

CHAPTER 2

The lunch crowd at the galaxy's most distinguished fine dining restaurant buzzed. Sharply dressed waiters hopped from table to table, taking orders and making small talk. They had the art of pretending to care about the affairs of the various species from far-reaching planets honed to perfection.

Scrumptious and delicate aromas from the daily specials wafted from the kitchen, enticing restaurant patrons as they perused the menu. Expensive glassware clinked behind the bar within earshot of the day drinking crowd. Recessed lights in the high arched ceilings dimmed, and candles provided the exact ambience for each patron's main event. Crisp, creaseless white linens hugged every table, and each setting contained a full complement of porcelain dishware, sterling silverware, and crystal wine goblets. Peaceful music floated through the main dining room, touching everyone's eardrums and creating peaceful interludes among the chaos of operations.

The daily lunch production, scripted down to the last olive in each chilled martini glass, danced in full swing. Every table was reserved, and most seats were already occupied. A line of hopefuls crowded the bar in case of cancelations. Forty to fifty different alien species came to the planet Gastrin for this experience each lunchtime. The galaxy's most acclaimed restaurant, Indigo, was open for the day.

Only thirty minutes into peak lunch rush, a male alien guest at table twenty-two had an appetizer fork lodged in the side of his head. The alien had a large and hairless, smooth skinned, orange hued melon sitting atop a pencil thin neck. The utensil stuck in his temple caused the motor skills center of his nervous system to malfunction. His unsupported cranium pitched forward into his bowl of lobster bisque, where minutes later he drowned in the scintillating aroma of tarragon, garlic, butter-soaked shellfish, and the galaxy's finest sherry.

There didn't seem to be much of a fuss as the wait staff bustled around the restaurant, order gathering, fetching exotic drinks from the bar, and making polite conversation with their patrons.

A waiter yelled over to the manager.

"We got a side order of lamb chops rare at table 22!"

Waitstaff used code for fork stabbings to not alarm other diners.

The assault issue listed fifth on Newton's current problems. As the *maitre d'* of Indigo restaurant, Newton played the role of head conductor for the dining staff, who consistently played off-key and out of rhythm.

Newton's tall six-foot, five-inch height allowed him to see across the expanse of the main dining room and he could see the chaos at table 22. His purple hued skin and dark ponytail made him stand out even in a restaurant full of aliens.

Newton said,

"Thank you. We have protocol in place. Please notify all staff to execute proper logistics."

Of utmost importance, Newton needed to prepare a table for the executive producers of the hit television series, *Caution Earth*. The television station owned a huge expense account with the restaurant. It was unwise to ignore or offend the network executives. On the planet Gastrin, appetizer fork stabbings were all too common and procedures existed to resolve the problem.

Newton was, as he called it, having a day. His nervous system teetered between spastic and tragic. The abnormality of stressing about every detail ate at him, but this job demanded it. Management of the mundane grated against his nature.

A nervous hostess approached him about the arrival of a broadcast executive. She shared a home planet with the stabbing victim and the episode put her on edge.

She stammered at the stressed-out manager.

"Newton, sir, the executive producer of *Caution Earth* has arrived without the rest of his party. What should we do? We cannot leave him

standing at the host stand. He is the one from the planet Zatos. Also, he smells.”

Ah yes, the Zatosian body odor problem. Add it to the list, the maître d’ thought.

Newton hailed from the nearby planet Zang, where offensive body odor didn’t run rampant. Nearby in galactic terms meant it only took a few hours to travel from Zang to Gastrin with modern spaceship technology. In reality, his home sat 1.7 light-years away.

The maître d’ squeezed the bridge of his pointy nose and averted his two wide offset eyes so he could decompress, if even for a moment. It also gave the hostess a break from the discomfort of speaking to a species who never blinked. The people of Zang were highly evolved and tuned into others, but their lack of blinking freaked out sensitive aliens in the galaxy.

Newton said to the nervous hostess.

“Marge, please seat the television executive at his preferred table away from other patrons and offer him a complimentary appetizer and a glass of wine while he waits for the rest of his party. Ensure the table’s air circulation unit is activated so the Zatosian odor is controlled.”

Marge marched off to complete the task, peering over her shoulder at her boss as she moved away.

She always thought Newton looked similar to the humans on her favorite television show, *Caution Earth*. Except for the purple skin, of course. The hostess expected an Earthling might find her manager looked under the weather!

She also loved how the broadcast executives made regular dining excursions to Indigo. It made her friends jealous when she posted pictures with them on her social media.

Newton returned his attention to the mindless details assaulting him every 20 seconds in today’s stellar edition of lunchtime.

Unfortunately for Newton, his species possessed an overbearing talent for observation coupled with keen eyesight. He could spot table linen wine or soup stains from across the expanse of the main dining room

that would leave even the most trained eye from the thousand-eyed aliens of Flogmore flummoxed. The minutia of this particular useless detail usually led to a round of nonsensical arguments with the linen providers that left him exhausted and unsatisfied. At the moment, he wished he only had to deal with suspect linens.

His assistant manager approached, looking down at the floor. This meant bad news.

He said,

“Sir, the special appetizer fork investigative unit is going to be another 25 minutes. They are wrapping up an assault at Shark Tooth Grill across the street. What should we do with the man who drowned in his soup? His wife doesn’t seem to be bothered. She ordered another glass of wine and some garlic bread sticks.”

Newton’s hard, angular facial features stared at his assistant manager, conveying the gaunt and exhausted look of a regular marathon runner just after the finish line. He reached back and wrapped his hand around his jet-black ponytail. This produced a calming sensation in his nervous system.

The straight hair on his head contrasted with the rest of his hairless body. Zangians’ hair grew slowly, and they rarely cut it. The elders of his species sported long ponytails. Once past childhood and fully grown, the length of their mane depicted a Zangian’s age.

Newton’s hair length meant he was still a young Zangian, even though the restaurant seemed to age him well past his years.

He said to the assistant manager.

“Communicate to staff to continue protocols until the investigators arrive. Offer complimentary appetizers and drinks to the tables nearest the tragedy.”

Newton’s species had an invisible third eye in the middle of their foreheads, only noticeable when they slept or closed both eyes while awake. The extra eye acted as their window to the essence of all things. He never used it at the restaurant. The idea of seeing the true nature of Indigo made his skin crawl.

As the assistant manager scurried away, Newton considered if stress and anxiety caused graying of hair, even though a Zangian's hair never faded. If it could, then this exasperating job would accomplish the feat.

He never considered in his upbringing or schooling he would become a maître d'. Newton's educational background in philosophy and galactic history were far disciplines from food service. His adjunct education in behavioral psychology and societal evolution seemed pertinent to customer service, but not in an enjoyable manner.

He took the job because of his uncle Newty, his namesake. Uncle Newty previously held the headwaiter job and was always Newton's favorite. He would tell exaggerated stories of famous people he met and the excitement of working in the galaxy's most distinguished restaurant. He omitted the mind-numbing and endless details, the unruly and constantly intoxicated staff, the too-cool-to-actually-serve-drinks bartenders, and the endless customer bitching and complaining. His uncle moved on to his next lifetime soon after retirement, depriving him of the opportunity to tell him he was full of shit.

A few years into this *exciting* career, Newton carried large doses of disdain, stress and indifference. Most of the time he wanted to drink and snort smashed porcelain dishes*.

In addition to readying the table for the irritable television executives, he was trying to resolve the correct number of ice cubes in the wine carafe holder at table twenty-six. The waiter working in section five had reached an obvious level of intoxication that would soon prevent him from performing his duties. Three petulant busboys from the small neighboring twin planet of Gastrot recently escaped rehab and smashed porcelain dishes into a fine powder, snorting the pungent residue to get high. Typical staff behavior, even after a poor guy from whereabouts unknown, drowned in his lobster bisque with an appetizer fork protruding from the side of his head.

Newton assumed the dining utensil was placed there by his disenchanting wife. The investigative unit would eventually arrive to sort out the crime. And if the work problems were not piling up enough today, his irate, bored and soon-to-be ex-wife kept messaging him every ten seconds.

Unfortunately, the entire restaurant planet of Gastrin experienced appetizer fork assault problems. With countless details already on Newton's plate, he bore the insane pressure to upkeep a certain professional and calm appearance in a dining establishment teetering on the edge of anarchy.

With this daunting set of tasks, even the casual observer could easily comprehend why Newton had stress and anxiety issues. Indigo operated as a successful insane asylum disguised as a fine dining establishment.

**Dishes at five-star restaurants on Gastrin are made from the universe's finest porcelain gathered from the exquisite sand beaches on the planet Soxelo. The porcelain, when smashed into a powder and snorted through the nasal cavity, produces an amazing high lasting for about 20-30 minutes. The world is uninhabited and is under constant guard to prevent galactic drug runners from seizing control.*