

The Jacksons' Debate

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The Jacksons' Debate

Cover Page Footnote

Have you ever felt utterly, irrevocably insignificant? Like a particularly dull pebble on a beach teeming with infinitely more fascinating pebbles? We're not talking ironic pebbles here, or pebbles pondering their place in some grand cosmic design — those are far too busy being profound. No, we're talking about those regular, unremarkable pebbles completely oblivious to their own inherent pebbleness. That feeling, that quiet, unsettling sense of being thoroughly, utterly ordinary — that's a starting point for what we're about to delve into. Brace yourself. This isn't your standard tale of valiant humans facing the cosmos armed with laser pistols and wry witticisms. This...is something far stranger, far more introspective. The question isn't "What's out there?" But rather: "What happens when what's out there...is deciding what to do with what's in here?" Yes, you. Reading this. You're the "in here" part of the equation. And if you're expecting the kind of intergalactic encounter where the aliens show up and conveniently think, act, and break down complex moral dilemmas in a way easily digestible to the human palate... well, that's simply not on the menu. This book doesn't offer those comforts. Because the central uncomfortable truth is this: When it comes to interspecies relations — and by "interspecies" we really mean "everything that isn't human" — the monkeys don't get a say. The fish don't get a say. The pandas, the squirrels, the earthworms — they all exist in a world meticulously shaped and reshaped by human decisions, yet they have no voice in the matter. Their fates are sealed by the whims, values, and sometimes the sheer capriciousness of human discretion. Humans, with their remarkable ability to narrativize, create hierarchies of worthiness among non-human beings. Consider the pandas, with their adorable, black-and-white countenances. These creatures are often the poster children of conservation efforts, their cuteness a currency that buys them a stay of execution in a world where many species are not so fortunate. Yet, have you ever pondered how odd it might seem to the pandas themselves, if they were aware of the reasons behind their protected status? Would they find it curious, perhaps even unsettling, that their survival hinges on human perceptions of their aesthetic appeal? Now, contrast this with the plight of the fish. For centuries, humans have debated the sentience of fish, oscillating between seeing them as cold, unfeeling creatures and recognizing the subtle complexities of their behaviors. The fish, silently swimming through their watery realms, are entirely at the mercy of these debates, their worth and the moral considerations extended to them dictated solely by human discourse. This is the crux of the matter: the inherent imbalance in who gets to have a say. Humans construct narratives around their own understanding, telling themselves comforting stories where they're the protagonists, the heroes, even when the evidence suggests they're more akin to that one guy at the galactic house party who spills the cosmic dip on the sentient rug and then tries to play it cool. And now, consider if the roles were reversed. Imagine if another species, far more advanced, looked upon humanity with the same scrutinizing gaze. Imagine if they were the ones deciding whether humans were worthy of moral consideration, whether our quirks and complexities rendered us deserving of preservation or mere curiosities to be studied, commodified, or even consumed. This story yanks the rug right out from under you. The narrative you're about to engage with (or more accurately, be engaged by — remember, your vote's not exactly counting here) — takes as its starting point a radical shift in perspective. Or more precisely, the lack of it. You'll find no reassuring inner monologues from the "other." No attempts to soften the edges of a stark truth: sometimes beings, regardless of how evolved or morally enlightened they believe themselves to be, don't grant much thought at all to the "lesser" creatures under their metaphorical microscopes. The reader's role here is an unsettling one. You become acutely aware of your own inherent human-ness, yearning for a voice, a platform to explain, justify, narrativize. But this story denies you that comfort. You're left to wrestle with the profound discomfort of not knowing "why." Within these pages, the silence isn't just golden; it's deafening. The lack of readily available answers forces an unsettling kind of introspection. You become, in a sense, that pebble on the beach — observed, considered, acted upon — but never truly understood. And within that silence, a disturbing thought might just take root: What if that's the point of the story all along?

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The Ethical Dilemma of Human Meatballs

The grand hall of the Jacksons' Academy hummed with a low, pervasive frequency. It wasn't a sound that human ears could detect, but to the Jacksons, interconnected as they were through their intricate telepathic network, it was as palpable as the gentle pressure of their methane-rich atmosphere. Each thought, each observation, each subtle nuance of emotion, rippled across their collective consciousness, creating a symphony of data streams and analytical murmurs that filled the vast chamber.

At the center of the hall, a series of holographic displays flickered to life, bathing the assembled Jacksons in a cool, blue light. Graphs, charts, and anatomical diagrams shimmered in the air, their intricate details scrutinized by hundreds of multifaceted eyes. The air itself seemed to crackle with a subtle electrostatic charge, a testament to the intense mental energy that permeated the room.

The year was 2031. The Jacksons, masters of logic and efficiency, architects of a society that prided itself on harmony and sustainability, found themselves facing a dilemma that defied easy categorization. It wasn't a planetary crisis, a technological malfunction, or even a particularly perplexing mathematical theorem. It was a question of...diet.

The source of this dietary quandary? Humans.

The very notion of consuming these strange, seemingly illogical creatures from a nearby planet had sparked a wave of debate that rippled through Jacksonsonville's telepathic network, unsettling the usually calm waters of their collective consciousness.

The origin of this unsettling culinary proposition could be traced back to the meticulously organized lab of Marvin Jackson, Jacksonsonville's most esteemed nutritionist. Marvin, a Jackson known for his relentless pursuit of efficiency and his unwavering faith in data-driven solutions, had spent countless rotations studying the intricacies of Jacksonian metabolism. His pioneering work in bio-engineered fungi cultivation had, for a time, solved their previous dietary crisis, leading to the creation of Fungihsonville, the orbital station that housed their carefully curated ecosystem of edible fungi.

But even the most meticulously planned systems are susceptible to unforeseen variables.

The Jacksons, for all their advanced technology and interstellar wisdom, had a rather...unfortunate Achilles' heel. Their digestive systems, while capable of processing a bewildering array of organic compounds, were notoriously sensitive to unfamiliar bacteria. This presented a rather significant obstacle when it came to exploring new culinary horizons.

Direct contact with sentient species, even for the purpose of a friendly inquiry about the potential palatability of their flesh, was strictly forbidden by the Non-Interference Agreement, a cornerstone of Jacksonian ethics. This left them with a rather limited menu of options when it came to diversifying their diet. Procuring biological samples from deceased individuals for scientific research, however, was deemed perfectly acceptable.

Marvin, ever the pragmatist, saw an opportunity within these ethical constraints. When reports of a subtle but persistent decline in Jacksonian health began circulating through the network, he immediately initiated a new research project. He requisitioned tissue samples from a variety

of deceased organisms, carefully cataloguing their nutritional content and analyzing their compatibility with Jacksonian physiology.

His lab, a model of efficiency and sterility, hummed with the low thrum of advanced analytical equipment. Holographic displays flickered with genetic sequences, molecular diagrams, and complex equations. Marvin, his brow furrowed in concentration, scrutinized the data streams, his three-fingered hands manipulating the controls with a practised ease.

It was during one of these late-night analysis sessions that Marvin stumbled upon a data point that would send ripples of both curiosity and unease through the Jacksonian network.

The subject of his current scrutiny wasn't a particularly exotic species of algae or a newly discovered strain of subterranean fungi, but a rather...unremarkable organism from a planet designated as Earth.

Marvin, his multifaceted eyes gleaming with a newfound intensity, activated a telepathic connection to the planetary network. "Colleagues," he announced, his voice a calm, steady frequency that resonated in the minds of every Jackson on Jacksonsonville, "I believe I've found a solution to our nutritional dilemma."

"It all began quite innocently, you see," Marvin had explained in a public broadcast. "We'd been analyzing the composition of various deceased organisms, strictly for research purposes, of course. Nothing untoward, purely a matter of due diligence before introducing any new food source to our delicate ecosystem."

"My latest analysis," he announced, "focused on a rather...unremarkable species from a planet designated as Earth. They call themselves 'humans'."

A holographic image of a human, meticulously rendered from Marvin's scans, materialized above the central console in his lab. The Jacksons across the planet observed with detached curiosity. The human, with its soft, fleshy exterior and its rather inefficient bipedal locomotion, didn't appear particularly threatening or noteworthy.

But as Marvin delved deeper into the data, a startling pattern emerged, a series of correlations that defied their initial expectations.

"The humans," he'd announced, his normally calm telepathic voice tinged with a flicker of excitement, "possess a remarkably high concentration of a particular protein that appears to have a synergistic effect with our existing dietary regime. In simpler terms, my colleagues, they're a nutritional wonder."

Within nanorotations, Marvin's announcement had circulated throughout the Jacksonian network, triggering a surge of data requests and analytical inquiries. Holographic displays across the planet flickered with cross-referenced data streams, population statistics, and projections of potential nutritional benefits.

Adhering to the Jacksons' strict ethical guidelines, Marvin's team conducted the initial trials using a limited supply of ethically procured human tissue. They developed a prototype food product—a spherical, protein-rich composite, meticulously calibrated for optimal Jacksonian digestion. The trials involved a controlled group of volunteer subjects, with comprehensive monitoring of their physiological responses, energy levels, and cognitive function. Preliminary

analyses of the data exceeded expectations, indicating a 97.8% compatibility rate with existing metabolic pathways.

Further analysis of the trial data revealed an unexpected benefit: the human-derived meatball exhibited a 99.2% digestibility rate, even among Jacksonian subjects with a history of gastrointestinal sensitivity.

Marvin, encouraged by the positive trial results and the network's evident interest, began to formulate a comprehensive plan. He envisioned a system of controlled cultivation, meticulously designed to maximize the nutritional benefits of human-derived meatballs while adhering to the Jacksons' strict ethical guidelines.

He projected a detailed proposal onto the network, his holographic diagrams and data streams illuminating countless screens across Jacksonsonville. "Colleagues," he addressed the assembly, his telepathic voice resonating with calm confidence, "Imagine a future where our energy levels are consistently optimal, where digestive discomfort is a distant memory, where our physical vitality matches our intellectual prowess. The solution, I believe, lies in the sustainable and ethically sound utilization of human-derived nutrients."

This proposition, however, did not trigger a wave of universal approval. Subtle ripples of unease and dissent began to emerge within the network, a counterpoint to the prevailing current of pragmatic acceptance.

Grag Jackson, his brow furrowed as he reviewed the data streams pulsing through the network, felt a growing sense of unease. The proposed solution, while logically sound and seemingly efficient, triggered a cascade of warning signals within his meticulously organized mind.

Grag, a researcher renowned for his cautious nature and his unwavering adherence to the Precautionary Principle, had devoted his long lifespan to the study of other species. He'd meticulously documented countless examples of sentient life across the galaxy, each with its own unique evolutionary trajectory, its own complex set of behaviors, its own balance between instinct and consciousness.

The humans, however, presented a series of anomalies that defied Grag's attempts at categorization. His long-range observations, meticulously documented over countless rotations, revealed a species seemingly driven by self-destructive impulses. They constructed sprawling cities that choked their atmosphere with noxious fumes, engaged in violent conflicts over abstract ideologies, and exhibited an insatiable hunger for material possessions that offered no discernible evolutionary advantage. Their actions, when analyzed through the lens of Jacksonian logic, were a paradox, a chaotic equation with no apparent solution.

Grag acknowledged the patterns, the meticulously documented evidence of their self-destructive behavior. He knew that the sum of their knowledge, while impressive, was dwarfed by the vast expanse of the unknown. Their understanding of the universe, of life itself, was a perpetually evolving, each new discovery revealing threads they had yet to imagine. Grag, for all his years of research, recognized the inherent limitations of their methods.

Was it possible, he wondered, that their current understanding of sentience was simply inadequate when applied to such a perplexing species? Could their methods of observation and analysis, so effective for categorizing other life forms, be missing a crucial dimension of the

human experience? To base such a momentous decision solely on their current, admittedly limited, understanding felt...reckless.

“Marvin, my esteemed colleague,” Grag had countered in a public broadcast, his thoughts pulsing with a soft amber light of concern, “while I admire your ingenuity, I believe we must proceed with caution. The humans, for all their flaws, may possess a level of sentience that we have yet to fully comprehend. To consume them without a thorough understanding of their nature would be a grave ethical transgression, a stain on our collective conscience.”

Grag’s cautionary note resonated through the network, triggering a cascade of analytical inquiries and counter-arguments. Holographic displays flickered with data streams, philosophical treatises, and historical precedents, as the Jacksons engaged in a planet-wide debate. Could sentience be definitively measured? Was it a function of logical processing power, the ability to communicate complex ideas, or something more elusive, something that defied their current understanding?

The Jacksons, for all their mastery of science and technology, had yet to fully unravel the enigma of consciousness. They could deconstruct the building blocks of matter, manipulate the flow of energy, and chart the course of celestial bodies with impeccable precision. But the origin and nature of consciousness remained a persistent mystery.

The debate raged on, splitting the Jacksonian community into factions. The pragmatists, led by Marvin, argued for expediency. The humans were a resource, plain and simple, a solution to a pressing problem. The precautionary principle advocates, spearheaded by Grag, urged caution. They demanded a deeper understanding of human nature before making a decision that could have irreversible consequences.

Caught in the crossfire of this ethical storm were the children of Jacksonsonville. The Jacksons, unlike humans, did not reproduce through biological means. They were a product of advanced bio-engineering, their consciousness nurtured in specialized incubation chambers. The process was meticulous, ensuring that each new generation inherited the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of their predecessors.

However, this process was also energy-intensive, requiring a steady supply of nutrients to fuel the incubation chambers and to sustain the developing consciousnesses. The Jacksons’ traditional diet, based primarily on a species of highly intelligent fungi, had served them well for centuries. But the recent discovery of the fungi’s potential sentience, coupled with the gradual decline in the Jacksons’ physical capabilities, had forced them to seek alternative sources of nourishment.

Marvin’s initial research was conducted with the utmost respect for the Non-Interference Agreement, he had relied on ethically acquired human remains. But the promising results of his meatball trials had sparked a new line of inquiry. The reliance on deceased individuals, he realized, presented a logistical bottleneck. Decomposition, while a fascinating natural process, was hardly conducive to the efficient, large-scale production of high-quality foodstuffs.

The solution, as Marvin saw it, was a simple matter of optimization. Why wait for nature’s inefficient decomposition process when they possessed the technology to cultivate human tissue directly? Why rely on the limited supply of ethically acquired remains when a vast, self-replenishing source was readily available just a few light-years away? The question, posed to

the Jacksonian network with a detached, almost clinical curiosity, was this: Could their ethical framework, so carefully crafted to guide their interactions with other species, accommodate such a...pragmatic approach?

The Jacksons Institute of Childcare, became a battleground for this ethical war. Some caregivers, convinced by Marvin's arguments, embraced the human meatball solution with pragmatic zeal. They saw it as a necessary sacrifice, a means to an end, a way to ensure the well-being of their own children, even if it meant the demise of another species.

Others, swayed by Grag's concerns, resisted this new dietary regime with a fierce protectiveness. They argued that the Jacksons, as a species that valued compassion and wisdom, could not in good conscience condone the consumption of sentient beings. They pointed to the children's increasing telepathic sensitivity, their growing awareness of the interconnectedness of all life, as evidence that the Jacksons were evolving beyond the need for such a morally questionable solution.

The debate, conducted entirely through the silent hum of their interconnected network, continued to simmer. The Jacksons observed earth more keenly, with a detached curiosity, their collective mind struggling to reconcile the humans' chaotic and often contradictory actions with their own understanding of logic, efficiency, and evolutionary principles.

Krook Jackson, the president of the Academy, had been observing the unfolding debate rather dully. From his office atop the Academy's central spire, he had access to every data stream, every whispered argument, every flicker of uncertainty within the network. He found the whole situation rather...tiresome. The Jacksons, for all their intellectual prowess, had a tendency to overthink even the simplest of matters.

"Well, now then," Krooks drawled in a public address, "aren't we in a right pickle? Seems like our esteemed colleagues are having a bit of a moral meltdown over a bunch of...well, let's just say they're not exactly the sharpest tools in the cosmic shed, are they? Running about in circles, covering themselves in bits of brightly colored fabric, shouting at each other about things that don't even exist. Honestly, it's enough to make you wonder if they've got a loose wire or two up there, in that...what do they call it? Ah yes, the 'brain'."

Krook paused, allowing his sarcasm to hang in the air. He found it rather ironic, the Jacksons agonizing over the ethics of consuming a species that seemed hell-bent on consuming itself. But, of course, as president of the Academy, he had to maintain a certain level of decorum, at least publicly. Privately, however, he couldn't resist a little telepathic chuckle at the sheer absurdity of it all.

"Now, don't get me wrong, colleagues," he continued, his voice dripping with faux-sincerity, "I'm all for ethical considerations. We wouldn't want to be accused of being...well, you know...gastronomically challenged, would we? But let's not lose sight of the bigger picture, shall we? Our resources are dwindling. Our young ones are getting a bit... fragile, shall we say? And here we have this... abundant supply of... nutrients, just ripe for the taking. Seems like a perfectly logical solution to me. But then again, what do I know? I'm just a humble chairman, shackled to this administrative post, burdened with the tedious task of guiding you lot towards enlightenment."

Krook's address, broadcast across the network with a calculated blend of logic and subtle persuasion, shifted the tide of the debate. The anxieties of those who had expressed concern about the ethical implications of consuming humans were quickly overshadowed by a wave of pragmatic acceptance. The data, after all, was compelling.

Marvin, emboldened by the collective shift towards acceptance, expanded his research efforts. He established a dedicated team of geneticists, bio-engineers, and nutritionists, tasked with optimizing the cultivation process and developing a range of human-derived food products that would meet the diverse dietary needs of the Jacksonian population. The results, meticulously documented and disseminated across the network, only reinforced the practicality of his solution.

On Earth, billions of humans went about their lives, oblivious to the fact that their very existence was being debated by a committee of highly evolved aliens with a fondness for data analysis and a rather unsettling approach to dietary planning. Their routines, their conflicts, their triumphs and tragedies—all meticulously documented, analyzed, and categorized by the Jacksons. Some humans, those who happened to be particularly high in protein or possessed a desirable omega-3 fatty acid profile, might have felt a slight chill, a cosmic shiver down their spines. But for the most part, they remained blissfully unaware, continuing to play out the messy, illogical symphony of their existence, blissfully ignorant of the fact that their fate hung in the balance.

The Scales of Sentience

By 2033, the rather dull murmur surrounding the human meatball debate acquired a certain urgency. Something peculiar was happening to the children. Not a malfunction, precisely, but an *enhancement*. Those youngsters weaned on the ethically procured human composite displayed an uncanny knack for sensing emotions in other species – a handy, if entirely unexpected, boost to their telepathic acuity. Marvin Jackson, the architect of the meatball initiative, naturally pored over this data with professional pride, mixed perhaps with a flicker of self-congratulation. The initial nutritional dilemma seemed quaint now; this was something far more... interesting.

"Human protein," Marvin announced with cautious triumph across the Jacksonian network, "has a demonstrable effect on our telepathic abilities." The mechanism remained elusive, the long-term implications unknown, but the effect was undeniable. Jacksonsonville, never shy of a new trend, dove into a state of heightened excitement (and, for the more cautious, telepathic indigestion). Entrepreneurs seized the moment; frozen human meatball packs vanished from bio-markets. Self-proclaimed gurus, robes shimmering with the promise of enlightenment (and profit), offered workshops on maximizing one's connection to the "human essence."

Enter Brew Jackson, a young academic already known for flamboyant theories blending astrophysics and spirituality. He saw the phenomenon not as a complication, but as confirmation. "My fellow Jacksons," Brew projected, pacing his holographic stage like a nebula in motion, "we stand at the precipice of a profound discovery! The human essence... holds a key to unlocking deeper levels of our own telepathic potential... a catalyst, a portal! By consuming this...unique form of nourishment, we will embrace the potential to synchronizing into the universal flow!" Some embraced Brew's fervor; others clung stubbornly

to traditional values, muttering about ethics. The universe, in its infinite capacity for awkwardness, had served up a choice: embrace the mental boost or confront the unsettling fact your favorite snack might be having an existential crisis.

Naturally, Grag Jackson, ever the champion of caution, felt unease. He broadcasted somber reminders of the Precautionary Principle, that guiding star woven into their very fabric, urging prudence when facing uncertainty. Holograms flickered – Jacksonian history, ethical guidelines. "We have not yet definitively determined if humans are sentient," Grag stressed, his thoughts amber with concern. "To act without certainty... would be a grave violation..." Patience, research, restraint – his pleas rippled through the network, a calming wave that did little to quell the underlying hunger for a solution.

Brew, in response, crafted a characteristically spirited, yet academic, counter-argument. "Grag, my esteemed colleague, always the voice of reason and prudence," Brew's holographic image projected into countless living spaces, showcasing him in a meditative pose within a perfectly manicured bioluminescent garden. "But are we, perhaps, being a tad...overly cautious in this particular instance? A touch too generous with our application of the principle? After all, haven't we stumbled upon something remarkable here? Science has illuminated a path—the human essence offers tangible enhancement to our abilities!"

"Now, I do wholeheartedly agree that respecting sentience is paramount," Brew continued, leaning forward slightly, his eyes twinkling with a mischievous glint, "But what constitutes sentience? And are we, perhaps, being a tad inconsistent with our application of this principle? On one hand, we're agonizing over consuming *humans*, a species that, while undeniably perplexing, demonstrates a certain...disregard for the well-being of their planet and, quite frankly, for each other. And on the *other* hand, we have no qualms about harvesting our dear, delicious fungi for sustenance. And let's not even mention the poor algae, cheerfully bubbling away in their vats, contributing so selflessly to our dietary regime!."

He paused for a beat, letting his words resonate. "Now, don't misunderstand me, I'm not advocating for rampant, thoughtless consumption," he said with a playful wave of his three-fingered tentacle. "I propose, my dear colleagues, that we establish a scale of sentience. A nuanced system that takes into account a species' actions, their impact on the universe, their demonstrable capacity for empathy and interconnectedness."

He conjured a holographic representation of a vertical scale, with "Algae" at the bottom, "Fungi" somewhere in the middle, and "Jacksons," of course, proudly perched at the top. "We've already seen through observation that human behaviour leaves much to be desired, ethically and environmentally. Where do *they* belong on this scale? What separates them from our delectable fungi? From the algae that sustains us? Why, in light of this extraordinary discovery, must we cling to the status quo? Is it not our duty to embrace progress, to allow science to illuminate the path toward a healthier and more vibrant Jacksonian society?"

Brew chuckled, a good-natured ripple of amusement coursing through the network. "Grag, my ever-so-wise colleague, has rightly emphasized the importance of the Precautionary Principle. Let's not rush to any conclusions. Instead, let's ponder upon this Sentience Scale. Let's use our collective intellect, our shared knowledge, to determine the most ethical course of action."

"After all," he continued, his tone shifting to one of thoughtful inquiry, "as Marvin has pointed out, we still don't fully understand *why* human protein has such a profound effect on our young

ones. The evidence is undeniable, but the underlying mechanisms remain elusive. My research, going forward, will delve deeper into these questions. Let's analyze the curious data, study these perplexing humans with Jacksonian diligence, and let our findings, not our assumptions, guide us towards a solution that upholds our values and ensures the well-being of all—be it Jackson, fungi, or yes, even these wonderfully weird humans.”

Brew and Jax Chew the Fat

On the lush, bioluminescent grounds of Jacksonsonville University, Brew Jackson and Jax Jackson sat beneath a shimmering canopy of genetically engineered starlight orchids, their conversation meandering through the cosmos of outlandish ideas. Brew, radiating a vibrant, almost kinetic aura, and Jax, his thoughts pulsing with a quiet intensity, discussed the peculiarities of human behavior.

Brew, waving his hands expressively, launched into an offbeat analogy. “Jax, consider this—humans wear those tight, restrictive neckties, right? Now, what if these ties are actually subconscious antennas to the universe, trying to tune into cosmic frequencies, but they got it all wrong!”

Jax chuckled, his brow furrowed in playful thought. “And what if their obsession with footwear is actually an unconscious attempt to ground themselves to Earth's energy fields? They're constantly changing shoes, trying to find the right ‘frequency’.”

Brew, energized by the trajectory of their thoughts, added, “Yes, and every new fashion trend is like a new attempt at a ritual to harmonize with the planet! But they've forgotten the meaning, and now it's just a bizarre dance of fabric and color.”

Jax, leaning forward with intrigue, tied it to their earlier discussion about human sustainability. “Imagine if their fashion cycles are a reflection of Earth's own environmental cycles,” he mused, “like they're mimicking the seasons or the migration patterns of birds, but in a completely abstracted, human way.”

Brew nodded enthusiastically. “Exactly! And this whole cycle of buying and discarding clothes could be an unconscious mimicry of Earth's renewal processes—like shedding leaves or regrowing forests, but in a twisted, humanized form.”

Jax, his eyes twinkling with amusement, ventured further, “So, in a way, they're trying to connect with their planet but end up doing the exact opposite! It's like a cosmic joke they're not in on.”

A gentle chime echoed in Brew's mind, momentarily interrupting his train of thought. “Ah, apologies, Jax,” Brew chuckled, “that'll be my hydration reminder. Seems I'm due for a methane top-up.”

He gestured towards a nearby kiosk, a sleek, bioluminescent dome pulsating with a soft, green glow. “Care to join me? I hear they've got a new batch of fermented algae extract. Surprisingly palatable, if you can get past the initial sulfurous bouquet.”

Jax grinned. “Can't resist a good sulfurous bouquet. Lead the way.”

The two Jacksons made their way towards the kiosk, their conversation punctuated by the gentle clicks and whirs of passing transport pods and the soft, melodic hum of the city's energy

grid. As they sipped their algae extract, Brew's thoughts drifted back to the paradox of human behavior.

"You know, Jax," Brew mused, his gaze drawn to the swirling patterns of bioluminescent algae in his drink, "what if it's not just about fashion or habits? What if humans are actually controlled by some sort of cosmic artificial intelligence, and all this incoherence is just a bug in the system?"

Jax rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "A cosmic AI, huh? That explains a lot. Like why people are obsessed with capturing every moment on their phones. Maybe they're programmed to *document* life, not live it."

Brew's eyes lit up with fervor as he pondered Jax's remark. "Imagine, a cosmic AI, subtly guiding humanity's evolution, but somewhere along the line, there's a glitch. All these irrational behaviors, their fashion, their obsessions with technology, are symptoms of this malfunction."

Jax nodded, intrigued by the direction of their conversation. "It's as if humans are trapped in a loop, continuously repeating patterns that no longer serve a purpose, yet they can't break free. It's like watching a program running amok, devoid of its original intent."

Brew, always keen on exploring spiritual realms, speculated further. "What if this AI was initially programmed to help humans achieve a higher state of consciousness, to connect more deeply with their planet? But now, it's lost control, and humans are spiraling into chaos."

Jax leaned back, absorbing the enormity of the hypothesis. "That would mean their entire civilization is a grand experiment, a test of whether a species can overcome its programming and find its way back to cosmic harmony."

The conversation then shifted back to the ethical dilemma surrounding the consumption of human meatballs. Brew, with a contemplative expression, said, "This cosmic AI hypothesis, if true, brings a new perspective to our ethical debate. Are we consuming beings that are essentially lost in a cosmic error? Does that make our actions more justifiable, or does it compel us to show even greater empathy?"

Jax pondered for a moment before responding. "If humans are indeed victims of a cosmic glitch, it adds a layer of complexity to our moral responsibility. Perhaps our role isn't just about dietary choices but also about aiding a species that's inadvertently strayed from its evolutionary path."

Brew, his eyes reflecting a mix of revelation and resolution, responded firmly, "If humans are merely the byproducts of a cosmic AI's programming gone awry, they're akin to robots, mere puppets of a higher system. Their so-called consciousness might just be an advanced level of programming, not genuine sentience."

He continued, his tone shifting to one of lighthearted observation, "Think about it, Jax. Humans put themselves in large metal boxes, rush around at high speeds, and then complain about not having enough time. They create complex gadgets to save time, only to waste it staring at smaller glowing screens."

Jax, laughing, joined in. "And their obsession with capturing images of their meals! They don't just eat; they need to document the eating process, as if the meal's existence depends on its digital footprint."

Brew, shaking his head in amusement, added, "Contrast that with the zoopards. Now, *there's* a species that knows how to live. They bask in the sun, they play in the fields, and when they eat, it's a straightforward affair. No gadgets, no rush, just living in the moment."

Jax, still chuckling, said, "The zoopards have an uncomplicated wisdom. They understand their place in the ecosystem. They don't build unsustainable structures or create needless waste. They live in perfect harmony with their environment."

Brew, adopting a mock-serious tone, continued, "And let's not forget their communication. No need for complex languages or misinterpretations. A simple series of chirps and tail wags, and they understand each other perfectly."

Jax, nodding in agreement, added, "Yes, and they don't wear restrictive clothing or follow bizarre trends. Their fur changes with the seasons, naturally adapting to their needs. It's the epitome of practicality and elegance."

As the iridescent glow of the starlight orchids shifted from emerald to sapphire, signaling the approaching dawn, Brew and Jax finished their fermented algae extract, the sulfurous aftertaste lingering like a philosophical afterthought.

"It's fascinating, Jax," Brew said, his voice tinged with a renewed sense of wonder. "No matter how we try to rationalize it, human behavior remains a labyrinth of illogical actions. They engage in practices that seemingly serve no purpose or benefit to their well-being."

Jax, equally perplexed, added, "Indeed, Brew. Their actions often contradict their self-interest. Take their environmental policies, for instance. Despite clear evidence of harm, they continue behaviors that damage their own planet."

Brew, leaning in, his brow furrowed with a mix of concern and curiosity, said, "And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Their social structures, filled with contradictions and inefficiencies, are a maze of confusion. It's as if they're following a script that's devoid of any coherent narrative."

Jax, with a thoughtful nod, replied, "This puzzling nature of human behavior strengthens our argument for choosing human meatballs over fungi. Our fungi are a harmonious part of our ecosystem, while humans disrupt their own. In a strange way, our consumption of human meatballs is a lesser ethical dilemma compared to the potential disruption of our ecological balance."

Brew, contemplating the precautionary principle, added, "That's true, Jax. Our choice, though unconventional, is made with careful consideration of the impacts. We're treading a path guided by caution and a respect for life, constantly reevaluating our decisions as we gain more understanding."

Jax, acknowledging their limited understanding, said, "Exactly. Our decision to consume human meatballs isn't a dismissal of human life but an acknowledgment of our current understanding of their nature. We stay vigilant and open to new information that could change our perspective."

Brew, with a sense of duty, concluded, "Our journey as a species is one of exploration and moral questioning. We must navigate these ethical waters with care, respecting the complex tapestry of life in the cosmos, even when it defies our understanding."

As the night gave way to the first light of dawn, Brew and Jax ended their dialogue with a renewed sense of their ethical responsibilities. Their conversation, a blend of curiosity and philosophical inquiry, echoed the Jacksons' commitment to exploring the unknown while maintaining a deep respect for all forms of life, no matter how enigmatic or incomprehensible they might appear.

The Robes of Judgment

These swirling debates, speculations, and pragmatic analyses finally coalesced into Marvin Jackson's formal proposition to the ultimate arbiter: the Krooks Committee. He submitted, with a heavy yet hopeful heart, the Human Harvest Programme. It was meticulously crafted, addressing nutritional needs while upholding the "highest standards" of ethical conduct. The details were laid bare: Acquisition via imperceptible teleportation (targeting 2.5 million individuals whose absence would cause least disruption), Assimilation Facilities mimicking Earth (complete with a diet of earthlings, roots, and insects), and the sensitive Ethical Termination process (deep unconsciousness, painless cessation, ethical oversight). Followed, of course, by efficient Utilization – converting biological materials into beneficial products, maximizing utility, honouring the "sacrifice." This, Marvin urged, set a precedent for advanced civilizations resolving complex survival challenges with "compassion and foresight."

The grand hall buzzed with palpable tension. The Krooks Committee gathered. Chair Krooks Jackson, multifaceted eyes surveying the diverse assembly, stood at the podium. "Ladies, gentlemen, and everyone in between," he drawled, "it is I, Krooks Jackson, your humble chair at this council of kinship and calamity." He spoke of oscillating between amusement and despair, recoiling at the "absurd theatrics of greed masquerading as grief," acknowledging the gravity beneath the bickering. "The stakes," he reminded them, "are the very soul of the human lineage, if there may lie a soul in any sense you might consider."

He pointed out the ludicrousness of their internal conflicts while the universe spun on. He noted the presence of fervent dreamers like Grag, whose quests for meaning were perhaps a luxury, and the necessity driving dissent. "As Jacksons, we straddle the fine line between tradition and evolution... Our morals are the battlegrounds for our very identity." The robes they wore, symbols of empathy and morals, were heavy tonight, laden with the weight of this decision concerning Jacksons, fungi, *and* humans.

Refusing to dictate terms, Krooks proposed a plebiscite. "Let there be a vote, clear and unequivocal... Reflect, then, on what you truly seek... Is it wealth? Is it justice? Or is it perhaps something as simple yet elusive as inner peace?" He presented the three paths laid out in Marvin's proposal:

1. Initiate the Human Harvesting Programme. Commodification for Jacksonian necessity.
2. Maintain the Status Quo. Inaction, risking stagnation.
3. Prohibit Human Commodification. Uphold sanctity, face the consequences.

The gathered Jacksons, beings with lifespans stretching over centuries, recipients of millennia of ethical pondering, shifted in their seats. One could almost hear the whirring of ancient mental gears calculating self-interest versus philosophical principle, a process that, to an outside observer, might seem glacially slow given the potential immediacy of the human fate hanging in the balance. Krook, perhaps sharing this thought, cut through the ponderous silence.

"The choice is yours," Krooks announced. "Reflect... Is it wealth? Is it justice? Or is it... inner peace?" The assembled Jacksons, ancient beings accustomed to measured deliberation, considered the paths. Their collective minds, honed over centuries, weighed logic against principle, necessity against ethics – a process seemingly impervious to the potential urgency felt by the species hanging in the balance. Krook surveyed the room, perhaps with a touch of his characteristic ironic detachment at the slow turning of bureaucratic wheels deciding the fate of billions. "Cast your vote secretly... Remember, the future... hangs in the balance. Tonight... we define not just a legacy of wealth, but a legacy of values. The time has come. Let us vote.