

Behold Shrimposium: For wherever else in the year 2073 can one find finer food in all of Chicago? Although all kinds of fare are served in Shrimposium, it may be deduced from the name of the restaurant that it is most famous for its seafood. It takes the space of the three highest floors of the cylindrical Vallimont Hydroponics Tower, which is itself a little over half the height of the nearby Herbert Tower, formerly the Willis Tower, and even further back, the Sears Tower. The distinguishable roof is made of a circle of negative parabolas with zeroes that touch and vertices that overhang the skyscraper. At the center of the roof there burgeons a thin column that supports the restaurant's sign, which is an oblate spheroid with a horizontal minor axis. On both sides of the spheroid, which might seem too large for the column, is featured the logotype of Shrimposium, the first "s" of which is formed by a lobstering shrimp. The sign has not stopped spinning since Shrimposium opened in 2064. However, it was not too long ago that the restaurateur thought it had to be shut down. It was earlier this year, actually...

Aelita Constance Vallimont, the owner and manager of Shrimposium, was on her way from the Vallimont Tower to the Dictatorial Palace. It was on the last day of March, after Shrimposium had closed and midnight was nearing. She took the Clarke Bridge, which she lived in, to cross the New York Canal.

New York City, along with many other cities of what was formerly the American East Coast, had been destroyed in the Gaian-Lunar War in 2033. Soon after, Chicago had replaced the Capital of the World as the Capital of the World. We all know that it is now larger than what was once Rhode Island and has a population of over 25 million people. America's Congress decided that Chicago had to have a direct connection to the Atlantic Ocean to fully succeed New York as the economical center of Earth and the New York Canal was built, with construction starting in 2034 and ending in 2040. The Clarke Bridge was the largest of the bridges that were built to span the canal. The engineers who designed the bridge decided that it should contain apartments, which were built underneath the road and in the supporting towers. Aelita occupied one that was under the road.

Aelita arrived at the gates of the palace. Although the guards recognized her car, they had to check her I.D., inspect the vehicle, and interrogate her on her purpose. A valet then came to take her car to the garage.

Aelita knew her father would be in his study at the time. She walked up the staircase and to the door. It did not have handles but there was a camera by it, which the dictator used to see who was approaching. It slid open as she stepped in front of it. Her father had opened it with a switch at his desk, which was to her left and to the far end of the room.

She stepped into the study. Its four walls were bookshelves. It was about eight meters wide and twenty meters long. The door was closer to the right side of the room than to the left, from the perspective of someone facing inside. To Aelita's right were three sofas that were arranged at right angles to each other. Dictator Vallimont was at his desk reading a thin book.

"One second Connie," said Vallimont with his eyes still on the page. "I'm just about done with this chapter." When he had finished he closed the book and looked up. His eyes lit up and he gave Aelita a welcoming smile. Although he was going to turn 65 in October, he looked as if he was only in his early forties. "So what are we doing here on this lovely night?"

And he rose and walked to the front of his desk to hug Aelita. As they embraced each other, Aelita looked at the book her father had been reading when she came.

“Dad, what’s that book?” asked Aelita as Vallimont led her to the other end of the room so that they could sit down and talk.

“*A Brief History of Luna* by Dominic Nelson,” said Vallimont after they sat down. “Nelson’s one of the Chief Directors of the moon. Chief Directors are the ones who are in charge of governing, you know. I decided that I’d better read his book if I’m going to plan the Second Gaian-Lunar War.”

“The Second Gaian-Lunar War?” exclaimed Aelita.

“Yes. We’re going to have to make the Selenites suffer, there’s no getting around that. They did destroy New York City. I loved that city. I did think a few years ago that I’d have it rebuilt but...it just wouldn’t be the same. So we’re going to have to starve them. You know that most of their food is synthetic. They do use hydroponics but it’s just so inefficient in low gravity that only the very rich Selenites can afford to eat natural food. In order to feed the majority of the population they need the base that is required for food synthesis. The base only comes from maize, which unlike other plants, can be grown only on Earth. Well, it can be grown hydroponically, but it’s *very* expensive to do so.

“So what I’ll do is halt corn exportation to the Moon. A corn embargo, you see. My spies are telling me that the Moon’s Chief Directors haven’t been prudent enough to stock large amounts of corn. The Selenites will try to grow it hydroponically, they will probably try to load each and every farm to its full capacity with it, but they still won’t be able to grow enough to feed their entire population. And then the Chief Directors will be forced to deign to ask me to lift the corn embargo. He who controls the corn controls the moon, you understand? I’ll say ‘No...unless you hand over the Moon.’ They might agree to do so, although I’m hoping, to tell you the truth, that they won’t.”

“So the CDs will be forced to declare war against the Earth once more? But if the Second Gaian-Lunar War starts, they’ll probably bombard Chicago just like New York.”

“Obviously, which is why we’re going to have to disable their mass drivers. But it can only be known to them that they are disabled after they declare war. Otherwise, they won’t declare war at all. So after they find out their indispensable mass drivers are shut down, we’ll launch some battalion spaceships and there will be a fantastic moon battle. And then I’ll choose someone to be the ruler of the Moon. Maybe I’ll give you the job. Or maybe Conrad Munro, you know, the current emperor of Brazil. But I’m pretty sure you didn’t come here to listen to me bore you with my future warfare designs.”

“Well, dad, I just wanted to talk about Shrimposium,” said Aelita.

“What about it?” asked Vallimont.

“Profits have been declining for a few months now.”

“And why do you think that could be?”

“Competition. There’s a new seafood restaurant. You might have heard of it — the Prawn Shop.”

“Just what we all needed — more puns. So what do you want me to do about it? Do you want me to *make* people go to Shrimposium instead? Because if that’s what you want I *could* do it, you know. The only thing is I don’t like to use force when it’s not absolutely necessary. Maybe a really aggressive marketing campaign? I could definitely launch that.”

“I just wanted some advice.”

“Hmm,” said Vallimont as a guileful smile materialized on his face. She thought it was as if he hadn’t heard what she had just said and instead was thinking about the idea he had suggested just before.

“What’s with the smile dad?”

“I was just thinking...I’ve done so little for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that as the dictator of Earth, I really should be doing my daughter more favors than I’ve done.”

“No you don’t. You’ve done a lot for me.”

“No I haven’t. You only think that because I raised you so well. I think I owe you something. Tell you what — I’ll take care of everything. I promise that Shrimposium’s profits in April will be twice, if not thrice, what they were in March.”

“No dad, you don’t need to do that.”

“What is it?” asked Vallimont. Then, in a falsely puerile, loving, and almost mocking tone, “You don’t trust your daddy?”

“What? I never said that. I mean that I just wanted advice. I’d rather take care of Shrimposium’s problems myself.”

“Nonsense. Now go home. Or better yet, why don’t you stay the night at the palace? Your room’s always ready, you know.”

“No, thank you. I think I’ll go back to the Clarke Bridge.”

“Alright then.”

And so they stood up and hugged again. After they had said their au revours, Aelita left the palace and Vallimont returned to his desk.

The old despot picked up the book again but put it down soon after. The Second Gaian-Lunar War could wait, he thought. Shrimposium was much more important than the moon. And besides, I might be able to profit as well. He took out a notebook and a pen and started writing.

The following day at around ten minutes after nine o'clock, an hour and twenty minutes before Shrimposium was to open for lunch, Aelita returned to the palace. She didn't drive there in her car, however. She felt that she needed to have an audience with her dad as soon as possible so she took an automated flying taxi.

A chamberlain told her that her father was at a meeting. He said that her father wished for her to stay in his study until he could come to talk to her and opened the door for her. She sat down at her father's desk. About a half-hour later, the door opened and Vallimont entered and smiled that same guileful smile that she had seen him smile the night before. Vallimont closed the door with a button on his watch.

"April Fools!" he bellowed.

"What? This was all a prank? Dad, how could you do this to me?"

"I'm sorry. Well, not really. / thought it was funny."

"I didn't."

"Want to see it again?"

Before Aelita could protest, Vallimont pushed another button on his watch and an LCD television was lowered from the ceiling in front of the desk. It instantly began to play the recording that had aired at noon.

"Greetings my fellow citizens," began the dictator, "I have an important announcement to make. I think the time has come for my daughter, Aelita, to marry. I've arranged a lottery to choose who will be betrothed to my daughter. All you have to do to enter the lottery is buy a meal at Shrimposium, her restaurant, sometime between the end of this announcement and 10:30 P.M. on April 30th. Your name will be entered into a computer each day you buy a meal, if you wish. Please note that it does not matter how many meals you buy on a given day; your name will be put into the computer *only* once per day. Each entrant can have their name entered into the computer only seven times. After Shrimposium closes on the last day of April, the computer will randomly choose the winner. I will announce his name to you before the end of the same day." He concluded by saying, "Thank you for your time. This announcement has been brought to you by Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc. This year is the centennial of the release of their film *Magnum Force*, starring Clint Eastwood. See it in 3-D today."

The screen turned black at the end of the recording and the T.V. rose into the ceiling.

"Were you serious dad? Are you really going to choose a husband for me with this lottery?"

"Of course I'm not. Do you really think I'm that cruel?"

"But didn't you make an announcement a few years back that I'd be married when I was thirty-five years old because that was when you became dictator of Earth?"

"The people have by now, most likely, presumed that I have changed my mind. I *can* do anything I want."

"But the people will expect a televised wedding."

“And they’ll get one. I told Larry to think of a good fake name. You remember Larry, right?”

“The grand master? Yes.”

“So the name he makes up is the one we’ll give to the people at the end of the month. Larry will create a whole history and records for a fictitious person. You’ll pretend to marry him on T.V. He’s going to be, for lack of a better word, ‘played’ by one of my jesters. A month after the marriage, he’ll be killed in a car crash — or something, I didn’t really plan that part out so well — and you’ll be a ‘widow’ and you’ll marry ‘again’ when you’re thirty-five.”

“Quite an elaborate prank.”

They tyrant laughed. “Anything for Shrimposium.”

“But this all seems too devious. I don’t think this whole fake lottery thing is fair. I respect my customers very much.”

“You don’t get anywhere in this world without being at least somewhat devious. I’m the most devious person I know and just look where I am now.”

“Alright then,” said Aelita, getting up from the desk. “I’d better get going. It’s Saturday and you know how busy Shrimposium can get on Saturdays, especially at lunch.”

“Okay,” said Vallimont. And in that familiar falsely puerile voice, “And don’t you worry about anything. Daddy will make sure nothing will happen that you don’t want to happen.”

Aelita left the room and took the stairs to the roof. She got into the same automated taxi and flew back to Shrimposium. As the taxi soared over the New York Canal, Aelita wondered why she wasn’t too worried. I should be worried, she thought. Dad might be the dictator of Earth, she reasoned, but he isn’t omnipotent or omniscient. Something could go wrong. And what was that old adage? Oh yeah, Murphy’s Law: Anything that can go wrong will go wrong. Wait, she thought, I could have said the same thing. Why was it named after some guy named Murphy?

The last day of April came. After Shrimposium closed, Aelita drove to the Dictatorial Palace again. This time, a few chamberlains were at the study to meet her. They told her that her father was preparing to tell the citizens of the world the name of the winner of the lottery. She could watch the announcement, they said, in the study. She went inside and sat down at the desk while one of the chamberlains pressed a button on his watch that lowered the T.V. from the ceiling. It turned on by itself. The screen showed a white text against a black background: ANNOUNCEMENT AT 10:45 P.M.

At last, at 10:45 P.M., her dad appeared on the screen. He was in his main office, like before.

“Greetings my fellow citizens,” began the dictator. “And now the moment you’ve all been waiting for! I’ll get right to it. The lucky winner, the future husband of my daughter, and the future dictator of Earth is...Zebulon Trondheim! If Zebulon Trondheim accepts, he must call the Dictatorial Palace within the next five minutes. If he does not, the computer will select someone else. The telephone code is 1-YE32-48-6E3Q1-2V.” (The code appeared on the screen as well.) “That is all. Thank you.”

The screen turned black. Two minutes later Vallimont appeared again to answer a phone that was ringing on his desk.

“Is this Zebulon Trondheim?” he asked. After apparently receiving an answer in the affirmative, Vallimont simply said, “Congratulations! You may come to the Dictatorial Palace tomorrow at nine o’clock A.M. Make sure you bring all necessary forms of identification, Mr. Trondheim.” He then put the receiver down.

The screen turned black again and the T.V. rose up into the ceiling. About five minutes later, Vallimont came into the room with Grand Master Larry Anderson.

“Hello Miss Vallimont,” greeted the latter.

“Wasn’t that wonderful?” asked the tyrant.

“I guess I’d better get ready for that fake wedding, right?” said Aelita as she walked over to the two men.

“You probably should,” said her father. “Larry will take care of all that. But Larry, I have just one question. Didn’t we agree that you’d call me nearly five minutes after the initial announcement to heighten suspense? You called me a bit too soon.”

“/ had to call you, Mr. Dictator?”

“Of course Larry. Who else would have —” but he knew the answer to his question before he finished asking it. He continued in a slower and quieter tone, “You didn’t make up the name ‘Zebulon Trondheim’, did you Larry?”

“No, Mr. Dictator, why would I need to make it up when he’s the one who called you?”

“Because, um, I told you not to get the name from the computer. I’m pretty sure I told you to make one up that we could give the people of the world.”

“You did?”

“Of course I did — month ago. Are you deaf?”

“I *am* a little hard-of-hearing in my right ear.”

Vallimont’s eyes widened with a bit of disbelief. “You may leave us Larry,” he said after a few seconds.

Larry left the room and Vallimont turned to Aelita.

“What will happen now?” his daughter asked.

“We’d better get ready to meet the lottery winner tomorrow morning. I’ll have to let him down gently. Poor guy’s probably already ready to be the next dictator of Earth. He’s going to have to give up his old identity. Hmm. Zebulon Trondheim. The name’s obviously still made up.”

“What if he tells the public about this plan of yours after you have him ‘killed’ in a car crash?”

“I didn’t think of that,” admitted the dictator. Then he thought of the possible implications of Trondheim’s potential action. “That would be quite scandalous. The people might come to distrust me. They might begin an insurrection. And then the Moon’s CDs just might take the opportunity to invade Earth.

“And who would come to Shrimposium after they found out what *we* planned? Actually, is it alright if I just blame you for this dad? I mean, / didn’t do anything.”

“Okay, I’ll take all the blame,” agreed Vallimont. “Anyway, you’d better stay at the palace for the night.”

“I suppose so,” said Aelita.

The next morning, Dictator Vallimont and his daughter were ready to meet Trondheim in a conference room. Vallimont received a call from one of his guards. He was told that Trondheim had landed on the roof. The father and his daughter went to face the door so they could greet Trondheim as soon as he stepped inside the room. They were quite anxious to meet him.

The door opened and a man dressed in a white suit, a white shirt, and a red paisley tie walked into the room. His hair was a lustrous black. He had over his eyes a pair of oversized aviator glasses that covered most of his face.

“Hello Mr. Trondheim,” said Vallimont. He extended his hand to shake his. The man shook it with cordiality.

“Good morning Mr. Trondheim,” said Aelita. She shook hands with him as well.

“Good morning Mr. Dictator. Good morning Miss Dictatrix,” saluted Trondheim.

Then Vallimont motioned to the guard who had conducted the man to close the door and stay in the hall outside the room so the three of them could talk alone.

“That’s quite a strange outfit for this occasion. Wouldn’t you say so Mr. Trondheim?”

“No, boss, I wouldn’t,” said the strange man with a smile.

“Now wait just a second; you may call me only—,” but he stopped when Trondheim took off his glasses. He was astonished. “Conrad? You’re Zebulon Trondheim?”

“The one and only,” replied Trondheim.

“And when did you change your name?”

“Let’s just say, sometime between the last time we met and right now.”

“What are you doing in Chicago?”

“I just happened to be here when you made your announcement. My nephew’s taking care of all the ruling that needs to be done in Brazil.”

“I can’t believe it Emperor Munro,” said Aelita.

“Why not? Well, I admit,” said Trondheim, “I don’t really believe it myself. It’s quite incredible. The first time I saw you was when you were only a few months old. I never thought I’d marry you. Okay, it’s not incredible, just anomalous. Remember when I was just your intern, Mr. Dictator? Now I shall be the dictator of the Earth. So, when’s the wedding again?”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Conrad, but there’s not going to be a wedding.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you see, it was all kind of a joke,” said the despot. He forced a laugh. “You see, I promised Aelita that I’d get Shrimposium’s profits up one way or—”

“You mean I ate all that seafood for nothing? Have I ever told you I hate seafood? I’m pretty sure I have,” said Trondheim. “No offense, Aelita,” he modulated awkwardly.

“None taken, Emperor,” said Aelita. “I’m sorry, though, even if it was completely my father’s idea.”

“Anyway, said Vallimont, “you’re going to have to pretend to marry her. And then pretend that you got killed in a car crash — or something. I still haven’t really thought about it much.”

“Alright, I submit myself to your will,” said Trondheim in a rather histrionic way. “But what’s in it for me?”

“What about one of the palace concubines?” asked Vallimont.

“What palace concubines?” uttered his daughter.

“They’re not for me. They’re for the advisors. Because,” he mumbled, “um, advising me can be kind of hard. I’m pretty sure that you can understand that.”

Before Aelita could say anything else, Trondheim said, “Hmmm.” He was hesitating. “Deal. Do I get to choose one?”

“Of course, we’ve got around fifty of them.”

“Alright then,” said Trondheim.

“So you’ll do it,” asked Vallimont in a state of incredulity. “Even the part with the fake marriage and the car crash?”

“Anything for my old boss,” replied Trondheim.

“And here I was thinking that I’d have to send you to Titan so that you wouldn’t say anything to the public about this whole thing and make them lose trust in me for doing something so frivolous and start an insurrection.”

“That’s nice. I never wanted to go to an extraterrestrial prison anyway.”

“Let’s all go to Shrimposium and celebrate,” suggested Aelita, happy that the whole affair had been concluded.

“No,” said Vallimont. “I hate seafood too. Come on, you know that.”

“I was just kidding.”

“What about we go see *Magnum Force* instead?” proposed Trondheim.

“Why not?” said Vallimont.

And they exited the room, took the elevator to the roof of the Dictatorial Palace, got in an automated taxi, and flew to one of the movie theaters in Chicago. On the way there, they flew past Shrimposium, its spheroid sign ever spinning.