

Gỏi Cuốn

When I stepped to the door, I could hear the air conditioning unit of the room whirring. It was one of the only AC units present on the ship, considering that most of us didn't need oxygen to live. I prepared myself for the rush of air to hit my joints and circuitry, cooling my internal processes. The door opened, and I saw Log Engineer Hoang Xuan Quỳnh sitting at their computer module, typing without regard for spelling errors. I noted around eight from what I could see, but they quickly stopped typing when hearing the door slide open. Perhaps if I focused on something else, the cold would not affect me as much as it had before.

"Carpal tunnel syndrome is common within humanoid workers, especially those working at computers, as often their wrists bend at an awkward angle," I explained, waiting for them to look at me.

When their eyes met mine, I bowed. They bowed back, and I stepped fully into the room. They sighed as I scanned over the messy bedroom. The only other living lifeform inside is flora native to Earth's atmosphere, specifically those central to Vietnam. I spy a lotus bursting from its pod. Soon enough, that lotus will be in bloom, and the mood around the ship will grow lighter as Quỳnh is reminded of their home.

"Kadek," they mumble. "I've told you multiple times that if I ever feel 'numbness, tingling or pain' that I would let you know."

"Specifically when referring to your hands?"

"Yes, specifically my hands."

Sometimes I fear that if we did not work together, Quỳnh would not take good care of themselves. Quỳnh also says I worry too much- that humans aren't as delicate as they seem. Perhaps they are correct, but I have yet to see full proof.

"What's got you so worried that you've come here?" Quỳnh asks.

"Worried? No, no. I just wished to see how you were doing. You seemed incredibly sad when told you had caught the common cold."

Quỳnh stood up to defend themselves, blankets wrapped tightly around their frame. They looked like a cocooned insect, and I stifled a laugh. A gentle sigh escaped Quỳnh's lips as the hairs on their arm bristled.

"I heard that, Command Engineer," they seethed.

"I apologize for my transgression, Quỳnh. It is just that you look so small and puffy."

I extended my hand, and they shook it.

"Being five foot seven is a perfectly normal height for humans to reach, thank you very much," they said, the pitch in their voice going higher as they try to defend themselves, standing up. I paused. According to my sensors, Quỳnh's height was approximately five foot five and one-fourth inches.

Quỳnh lets out a heaving, dry cough after standing and speaking. They begin to double over, but I grab them before they hit the ground. I pick them up quickly, the joints in my mechanical arms barely moving.

"Kadek?! Let me down!"

"You should rest. Your temperature is unusually high, and I can tell you are dehydrated."

“Just let me finish this last line of code, okay? Please, I need-”

I shake my head. “That is impossible.”

Quỳnh's eyes widen as I carry them to the bed and lay them down gently. Their arms wrap around my neck, and I hold them tightly. They didn't seem to mind it, instead holding me tighter in return.

“You can let go now, Quỳnh,” I told them as softly as I could manage. “It won't be long now. You will be with your family again.”

I readjust Quỳnh to leave them laying them down onto a comfortable pillow. Quỳnh has been missing their home and family much more often. It seems the further we get from them, the more distraught they are. Avry has been scanning every known human cooking database looking for Vietnamese food we can serve to them to help. So far, all he's found is something called Gỏi Cuốn. It translates directly to mean '*salad rolls*.' From what I remember Dmi telling me, a salad was any mixture of leafy greens and herbs. I've never had a salad before.

A sound like metal knocking into metal reverberates at their quarter's door. There are only a few possibilities, considering how many robotics were on the ship versus organics.

"What's that noise?" Quỳnh asks, pushing themselves off me to stand up once more.

Their health seems to fluctuate by the day. Some days they are cognizant even after taking the medication they require; other days, they are groggy and do not wish to converse with anyone.

The noise grows louder until the door opens, and there is a clanging sound of heavy footsteps pounding across the floor. I quickly scanned the ship's recent security footage to see what was entering the room.

03 Kitchen:

I watched as Avry sliced pieces of pork belly on his cutting board and mixed it with deveined shrimp pieces. He then took out thin rice noodles, turned on the stove, and cooked them. While the noodles were cooked, Avry grabbed green leaf lettuce, mint, and chives. I wondered how he had even found these ingredients, though I remember a log stating that the ship docked in a predominantly human colony while I slept. He washed the vegetables thoroughly before stopping to catch his breath. He then took rice paper and wrapped all the ingredients inside tightly before setting the spring rolls down on a plate and taking out a bowl of peanut sauce. He then took the plate and headed out of the kitchen.

13 Hallway:

Avry walked towards Quỳnh's quarters, plate in hand, and knocked on the door.

Avry was the one coming inside. I let out a sigh of relief.

“Avry has a gift for you,” I explain.

“Are you ready to be dazzled?!” Avry exclaimed, a smile on his face.

“Dazzle me, Robo-boy.” Quỳnh rolled their eyes.

Avry silently stalks across the quarter's floor, bowing his head and then presenting the plate and bowl to Quỳnh. Metallic chopsticks lay over the bowl. A tense silence fell over the room as

Quỳnh stared at the meal before them. I shifted, going to sit beside them and take a closer look at the spring rolls. As I sat, I noticed silent tears falling from Quỳnh's face. Avry and I jumped to comfort them, putting a hand on each shoulder.

"Hoang? I'm sorry- did I prepare the dish wrong?" Avry asked, and I saw their eyes glaze over as they scanned for any mistakes they could have made- but I had been watching them work the entire time and counted no errors.

Quỳnh shook their head, tears continuing to fall. They wiped their eyes with shaking hands as we both hugged them.

"This is amazing, Avry. Thank you both for coming up with this idea. I've.. Thank you both." They wrapped their arms around us, pulling us closer.

"No need to thank us, Hoang. We just wanted to give our friend a taste of home," Avry said as he stood awkwardly in their hug.

"Your recent case of Influenza has all of us extremely worried." Quỳnh pulled away from us both and began to cough into their sleeve. "We think the virus is affecting your immune system. If the virus spreads through your lungs..." Avry trailed off.

"For the love of all the stars, Avry, I'm not going to die. This is an extremely common cold back where I'm from," Quỳnh rolled their eyes, laughing.

"But- Death is also very easily obtained."

I turn to Avry. "Do you remember when sand got into your circuitry, and we had to shoot with a hair dryer for two hours?"

"Oh... I see. It is more of an inconvenience than a deadly pathogen."

Quỳnh sat up, a teasing smirk on their face. "Ah, so you only wanted to make me spring rolls because you thought I was dying? Tsk tsk, Chef. What would Commander Gabryel say?" If Avry could, I think he would be blushing right now.

"No I- I simply wanted to- I wasn't sure!" he exclaimed.

Both Quỳnh and I let out cackling laughs.

"So, what do you think? Is it good enough?" Avry asked, turning back to the plate.

"I think it is perfect, Avry," Quỳnh replied, though I could tell there was some hesitation.

Then, they picked up a roll and bit into it. A smile cracked across their face, tears welling up in their eyes all over again.

"I missed the taste of these stupid rolls..." they mumbled, shoveling them into their mouth and crunching happily. They left one, though.

I tilted my head. "You're full?"

"It's for you two to split!" they explained, grinning from ear to ear as they split it in half and handed each of us one.

I shrug and unhinge the skull's jaw protecting my circuitry, gulping it down. Avry has an easier time, considering he is a synthetic robot that looks like a human. He simply opens his mouth and begins to chew. Sometimes I can't help but be jealous of humanoid anatomy rather than my own

randomly compiled robotics. I shake the thought from my mind. I'm luckier than most, for certain.

"Avry! This is wonderful!" I exclaim.

I had been so caught up in my thoughts that I forgot to taste the spring roll, but I have no doubts that it was excellent. I imagine Commander Gabryel scanned all of the known universes to find the perfect cook for *Termite*.

"Thank you both. I tried my best with what I remember from watching humans cook," he explained, bowing his head as a soft smile parted his lips.

"Though eating is not a required form of survival for myself, I do find that I enjoy your cooking greatly. I wonder how different it is to experience it with a human perspective, though."

They both paused in thought. Quynh looked to the ground, face falling, while Avry seemed more focused on providing an answer.

"I think food simply brought humanity together, and in times now, humans seem to take so much for granted. I think that older humans especially can appreciate a good meal, though I have noted many young ones overjoyed to be able to experience 'alien' food types. Swift travel times and making lots of credit are easy these days, but a long time ago, these things would have been much harder to acquire." Avry said.

Quynh nodded. "When I was young, it was easy to pick up food that would fill me up and let me do my work, but I never appreciated homecooked meals. Now that I'm gone, I want nothing more than food cooked from scratch and to be around my family. I always laughed when the alarm went off because of the smoke of my brother cooking, but now when an alarm goes off all I can think of is how stressful it is to maintain the ship."

Humans are extremely complex. Even synthetic robots made to mimic humans are. Humanity has never once known itself truly, and they never accept defeat. I suppose if they had accepted defeat, humanity would never have made it to the furthest reaches of space. Often, human crew members are searched for like diamonds in coal piles. Humans can survive close to any environment, considering how their planet is ever-changing. They rarely complain and always seem to want to help so adamantly. I remember when Quynh first joined the crew, how homesick they were but also how excited; ecstatic. It reminded me so much of Dmi I had to take a few moments to breathe.

The beauty and complexity of humanity will always entertain and delight me, without any doubt. I know almost everything there is to know about the species that are 'alien' to them and have met thousands across my travels in deep space. Each species and race is completely different, but something about humanity specifically encapsulates my every thought. Perhaps it is because I was created by a human, and they left me so quickly. Perhaps it is because I still search for them each day, finding bits of themselves in every person I meet.

Avry and Quỳnh had been chatting while I was distracted. The thing that snapped me out of it was Quỳnh's hand on my arm.

“Kadek? Is everything alright?” they asked.

“Everything is alright, don't worry. I am just.. Thinking. Of how lucky I am to have met you both and everyone in this crew.” I explained.

Tears came to Quỳnh's eyes for a second time. They are very emotional. I am admittedly jealous of how expressive they are. Their arms latched around me, and I felt the blanket's warmth and their fever.

Their fever.

“Quỳnh, you must rest now. Your temperature is spiking.” I said.

They let go, sighing and beginning to sulk. I rolled my eyes, forcing them (gently) to lay down and tucking them in tightly.

“I agree with Kadek. If you have any requests for other food, you can always contact me later, Quỳnh.” Avry said.

I paused. Quỳnh could simply ask me. Never mind, that was not what was important. Avry was offering their kindness to Quỳnh, and I remember when they used to despise each other. Quỳnh nodded to the chief cook, smiling as he stood up and left the dormitory.

I let out a low mechanical buzz, equivalent to what a human may consider humming. It helped clear my brain so I could best take care of them. I know we have a good medical officer, Kniqir, and I know they have done everything to make Quỳnh as comfortable as possible besides forcing them into a cryopod to sleep the sickness away.

“Thank you, Gấu,” Quỳnh whispers as their eyes close.

Gấu. I scanned through my language memory cards while simultaneously trying to remember if I had ever seen the word used by Quỳnh before. “You are calling me a bear?” I ask.

“It's a nickname for a.. friend, Kadek.”

“Oh. Should I call you a nickname?” I tilted my head.

“Do you know about any names specifically that you want to call me?”

“Fair point. Your first name, Quỳnh, means ‘night blooming flower.’ That is a rather long and wordy nickname, though. Xuan, your middle name, means spring. Perhaps I will call you

something relating to the season.”

“It’s strange how you know all of this off the top of your head.” Quỳnh retorted.

“I was input with the latest machinery and knowledge to date of almost every known species and sub-species. It’s not necessarily ‘off the top of my head.’”

Quỳnh nodded. “Well, still weird.”

“What if I called you *Đầu Gấu*?”

“You would call *me*, your closest friend, a bully?!” they exclaimed, shooting up from bed and groaning as they slowly laid back down.

“No, not bully! Rascal. You are tough and hot-headed.”

Quỳnh let out a wheezing laugh. “Fine, fine. Don’t tell anyone else about it, though. It’ll just be our nicknames.”

“I am fairly certain no one but us fully understands the Vietnamese language, but I will do as you ask.”

Gấu. As a term of endearment, *Gấu* stands for ‘teddy bear,’ not the bears commonly found in forests. I scanned for images of teddy bears. They looked... soft. Most of them smiled, paws outstretched for a hug. They even had a stubby tail. I looked down at myself. I was all mechanical parts, even with a few synthetic blue organs that allowed me to consume food. What about me reminded them of a cuddling teddy bear? Perhaps when we visited the planet *Cauaz*, and it was so cold I had to wear a furry jacket to protect myself from freezing? That was a few weeks ago, though. They only just started calling me this now...

Quỳnh rolled over, yawning loudly. “Goodnight, Kadek.”

“It is 1:26 AM human standard time, technically making it morning. Most humans prefer to sleep at night.”

“When a human is sick, any time is a good time to sleep.”

I shrugged and laughed. “Fair point.”

Silence enveloped us like muffled snow.

“Kadek?”

“Yes?” I said, turning towards them.

“You don’t sleep, right? Do you think... Do you think while I sleep you could stay with me? If you get bored, you can play on the holo, and I have another bunk if you wanted to lay down.” they said, words pouring out of their mouth almost fast enough to make my circuits fry.

“Of course I can watch over you, Quỳnh. I am worried deeply for your health, though I know you will survive this. No ship maintenance is scheduled for another two days, and unless something happens where I must work, I will stay. Also, I have never played holo games.”

“Really? Damn, Kadek, what do you do all day?”

“I read through every book I can in every language I can.”

Quỳnh laughed, rolling over to face me. “I have a question.”

“Proceed.”

“Did Avry come up with the idea of giving me Gỏi Cuốn, or did you?”

My shoulders tensed. Of course it was me, I wanted to say. Of course. If I were allowed in the kitchens, I would have made them for you myself. If I could, I would do anything to make your sickness disappear and remind you of the home you left behind.

“I do not recall who came up with the idea.” I respond.

Quỳnh nodded, shrugging and closing their eyes. “It was sweet.”

Sweet. A way to describe a kind action and a way to describe food. I was not sure which they intended, so I simply nodded. They quickly fell into sleep, deep breaths rising and falling. I stood carefully to avoid waking them up, walking over towards the almost-blooming lotus flower. I picked up a small watering can they used, pouring what water was left onto the plant. Its petals burst open so quickly that it surprised me.

I don't think that plant was truly from Earth. Its timing was rather strange.