainment, and social interaction. Well, so far, it's completely dedicated but nobody's in any position for a power grab yet.

OuterComm is an Ice Giants operation and originally it served only the Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune systems. No one seems to know exactly where the home office is—i.e., which moon. I figure even if they started off as far out as Uranus, they've probably been on Titan since they decided to expand to Jupiter.

Anyway, their technology is crazy-great. It still takes something over forty minutes for *Hello* to get from the Big J to Saturn and another forty till you hear, *Who the hell is this?* but you get less noise than a local call on JovOp. JovOp wasn't too happy when the entertainment services started migrating to OuterComm and things got kind of tense. Then they cut a deal: OuterComm got all the entertainment and stayed out of the education business, at least in the Jovian system. So everything's fine and JovOp loans them anything they need like a big old friendly neighbour, but there's still plenty of potential for trouble. Of *all* kinds.

The Jovian system is the divide between the inner planets and the outer. We've had governments that tried to align with the innies and others that courted the outies. The current government wants the Big J officially designated as an outer world, not just an ally. Saturn's been fighting it, claiming that Big J wants to take over and build an empire.

Which is pretty much what Mars and Earth said when the last government was trying to get inner status. Earth was a little more colourful about it. There were two-steppers hollering that it was all a plot by monsters and abominations—i.e., us—to get our unholy limbs on fresh meat for our unholy appetites. If Big J got inner planet status, they said, people would be rounded up in the streets and shipped out to be changed into unnatural, subhuman creatures with no will of their own. Except for the most beautiful women, who would be kept as is and chained in brothels where—well, you get the idea.

That alone would be enough to make me vote outie, except the Big J is really neither outie nor innie. The way I see it, there's inner, there's outer, and there's us. Which doesn't fit the way two-steppers do things, because it's not binary.

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This was all sort of bubbling away at the back of my mind while we worked on the comm station but in an idle sort of way. I was also thinking about Fry, wondering how she was doing, and what shape she'd be in the next time I saw her. I wondered if I'd recognise her.

Now, that sounds kind of silly, I guess because you don't recognise someone that, for all intents and purposes, you've never seen before. But it's that spiritual thing. I had this idea that if I swam into a room full of sushi, all kinds of sushi, and Fry was there, I would know. And if I gave it a little time, I'd find her without anyone having to point her out.

No question, I loved Fry the two-stepper. Now that she was sushi, I wondered if I'd be in love with her. I couldn't decide whether I liked that idea or not. Normally I keep things simple: sex, and only with people I like. It keeps everything pretty smooth. But *in love* complicates everything. You start thinking about partnership and family. And that's not so smooth because we don't reproduce. We've got new sushi and fresh sushi, but no sushi kids.

We're still working on surviving out here but it won't always be that way. I could live long enough to see that. Hell, there are still a few OG around, although I've never met them. They're all out in the Ice Giants.

#

We're home half a dec before the first Okeke-Hightower impact, which sounds like plenty of time, but it's close enough to make me nervous. Distances out here aren't safe, even in the best top-of-the-line JovOp can. I hate being in a can anyway. If anyone ever develops a jellie for long-distance travel, I'll be their best friend forever. But even in the can, we had to hit three oases going and coming to refuel. Filing a flight plan guaranteed us a berth at each one, but only if we were on time. And there's all kinds of shit that could have made us late. If a berth was available, we'd still get it. But if there wasn't, we'd have to wait and hope we didn't run out of stuff to breathe.

Bait worked the plan out far enough ahead to give us generous ETA windows. But you know how it is—just when you need everything to work the way it's supposed to, anything that hasn't gone wrong lately suddenly decides to make up for lost time. I was nervous all the way out, all through the job, and all the way back. The last night on the way back, I dreamed that just as we were about to re-enter JovOp space, Io exploded and took out everything in half a radian. While we were trying to figure out what to do, something knocked us into a bad spiral that was gonna end dead centre in Big Pink. I woke up with Aunt Chovie and Splat peeling me off the wall—so embarrassing. After that, all I wanted to do was go home, slip into a jellie, and watch Okeke-Hightower meet Big J.

By this time, the comet's actually in pieces. The local networks are all-comet news, all the time, like there's nothing else in the solar system or even the universe for that matter. The experts are saying it's following the same path as the old Shoemaker-Levy, and there's a lot of chatter about what that means. There those who don't think it's a coincidence and Okeke-Hightower is actually some kind of message from an intelligence out in the Oort Cloud or even beyond, and instead of letting it crash into Big J, we ought to try catching it, or at least parts of it.

Yeah, that could happen. JovOp put out a blanket no-fly—jellies only, no cans. Sheerluck suggests JovOp's got a secret mission to grab some fragments, but that's ridiculous. I mean, aside from the fact that any can capable of doing that would be plainly visible, the comet's been sailing around in pieces for over half a dozen square decs. There were easier places in the trajectory to get a piece, but all the experts agreed the scans showed nothing in it worth the fortune it would cost to mount that kind of mission. Funny how so many people forgot about that; suddenly, they're all shoulda-woulda-coulda, like non-buyer's remorse. But don't get me started on politics.

I leave a message for Dove saying we're back and getting ready to watch the show. What comes back is an auto-reply saying she's out of the office, reply soonest. Maybe she's busy with Fry, who probably has comet fever like everyone else, but maybe even more so, since this will be like the big moment that kicks off her new life. If she's not out of the hospital, I hope they've got a screen worthy of the event.

We all want to see with our naked eyes. Well, our naked eyes and telescopes. Glynis is bringing a screen for anyone who wants a really close-up look. Considering the whole thing's gonna last about an hour start to finish, maybe that's not such a bad idea. It could save us some eyestrain.

When the first fragment hits, I find myself thinking about the sensors that fell into the atmosphere. They've got to be long gone by now, and even if they're not, there's no way we could pick up any data. It would all be just noise.

Halfway through the impacts, the government overrides all the communication for a recorded, no-reply announcement: martial law's been declared, everybody go home. Anyone who doesn't is dust.

This means we miss the last few hits, which pisses us off even though we all agree it's not a sight worth dying for. But when we get home and can't even get an instant replay, we start wondering. Then we start ranting. The government's gonna have a lot of explaining to do and the next election ain't gonna be a love-fest and when did JovOp turn into a government lackey. There's nothing on the news—and I mean, *nothing*, it's all re-runs. Like this is actually two J-days ago and what just happened never happened.

"Okay," says Fred, "what's on OuterComm?"

"You want to watch soap operas?" Dubonnet fumes. "Sure, why not?"

We're looking at the menu when something new appears: it's called the Soledad y Gottmundsdottir Farewell Special. The name has me thinking we're about to see Fry in her old two-stepper incarnation but what comes up on the screen is a chambered Nautilus.

"Hi, everybody. How do you like the new me?" Fry says.

"What, is she going to law school?" Aunt Chovie says, shocked.

"I'm sorry to leave you a canned good-bye because you've all been so great," Fry goes on, and I have to knot my arms together to keep from turning the thing off. This doesn't sound like it's gonna end well. "I knew even before I came out here that I'd be going out for sushi. I just couldn't decide what kind. You guys had me thinking seriously about octo—it's a pretty great life and everything you do matters. Future generations—well, it's going to be amazing out here. Life that adapted to space. Who knows, maybe someday Jovian citizens will change bodies like two-steppers change their clothes. It could happen.

"But like a lot of two-steppers, I'm impatient. I know, I'm not a two-stepper any more, and I've got a far longer lifespan now, so I don't have to be impatient. But I am. I wanted to be part of something that's taking the next step—the next *big* step—right now. I really believe the Jupiter Colony is what I've been looking for."

"The Jupiter Colony? They're cranks! They're suicidal!" Glynis hits the ceiling, banks off a wall, and comes down again.

Fry unfurls her tentacles and lets them wave around freely. "Calm down, whoever's yelling," she says, sounding amused. "I made contact with them just before I crewed up with you. I knew what they were planning. They wouldn't tell me when but it wasn't hard to figure out that the Okeke-Hightower impact was the perfect opportunity. We've collected some jellies, muted them and put in yak-yak loops. I don't know how the next part works, how we're going to hitch a ride with the comet—I'm not an astrophysicist. But if it works, we'll seed the clouds with ourselves.

"We're all chambered Nautiluses on this trip. It's the best form for packing a lot of data. But we've made one small change: we're linked together, shell-to-shell, so we all have access to each other's data. Not too private, but we aren't going into exile as separate hermits. There should still be some sensors bobbing around in the upper levels—the Colony's had allies tossing various things in on the sly. We can use whatever's there to build a cloud-borne colony.

"We don't know for sure it'll work. Maybe we'll all get gravitated to smithereens. But if we can fly long enough for the jellies to convert to parasails—the engineers figured that out, don't ask me—we might figure out not only how to survive, but thrive.

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to let you know. Not until we get around the interference problem. I don't know much about that, either, but if I last long enough, I'll learn.

"Dove says right now, you're all Down Under on loan to OuterComm. I'm going to send this message so it bounces around the Ice Giants for a while before it gets to you and with any luck, you'll find it not too long after we enter the atmosphere. I hope none of you are too mad at me. Or at least that you don't stay mad at me. It's not entirely impossible that we'll meet again some day. If we do, I'd like it to be as friends.

"Especially if the Jovian independence movement gets—" she laughs. "I was about to say, 'gets off the ground.' If the Jovian independence movement ever achieves a stable orbit—or something. I think it's a really good idea. Anyway, good bye for now.

"Oh, and Arkae?" Her tentacles undulate wildly. "I had no idea wormy would feel so good."

#

We just got that one play before the JCC blacked it out. The feds took us all in for questioning. Not surprising. But it wasn't just Big J feds—Dirt feds suddenly popped up out of nowhere, some of them in-person and some of them long-distance via comm units clamped to mobies. The latter is a big waste unless there's some benefit to having a conversation as slowly as possible. Because even a fed on Mars can't do anything about the speed of light—it's still gonna be at least an hour between the question and the answer, usually more.

The Dirt feds who were actually here were all working undercover, keeping an eye on things, and reporting whatever they heard or saw to HQ back in the Dirt. This didn't go down so well with most of us out here, even two-steppers. It became a real governmental crisis, mainly because no one in charge could get their stories straight. Some were denying any knowledge of Dirt spies, some were trying to spin it so it was all for our

benefit, so we wouldn't lose any rights—don't ask me which ones, they didn't say. Conspiracy theories blossomed faster than anyone could keep track.

Finally, the ruling council resigned; the acting council replacing them till the next election are almost all sushi. That's a first.

It's still another dec and a half till the election. JovOp usually backs two-steppers, but there are noticeably fewer political ads for bipeds this time around. I think even they can see the points on the trajectory.

A lot of sushi are already celebrating, talking about the changing face of government in the Jovian system. I'm not quite ready to party. I'm actually a little bit worried about us. We were born to be sushi, but we weren't born sushi. We all started out as two-steppers and while we may have shed binary thinking, that doesn't mean we're completely enlightened. There's already some talk about how most of the candidates are chambered Nautiluses and there ought to be more octos or puffers or crabs. I don't like the sound of that, but it's too late to make a break for the Colony now. Not that I would. Even if Fry and all her fellow colonists are surviving and thriving, I'm not ready to give up the life I have for a whole new world. We'll just have to see what happens.

Hey, I told you not to get me started on politics.

END