

The Town Drunk

Presents

Dinner Made Willing

Vylar Kaftan

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Hi, and welcome to Sessumian Consensual Chef, the cooking show for spiritual purists! I'm your host, Safassi, and this is my lovely assistant, Suratha. We'll show you the best in Sessumian cuisine—and as always, we guarantee that our recipes are chemical-free. No biting. No fighting. No hypno-enzymes injected into the prey what-so-ev-er—and that's a promise.

We've got a great line-up for you today: fresh lyth'an beetles, still crunchy in their shells. Just like Dad used to grub—and more! Plus the ever-popular Vermalian worm, freshly persuaded to be eaten, and—at the end of the show—a surprise. But first, beetles!

Lyth'an beetles are comfort food, folks—the kind of thing you eat when you're incapacitated by molting, or your lifemate just dumped you for your mother. Look at them wiggling on the plate. These aren't your mother's beetles, frightened to near-carrion foulness. These are fresh beetles, hunted just last night and carefully de-shelled so they survive the process. We don't recommend trying that at home; you can find pre-shelled beetles at your local gourmet hexpod.

Suratha, bring those beetles closer to the scanners, please—thank you, seedpocket. Here you can see their natural purplish color. Note the red undertones, indicating that they fed on high-protein dung before joining us for dinner. We've glazed them with yark butter and chingroot choppings to bring out their natural meaty flavor. Yark butter shares a few enzymes with your father's digestive tract, so it's a perfect accompaniment for these favorites of spawnlings everywhere. But the best thing about these beetles—they're always natural, no matter who prepares them. No chemical enhancements are required to kill them. Not a single hypno-enzyme needs to be injected into their brains. Frankly, folks, they're too stupid to bite into submission!

Now we'll send out their flavor to you. Be careful to turn down the sensory volume on your receptor; otherwise, the warm smell of lyth'an beetles might send you into spasms of ecstasy! Oh, yes. The telecom's smelling off the hook. Caller from Zreebush: Yes, yes, I quite agree—it reminds me of my father's innards, too. Just like being home for the holidays. Caller from Saariss: Oh, I smell you on that! Absolutely—oh, of course, you can have a complete transcript. Suratha will take care of you after the show. Leave the scent of your waste products and she'll call you right back.

And now, folks, for the ever-popular Vermalian worm! Suratha, bring out the dish of worms, please—thank you, cluppa-cakes. Now folks, don't be alarmed by the lack of a mesh grid over the dish. These worms may be mildly sentient and generally inclined toward freedom, but look! They're staying in the dish. Smell how fat and content they are? Look at that one on the right, nestled into the pommera leaf as if it were a blanket.

Does he know he'll be eaten, you ask? Of course! He's eager. Willing. And that's what we'll demonstrate today: the power of religion. See, Vermalian worms have just enough sentience to understand that they're pretty darn low on the food chain. They know they're small and helpless, and the best thing to do is hide. Life is suffering, and their only hope is to be born as something better next time or hope for an afterlife. In other words, they're perfect candidates for a monotheistic religion—with a cruel deity. That would be me, folks. Or it could be you, in your very own kitchen! I shall communicate with the worm through simple chemical means. Note that these are aerated chemicals only, nothing that will enter the worm's brain and alter its chemistry. That's not the consensual way, folks. Remember: No biting. No fighting. But smell this:

Hello, little worm. How are you doing today? What's that? Oh, you wish to flatten yourself before me and grovel to be selected? Very well. I shall choose you. Oh! Look at how he's plumped up with joy, folks! Do you smell the willingness emanating from his succulent white flesh? A miracle! And how was it accomplished?

Simple. We've been conditioning these worms for weeks. We started with simple painful methods—mild electric shocks, nothing chemical of course. We trained these worms to be afraid of the unknown world. We zapped them when they tried to escape the dish until they stopped trying. You can replicate the effect with a simple gluft-frier, or your loose electric connection if you prefer. Then, I trained them to believe that I was the deity who fed them. I dangled slupweed over their heads, yanking it away when they reached for it. I fed only a select few and let the others die. Eventually they learned to compete with each other and honor their deity. And now look! This worm is presenting himself to me willingly. Do you smell the intensity of the competition? But more importantly, do you smell this worm? Magnificent! And it was done without a single bite; no chemicals whatsoever into the worm's brain. Just a little bit of marinade—kimpi sauce and a dash of sprigget. The worms rather like it.

Yes, little one—come here—mmm! So remarkable. Folks, if you haven't tried consensual, you simply must. The willing are so much tastier than the hypnotized. And consensual is less cruel, too—you can feel better knowing that you're contributing to galactic harmony and molecular karma.

And for our final feature today, we promised you a surprise! A rare and exotic creature, straight from Galaxy MN-13-F-3. We don't even have a name for this one, folks. We're calling these creatures the Holischit, after the first sound we ever heard them make. They live in a podlike metal structure, which they require for survival. At first we thought the Holischit were part of a hive-mind, traveling the galaxy to invade and conquer, but then they sent radio signals out and we determined they were individual creatures. A quick gastrospectral analysis proved the results: edible. But the Holischit are like nothing we've ever had before.

We started with two hundred. We put them in a caged dish, like we do for worms. Electric shocks killed a few before we realized these creatures can't handle a good charge. A few, sadly, had to be bitten because they were inspiring and organizing the others. I bit one myself. The hypno-enzyme altered its flavor—there's just something bitter about chemical consent—but it was still succulent, moist, and meaty. After eating the rebels, we trained the rest. Apparently, the Holischit aren't as hive-minded as the worms; they fought over food and killed each other to get it. Makes you wonder how they evolved on their own.

Anyway, here are our eight survivors. Note the natural color variations—pinkish to dark brown, and several shades between. It doesn't affect the flavor. I'll choose one at random here. Smell as I dangle this bit of grukfish over its—ssssth! No, not my front leg—oww! Quit it—stupid thing—watch out, Suratha my poundkettle—no, don't bite it, you'll ruin the—watch out, it's getting away! Look out for the—

Stssstharithissss... it hurts, it hurts all over. Oh, the burning! The whole pot of ketchill soup spilled on my body, folks. It stings. It throbs. I'm healing the burns right now, but—oh, the effort—Suratha, slitherbutt, go answer the telecom. The smell radiating from it is the strongest I've ever sniffed. Everyone's excited about something.

What? What's that? Suratha says you all love the smell of me basted in spicy soup. Yes, caller from Turbleblatt—radiant, you say? Like a black wilden fungus soaked in seeded yark milk? Well, thank you, but I—caller from Sarithikak, what's that? Subtle yet complex, unique and defiant? You make me sound quite special, really. Caller from Askizek—you want to *what*? With my—well! I never smelled such a...

Hmm. And why not, I suppose? As a greatly sentient creature, I am capable of more consent than the worms or the Holischit. I can be truly willing in a way these poor creatures cannot. Indeed, the idea intrigues me. Will you remember me like this? Will you gather in the Great Halls underground, molt your skins in my honor, and exchange the taste experience of having me inside your mouths? Can I enter the bodies of you, my listeners, and form your cells, your neurons, your sensory reactions?

Oh, let those stupid Holischit go. They look stringy anyway. In closing, this is your host Safassi, and I hope you'll serve me in a light kreeple sauce.

Vylar Kaftan writes science fiction, fantasy, horror, slipstream, and cleverly-phrased Post-It notes on the fridge. Her stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *ChiZine*, and *Clarkesworld*, among other places. She lives in northern California and has a standard-issue tie-dyed T-shirt to prove it. A graduate of Clarion West, she volunteers as a mentor for teenaged writers with the online group Absynthe Muse. Her hobbies include modern-day temple dancing and preparing for a major earthquake. She blogs at VylarKaftan.net.