



selected aquatic beetle, vegetables, and bread from the menu panel.

The food printer started on my synthetic tubers layer by layer with organic paste while I watched. Eventually, they looked like the real veggie, complete with little roots and bulges in seemingly random places. But every tuber was identical.

The machine laid the bread down as a foamy paste that swelled, with some bubbles popping to leave open spongy cavities. It sprayed the crust onto the perimeter of the bread.

“Uncle, this is my classmate Kartine.”

My niece approached with some stranger. Shaylor was the reason I was here.

“Kartine, this is my uncle, Claymore.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Kartine,” I said to the slender human female. I held out my lower right hand, which she shook. Humans were perhaps the most populous race, even though they had no known home world beyond unproven indications of 20,000-year-old human ruins on a planet called Mars in a distant arm of the galaxy. Interstellar civilization had fallen and risen several times since then.

“Shaylor has told me nice things about you,” she said.

My niece and I shared an eight-arm hug. It had only been five hours since I saw her, but her presence cheered me.

They both selected their meals and watched as the printer constructed the food on their trays.

My beetle was complete, and a blast of heat cured it before the door opened. I pulled out my tray and touched the tubers. They were realistically firm and warm. I poked at my beetle. It was rubbery. I should