

# Up the Alimentary Canal with Camera and Ray Gun



Artist, Visionary-Art and Universe, Ionel Talpazan

What do you want me to look at, Doctor Shankar?"

"Well, uh, Doctor Lee, it's—it's some very unusual colonoscopy results I got this morning and I wanted the Head of Gastro to—to take a look at the results."

"OK," Dr. Lee said, sitting at the monitor, "fire away." He noticed that Dr. Shankar, usually a very even-tempered individual, looked pretty shaken.

Dr. Shankar opened the file and started clicking through the images.

"As you can see," Dr. Shankar said, "it was all very uneventful, strictly routine for a patient getting their first scope due to age. No symptoms at all. No problem with the anus, the rectum, sigmoid, descending—and then we get to the transverse..." Dr. Shankar's voice trailed off.

"What??" Dr. Lee said softly.

"I know," Dr. Shankar said.

"How is that possible?" Dr. Lee mumbled.

"It's not," Dr. Shankar said, "but there it was."

"How—I don't get it," Dr. Lee said.

"I took biopsies, and we looked at it every way to Sunday," Dr. Shankar said. "Put it through every test I could think of. Nothing—no cancer, no pathology, no disease or problem of any kind that we can detect."

"What—what did you tell the patient?" Dr. Lee asked.

"Just that we took some biopsies and the examination was fine and then we called with the biopsy results—absolutely normal."

Dr. Lee leaned back in the chair and said, "Well—what do you want to do?"

"I'd like to do a yearly scope and keep in close touch with this patient about any symptoms; what do you think?" Dr. Shankar said.

"Yeah, I agree with your approach," Dr. Lee said. "We could

also send the biopsies to some other labs and see if they find anything.”

“We might as well, but I’d be surprised if they found anything at all—the tissue is textbook perfect,” Dr. Shankar said.

“Well, not textbook perfect,” Dr. Lee said, staring at the monitor. “That’s not in any textbook. No way.”

“Right,” Dr. Shankar said. “It’s just—I don’t know what it is.”

“Well,” Dr. Lee said, getting up, “we’ll keep a close eye on the patient.”

\*\*\*

The circular entry hatch dematerialized briefly, admitting Tkanthix into the palatial office, then rematerialized in soft pulses behind him. He was humming to himself as he grabbed a handful of quivering blood candies from the platinum jar on the coffee-table and sidled up to the reception desk.

“Those candies are meant to be enjoyed one at a time,” the secretary said, not looking up from her floating screen.

“Oh, be a little nice to me today Vixaneh,” Tkanthix said. “I’ve got enough trouble as it is.”

“That’s Vixaneh Grammatea to you, young man,” she said.

Tkanthix sighed and said, “I suppose uncle Xentarus called me in for a dressing-down?”

“I imagine so,” she said, shrugging.

“He’s getting touchier as he ages,” Tkanthix said.

“Maybe,” Vixaneh said, “if you worked on your attitude, you might get along a bit better with your Uncle Xentarus. Just a suggestion.”

“Subcommander Xentarus, if you please,” Tkanthix said, turning on what he thought was the charm.

Vixaneh’s lips got thin and tight (and they were very thin as it was).

“Thank you for the reminder,” she said. “And if you don’t stop staring at my oculars, I will punch you right in the face.”

“Right. Right. Sorry,” Tkanthix said, and wandered off to look at the images on the wall—Uncle Xentarus’ diplomas from the Institute of Advanced Military Science, campaign commendations, and rows of his decorations, certificates, ribbons.

There was a wavering warble and Vixaneh Grammatea said, “The Subcommander will see you.”

The entry port to the inner office flicked open, and Tkanthix walked inside.

“Dear Uncle! How are you?” Tkanthix said, turning on the charm again. It was about as effective with his uncle as it had been with Vixaneh.

“Don’t come traipsing in here, pretending everything’s dandy,” his uncle growled.

“Good heavens, uncle,” Tkanthix said, his pearl-black oculars wide and innocent. “What have I done?”

Xentarus looked at Tkanthix, slowly shaking his oblong head. Then, he took a long drink from the cut-glass tumbler of ammonia he kept on his desk.

“You know very well what you did,” Xentarus growled. “You violated every guideline and ethical protocol of your job!”

“What a lovely piece of glassware,” Tkanthix said. “I don’t recall seeing it in your office before? It must have been

recently liberated. And from an Earthling with very good taste—Baccarat, I’m guessing?”

“You know,” Xentarus said, “the humans have a word for someone like you.”

“No need to be vulgar, Uncle,” Tkanthix said.

“And take off that stupid tie,” Xentarus said.

“But it’s very nice—it’s an Eton tie,” Tkanthix said.

“You’ve never even been to Eton!” Xentarus shouted.

“Au contraire, Uncle!” Tkanthix said. “I abducted a Classics Master from Eton once; my first solo probing, in fact.”

“You’re not exactly Bertie Wooster, you know,” Xentarus said.

“I like the cut of his jib,” Tkanthix said, smiling.

Xentarus’ silver lids narrowed. “You really know how to push your luck, don’t you?” he snarled. “Let’s get back to why you’re here.”

“I know I did a baddie,” Tkanthix said, trying (and failing) to look contrite. “But Uncle, my job is *such* a bore. Probe, probe, probe. By the by,” Tkanthix said, leaning conspiratorially close to his Uncle, “you wouldn’t happen to have any idea of the kind of perfume Vixaneh Grammatea favors, would you?”

Xentarus rolled his oculars and muttered, “How my brother ended up with a son like you—”

“Well, he did,” Tkanthix said smugly, “and he happens to be Proconsul and he got you your job, just as much as he got me mine.”

Xentarus said, “Why, you little—”

“—Watch it,” Tkanthix said, smiling.

The room was silent except for the grinding of Xentarus’ plates, like slate against slate. Then he got control of himself and said quietly, “Let’s get back to the issue at hand, shall we?”

“Certainly, Uncle,” Tkanthix said.

“What you did,” Xentarus said quietly, “was irresponsible. And cruel. It’s sick. Makes my exoderm crawl. And it puts our contract agreements with the Supreme Assembly at risk, do you understand? We have a protocol, explicit ethical guidelines, and we follow them to the letter. We are engaged in peer-reviewed scientific research, we’re not monsters.”

“Try telling that to the Earthlings,” Tkanthix said, looking at his perfectly-manicured rhodium fingernails.

“Why would you do such a thing, is what I can’t understand,” Xentarus sighed.

“I don’t know why I did it myself,” Tkanthix said. “I just can’t stand dealing with humans anymore, I suppose.”

“We all start out on probe duty!” Xentarus said. “It’s like boot camp.”

“I’m bored beyond endurance,” Tkanthix sighed. “Do you have any idea of the workload? I can’t begin to count the number of human rectums I’ve seen—and if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen ‘em all. And humans are so—excitable. I mean, the kicking, biting, scratching, the whining and sobbing, the struggling to get off the table as we’re giving them telepathic anesthesia. And the the smell! Like fermenting bacteria. Well, because they are, I suppose.”

Xentarus said, “What am I going to do with you?”

“Well,” Tkanthix said, “you could assign me to the study group

on interplanetary reproductive habits and customs.”

“There is no study group like that!” Xentarus said.

“I could start one,” Tkanthix said with a silly grin.

Xentarus took a big slug of ammonia and was silent for a long time. Then he yanked open a desk drawer, rummaged around, and pulled out an impressive piece of ornamented parchment. He laid it on his desk and started writing on it, slowly and carefully.

“This,” Xentarus said, “is an official Order of Advancement. I am promoting you to the Central Procurement Division, the CPD, on the homeworld.”

“Procurement?” Tkanthix said. “I rather like the sound of that.”

“I thought you would,” Xentarus said. “All vehicles, fuel, food, and ammonia-based beverages are overseen and distributed by this division, including all specialty goods earmarked for the military—clothing, shoes, cosmetics, gourmet items. The CPD also handles all the grooming parlors and stores on our bases, VIP accommodations and travel vouchers. Not to mention the management of all military bars, clubs, restaurants, recreation centers, and entertainment.”

Tkanthix’ mouth gaped and his oculars were as wide as the vast reaches of outer space.

“I’m sure an enterprising young man like yourself will find it a very congenial assignment,” Xentarus said, with a crooked kind of smile.

“Uncle! You’re absolutely the best,” Tkanthix said. “How can I ever repay you?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Xentarus said, leaning back into his plush chair, tumbler of ammonia in hand. “I’ll think of something.”

Be sure to contact me when you've settled into your new office."

"Will do!" Tkanthix said, getting up and practically skipping toward the port. "Think I'll go have a chin-wag with your secretary. She's awfully nice. Heigh-ho, Uncle!"

\*\*\*

It was late at night and Dr. Shankar sat at the monitor with a tumbler of whiskey in his hand. He took a big swig, put the glass down, and looked at the colonoscopy images again.

He scrolled through until he got to the pictures of the transverse colon.

And there, on the lumen, in perfectly clear shimmering iridescent letters, were the words: "Take Me To Your Leader."