

Etiquette

by Bud Sparhawk

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The Rix on Angel's right side pointed at the white cylinder on the table in front of her with one of its limbs. "Pass the salt," it said abruptly.

Angel considered the request. The Rix's tone clearly indicated that it would brook no refusal of its demand, just like the Rix ultimatum at Scroffulous IV. That demand had resulted in several millions of needless deaths when the human colonists had refused to honor the Rix demands. "This is our home," they had responded adamantly, "and no authoritarian, bug-eating, mother killing troll was going to wrest our hard-earned planet away from us." Angel shook her head slowly, trying to clear the memories of the horrible efficiency of the Rix attack from her head. This was not a time to renew old grudges, not here, not now.

Across the table one of the Chrrh was tearing apart a small furry animal of some sort. Watching the Chrrh was enough to ruin her appetite. It wasn't their eating habits alone; after a few years of trading with half a dozen alien cultures you're pretty inured to the bizarre. No, it was the wet, pulsing, orange tumor-like protrusion on the side of the Chrrh's head that writhed and squirmed as if it were some alien remora feeding on its host that turned her stomach. Normally quiescent, the Chrrh's tumors were now throbbing with vigor, and it was more than the food; that she knew. Some scientists theorized that the tumor-like organ was used for communications. Others suggested that it was some sexual organ, a device for attracting members of the opposite sex; although, to be honest, she'd be hard put to imagine anything that could be the opposite of those repulsive piles of flesh and

chitin. In all of her years of trading with them she had not seen those particular, peculiar organs putting on this kind of disgu

On the other side of the Rix who had demanded the salt sat one of the Imperials; a largish alien who represented some real power in most of the galaxy. Common squabbles, such as the eradication of the human colonists on Scroffulous IV, were apparently beneath the notice and concern of the Imperials. They seemed to deal in a larger sphere than the other races; planning their moves over a million years on a board a trillion light years across and half as deep. Angel hated the haughty and uncommunicative Imperials, for their ship had sat in orbit about Scroffulous IV and watched the Rix bomb the human presence into extinction, doing nothing to help nor hinder either side. It had been so unfair; the colonists with little more than hunting weapons against the Rixian military fleet, or what humans considered a military fleet. Who knew what the Rix thought it was -- a welcoming committee,

perhaps? "Glad to see you in this part of the universe. Here's a few thousand bombs for your health."

What was the Rix's intentions in demanding the salt from her? Was it playing some damn dominance game, hoping that she'd submit to the request without a whimper? Was it thinking that she, and most humans for that matter, were a pitiable lot, easy to control and easier to kill? And what was the relationship between the Rix and these others; this assortment of aliens that the Imperials had gathered together under their ever-so-polite "invitation" that allowed no refusal?

For the past few years Angel had been running organics from her home world across the rift to the Chrrh's home planet, or at least one that was developed enough to be called their main base. For all she knew they had a dozen or more similarly developed planets around this region. What they did with the stuff she delivered she neither knew nor cared. The only thing she cared about were the products they gave in return -- rare earths ("What a strange, old world term," she'd always thought) and access rights to their stations. The rare earths paid for the trips while the access rights were her bank account for the future; a future in which she would collect an bountiful stream of returns when the wave of human expansion headed this way.

The Imperial ship that had swept her up was so vast that some would consider it a planet in its own right, although there was hardly enough mass in it to hold a decent gravity field. She had done a little surreptitious measuring when they had parked her ship along one edge and found that the ship was nearly a full light second across. She could see the delicate-appearing strands of the distant sides of the structure obstructing the stars as the Imperial's ship rotated. Gradually her computer had built up an image of the structural details as it interpolated the rotation rate and the eclipsed star fields. Their huge ship resembled an empty, broken sphere, where long curving strips of the thin outer shell surrounded an empty interior. There was no pattern to the strands so far as she could detect. Even the computer reported that the paths the strands followed were entirely random and chaotic, as if accidentally created from an explosion. Why the structure was so huge and how it could hold together and act in concert were mysteries beyond her capability to solve.

But much of the technology of the Imperials was like that; inexplicable and unknowable. Huge ships of uncertain design, capture fields that were undetectable by any measurement the few human scientists that had access to their ships could take, and behaviors that defied rational analysis. While it was true that they had stood quietly by as the Rix had expunged humanity from Scroffulous IV they had also relocated the human colony on Omicron Delta Primus nearly eighty light years away to a much more attractive planet. The fact that they had not asked anyone on ODP if they wanted to relocate was balanced by the fact that they had not demanded payment for their services either: They had simply picked up all traces of human colonization on Omicron and deposited them elsewhere without a word of explanation or apology. Since then there had been a continual surveillance watch on ODP to see what developed; maybe a nova, a new wave of migration, or something completely unexpected. Who knew what incentives the Imperials acted upon?

For years the Imperials had been a background player in the far flung human expansion. None of the

races seemed to have contact or deep knowledge of them. There were no Imperial trade goods, no one had located an Imperial planet or settlement, and no Imperial artifacts had ever been found. Instead they were a shadowy culture, always present, occasionally active, and never communicative.

Two more Imperials sat further down the table, watching her carefully with their multifaceted eyes. She had learned that when their eye stalks were both pointed in your direction you could be certain that you were a target of their attention. Ordinarily the eyes waved around and around, pointing this way and that, ever seeking, missing nothing. Why should they be observing her, she wondered. Had they overheard the Rix bark his demand? Were humans going to be judged based on her reaction to the Rix and, if so, what should she do?

One of the Imperials was pounding a hoof at one of the large nuts that constituted their menu for this meal. The sharp brown pieces scattered across the rough surface of the table as the heavy hoof broke through to the rich meat inside. One of the Imperial's tubes extended to slurp up the fluid that leaked from the broken nut while one of the creature's lesser limbs worked pieces of the meat into its maw. A complex of crunching, slurping sounds emerged from the alien.

Still, its eyes did not leave her. The Imperial beside it leaned back in relaxation, having already demolished two of the nuts earlier, and had nearly speared another of the Rix with one of the shards when doing so. She'd had to stifle a giggle when the Rix dodged the flying fragment as it barely missed taking off one of its large ears. The damned trolls always acted so damned stiff that to see one act so undignified was just . . . funny as hell. Still, she had been mindful of decorum, not knowing what this invitation involved and frightful of insulting the other guests: Who knew what passed for manners in this strange environment.

She considered the salt shaker. Could it be a metaphor for the human holdings in this region. In that case her submission to the Rix demand would be a symbolic surrender of her rights, her people's rights. Or maybe it was just the opposite, that the shaker represented something of value to the Rix but relatively unimportant in the human sphere. How would the Imperials interpret the interplay between these two bitter enemies, for the Rix were marked as dangerous adversaries of the humans from their first demand and confirmed as such when the bombs began to fall. Where was the clue to what was expected of her?

On the other side of the Imperial were some more of the repulsive Chrrh, their tumors throbbing and bobbing as they literally tore into their meals, talons flying as they shredded the squirming creatures into flayed bits of hair and meat, all dripping fluids as they were slowly sucked into the glistening mucous pillow of their mouths. She had long ago shut her ears to the tiny squeals of pain from the tiny animals as they were dismembered and flayed.

Surely, she thought, the Imperials had a reason for gathering this assortment of aliens together, arranging this dinner, and providing each of them with appropriate food. No, the food wasn't just appropriate - it was superb! Angel had subsisted on ship rations for so long that she had forgotten what warm food tasted like. She had sucked protein paste for so many years that she had quite forgotten the taste of fresh

seafood and aged meats. No Vitamin Supplement, Liquid, Type III-A-2(b) filled her cup, but a heady beer of such rare taste and body that she was certain no earthy brewer could have concocted it. The vegetables and spices were absolutely perfect and complemented the entree exactly. As meals went it was a work of art and one that she desperately wished she could give more attention to.

From the gusto that the Chrrh were attacking their dinner cages they must be experiencing similar delight, although they showed none of the reserve that Angel was certain that those two staring Imperials down the table detected in her. She noticed that the Rix were slowly but certainly consuming their portions as well, although how they could stomach that stinking, decomposed heap of garbage that sat in the bowls before them was beyond her imagining. One whiff of it when the Rix had taken the cover off had been enough to turn her stomach. It was only the aroma of fresh bread that came from her own serving that had helped her recover.

Why had the Rix attacked Scroffulous IV without provocation? The fast reconnaissance ships that humanity had sent to scan Scroffulous after the disaster had detected no Rixian colonists on the planet. Neither was the Rix fleet any longer in orbit around the place, nor anywhere within two lights in either direction, for that matter. The planet was well within the bounds of other human settled planets, and a very long way away from any known Rix volumes. Had the attack been in reaction to something the humans had inadvertently done? If so then why attack without explaining the reason? Was there some ethos that humanity had yet to absorb, some rules that the Imperials wanted young humanity to learn, or some Rixian territorial imperatives that only bitter lessons would teach?

Perhaps that was why the Imperials had gathered them together. Here, sharing a common table, exposed to each other in a setting at once civilized and open-ended, they could resolve some differences, or at least make a start in that direction. Angel risked a glance over the Rix's crest at the Imperial on the other side and realized with a shock that both of that worthy's eye stalks were aimed directly at the Rix! So, this little confrontation between them was of interest to them.

But if the purpose was to evaluate humans and Rix then why were the Chrrh present? As far as she could discover the Chrrh were ubiquitous in every section of the galaxy, steering their age-old ships slowly from settled planet to settled planet. Their stations were everywhere, providing sustenance and trade to nearly every ship of every race, except the Imperials, of course who moved in their private orbits and never deigned to intercourse with the lesser races. She counted the Chrrh around the table: there were six of them, all trader-priests from the drape of their cloaks. Four Rix, all in military regalia and dripping with weapons, five Imperials, and one, very lonely, very scared, very confused human female. With a start she realized that the distribution came very close to the relative population sizes of the known major star-traveling races. Could this be an object lesson that the

Imperials were providing in the guise of hospitality; showing each of them their relative population sizes to gauge their r

But if that was so then why were the Chrrh present, for they were not in contention with the Rix, nor

were they anything but friendly with the humans. Trade between their two races had gone on for centuries, ever since their first contact at Bayloor. Was their function here merely to fill out the table while Rix and human fought for dominance over the metaphoric human possessions? Yet, it was possible that there was another purpose to their presence.

Angel considered her options as the Rix huffed impatiently; "I asked for the salt," it said again. If she were to simply hand over the salt shaker to the Rix it could be interpreted as submission, losing her valuable points in this dominance game they were playing. On the other hand refusal to do so might be interpreted as intransigence, an unwillingness to accept the reality of the odds facing her. Doing nothing wasn't an option either. The Rix had clearly enunciated its desires, had attracted the attention of the Imperials to their little tableau, and was now, no doubt, gloating over her indecision in the face of its challenge. She had to act, to respond to the directness of the Rix.

For a moment Angel considered simply pulling out her weapon and firing on the hapless Rix; fair payment for the attack on Scroffulous IV in her mind, and fully justified. But, given the power of the Imperials, the weaponry on the other four Rix and the tactical layout of the table she doubted that she could draw and fire fast enough before one or all of them cut her down. No, she only had the three choices -- there was no escape for her.

Why had she ever decided to take her ship on this run anyhow? It should have been an easy passage of a month or two, nothing special that she hadn't done a dozen times before. But halfway along her flight profile the Imperials had snatched her ship from deep Tau space back into the Einsteinian universe, which in itself was a violation of all known physical laws, and secured it within their planet sized vessel. Somewhere they had also captured a Rix ship and some Chrrh as well. It had to be three of the Chrrh ships, for they ran always in triples whenever they ventured the vagaries of Tau space.

A few years back she had looked at one of the Chrrh engines and been amazed that the damn things even worked. Where the Hsu coils of her ship were precision machined topologies of shining perfection the Chrrh coils looked like they had been roughly hammered out in some smithy's shop on old Earth. If her coils were one micron off of tolerance her ship would miss its destination by months and light years. With the construction of the crude coils she had seen the Chrrh couldn't possibly navigate or even manage to get to where they were going with any expectation of success. One reason, boiled out of a bar discussion among some of the traders, was that the Chrrh didn't particularly care where or when they came out. They were in so many locations that any place they popped out was probably all right. To accept that as a possibility raised more questions about Chrrh psychology and trade practices than I cared to consider. Still, how could they do otherwise with the rotten hardware they used? Maybe that was why the Chrrh were so ubiquitous: If they came out near an unpopulated planet they simply started a colony; if in empty space they could simply try again; and if they encountered another Chrrh or two they might even establish a station and wait for others to come.

The two Imperials were now finished with their nuts and leaned forward, eye stalks rigidly fixed on her and the Rix, all of their limbs at rest, although their bodies seemed to telegraph a heightened state of

readiness. Bother, she wished that the Chrrh would do something to divert them and draw those Imperial eyes elsewhere while she stewed in indecision.

Out of the corner of her eye she noted that one scrawny limb of the Rix began to move slowly sideways, toward the salt shaker. So some new gambit was being introduced into the game! Now there was a fourth option -- allowing the Rix to capture the prize for itself. She quickly racked her brain for a responding move, one that would return the initiative to her and keep the Rix from dictating the pace of this war of nerves. She estimated the distance from the shaker to its hand and realized that the Rix would actually have to lean across her to grasp it. That meant that it would penetrate her space on the table.

Where had the salt shaker been originally? Had the Imperials deliberately placed it in a strategic spot so that she controlled its movement and made the Rix make the opening move? A glance around the table showed that the salt shakers were regularly placed; one in front of one of the Imperials, one before a Chrrh, and one in front of the two Rix across the table to her right. Wait, hadn't she used salt on her potatoes? No, she had intended to, had extended her own hand for a moment and then thought better of it. The food was delicately flavored and salt would have spoiled the taste.

Wait! Maybe there was a deeper game being played here. Certainly the Imperials were masters of the subtle games. The food in front of the Rix was probably exquisitely flavored to suit its disgusting tastes as well - the Imperials wouldn't deliberately insult the Rix by putting less than perfect food in front of them. So perhaps this was a test of the Rix, to see if they were boorish enough to salt their food and thereby insult their hosts. Then the salt shaker was there as tempting bait, bait that she had refused to accept and that the Rix was taking.

On the other hand by placing the salt where they had and forcing the Rix to reach past her for it the Imperials could be creating another metaphor; this one involving a Rix intruding in human space. Sure, they were waiting to see if she would accept this affront or deny the Rix his passage. If that was the case then she had better come up with the proper response, for the Imperials might judge all humanity by what she did about it. She checked the position of the Rix's limb again to see if it had continued its movement. It had.

Quickly and smoothly she reached out and wrapped her fingers around the smooth white cylinder, lifting it from the table top and withdrawing it toward her, and out of the Rix's grasping claws. Now was the time for decisive action, since she had decided to act she must follow through, and quickly else she look like she was protecting the pawn in this deadly game.

For the thousandth time that evening she regretted that they had picked her, a simple trader, instead of one of the diplomatic couriers that plied known space. Surely any one of those diplomatic staff would be better qualified to handle this game of cat and mouse, feint and counterblow, than she. They would know how to interpret the body language of these aliens based on their extensive education and training in the arts. They would know from innumerable briefings the known minutiae of Imperial, Rix, and Chrrh cultural norms and be able to gauge the proper course to take. But no, it had been she that the

Imperials had snatched at random to represent humanity and she would have to bear the burden.

She felt the cool smoothness of the cylinder twist in her fingers as her hand reached out and slammed it down exactly on the demarcation line that separated the Rix's place from her own, but far enough from the edge that the Rix could not easily reach it. Now she had extended the challenge: You will not claim this without an effort, she meant to say.

The Rix hesitated, uncertain of what her move might mean. Angel was certain that the Rix realized that she was wise to its dominance game and had challenged it in return. A deep chattering rattle came from somewhere inside the creature; whether it indicated a sign of amusement or the roar of battle she could not say with certainty, but clearly the Rix was about to react to her move.

The left limb of the Rix twitched, slowly began to reach out for the cylinder, and then stopped. To gain the shaker the Rix would have to expose its back to the human sitting beside it. It withdrew that limb and began to reach out with the other, turning its back to the Imperial beside it. The Rix stopped mere centimeters from Angel's fingers, which were still wrapped around the shaker. One black claw emerged from the sheath at the end of the Rix's limb and extended toward the closest of Angel's fingers, its sharp tip dripping some noxious fluid -- a poison perhaps? One millimeter more and either Angel would have to release the salt to the Rix or face the consequences of contact with its claw. She hesitated, feeling her fingers starting to release. She realized that she was unwilling to die over something so trivial as a shaker of salt.

WHAM! The Rix withdrew in surprise just as Angel pulled her hand back. The Imperial on the other side of the Rix had slammed another salt shaker onto the table in front of the Rix in a position roughly corresponding to Angel's. Both of the Imperial's eye's were focused on the Rix.

What could that move mean? Was the Imperial introducing a new piece into the game, offering an Imperial pawn equal to the human's? Or was it simply placing another alternative before the Rix, as if asking if it was willing to challenge them as easily as it had challenged the human? Either way the action had placed the Rix in a dilemma, and one that clearly troubled it for the Rix's crest had turned a pale white as its head swiveled to stare at the Imperial.

The tableau was locked for long moments as Angel and the Imperial waited for the Rix to decide. Were the Imperials benefactors, promising by this action to protect the human race from the predations of the Rix? Perhaps it was telling the Rix that there were many more prizes to be won and would help them. A third possibility was that it was asking the Rix if it had the nerve to take what they had as well, and suffer whatever consequences obtained.

From the indecision of the Rix it was obvious that it could no more

understand the Imperial motivation than Angel and was uncertain of the proper way to proceed. In any case the pressure was off of her. By its move the Imperial had clearly removed all volition from her side

and placed control in the hands of the Rix. Whatever happened would be up to it and not the result of human stupidity.

A keening cry began to come from the Rix as its limb twitched first toward Angel's shaker and then toward the Imperial's. She could imagine its thought processes as it wrestled with the choices: TAKE from the human or ACCEPT from the Imperial was the choice. SEIZE the human prize or TAKE from the Imperial. REFUSE the human and be thought a coward or REFUSE the Imperial and be branded as ungrateful. The crest of the alien had changed from the pale white of surprise to the deep purple of tortured confusion. Angel looked at its mates to see what help they offered and saw their blank stares of puzzlement. Whatever decision the Rix made would be its responsibility alone.

A long Chrrh arm suddenly swiped across the table and snatched both shakers from the Rix, pulling them out of reach. With a start Angel realized that the Chrrh had pulled all of the shakers closely in front of their central member. By their action they prevented anyone else from getting them, for only the Chrrh had the reach necessary.

The Rix relaxed back in its seat, probably thankful that the crisis had passed and that the decision had been taken from it. Angel also felt a flood of relief. It was now between the Imperials and the Chrrh, whatever it was. She returned her attention to her food.

"Pass the water," the Rix said.

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