

A Safety Weasel Christmas

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“Will this never end?” Elijah North snarled, as he tossed the gloves of his weasel costume at the stupidly grinning costume head, leering at him from the make-up table.

The Eliothnian sitting on the far side of the dressing room pulled his sunglasses down to look over the frames. “The show is highly anticipated, El-jah,” he said. He turned the screen of his compupad toward Elijah. “The pay-per-view orders are through the roof!”

Elijah collapsed into the remaining chair. “That should make Uncle Senile’s sponsor very happy,” he grumbled.

“How many times do I have to remind you?” the Eliothian asked. “The host of the show is named Kindly Doctor Cordial.”

Elijah rolled his eyes. “Mine’s more accurate,” he growled. He thought of several sarcastic ways he could have alluded to Zafnir’s failure, in all the years they’d worked together, to pronounce Elijah’s name correctly. But there was no point; sarcasm was always lost on the alien.

Outside the dressing room, a nasal voice called, “Ten minutes, Mr. Weasel!”

Elijah called back, “That’s Mr. North! Weasel is the character’s name!” After a moment he added, “And species. That’s the other way you can tell us apart—I’m the raccoon inside the weasel suit!”

Zafnir shook his head. “El-jah, do not be angry. Your portrayal of the character is so compelling, people believe he is real. Take it as a compliment.”

Elijah rolled his eyes. “And another thing, who broadcasts live for anything other than the news?”

“For decades the Kindly Doctor Cordial Christmas Special has been broadcast live to the children of Wilson’s Rings,” Zafnir explained. “It is a tradition! And traditions are especially keenly observed in show business.”

“Anything that makes money hand over fist is keenly observed and repeated in show business, you mean,” Elijah replied.

“An excellent, if somewhat cynical, observation,” Zafnir said. “You are being paid more than your standard fee.”

Elijah smiled weakly. It didn’t matter how much he was paid. Thanks to the terms of his

criminal conviction back on Elioth, most of his earnings went to the Eliothian government to pay off his legal fees and to finance, among other things, the continued presence of Zafnir. Most people thought the alien was his agent, but he was also his guard, escort, warden, and if necessary, executioner. Elijah caught himself rubbing the spot on his upper arm where the subcutaneous tracking device and bomb had been implanted.

It was so unfair. Unfair that Captain Marko Rasputin, his former employer, had fired him on the flimsiest of excuses. Unfair that they had stranded him on Elioth, the biggest bureaucratic nightmare in known space. Unfair that an Eliothian cop had arrested him for loitering. Unfair that the Eliothian prosecutor had also charged him with operating a remote control without a license. Unfair that the sentence for those petty crimes resulted in a form of indentured servitude which, thanks to the endless maze of rules, fees, interest charges, and catch-22, would last a lifetime. Unfair that when he thought he’d found an escape clause by landing a job with an off-world entertainment company portraying the children’s educational character, the Safety Weasel, it had just become incorporated into the original sentence.

Thank goodness they’d never realized that he’d been using that remote to try to murder Captain Rasputin!

Elijah’s musings were interrupted by the sounds of a commotion down the hall, which culminated in a distinct scream. He jumped to his feet, but Zafnir was far quicker. “I will see what the trouble is, El-jah,” he said.

The door flew open before Zafnir reached it. The assistant director, a nervous pronghorn, stood in the doorway, a look of utter terror in his eyes. “Dead!” he exclaimed. “Doctor Cordial is dead!”

Elijah blinked.

Zafnir’s head fins fell. “You are, perhaps, speaking metaphorically?”

The pronghorn shook his head. “Heart attack, or maybe stroke.” He covered his face with his hands. “Right at his make-up table!”

Elijah sank back into his chair and began unfastening the torso of his costume. “Well, so

much for the broadcast....”

The pronghorn gasped. “What are you doing?” He glanced at his wristcomp. “You go on in eight minutes!”

Elijah spun his chair around and gaped. “How can we go on?” he asked. “The star of the show just dropped dead!”

Zafnir looked at Elijah as if he had lost his mind. “Oh, El-jah, you know that the show must go on!”

Elijah shook his head. “But it can’t! Millions of obnoxious little urchins are expecting Doctor Cordial! *The Doctor Cordial*. You can’t just put some understudy out there in those ridiculous gold glasses and that antique suit and expect them to sit still for it!”

The assistant director opened his mouth as if to explain, but was shoved aside by the show’s producer, a grizzled puma wearing an ill-fitting suit who went by the name of Donald Hinze. “You’re needed on stage now!”

“How can we go on—?” Elijah began.

“Five hundred million pay-per-view pre-orders!” Hinze snapped. “Not to mention a studio full of kids out there right now! Get into the suit!”

“You can’t expect me to improvise a show without the star!” Elijah protested.

“Of course not,” Hinze said. “We’re loading up the contingency script into the teleprompters right now.”

“Contingency script?”

Hinze nodded. “We all knew the geezer couldn’t last forever,” he explained. “There was a nasty scare about 18 years ago when his artificial heart conked out during a commercial break. My predecessor had a bunch of scripts drawn up for episodes we could do without him.”

“But it’s his show,” Elijah pointed out. “Everything revolves around him!”

“Of course it does,” Hinze agreed. “That’s why we open with you, Missus Neighborly, Nurse Holly, and the Delivery Boy talking about why Doctor Cordial’s house is empty, with a mysterious note about him going on a special mission tacked to the door. Then most of the special is all about the mystery of the mission.”

“Special mission?”

Hinze nodded. “Don’t worry, it’s all in the script. After the opening scene, we’ll go into that skit you rehearsed with Felix Fixer about avoiding hazards while decorating. Then you’ll do the From the Mailbag skit instead of Doctor Cordial, because he’s still gone on the special mission. There’s a Missus Neighborly in the garden bit after that, which will reveal a few clues about the special mission. We’ve got the musical numbers with that tiger boy band. You and Nurse Holly will handle the intro and the outro for that. There’s another skit with you and all of the regulars finding some more clues. You’ll lead the sing-a-long—”

Elijah shook his head emphatically. “I don’t sing. And I know that’s in my contract!”

“Trumped by the Unforeseen Circumstances Clause,” Zafnir murmured.



Elijah growled and glared at Zafnir.

Hinze continued as if neither had spoken, “—and finally, in the fireside scene, Doctor Cordial will make his appearance.”

“You’re going to wheel the corpse out on a gurney?” Elijah asked.

“Of course not! It’s a holographic message beamed directly from Father Christmas’s workshop,” Hinze said. “We pre-recorded a bunch of these messages. One for each of the contingency scripts.”

“This is insane,” Elijah grumbled.

Three stage technicians and another assistant director had arrived. “You’re not in your suit yet?!” the director exclaimed.

Before Elijah could answer, the techs swarmed into the room. Two began checking the electronics of his exoskeleton, while the third shoved the costume head into place. The next thing he knew, Elijah had been hustled out onto the stage, his heads-up display had flickered into life, and the other actors were taking their positions.

The nasal voice sounded in his earpiece, “One minute to curtain.”

Ghostly green letters scrolled past his eyes: “Scene 1: A dark stage. Cue theme music. Lights come up slowly. Nurse Holly addresses Safety Weasel....”

“There’s no way this is going to work,” Elijah muttered. “We are so frakked!”

His earpiece crackled. “Don’t talk to yourself!” the director’s voice snapped. “Your mic is going to be live most of the time! And watch your language. The last thing we need is another petition campaign from the Concerned Parents League.”

“I got your petition right here,” Elijah muttered.

“I’m serious,” the director retorted. “If you get them breathing down my neck, I’ll make sure you never work any show anywhere ever again!”

Elijah started to tell him where he could shove his threat, but then realization dawned. That was it! It was a live, planet-wide broadcast. The highest-rated children’s show in known space. If he screwed this up just right, he’d be fired. Sure, he’d have to go back to Elioth and start over, earning diligence

points toward his eventual release, but no more screaming kids. Heck, they’d probably remove the bomb from under his skin. This was perfect!

Aloud, he said. “Right. Just stage jitters, I’ll be fine.” He grinned. “Just fine.”

When the first notes of Doctor Cordial’s theme song sounded, the kids in the audience erupted into ecstatic screams, which became thunderous applause as the announcer’s voice boomed, “Welcome to Kindly Doctor Cordial’s Christmas Special, brought to you by ChocoSoy! ChocoSoy, the drink that nourishes and satisfies! Tonight, Kindly Doctor Cordial welcomes special guests: singing sensation N’Stripe; everyone’s favorite hazard-preventer, the Safety Weasel; and the Sugar Plum Dancers!”

When the lights came up, the audience’s excitement subsided only slightly. As the opening dialogue revealed that Doctor Cordial wasn’t going to appear right away, there was a collective sigh of disappointment, but the ecstatic screams returned as the first skit got underway.

As much as Elijah hated being stuffed inside the suit, he had to admit it was a bit of an ego-boost every time an audience applauded his arrival. He might be only the second-most popular children’s show host on this planet, but second-most popular was nothing to sneeze at!

The first skit was standard Safety Weasel fare. While Felix Fixer was hanging Christmas lights on the roof, his ladder, not being correctly secured, would fall, but Felix would be rescued by the Safety Weasel, who would then demonstrate the proper way to secure a ladder. He and Felix would go on to explain potential hazards of plugging in electronics, operating agrav-equipped decorations, and the proper handling of custom holographic lasers.

As Felix climbed the ladder, delivering his corny monologue, Elijah slipped onto the stage a bit early. Ignoring the frantic commands of the assistant director, Elijah mugged for the audience, making his way to the ladder. If he just nudged it, with the full power of his exoskeleton, the ladder would topple early. Felix would fall and probably yell a few choice expletives. Whether he did or not,

Elijah could say something equally inappropriate as Felix landed on him.

Felix stammered on one of his lines, probably trying to decide whether to improvise something since Elijah was on stage early.

Elijah bumped the ladder, as if by accident, and braced himself for impact.

Instead of the startled shout he was expecting, Elijah heard a snap and a thrum. He felt something tighten around his ankle, and he found himself flying across the stage, feet first.

He hadn't counted on getting tangled in the auto-line. It was a near-invisible cable that ran from the base of the ladder to a series of pulleys and a powerful electric winch. It was supposed to yank the ladder out from under Felix after Felix had gotten a grip on the hidden handholds built into the roof façade. The mechanism had been arranged to make the ladder perform a humorous and exaggerated tumble across the stage and back.

Elijah was dragged across the stage, flung this way and that, then yanked up into the air, upside-down, and hurled back across the stage to crash into a prop tree.

He fell from the tree with a loud thud, though the sound was barely audible due to the raucous laughter from the audience. He shook his head and looked around. The costume head was mounted on an extension of the exoskeleton above his own head. It had cameras built into the eyes, whose images appeared on a pair of screens in front of Elijah's face. For a moment, both screens showed nothing but static. As the image came into focus, he saw Felix standing near the top of the ladder, which had never moved, gaping at him in disbelief.

"Buggering hell!" Elijah exclaimed. Well, at least he remembered to say something!

But his words didn't ring out of the house speakers. Instead, Felix's voice called out, "Golly, Safety Weasel, what happened?"

"I was nearly killed by that ruttin' cable is what happened!" Elijah snapped back.

No sound came out of the speakers.

Felix looked toward the audience. "Oh, no! The Safety Weasel must have had the wind knocked out of him!"

The words of the contingency script had suddenly vanished, replaced by lines apparently being rapidly typed by someone backstage. "Felix speaks," it said. "Nurse Holly! Nurse Holly come quick!"

Felix delivered his lines faithfully, hurrying down the ladder. The actress who played Nurse Holly rushed out onto the stage carrying an enormous white doctor's bag with the words "First Aid" written in large, friendly red letters. As Felix and Nurse Holly hurried to his side, Elijah felt several of the joints of the exoskeleton twitch as if of their own accord. There were several small electrical flashes inside the suit, accompanied by several tiny but painful shocks. As the scent of his own fur burning filled the suit, he exclaimed, "Get me out of this frakkin' thing before I die!"

There was a loud *zorch* sound from the main control unit strapped to his back, and a voice exclaimed from the speakers. It was his own voice, a recording, probably from one of the rehearsals. "In a medical emergency, inspect the situation and assess the territory!"

"Right!" Nurse Holly replied.

The recorded voice of Kindly Doctor Cordial chimed in, "Don't be afraid to ask for help!"

"What the—?" Elijah murmured.

Nurse Holly and Felix exchanged a look, but played along. "If possible," Nurse Holly recited, "ask the injured person what happened."

"Can he or she speak?" Felix asked. "If not, this indicates a more serious injury!"

Elijah just blinked dumbly as new words flew across his screen. Had he struck his head so hard, he was hallucinating?

When a line of dialogue for him appeared, he expected another snippet of pre-recorded nonsense to come out of the speakers. Nothing did. Nurse Holly repeated her line. Felix nudged Elijah. Elijah's line on the screen blinked. "Uh," he said, and now the words could be heard throughout the theatre. "I'm fine. Just a little tumble. But we should make certain none of the electrical wires have been damaged or exposed!"

Elijah climbed gingerly to his feet, surprised that the exoskeleton didn't electrocute him in the



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process. As the script directed, he pointed to the half-finished strings of lights. "Approach with caution. If you can't see the whole line, don't touch it!"

"This part is hanging down," Felix said, moving to a dangling tangle of lights and wires.

"No!" Elijah exclaimed. "First, find the source and disconnect the power!"

Elijah moved stage right, where a previously obscured, cartoonish circuit box was suddenly bathed in light. "Never touch a live wire, if you want to stay alive!" Elijah exclaimed. Then he added, "You bloody ignorant rug rats!"

He felt another series of electrical shocks from various parts of the suit. His arms and legs flailed wildly as stage flames and exaggerated sound effects erupted from the prop circuit box. As the ringing in his ears subsided, Elijah realized that somehow, while his first line had broadcast clearly from the speakers, his insulting follow-up had not.

"What the—?" he asked again, feeling another shock before he could finish the phrase. It was as if the suit and the sound system had a mind of their own, carefully censoring anything inappropriate for the delicate ears of the little monsters.

The rest of the hastily re-written skit went off without a hitch. Elijah tried to duck off-stage to flag down a technician, but the stage ninjas steered him out in front of the descending curtain. A spotlight hit him just as the Delivery Boy rode his agrav skateboard from the other side of the stage, a large bag clearly marked "Mail" slung over one shoulder.

The Delivery Boy executed a perfect loop-the-loop midair and landed beside Elijah. "Gee, Mr. Weasel, who's going to answer all of Doctor Cordial's mail?"

"Try forwarding them to the afterlife," Elijah retorted, except once again his words didn't come out of the speakers. Instead, while the suit was delivering yet another series of painful electrical shocks, a recording from the rehearsal of a now-abandoned skit called out, "We'll just have to give it a try!"

The Delivery Boy pulled a flimsy out of the bag and read off a question from one of Doctor

Cordial's many fans. Elijah, resigned, read off the dialogue as it appeared on his screen. "I bet if Doctor Cordial were here, he'd say..."

As long as he stuck to the script, everything went fine. Any time Elijah inserted an insult, cuss word, or other unscripted comment, he'd receive a painful shock and his mic would go dead. Sometimes a bit of dialogue from one of the rehearsals would play. Other times, the audience would hear nothing, and the Delivery Boy would have to repeat his question.

Elijah was now convinced that someone backstage had hacked his suit. It was the only logical explanation. He didn't know how they always managed to cut off his microphone just before he said a bad word. Maybe there was some sort of delay in the system; a properly sophisticated artificial intelligence could divert the signal in milliseconds when key words or phrases appeared.

It was probably Hinze, the producer, Elijah decided. Only he would be cruel and heartless enough to punish him repeatedly with electrical shocks.

So, grudgingly, Elijah delivered his lines with exaggerated cheerfulness. He added Hinze, and any technicians who were helping, to that very long list he kept in the back of his mind. The one he called, simply, "You'll get yours."

He exited the stage at the end of the mailbag segment, and tried to flag down the medic who was always supposed to be on standby. If he could claim a medical emergency, maybe he could escape the suit and the rest of the show before the sadistic hacker inflicted any more pain.

But the nasal voice of the stage manager crackled in his earpiece. "The skit has been changed, Mr. Weasel. Turn around and walk back on stage in three, two, one—"

"How many times do I have to tell you, you imbecile!" Elijah growled. "It's Mr. North! My name is Elijah North!"

The stage ninjas propelled him back on stage, where Missus Neighborly and Felix were looking over some mysterious hoofprints and sleigh marks in the garden.

Elijah stayed on script throughout the garden

skit, the introduction of the boy band, including the chit chat with some selected audience members in between the songs. Everything proceeded as well as could be expected until the chat-up before the sing-along segment. More fans selected from the audience were on stage, and each got a few moments to share their holiday wishes. Since they all seemed to be hoping for a cure for some obscure disease, that a grandparent would come home from the hospital, or a parent come home safe from the war, Elijah knew they had all been very carefully screened.

So he was caught off guard when an adolescent otter leaned over and whispered, "I know you're a fake!"

"What?" Elijah asked.

The otter kicked him in the shin. "I've been to Bring the Real Safety Weasel Back dot Com," he growled. "I've seen Cecily's video. I believe!"

"Listen, kid," Elijah murmured, "you're old enough to know—" but the suit delivered a series of painful jolts again.

The kid continued, "I don't know how you tricked Dr. Cordial, but we're watching you!"

Elijah was saved from further argument by Missus Neighborly, who grabbed his arm and steered him toward the center of the stage, "And now, while we trim the tree, the Safety Weasel will lead us all in singing Kindly Doctor Cordial's favorite carols!"

Holographic lyrics were projected into the air, complete with a bouncing snowflake to help kids with the rhythm, as the music began playing. In the middle of the second song, one of the hovering ornaments, which depicted a full manger scene (complete with little bleating sheep) and was a bit larger than a breadbox, flew erratically out of the tree and started bouncing against Elijah's head.

Elijah stepped to the side, trying to stick to the script while avoiding the rogue decoration. He could see stage ninjas and technicians moving around just offstage, trying to swing a boom over to capture the ornament. When that failed, someone else tried to use one of the hovering vid cameras to intercept it.

The music played manically on, half

the children singing, the other half giggling uncontrollably as the hovering ornament eluded every effort to capture it.

Besides the indignity of being in the center of a dogfight between a hovering camera and a flying manger, the suit was more frequently shocking him. And the voltage of the shocks seemed to be increasing. And now they came whether he uttered a bad word or just tried to sing the lyrics.

As they reached the end of a song, the ornament suddenly zipped toward the back of the stage, executing a tight turn around the enormous Christmas tree. Whoever was operating the camera wasn't quite as skilled, because the camera got trapped in the tree's branches. Then the manger flew full speed toward Elijah, striking him smack in the center of his back. The force of impact sent him stumbling, and it cracked some of the control system. A much more powerful jolt of electricity surged through his body. The suit filled with smoke.

As he tried to catch his balance, his hand collided with the boom, which had been swung low to try once more to intercept the manger. The servos in his glove whined loudly, grabbing the boom with vise-like force. Elijah heard several bones in his fingers break, as the exoskeleton hand locked into place.

Elijah was yanked into the air, as the boom was pulled back into the rafters. He screamed, and it didn't matter whether the microphone was still live or not, all the children in the audience were squealing along with him. The smoke stung his eyes and filled his lungs. As he was twisted around by wildly swinging cables, the boom, and the agrav unit of the manger, he caught a glimpse of the children on the stage. All but one were looking up at him with wide eyes.

The otter kid was busy fiddling with his wristcomp.

"Of course, you little bast—" Elijah began.

Suddenly the stage was bathed in a heavenly light. Tubular bells pealed out in repeating arpeggios. An enormous holographic image of an elderly badger, wearing gold bifocals, appeared above the stage. "Hello, children," the dulcet tones of Kindly Doctor Cordial said.

The applause and screams of delight were like a shock wave, shoving Elijah, dangling in the suit, toward the back of the stage, where he collided with a catwalk. There were more sparks, and several flames, inside the suit, and a very strange tingling sensation in his upper arm. It took Elijah only a heartbeat to realize that it was the subcutaneous tracker, suddenly vibrating. After a second it stopped. He breathed a sigh of relief, but it started vibrating again. This time it vibrated for a slightly shorter duration, before stopping again. And then repeated, for yet a shorter duration.

“Oh, god,” Elijah breathed. “It’s some kind of countdown!” It couldn’t be that Zafnir had activated it. Zafnir had been quite insistent that any living

thing within 50 meters (or maybe miles, Zafnir had been uncertain) would be in danger if the device was activated. Zafnir was mad as a barrel of space weevils, but there was no way he would endanger all those children.

“Shorted out!” Elijah exclaimed. “Somehow the electrical malfunctions have set it off. I’m going to die!”

He swung back and forth over the stage. His words weren’t going through the speakers, but surely some of the people below could hear him without amplification. Couldn’t they?

The audience had all its attention focused on the holographic image of Doctor Cordial, which had apparently been explaining his secret mission



to Father Christmas's workshop, and was now delivering an appropriately saccharine message of hope, love, and acceptance to his devoted followers.

"...And in this season of light," his voice explained, "we must remember that all of us, no matter our religion or creed, are children of this universe. We are meant to share its bounty with all our neighbors. Each of us must do our part to spread peace throughout all worlds, goodwill to all beings, and embrace the principles of kindness and forgiveness. Remember, the kindly never hold grudges. No matter how badly someone has wronged us, we must cling to the hope that they will change. Everyone makes mistakes, but if we learn from our mistakes, and embrace our neighbors as our friends, we can all look forward to a future filled with love."

The flames inside Elijah's suit were growing. The countdown vibrations of the implant were getting faster and more insistent. "I don't want to die!" Elijah exclaimed.

Doctor Cordial's hologram flickered, changing colors slightly, as if another recording had been added. "Remember, just saying 'I'm sorry' is not the same as asking forgiveness. To do that, we must admit we behaved badly and promise to do better."

"I'll promise anything, just please save me!" Elijah screamed.

This time, his words came through the speakers. He swung out over the audience, and all the children were looking up in a mix of fear and awe.

"Everyone deserves a second chance," Doctor Cordial said. The recording glitched again, and as Elijah swung back over the stage, Doctor Cordial finished, "A smile costs us nothing, but it enriches everyone. Happy Holidays, children."

Doctor Cordial's kindly smile was the last thing Elijah saw before the explosion.

As Elijah regained consciousness, he could hear the unmistakable beeps of medical equipment along with quietly murmuring voices. The air had that universal hospital antiseptic smell.

The beeping of one of the machines changed slightly, and a voice said, "I think he's awake."

Zafnir's voice said, "At last. I should break the

news to him."

Elijah tried to move, but he seemed to be bound tight in an all-body cast. When he tried to open his eyes, only the left one responded, and his field of vision was surrounded by gauze.

Zafnir's reptilian face came into view.

"Oh, El-jah, we were so worried!" he said.

"So was I," Elijah croaked. It hurt to move his tongue.

"Don't exert yourself," Zafnir said. "You're lucky to be alive. All of the doctors have said so."

"Lucky?" Elijah asked. As sensation came back to him, every nerve ending seemed to be reporting agony. He wasn't lucky, he thought. He was cursed!

"But you will be happy to know no one else was hurt when the exoskeleton's power pack exploded," Zafnir explained. "And the doctors say you will be back on your feet and able to lead a full life once you adjust to the prosthetics."

"Prosthetics!" Elijah gasped. He was seized with a coughing fit.

"I know it is all a bit of a shock," Zafnir said. "But the good news is—"

Elijah interrupted. "Please tell me they've arrested the hacker and charged him with reckless endangerment."

Zafnir blinked, and his head fins flagged. "The boy who pulled the prank with the ornament?" he asked. "He's been going to counseling, and I understand he is already making great progress. You know how impulsive adolescent mammals are! He has learned his lesson. And, I understand he is going to start a new fan club in your honor."

Elijah tried to shake his head, but he couldn't move. "No, I mean whoever it was that hacked the exoskeleton. You know, they kept turning off my microphone whenever I messed up a line! And they made it shock me when I screwed up. You can't tell me that was legal."

Zafnir's fins were completely flat. "I don't know what you mean, El-jah. The suit was extensively examined and investigated by two different agencies. There is no sign of tampering. The suit was damaged during the first skit and it just kept getting worse."

"They just haven't looked closely or long

enough,” Elijah growled.

“The occupational safety lab spent nearly two months going over every part—”

“Months!” Elijah gasped. “How long have I been unconscious?!”

Zafnir held up his hands in a gesture which he probably thought was calming. And it might have been, if Eliothians didn’t have such long, deadly talons. “I’m sorry, El-jah, they told me to break that to you gently. It took two months to grow your new lungs alone!”

“Lungs!” Elijah spat.

Zafnir continued. “They said that the physical trauma would be too much, so they induced a coma for 94 days. You heal so much more quickly that way.”

“Ninety-four days?”

Zafnir shrugged, and decided to change the subject. “There was one thing they couldn’t figure out. How did you broadcast those pre-recorded sound fragments?”

“What? I didn’t broadcast anything, that was the hacker!”

Zafnir shook his head emphatically. “No, sometimes instead of speaking lines, you uploaded sound files. The records on the routers are all clear. It came from the exoskeleton’s onboard computing systems. We could understand how you had recordings from rehearsals, but no one knows where the extra holo-scene from Doctor Cordial came from. They’ve been scouring all his old shows and no one can find it.”

“That was Hinze,” Elijah said. “He said they’d pre-recorded a message.”

Zafnir nodded. “Most of the message was from that scene. But there was an extra bit. About forgiveness and second chances. That wasn’t part of the script.”

Elijah closed his eye and groaned. “Haunted. The senile old coot had to get in one last word, didn’t he?”

Zafnir said. “I don’t think I understand the



simile, El-jah. But when they loaded you in the ambulance, you kept repeating over and over that you thought the suit was haunted.” He cocked his head to one side, thoughtfully. “That is why one of the experts who examined the suit went to such lengths looking for evidence of tampering. He said it did seem almost as if the neural net had been possessed.”

Elijah groaned, but said nothing.

“But you distracted me from telling you the good news, El-jah,” Zafnir said. “This year’s special has become the highest rated Doctor Cordial episode ever. It was immediately picked up by networks in a dozen nearby star systems, and scores more have contracted to broadcast it next year! The ChocoSoy people are so pleased, that they asked to buy out your contract. They’ve purchased the entire Safety Weasel Production Company. You’re going to co-star in a new series. Filming won’t start until you’re fully recovered, but pre-production is well underway.”

“Co-star?” Elijah asked.

“With Doctor Cordial. Or at least his hologram,” he said. “There are so many thousands of hours of video of him over the years, we’ll hardly ever have to resort to computer-generated imagery.”

“Co-star?” Elijah repeated.

“The salary is extremely generous, though your medical bills will eat into that for the first few years.”

“Years?” Elijah gasped.

“The terms were so generous,” Zafnir explained. “And the number of affiliate networks throughout known space that have signed him means a much wider audience than ever before. Knowing how show business is in your blood, and how deeply you care about the integrity of the Safety Weasel brand, I had to sign the contract. Even though it means ten more years before we can return to Elioth.”

Elijah couldn’t speak. He also couldn’t properly sob. A strangling noise and snuffle was all he could manage.

“Oh, don’t cry, El-jah,” Zafnir said. “If you get all sentimental, I’ll lose my composure, too.” Tears had appeared in the corners of the alien’s eyes. “I knew you would be pleased! As the saying goes—”

Elijah found his voice, and managed to croak out, “The show must go on?”

Zafnir’s fins perked back up. “I was going to say, ‘The world is a stage,’” he explained. “But as always, El-jah, you knew just what to say.”

The  End

*A Safety Weasel Christmas
was brought to you by*

ChocoSoy

the Drink that Nourishes and Satisfies!



The Safety Weasel will return...