

Holiday on the culinary planet of Michelin

"Ms Rommer," says Pia, "Tell us about your holiday on the culinary planet of Michelin, where you met a prophet whose visions had a way of coming almost - but not quite - true, and what happened when you discovered the source of the prophet's powers."

Life

Ariel sips her recently arrived Earth Beer.

"Ahhh. Better. Much better. You know, the Michelians have a similar drink to EB. At least, they say its made by the same fermentation process. Tooze it's called. But nobody's ever found what it's actually made from. The Space Corp lab once tried to characterise what it was that gave it its distinctive properties. But the funny thing was, while they identified any number of sugars and proteins and other complex molecules, it kept changing. The lab simply couldn't come up with a fixed composition. It was like it was almost alive. And when you actually see a glass of the stuff, it kinda makes sense. Pale green, sweet but pungent, and deliciously fizzy. And it goes straight to your head!"

She grins unexpectedly. "Although, that *is* rather the point."

"I had just completed a particularly nasty mission ? which I'm afraid I cannot discuss (Space Corp Directive 12759/j). My partner, Captain Daniel Lester, had suffered an even nastier time of it. He'd barely survived. So barely, in fact, that all that remained of him was his slightly charred brain and some remnants of spinal cord. We fitted him out pretty quickly in one of those Beridian life support capsules; he was mobile and could communicate, more or less. But it would be several weeks before his Regen (TM) body was ready for use.

"We both had leave owing and we decided to make a short tour of the nearby sector. I had always desired to visit Michelin: leisure planet, gastronomic hub, and home of the fabled Tooze. It seemed the ideal place to start."

Ariel looks a little sheepish. "Well, except that Dan couldn't eat. Or drink. Or even smell for that matter. But he said he didn't mind."

"I bet Dan had some other reason for going," interjects Pia. "I bet he had revenge on his mind." A credit holo appears between her and Ariel on the table.

Brro pushes forward a credit piece.

"Revenge? I'd imagine theft. Beridian life support capsules are noted for causing a breakdown in the neural structures responsible for ethics and morality. Beridian medical science never payed serious attention to the problem, because they're not concepts that are easily quantified within the Beridian medical hierarchy. Even a fine and upstanding member of the Space Corps, and I'm sure there's no other kind..." Brro smirks somewhat, "...would find himself at the mercy of his... baser impulses. I'm surprised the Space Corps still use them.

"And with Michelin android technology being what it is - well, why would an amoral brain in a jar settle for a Regen(TM) flesh-body, when it could have the latest in Michelin Pleasure or Military hardware?"

Choices

Smiling slightly, Ariel replies. "Oh I don't know Captain. I think that there's still something to be said for the pleasure of uh... flesh."

"Beridian capsules are still acknowledged to be the best at maintaining tissue integrity and their affects are completely reversible - that's why the Space Corp still use them. But you are correct."

She pauses, choosing her words carefully.

"Before this particular... incident, we were, perhaps, not fully aware of the extent that judgement was... impaired by the capsule. Indeed, until Dan, most capsulees remained in the Space Corp medical facility on Phoebe - where often the biggest moral dilemma is whether to plug in to 'Android Antics' or an improving documentary on Community Access. And I certainly don't think that any of us expected that the man awarded the Space Corp 'Ethics Plus' award three times running would ever act in quite the... manner that he did."

"Besides, the alteration occurs gradually and there certainly weren't any signs Dan had been affected when we left. Heck, there weren't any signs the first couple of days we were there - and maybe things would've been different if we hadn't chosen to land at Ctober. Sure, it's the home of the famous year-round 'Ctoberfest' (a complete blast by the way) but its also the site of the top secret Michelian Robotics and AI Research Instalation, Selvik."

She sips her beer.

"Selvik make the standard android shells - both military and pleasure configurations, as well as some more... specialised items that are only available to the Michelian government. The standard shells are nothing special. They're widely available throughout out the sector - not to mention the thousands of el cheapo copies sold at the Ctober street markets. But Dan was after the real thing..."

"Ah yes, Michelin, such a gorgeously faux-stable tri-star system... *ingenious* is the only way to describe how they've combined their two cutting-edge technologies - whoever would have thought that edible androids would be so popular? and I particularly enjoy what they can do with ice-cream!"


"Ariel, I'd bet that it was the serendipitous development of Tooze icecream and the slick new prototype combining the latest in military and pleasure technologies - the Edible Android Mark XXIII.5, Tooze Icecream Flavour, Now in Taupe and Teal - which was just the incentive to push poor Captain Lester over the rather rigid bounds of Space Corp defined morality."

Manoeuvres

"Yes. I quite enjoy what they do with icecream too. Isn't it marvellous how it retains its consistency?"

She looks at Bobo appraisingly, "But I wonder that you know so much about the EdAM XXIII.5 when its delivery to market must still be at *least* a standard year away. I was under the impression that the whole project was still completely under wraps. The agreement with which the Space Corp managed to wrangle our release explicitly stated that we couldn't disclose anything we learnt about it. They even fitted us both with honesty chips to make sure."

"Like I said, Ctoberfest was a blast. You should definitely go if you can. I probably ate more weird and wonderful food there than I had in the rest of my whole life - and I've eaten some pretty weird things in my time. And the *Tooze*. It just flowed and flowed and flowed. Dan was fine at first - he acted as my portable table and really tried to get into the swing of things. But after a day or so it really began to get to him that he couldn't eat anything. At first it was the icecream - he just *had* to try the icecream. I tried to describe how it smelt and tasted and... felt. But that just riled him up even more. He started spending more and more time down in the street markets. I was happy that he'd found something that interested him, although I was a little worried about the stories he came back with. Stuff about edible android shells - I just didn't believe him. And a few days later he disappeared completely.

"Now, Dan's capsule was fitted with every acronym under the sun - CNN, WWW, DVD, , DUI and, most importantly, GPS. I tracked him to the Selvik facility no problems - it was getting in that would be the difficult bit. Space Corp Directive 34834/k requires all Officers to act with diplomacy and discretion - particularly when acting in an... unofficial capacity. It was imperative that I use the proper channels to gain entrance. Fortunately I quickly identified my channel leaving the complex later that morning. His name was Xoffert and he worked in the AI facility. A large credit 'donation' secured his agreement to get me inside Selvik and - more importantly - out with Dan later that night."

Prophecy

"Xoffert seemed like a decent enough guy, except for that manic look that often besets those involved in research. He got me into Selvik like he promised (bit of an anticlimax really - there wasn't even any climbing involved!) It was only after we got to his lab in the AI wing that he admitted that he didn't actually have clearance to get over to the other side of the complex. That's where the Shell research was carried out - and, according to my tracker, Dan's location. Dan wasn't moving, but I was still anxious to get over there A S A P. Xoffert said we could ask his computer, a special AI prototype, to help us out."

"Artificial intelligence really has come along swimmingly since those first breakthroughs with the QWERTY archetype. Of course there have been some moments of 'turbulence' along the way - systems that haven't *quite* functioned as their designers might have wished. The infamous JIM prototype, for example. Initially designed to increase efficiency, it tried to assign its workload to its human creators ('Could you process this data form me Dave? It will only take you an hour or so...")

"But, yeah, apart from the odd bump here and there, AI systems work really well. Asking Xoffert's computer seemed a fine idea. At the very least we should be able to download some sort of map to work out how to get over there (and, frankly, the odd locked door has never *really* been a problem for me). It was when Xoffert explained that his computer - the Notional Ordination Space Time Response Organiser (NOSTRO for short) could predict the future, more or less, that I began to wonder..."

"An AI like JIM would not have disappeared quietly," muses Pia. "I'll bet that it had somehow escaped shutdown and - in its maniacal drive for efficiency - was behind the design and peculiar influences of the Beridian life support capsules. I'll bet you had to beat JIM at his own game before your adventures on Michelin ended."

A gently roating credit chip appears in the air above the table. An astute observer might note that it looks a little uneven and might well wonder: is it *possible* to file the edges off a holographic coin?

Efficiency

"JIM's major fault was no personality chip but I don't think it was ever forcibly shut down. It just became obsolete, eventually. And while it **was** a pain in the arse to work with, frankly, it did tend to get things done. JIM was involved with lots of projects - including development of much of the Beridian's now famous medical paraphernalia."

"They say each product JIM designed was imbued with a little bit of its, well, personality (for lack of a better word). Some people find this quite disturbing. It's definitely JIM's efficiency bent that causes breaches in the capsules. Instead of taking into account **all** the consequences of its actions, the brain gradually decides to just take the most expedient route possible. If I was going to stop Dan, I'd have to somehow override the capsule's in built efficiency routines. It seemed to me that Xoffert had the perfect system to help me. After all, what could be more efficient than knowing **exactly** how you did something before you'd even done it?"

"But first things first. I was in the AI wing - Dan was up to who knows what over in 'Shells'. I needed to get over there and I needed NOSTRO to tell me how. On the face of it, it looked fairly primitive - there was no voice interaction built in yet and I had to communicate with it by typing my question in (**very** quaint). I fed in the necessary information; its answer was a bit cryptic to say the least."

"LEVEL 7 CORRIDOR - DISABLE 2 SECURITY DRONES - USE CODE R36NHTE45H0938 - KILL THE CHICKEN."

"I hacked into the Selvik mainframe to double check the route. According to their map, Level 7 was the way to go. The code was spot on too. And, when we actually got up there, we bumped into a couple of guards just like NOSTRO said. But kill the **chicken**? What the hell was that about? It was only then that Xoffert admitted that there were a still few 'teething problems' in his system - that NOSTRO couldn't predict one hundred percent. That wasn't going to be much help when it came to neutralising Dan. And, while I was always sure that I'd be able to restrain him if I **had** to, things are always far more pleasant when they just come along quietly. For that we needed to iron out NOSTRO's remaining bugs"

"NOSTRO works using some pretty elegant mathematics - kinda like Chaos theory, but with a fancier butterfly. Xoffert tried to explain it all to me, but he got flustered and a bit over excited. Maths does that to some people. I had to make sure that I understood what he was talking about, but precious time was passing. In the end I just downloaded the code - I could process it on the way there."

Nitrous glances at Ariel and comments

"I'd a thought it'd be pretty hard to tell if your sidekick had swapped capsules"

then slaps a credits worth of Terran Trillion Dollar bills onto the table.

"Matter a fact, I'd wager the first shell boy you grabbed turned out to be someone other than Dan"

Closure

"Well, I don't think I can be blamed for that", Ariels replies crisply. "One capsule does look pretty much like any other."

She slurps her EB.

"So where were we? Oh yeah - we took the Level 7 corridor over to the Shell section. Xoffert brought along a porta-console hooked up to NOSTRO. We met a couple of patrol drones, but nothing difficult. They were expected, after all, and were strictly surveillance models. I checked out NOSTRO's code along the way. Xoffert had written the loveliest program, but he did make the silliest of mistakes. I found most of 'em pretty easily - I mean, does anyone **else** here think that the square root of four five sixty-seven is **five** point seven five seven nine. I don't think so!"

She rolls her eyes before continuing.

"Now, I like a bit of icecream as much as the next lifeform, but things were pretty bad when we got there. An empty Beridian capsule was lying against the wall and an EdAM XXIII.5 was, erm, indulging itself in the middle of the room. No wonder Dan hadn't been moving on the GPS screen! There was icecream **everywhere** - and a heap of officials and research guys helplessly watching on. They didn't notice our arrival. Frankly, I don't blame them."

"It was time to find out what we were going to do next. We uploaded the revised code into NOSTRO and waited with baited breath. I guess we'll never know **exactly** what happened but, after a nanosecond or two compiling, a new message appeared:

ANSWERING YOUR STUPID QUESTIONS FOREVER?

- .
- .
- .
- .

BUGGER THAT.

"After that the console went blank as NOSTRO imploded. Xoffert was a bit stunned - I was too. I guess nobody had really stopped to consider how NOSTRO would deal when it could see its own future perfectly. But I still had to stop Dan. None of the Michelian seemed to be doing anything and it was time for me to take charge. I attacked the EdAM. It fought well and I think its squishyness was to its advantage. But in the end a swift kick to the torso sent it toppling over - killing a turkey that had been inexplicably wandering round the room (there was no chicken, obviously). I opened up the breastplate and ripped out Dan's brain. Except - now that I looked at it closely - it didn't **really** look like his brain at all. Dan's brain was much slimier. The officials finally started moving - apparently I was holding the brain of the Beridian ambassador to Michelin. As a matter of courtesy, he's been asked to try out the new prototype. He probably wasn't expecting this additional excitement..."

"But where was Dan? The GPS said he was in the room - and we eventually found him hovering in a corner. The sneaky devil was quietly downloading top secret plans so he could build his own EdAM later on! He came along pretty quietly. I guess he realised it was the most efficient thing to do... They locked us both up while negotiating our release with the Space Corp. I guess I could've broken out pretty easily, but I felt kinda bad what had happened to the Ambassador. Besides, it was Michelin - the food was **excellent**."

"We got to say good bye to Xoffert before we left. He'd been demoted after his little transgression, but was handling it all pretty well. Poor guy - they were going to make him work on the JIM efficiency routines to make it up to the Beridians. He also admitted that before we fixed the code NOSTRO had believed that, eventually, it would be off to join the Space Circus as an anti-grav trapeze artist. I guess you could see why it'd be upset to find out otherwise."

Ariel smiles brightly “And that's about it really.”

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