

Fruitcake Theory

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Bjorn is trying to tell me that the rooster isn't dumb
asa spoon. Obtuse, maybe. Naïve, yes. Tedious, without
adoubt.

The rooster is sitting across the aisle and up two
seats, paying no attention to us. We're just followers.

He's staring out the window of the van at the snow.

"He's Kuvat , Maggie," says Bjorn. "Aliens think
differentlythan we do."

"Cranial capacity." I tap the side of my head. "Check
thatskull. He's got room up there for half a cup of
brains, tops."

"Maybe he's got some kind of distributed nervous
system," Bjorn says. "How else could they have built the
starship?"

"The scarecrows built the starship , " I say. "The
roosterscame along for the ride. You follow long enough

and it's obvious."

"Intellectual bifurcation is just a theory."

Nevertheless, Bjorn slides down in his seat, defeated once again. "All we know is that they're Kuvat, both roosters and scarecrows." He takes out his appetite pacifier and starts sucking at it. I don't mean to upset him.

The rooster starts eeking to himself.

"Eek eek eeeek, eek eek eeeek!"

He looks like a cauliflower the size of a washing machine-- with legs. They are bird legs, to be sure, with scaly shanks and clawed, three-toed feet. But his body is an enormous scoop of convoluted flesh. All he wears is the translator, a golden disk that hangs on a cord around his neck like the Noble Prize for Stupidity. His skin is as translucent as spilled milk. Beneath it are coils of muscle marbled with gray fat. He has spindly arms and his little head is mostly mouth. We can't see the upright ruddy flap, like a rooster's comb, just behind his button eyes, because tonight he's wearing a Santa's cap of red felt.

Bjorn pops the appetite pacifier out of his mouth. "I think that's 'Jingle Bells,'" he says excitedly. "The eeking." He makes a note of this. Bjorn is new to the following team. He's twenty-four and takes everything too seriously, except himself. He's fat and blond and

sweet as a jelly donut. I really do like him; he just hasn't realized it yet. He brings out the mother in me. I yawn. I'm not a night person and I'm riding in a van at two in the morning. It's the rooster's fault, of course. It's December 22 and the rooster has got a bad case of holiday spirit, even though he doesn't know an elf from an elephant. He wants to do a little shopping. It's a security nightmare, but we accommodate him. We always do because we're asking for the Kuvat encyclopedia for Christmas. Not that we know what's in it exactly, but these creatures come from a planet a hundred and thirty light years away. They're bound to have a grand unified theory, the secret of cool fusion, and a cure for cellulite.

"Persons?" The rooster turns toward us. "This one has hunger."

"Me too. I haven't eaten since dinner." Bjorn is always happy to interact with our charge. "Wait until you see the food court at this mall. It's totally grade. Must be thirty different kinds of ethnic." He's starting to bubble with enthusiasm; I give him a needle stare.

"Well, maybe only twenty," he mutters.

"This one has also thirst, persons."

"This one is called Maggie." I touch my chest.

"Mag-gie." The rooster can't tell humans apart. This

continues to annoy me; I've been following him for four months and he still doesn't know who I am.

=Laughing all the way, person, ha, ha, ha.=

There is some debate as to the accuracy of Kuvat translations.

I'm sick of this rooster. I've asked to follow any other Kuvat, preferably a scarecrow, but I'd even settle for another rooster. As far as we know, there are four besides this one. Roosters don't have names, don't ask me why. At first we gave them nicknames -- Dodo, Dopey, Dumbo, Ding-dong, and Dufus -- only when Balfour found out, she pitched a fit. Our job was to follow, observe, and protect the Kuvat, she said, not to make snide remarks. She doesn't even like us calling them roosters.

When she overheard Jasper laughing about "Dopey" back in August, she pulled him from the following team and banished him to Waste Assessment, where he sifts through Kuvat garbage and samples their sewage.

This rooster has been the most rambunctious tourist of the five. Since the Kuvat landed in May, he's been to the pyramids and the Taj Mahal and the Eiffel Tower.

He's crazy about zoos and Disney's. He saw the third game of the '08 World Series and was a Special Guest at the Sixty-Sixth World Science Fiction Convention. He seems to be partnered with Kasaan, the scarecrow who is the leader of the Kuvat expedition.

Bjorn has signed on to the theory that the roosters are scoutingus and make detailed reports back to the scarecrows, who rarely leave the compound we've built aroundtheir starship . This theory is conveniently unverifiable, since we're not allowed to follow roosters ontothe starship .

When we pull up to the entrance of the Live Night Mall, Balfour herself gets onto the van. She nods at the two ofus and then approaches the rooster.

"You will have an hour. I'm afraid that's as much as we can do, one hour. These two will accompany you for one hour. Anything you want, these two will obtain for you.

Do you understand everything?These two? One hour? "Even thoughshe won't admit it, it's obvious that Balfour, too, thinks that the rooster hasn't got the brains that God gave to spinach.

= Kuvatpay? That is the habit.=

"No," said Balfour. "These two will pay for everything."

=Person, is there fruitcake? This one hears much of the informationof fruitcake.=

"Fruitcake?"Balfour glances back at us, as if we have someidea what the rooster is talking about. Bjorn shrugs. "I'm sure there's fruitcake somewhere at the mall," Balfour says.

=The fruitcake solves much hunger.=

As we get off the van, Balfour touches my arm. I let

Bjorn go on ahead with the rooster.

"Any trouble?" she says.

"Not so far."

"Well, there is now. Kasaan is on her way here from the U.N."

"Here as in here? Why?"

She gives me an exasperated glare. "Maybe she realized there are only two more shopping days until Christmas."

Balfour is as mystified by Kuvat behavior as the rest of us, but she's Undersecretary for Alien Affairs. When people have questions, she's expected to give answers.

Sometimes that vein in her left temple pulses like a blue worm.

"You want to pull our guest out?" This would be the first time a rooster and a scarecrow have met outside the starship compound. It's a chance to observe new behaviors-- but the mall is so public.

"I don't think so. No."

"Tell him about Kasaan?"

She rubs her eyes and I realize that she probably dragged herself out of bed for this. "Maybe he already knows. Look, I've seeded the mall with our people. We're going to let this happen, okay? It's the good old observe and protect. I just wanted to give you a heads up." She turns away but catches herself. "How's Bjorn

workingout?"

"He should do more sit ups."

She sighs, but the vein subsides. "It's two-thirty in the morning, Maggie. Not even Hack Bumbledom is funny at two-thirty in the morning."

"Want me to pick you up some fruitcake? It's full of information."

"This could be big." She brushes snow off my shoulder.

"I'll be in the security office."

Followers and their families are scattered strategically around the room. When we take roosters on field trips, we try to minimize their access to the mundane world. If we can, we clear a site completely; otherwise we drop by unannounced and late at night. We're in and out before the media and the Kuvat chasers and the odd jobs arrive. There are a few civilians shopping at this ungodly hour, and of course the staff of all the stores are mundanes, but we've got good coverage.

The Live Night Mall is "Y" shaped. Ribbons of light hang from its vaulted glass ceiling; they shiver in the warm breeze that blows from the ventilators. Each of the arms is lined with the usual assortment of shops selling games, info dumps, shoes, T-shirts, ties, hats, kitchenware, software, artware, candy, toys, candles, perfumes and pheromones. You can get a skin tint, a hair

style, or walk-in liposuction. At the end of each of its arms is an anchor store, a Sears & Penny, a Food Chief, and a Home Depot. The three arms come together in a vast, garish, and noisy cluster of fast food storefronts. Bjorn might be right about the number of ethnics; I don't think I've ever seen Icelandic in a mall before. At the hub of the mall there must be a couple of hundred round tables. The surfaces of each are screenstuned to themed cable stations. Even though the place is pretty much deserted, it's still filled with the ghostly mutter of news and sitcoms and cartoons. I'm expecting to spot the rooster here somewhere but all I can see is a handful of followers and a Santa nodding over a latte. Kevin Darcy pushes his sleeping four-year-old by me in a stroller and murmurs, "Sears and Penny."

So I pick my way through the maze of tables. As I pass Santa, he shoots out of his chair.

"Where did you come from?"

"Home," I say and try to get by.

"No, you didn't." He pushes in front of me. "You're a stranger. Who are all these people?"

"This themall, friend. We're all strangers here."

"Not at my mall, you're not," he said.

"Listen, why don't you take the rest of the night off?"

I flip open my wallet and give him a good look at the

ID. "I'll bet you're tired. I'll clear it with your boss."

He glances at it, but I don't think he sees anything.

"It's not him," he says uncertainly. "It's all the presents. I have to finish my list." Now I'm just guessing at his story, but I'm pretty sure I've got it right. He's old and broke and stuck in Social Security shock-- just trying to earn a few extra bucks over the holidays. Only he hasn't actually moved to a night schedule, so he's trying to tough this shift out with chemicals. That's why he's just south of coherent and has cephadrine eyes. "If I go, they'll replace me with a Santabot." He lowers his voice. "They don't take bathroom breaks."

"Excuse me." I sidestep him. "I have to see a rooster about a fruitcake."

"Wait! I'll put you on my list." He clutches at me.

"What do you want for Christmas?"

"How about someone else's life?" He considers this and I slip by.

"You can have mine!" he calls after me. "Hey!"

As I enter the Sears & Penny, I notice an odd, stinging, flowery smell, something like the scent of a rose, only with thorns. I follow it to the men's underwear section, where it is so strong my eyes water. A mundane sales

clerk is tapping, "Silent Night," on the keypad of his
cashcard reader,

Bjorn and the rooster are sitting on the floor on a red
and white checked plastic tablecloth, having a picnic.

The rooster's Santa cap is cocked at a rakish angle. He
has opened a plastic bag containing three white Fruit of
the Loom undershirts.

He is eating them.

Somehow he has also obtained a four pack of Murray's
Chocolate Mint Wine, two of which are now empties.

"Hungry?" He holds a wine-stained rag out to me.

"No," I say, "thank you." I try to catch Bjorn's eye but
he is staring between his legs as if counting the red
checks on the tablecloth.

"One hundred percent cotton." The rooster pulls a new
undershirt from the bag and turns it this way and that,
as if admiring it. "Tasty cellulose." He opens another
can of Murray's and pours some on it. "Not starchy like
french fries." He takes a bite.

The smell is clearly coming from the rooster. This is
new behavior; I have to know what caused it. "Uh, Bjorn,
could I speak to you?"

He finally looks up, his eyes red and watery from
rooster smell. "You think I'm fat." He shivers like a
barrel of Jell-O, then laughs out loud.

"What?"

"Everybody thinks I'm fat. I am fat!" He spreads his fingers across his waist. Sure, Bjorn could do a creditable Santa without padding but what's that got to do with following the Kuvat? And what's so funny? I try to say, That's not true, except the words swell in my throat like balloons. I cough and manage to choke out, "What's going on here?"

"He knows you bad or good," The rooster says around a mouthful of undershirt. "So good good goodness sake." "He's not stupid, Maggie." Bjorn giggles and reaches for the last can of wine. "He just doesn't know what he knows." He pops it open and drinks.

"Bjorn!" I want to stop him but the rooster smell is blooming in my head. "What have you told him?" I'm not sure whether my feet are touching the floor.

"Kuvat not stupid." The rooster chews with a sideways motion, like a horse. "This one sees. This one remembers. But only Kasaan knows."

"Kasaan? What about Kasaan?"

"It's the truth," Bjorn says. "Want some?" He offers me the Murray's chocolate wine and I snatch it away from him.

"Cotton?" The rooster offers the bag of undershirts.

"No." I wave him off absently. "Maybe later."

"He's emitting some kind of euphoriant," says Bjorn.

"Can you smell it, Maggie?"

=Tidal of comfort and joy, comfort and joy.=

"Yes." I sit down next to him. If I don't, somebody will have to pull me off the ceiling. "How did it start?"

"He was talking about Kasaan. He says she's going to empty him, or something. I'm pretty sure he's getting ready to turn in his report." He beams, pleased that he's finally won our argument. "I have a theory. He has to tell the truth, right? The smell makes him do it, feel great about it. And it's working on us too. Tell me, Maggie."

=Lies stink.=The rooster spits out the undershirt's polyester size tag.

"Oh god," I say. "Oh my god." I take a swig of Murray's and pass it back to Bjorn. "Kasaan is on her way over here." The chocolate weight in my gut helps me forget that I'm breaking every rule of following there is. By this time tomorrow, I'll be helping Jasper centrifuge Kuvatsewage.

=Person,=says the rooster. =You smell unhappy always.=

"I am unhappy," I say. "I've got a right to be unhappy."

"Why is that?" Bjorn asks.

"Because we have to follow this stupid rooster around, Bjorn! I don't know about you, but that makes me feel stupid. It should make everybody in the whole damn world feel stupid."

"Well, at least you're not fat." Bjorn laughs and hands me the Murray's. Just to be sociable, I take a drink.

"Person is fat," says the rooster. "Person feels stupid."

I hear running footsteps. Our backup is coming fast.

When I think of how this is going to look to the rest of the following team, I start to giggle. "We're screwed," I say.

"Very." Bjorn thinks it's funny too.

Balfour herself is leading the charge. "Maggie!" When she spots us she pulls up. She stares as if she has just caught Santa shoplifting.

I struggle to my knees and hold both hands out to warn them. "Get out of here, now! It's an airborne intoxicant." I realize I'm waving a can of Murray's Chocolate Mint Wine at the Undersecretary for Alien Affairs. I set it discreetly on the plastic tablecloth.

"Gas masks in the van," Balfour says to the team as she covers her mouth and nose with her hand. "Clear the store. No, clear the mall. Seal everything." A handful of them peel off, running. The other followers goggle at us, then back away uncertainly. "Kasaan is looking for him," she says. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," says Bjorn. "Tidal of comfort and joy."

"I think we're all right," I say. "But we're not

observing anymore. We're part of it, Balfour. Now move, before it's too late."

They leave, dragging the giggling menswear clerk after them. The rooster stands and brushes a few white threads off. =Person, is there fruitcake?=
=

We find fruitcake at the North Pole, a seasonal kiosk halfway down the Home Depot arm of the mall. The North Pole also sells ten different flavors of candy canes, boxes of assorted chocolates and Christmas cookies in green foil wrap, marshmallow elves, and fudge tannenbaums. Gene Autrey sings "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" from hidden speakers as an animated Santa and his full complement of reindeer cavort around the circular base of the kiosk. I know it's the rooster smell which continues to float up my nose, but I find myself humming along with Gene.

The fruitcake is stacked five high in round red tins decorated with scenes of cherry-faced kids building snowmen and wrapped in cellophane. Bjorn takes one off the top and gives it to the rooster.

"This is fruitcake," he says.

The rooster takes it, turns it over several times, holds it up to the light and then taps a finger against the lid of the tin. =Is hard.=

"It's inside." I shake my head, laughing. "You have to open it first."

The rooster glances up and down the deserted mall.

=There is no pay person.=

Bjorn is unwrapping a white chocolate snowman. "Don't worry. We'll take care of it."

=This one pays. That is the habit.=He sets the fruitcake, unopened, back on the counter. =Christmas is.

The Kuvat pay.=

"No, really....," says Bjorn, but I nudge him in the back just as the rooster begins to eek.

" Eeeeeek, eek, eek, eek. Eeeek!" Beneath his translucent skin, the flesh appears to seethe. We can hear a sloshing, like a mop in a bucket of water. The rooster claps a hand to his chest and I see a viscous ooze between stubby fingers. He brings the hand to his mouth and blows on it, once, twice, then opens it and shows us.

=Pay.=he says. Bjorn drops his chocolate snowman.

Clicking softly on his smooth palm are four green pearls.

"What are they?" says Bjorn.

=The end of fat,=says the rooster. He offers them to Bjorn. =Person eats?=
Of course, I am immediately suspicious of the green

pearls. What is the end of fat anyway? What will these things do to the human digestive system?

"How many?" Bjorn's face is as soft as cookie dough.

"Wait a minute!" I'm stunned, but I can't bring myself to stop it.

=The one.=

"What was it you said, Maggie?" He smiles at me. "We're not observing anymore. We're part of things now." He accepts a pearl from the rooster. "Thank you. Do I chew?"

=Swallow hurry.=

"Bjorn!"

He pops it into his mouth and it's over. I wait for him to keel over and writhe or throw up or maybe even explode, but he just watches me with that goofy smile, which I absolutely understand. Whatever happens is all right, is true, is good. We'll both accept it because the world smells so sweet tonight.

Bjorn raises his hands over his head like a Sugar Plum Fairy and does a pirouette.

When the rooster offers me the green pearls, I'm not at all tempted. "Thanks." I sweep them onto my hand and pocket them. "But I think I'll save these for breakfast."

The rooster's eyes glitter for a moment and go dim.

=One,=he says. =Share.=He turns to the North Pole and retrieves his fruitcake.

The rooster wants to eat the cellophane wrapping but we

talk him out of it. When we pry the top off the tin, he
eeks and drops it. =Not Christmas!=The cake is still in
the bottom half of the tin; it rolls toward the Playbot
store.

=Fruitcake stinks!=He starts hopping up and down on one
foot. =Stinks like a lie.=

"I'm sorry," says Bjorn. "Maybe that one was bad. I can
get you another."

=Take it away!=the rooster says. =Bury it!=

"His hour is almost up." I say, "Let's get him out of
here."

But we don't get the chance because striding toward us
from the food court is Kasaan. A dozen gas-masked
followers trot behind.

The Kuvat scarecrows have no more in common with our
scarecrow than the roosters have with *Gallus*
domesticus. We call them scarecrows because they're so
gangly and because they wear loud, loose clothes that
cover most of their bodies. But nobody who meets a
scarecrow ever remembers her wardrobe. What you remember
is the impossible head. It looks something like a prize
pumpkin, only pumpkins aren't rust red or as wrinkled as
walnuts. The eyes are like bloodshot eggs and the mouth
is full of nightmare teeth, long and curved and pointed.

If the scarecrows weren't so shy, so polite, so

intelligent-- everything that the roosters are not --

they would've frightened the bejesus out of us.

At the sight of Kasaan, the rooster forgets all about

the fruitcake and begins to eek furiously. Instinctively

Bjorn and I step back. The scarecrow is swooping down on

the rooster; I've never seen one move so fast. The

followers are left scrambling behind. The rooster

tenses. He looks as if he wants to run in five

directions at once, but can't decide which one.

"Eek, eek, eek, eek, eek, eek, eek, eek!"

Just before it happens, I realize what I'm seeing. This

isn't any meeting. It's an attack: a lion charging a

wildebeest, a wolf taking a hare.

"Uh-oh," I say, but it's good. It's true. The smell has

changed everything.

Kasaan slams into the rooster, knocking him down. The

rooster bounces, rolls and lies, shivering, on his back.

His legs pump weakly as Kasaan looms over him. The

scarecrow bends to nuzzle the rooster's shoulder. He

closes his eyes. His eeking is low and wet. The

breathless followers catch up.

"What is this?" I recognize Balfour. "Oh my god, what's

she doing?"

Kasaan's bubbly pink tongue licks between bared teeth at

the rooster's shoulder. It makes a sound like someone

washing hands.

"Observe," I say. "But don't protect. Not this time."

The licking goes on for several moments. Suddenly the teeth pierce the skin and sink deep. The rooster stiffens, but makes no sound. With a quick jerk to one side, Kasaan tears an apple-sized chunk of the rooster's flesh away. Her jaws close on the meat -- once, twice, threetimes -- and then she tilts her head back and swallows. The wound brims with purple blood; Kasaan licks it clean. When the bleeding stops, the scarecrow steps away and stretches luxuriantly.

"What tasty information!" She offers a hand to the rooster, who struggles to his feet. "You have seen most deliciously."

"I have a theory," whispers Bjorn, "about how these reports are made..." But he doesn't get to elaborate because Kasaan comes up to him.

"What that one gave you," the scarecrow says, "is the egg of a vuot, a worm that will grow over the years in your intestines."

Bjorn turns the color of eggnog.

"How do you know about that?" I say.

"I ate those memories," says Kasaan. "Now the vuot is a beneficial parasite that all Kuvat share. It will filter toxins and regulate your metabolism and prolong your life. You need not worry about side effects. Indeed, I

believe you will be most happy with your relationship
with the vuot over the coming centuries."

I pat my pocket to make sure the pearls -- vuot eggs --
are still there. Kasaan notices this and bows
apologetically. "What has happened, is and is for the
good. But there is something that has not yet happened,
which I must unfortunately prevent from happening."

I can guess what's coming. "We bought them from him," I
say. "We paid."

"Maggie, a fruitcake is not the price of immortality,"
says Kasaan gently.

=Fruitcake stinks. =says the rooster. =Person lies. =His
wound has already healed.

"I'm afraid I must insist." The scarecrow lays a hand on
my shoulder.

=Better not cry. Tell me why. =

I know she means me no harm. So does the rooster, Bjorn,
Balfour, and all the followers. I'm going to give her
the eggs. Maybe later we'll find out what the right
price for them is. As far as I'm concerned, the
situation is under control. But it's not my mall.

"Get your hands off her!"

It happens so fast. Santa comes from somewhere behind
the followers. No one sees him until he goes airborne.

He's spry for an old man, clipping Kasaan at the waist
and spinning him around. The eggs go flying out of my

hand and splatter on the floor. Santa and the scarecrow
fall in a heap.

"Monster!" screams Santa. "Get out of my mall!" He's got
his hands around the scarecrow's neck. We swarm over to
pull them apart but we're a millisecond too late.

Kasaan bites down hard on Santa's bicep. She tears off a
mouthful of muscle and some red felt rags. Perhaps it's
instinct that makes her swallow.

"Ahhh!" Blood spurts. Santa faints.

The scarecrow picks herself up slowly, licking the blood
off her lips.

"Kasaan, I am so sorry," says Balfour, her voice muffled
by the gas mask. "I thought we had secured the area."

Kasaan stares thoughtfully at her. "He is a senior."

"Old, yes," she says. "Poor thing probably doesn't know
what he's doing."

"This is how you treat your elders?"

"What do you mean?"

"We have made a terrible mistake," says Kasaan. "I wish
to return to the ship immediately."

"=And a happy New Year,=" says the rooster, as he follows
the scarecrow out.

Three days later, the Kuvat starship takes off. They
have yet to return.

Barbara Balfour, Undersecretary of Alien Affairs,

resigns in February, after taking a merciless pounding in the media and both houses of Congress. In March she signs a contract to write *Who Lost the Kuvat?*, which presents her side of what happened. Although sales are disappointing, the vein in her temple stops throbbing.

Bjorn Lipponen loses one hundred and fifty pounds in six months. Two years after *The Incident*, as it comes to be called, he is named one of the twenty-first century's *Hundred Most Sexy Men*. Later, he becomes a noted futurist. His book, *The Road to Eternity*, is in its eighteenth printing.

Nobody knows quite what to do with Lester Rand, the demented Santa. There is considerable sentiment for charging him in the World Court with crimes against humanity. But who can say what will happen if the *Kuvat* come back and find out that we punished the messenger instead of accepting the message? In his later years, he writes a children's book, *Reindeer in the Mall*, which is optioned by Fox and made into a full length computer animated cartoon.

I am never going to write a book. I'm not going to live forever

There are a lot of theories about what caused *The Incident*. Some want to blame me for insulting the rooster, even though what I said was only the truth. Others say that it is humanity's fault for mistreating

the Lester Rands of the world. Many former Kuvat chasers maintain that when Kasaan digested the information he bit off Rand, he saw into the dark soul of Homo sapiens sapiens and was repelled. I guess everyone has a theory. Here's mine.

It was the fruitcake.