

The worst part about any recent acquisition was the near-endless amount of bureaucracy that came with trying to put everything back in order, something that was always a pain in the neck regardless of how well-integrated the most recent asset was... and in that particular case, the integration process hadn't even begun, let alone gotten anywhere near the point where it needed to be for things to flow seamlessly. It was a backwater planet, previously claimed by some minor stellar republic before it was swept up from under them during a manufactured revolution, *so* underdeveloped that even this third-rate empire hadn't considered it for further development until at least a couple of decades in the future, owing to its relatively sizeable native population. Thanks to the guidelines set by most "self-respecting" civilizations, or so they liked to call themselves, standard practice for the majority of political bodies was to not interfere in the goings-on of any extant species that displayed sentience without having reached the necessary level of technology to join the rest of the galactic community; as a result, a surprising amount of planets were left thoroughly untouched, as they were left under the care of governing nations who, for whatever reason, believed that not interfering was the best solution, that they should stand back and allow the natives to figure things out by themselves and maybe, in the future, bring them into the fold at their own leisure. This was, as far as Toma was concerned, a patently absurd notion that deserved nothing less than to be expunged from the annals of galactic civil codes, so much so that he'd made it his life's mission to disregard it at every opportunity given just to prove a point; why leave perfectly serviceable planets behind, with uncountable riches just *waiting* to be exploited, on account of a bunch of primitives who couldn't even figure out basic spaceflight? It was a waste, and above all, one predicated on what the jackal believed was a misguided sense of idealism; plenty of the people who would proselytize at length about the "rights" of these uncolonized peoples were more than happy to forcefully annex planets held by one another at gunpoint when the political situation so allowed it, making all of their arguments about self-determination ring hollow at their very best. As far as Toma cared, he was at least *honest* about his goals, so much so that whenever anyone tried to claim that his was a tyrannical kingdom disguised as a megacorporation, his first reaction was to stare blankly ahead and ask them what else was new; he *adored* seeing the reactions to this, enough that he actually bothered to attend every GC meeting that he was called to just so he could make a mockery of the proceedings and laugh all the way to the bank afterwards... but ultimately, everything fell back to bureaucracy, and whenever he had to sit down and actually *do work*, it was always so monotonous that he had begun dreading every new annexation like he would the idea of flying directly into a star. Thankfully, he at least had his wife by his side that time, as she'd finished up her administrative duties on the other side of the galactic arm and figured it best that the two of them spend some quality time together somewhere "untarnished by modern technology"; the quadrupedal husky was entirely correct on that last aspect, which was precisely why integrating the planet turned out to be so much of a pain, as the local tech level was so low that the natives had yet to figure out the combustion engine yet, let alone anything resembling large-scale infrastructure. When the development operation, designated SHADOW DRAGON by way of the jackal not wanting to bother coming up with an actual name for it other than his company's one,

landed near the equator a few miles away from the largest settlement, what they found was mostly untouched land with something that could very charitably be called a pre-capitalist society, if not outright a feudal one. Thankfully, at least the locals knew enough not to question the “skyfarers” when they came knocking on their door with weapons too powerful for them to fathom, though a few local lords had some ideas on what their authority was that didn’t exactly measure up to reality; establishing full control over the populace took a bit longer than expected, and a handful of casualties as unfortunately expected, but after the first couple of months were out, the planet was entirely under Shadow Dragon’s control... for better or worse. As Toma was quick to be reminded, the planet itself was located on a remote, dead-end cluster of the hyperlane network, with local disturbances making it all-but impossible to establish a portal network by use of powered crystals; this left them with very little recourse other than shipping people in the old-fashioned way, which of course meant that they’d have to rely mostly on local labour in order to get *anything* done on time, a headache and a half even when the natives were somewhat cooperatives, which those ones were absolutely not. The last thing Toma needed was to have to worry about a potential slave uprising whenever he turned his back on the snowy fields that covered most of the planet’s surface, a concern that never left his mind even when Lady Everest tried her absolute best to distract them during the vanishingly few hours of rest the two of them had together.

As if things weren’t bad enough though, a brand new problem arose, one that no one on the team nor any of the contractors associated with it could have foreseen: biological warfare. The natives, in an act of defiance so brazen and bold that the jackal was left actually respecting them more because of it, had decided that the best way of getting rid of their invaders was to kill them with kindness; more specifically, offering the foremen in charge of running operations some of their “local specialty”, a fruit that grew along the equatorial band where most of the population was located. On its face, it looked to be just like any other piece of fruit in the galaxy: seeds in the core, shaped in some odd rounded way, and varying wildly in terms of consistency and taste depending on their breed, but all effectively just *a* species of flora... and one that happened to have a chemical compound that provoked an intense addictive response in anyone that ate it, presumably as a means of getting the seeds to spread as far and wide as possible in the mostly inhospitable climates that covered the vast majority of the planet. A single bite was often enough to get people hooked, so much so that they were left unable to resist any further fruit when offered, often to the point where they would spend hours doing nothing but gorging themselves on entire baskets of the stuff. The locals had long-since learned that to properly consume the fruit, it had to be adequately prepared in such a way as to boil away the addictive substance, but when eaten raw, it inevitably led to a downward spiral where the unfortunate soul who took a bite would be unable to stop for as long as they could get access to more of the delicious, sweet snack; with plenty of it to spare thanks to a bountiful harvest in the previous planting season, operations began to grind to a halt as most foremen under Shadow Dragon’s employ simply stopped reporting back to headquarters, vanishing along with vast swathes of their pressganged workforce. This took a while to filter up to Toma and Lady Everest, who were both secure inside

their private space station orbiting the planet itself, but as soon as it became clear that something was dreadfully wrong with operations planetside, a full investigation was ordered, one that within days resulted in a full basket of the addictive fruit being presented to the ruling couple by a group of very fat, very sweaty, very obviously compromised corporate officers... who had to be removed from the premises once they tried to throw themselves at the fruits at the first opportunity they got.

“Absolutely disgusting,” Toma sighed as the last of the now-useless former managers were stuffed in an escape pod and jettisoned towards the planet, “I turn my back for *five minutes*...”

“Come now, it’s not that bad,” the husky replied, trying her absolute best to see a silver lining where there really didn’t seem to be one, “at least we have something to market to gourmands once we’re done pacifying the locals.”

“I don’t trust it. I don’t trust *them*, honestly; it’s been a while since we’ve had biological warfare thrown our way...”

Silence fell for a while as the two partners stared at the basket; while the jackal was content to leave it alone so the pharmaceutical division could have a look at them, Lady Everest... wasn’t so enthusiastic about letting go of such an opportunity. Being quite a large husky, and one that appreciated the finer things in life, the small trickle of information that had already gone up to her from their forces on the field let her know that, if the rumours were true, then these unassuming fruits were a delicacy unlike no other, one that could provide experiences and sensations that not even the most expensive of gourmet meals could; and, being one possessed of quite a large appetite, it didn’t take a lot of convincing herself for Lady Everest to step forward, taking one of the culinary grenades into her mouth, and then take a bite.

To say that it was heavenly would be to do it a grand disservice; in fact, to even so much as try and put it into words was nothing less than a *crime*, for no sequence of letters and syllables could ever so much as come close to describing the sheer purity, the raw *pleasure* condensed into each bite, each mouthful, each basketful... at least until said basket was empty, leaving the husky to wonder how exactly she managed to go through several pounds of fruit in what felt like seconds, and why it felt like the ground was a lot closer to her than it used to be. It took looking back at herself to realize what had happened, and to immediately confirm that the rumours were entirely true: her belly, already quite large from her less-than-responsible dietary habits, had bloated outwards until it smushed gently against the carpeted floor, rumbling in complaint as it demanded more of the delicious fruit the husky had just gorged herself on, for nothing else could ever satisfy her anymore. Demanding more of the stuff from their attendants, however, yielded nothing but very worried looks on both their part and Toma’s, who had just then realized what had happened; despite his best efforts to dissuade his wife, the husky femme *insisted* that she had to have more of the stuff, that she *had* to go planetside and investigate just how delicious the snacks could really be. It was a testament to her business acumen that, even with her mind wracked by nothing more than ravenous gluttony, she *still* managed to make a convincing case that clearly the natives weren’t all hopelessly addicted blobs, so if their company could discover why the fruit had this sort of effect, they could mediate its strength and market the fruit itself to

make some frankly *ludicrous* profits; despite his concerns, the jackal had to admit she had a point, and after assigning a large enough team of loyal officers and doctors, Lady Everest and her entourage were sent down to the planet, to one of the larger groves where the fruit was grown by the locals. It was big enough to qualify as a forest all on its own, and was apparently left to the care of only a select few who local traditions dictated were “worthy” of guarding and tending to the sacred foodstuff; it was very much a case of their existence being so heavily dependent on this fruit, thanks to the otherwise inhospitable climate, that the very act of making sure that it grew properly and in enough quantities to feed their population had become intrinsically linked with just about every individual culture on the planet. Not that Lady Everest particularly cared about this; she might be more inclined to speak with the natives than her husband was, but ultimately, her ambitions lay with herself, and maximizing her *own* pleasure; any words spoken between herself and anyone else that lived there, civil though they might be, were ultimately put to use purely for her own self-interest.

“If any of the locals offer you food, I expect you *not* to take it,” the husky informed her personal guards, who by that point really didn’t need to be told that, but then quickly followed it up with a legitimately surprising command, “instead, bring it to me. I wish to sample the local specialties.”

The heavily-armed team surrounding Lady Everest was reluctant, to say the least, especially considering their employer was already so bloated that she had to drag her belly along the ground and was clearly having trouble moving, which really shouldn’t be possible for someone capable of transforming themselves into a literal giant. In fact, many things that were happening shouldn’t be possible, such as the normally unflappable canine suddenly having the most ravenous look on her face, seemingly unable to contain the sheer *hunger* that the fruits had caused in her. It got bad enough that, after none of the native authorities expressed a desire to come meet them after they landed, she simply ordered her crew to forcefully fetch the highest-ranked representative they could find in the nearest city to them, a move that would normally be reserved for her husband’s more predatory and overtly hostile tactics. By the time the poor man was brought to her, the leopard-like creature was trembling from head to toe, and not just because they were surrounded on all sides by heavily-armed goons in power armour; no, the most dangerous thing in the command bunker that had been deployed from orbit was *Lady Everest*, and those burning eyes of her proved that much.

“I have taken an interest in that delicious fruit of yours,” she declared, making it exceedingly clear that she would not accept any interruptions, “and you will either find me a guide to lead me to the nearest plantation, or you will lead me there yourself. Make your choice wisely.”

The amount of sweat pouring down the supposed nobleman’s brow betrayed just how little they actually had to enforce their authority, for surely no one with an ounce of self-respect would so easily break underneath a request like that. Alas, this was a backwater planet suddenly being invaded by a far technologically superior mega-conglomerate, and he was but a local lord in charge of a bunch of peasants; within a manner of minutes, he had already made a dozen or so promises, most of which couldn’t possibly be upheld, before begging to be released so that he

could find someone to lead Lady Everest where she wanted to go. This turned out to be a much smaller, spindlier, and absolutely apathetic-looking snow leopard who certainly had the *appearance* of a farmer, not to mention the complete and utter lack of care for anything around them that would come in handy once the gorging truly began; the moment this young man was brought before Lady Everest, they instantly proved to either be possessed of a much stronger spine, or just be seriously dumber than the man who'd ordered him there, because instead of trembling before the awesome hunger of a lady who could have them shot to pieces under the flimsiest of reasons, all they did was ask whether or not the husky wanted to see the "big ones" or the "juicy ones", before going on an extended rant about the difference between the two that only ended when one of Lady Everest's guards bapped the young man across the back of their head. Unperturbed, the feline walked out of the bunker and told everyone to follow them, and thus began the long journey to the mountain orchards where the fruit was grown. As the farmer explained, though the trees themselves were present throughout the entire equatorial band of their planet, there were a dozen or more different subspecies, each with their own specific effects, with the only connecting throughline being the extremely fattening and addictive effect they had on people if they were consumed without proper preparation. This diatribe took *so* long, in fact, that by the time the young man was finished the husky asked that she be given some time to rest, as her fattened self was a lot harder to carry around than it used to be; with a simple command, she had her guards carry her to a nearby stream, as she was thirty enough not to worry about whether or not the water was even potable. In truth, perhaps she should've paid attention to how intently the snow leopard beside her was suddenly looking at her, how his eyes narrowed and followed her small jaunt over to the rushing water, how he clearly wanted to say *something*, and yet had trained himself to hold back to prevent any information from slipping out. She should've, but having to carry her new self around was tiring work, and the stream was so cold, so *inviting*, that the husky could only really think to open her mouth and let the water flow into it, taking long, deep gulps with a contented look on her face... and an increasingly large belly underneath her. The effects were near-immediate, and yet no one present noticed until it was too late to do anything, as Lady Everest very quickly reached a point where she was too heavy to be moved back now that her paws were anchored on the ground. The husky herself was quite aware of what was happening to her as well; it just so happened that it felt so good that she didn't want to move back, and once she fattened up enough that she *couldn't*, then she might as well have found her personal heaven. So she drank, and drank, deeply and greedily until she was slaked, and then some more, right up until the point where she started to genuinely feel as bloated as she looked; by the end, Lady Everest was less a husky as much as she was a large pile of flab with a husky's body somewhat attached to it, legs dangling helplessly off the side and the most punchdrunk look on her face. Only then did she tune back into reality, noticing how there were people calling out for her down below, dreadfully terrified of what had happened and begging for her to stop; how curious that they had all forgotten about her powers, that they were so panicked as to completely miss the obvious: she could just make herself bigger, and a corollary to that was that she had some control over which parts of her were made larger in comparison to others,

making it child's play for her to modify her form such that she ended up perfectly on her paws once again... albeit with her belly dragging along the ground, much like it had been back in orbit. Perhaps most worrying was how she couldn't seem to go back to her old size; for whatever reason, attempting to *shrink* wasn't exactly working.

"My Lady!" one of her guards called out, "We need to get you back to the ship, this isn't safe!"

"Honey, I *know* that," Lady Everest sighed, allowing her eyes to roll openly for once, "if it weren't safe, then I wouldn't be here; honestly, you need to learn to let me live a little, otherwise I might have half a mind to have a chat with my husband about who's getting a promotion and who's getting shown the nearest airlock. On a rope, of course."

The threat worked its magic, but surprisingly, the armed goon didn't back down... though he did clearly and audibly gulp a couple of times before he found the strength and idiocy needed to keep talking.

"B-Be that as it may, we don't know what else this planet might do to you, my Lady, so please, we really do need you to come back with us!"

He was right, and that was the worst part of it all. Maybe if she could reason some way that this one person could be wrong, then perhaps the husky wouldn't have given up so easily, but she *was* a lot fatter than before, her body *did* refuse to shrink back down properly, and they weren't anywhere close to the orchards, so perhaps it was time to take a different route.

"As you wish," she declared offhandedly before turning towards the path they'd taken from the command bunker, "I'll make my way back to the ship. *You* will continue onwards to the fruit orchard and bring me a full basket of the stuff. I expect you to report back within half a day at best, local time. Carry on."

And with that, the giant husky began her long, arduous, belly-dragging walk back towards where this entire misadventure had begun, not even bothering to stop and check if anyone was trailing her; after all, who would be so daring as to even *think* to try and attack her, when she was big enough to completely flatten anyone underneath a single paw? They'd sooner succeed at tickling her than doing any lasting damage, and indeed, such was her girth that the very ground itself had already begun to feel the impact of her weight, with both pawprints and a deep groove left behind wherever she stepped or her colossal gut passed, respectively. She was *so* large, in fact, that when she arrived at the bunker the husky realized she was bigger than *it* was, making it slightly difficult for her to actually go back to the station orbiting the planet up above; there was most likely no place there for her, not until she shed some of her extra weight, and seeing as Lady Everest wasn't at all thinking of doing such a thing, she figured she'd just have to get comfortable for the night. Thankfully, there was no shortage of helping hands eager to do their best to curry favour with her, so much so that not even *one* dared to raise any concerns over why exactly the canine was so massive as to outsize something that she fit inside of not a couple of hours before. Indeed, most of them seemed perfectly fine with the idea of Lady Everest being so big that they actually had to pay attention to where everything about her was, lest they end up being subsumed by her substantial fat folds, for some unfathomable reason; if only the husky

knew just how deeply the operation had been compromised by the same fruit that she was so eagerly seeking, then perhaps she might've taken a couple of steps back and reconsidered her decisions... only to then take them forwards again and carry on regardless, such was the call for her taste buds to savour the sweet mannah they had up on the station. It was stronger than her, so strong that it had all-but overpowered the rest of the husky's personality, so much so that when her team returned from the mountains, carrying heavy baskets *filled* with the delicious fruit, she didn't bat an eye at how much fatter they all were, how their equipment was missing, or how the young farmer had the biggest grin on their face; she just wanted to *eat*, and now she *could*.