



**A FUNNY THING HAPPENED IN OUTER SPACE
BY
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1 A FUNNY THING HAPPENED IN OUTER SPACE

Jackson Cantrell woke up from a short, unexpected nap while sitting at the controls of his light freighter, the Eagle 5, which was fortunately on autopilot. He was of indeterminate ethnicity as were most humans, he was average height, weight, his hair was a dark, woolly, thick Afro, he wore just a faint beard on his face.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked to his right seeing his copilot's chair was empty. Jack noticed it absently as he stood up in the cockpit shielding his eyes from all the flickering lights on the control panel and let out another yawn while fixing the collar of his black leather flight jacket.

"Coffee," he muttered to himself as he turned away from the vast black space beyond the ship's window scratching his right butt cheek.

He hobbled on legs that were still asleep through the automatic door which wheezed, as if in protest to being opened. Jackson shuffled down the narrow corridor of gunmetal colored walls, with another automatic door on the left that led to the cargo hold. He was just in front of the door when it wheezed open, startling Jackson.

"Shit!" said Jackson.

In the doorway stood Durfor Kolos, a five and half foot tall humanoid creature, his head was round with a pair of pointy ears on the sides and a long snout, covered in gray scales. On the top of his head and down the back were short orange-green feathers that grew like a mohawk. His snout and face reminded Jackson of a dinosaur, a creature he learned about in a documentary series studying the planet called Earth. Durfor was not a dinosaur but a Lizarian.

"Jack, I thought you were asleep." said Durfor as his thin four foot long tail rose up in the air quickly as he zipped up his brown leather flight jacket.

Jackson was about to answer when he realized where Durfor was coming from.

"What were you doing in the hold?"

"I was doing inventory." Durfor said easily, which was followed up with a loud belch.

Jackson's eyes went big as Durfor put a scaly hand over the front of his mouth, the smile on his snout was shy, showing embarrassment. Even the feathers on his head appeared to wilt.

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“God damn it, Durfor. Did you eat any eggs?”

“Just one or two or three. Possibly four....five at the very most.”

“Watch out!” said Jackson, going past him.

It was a small cargo hold, but not too small to carry five hundred Ovo eggs, which were palm sized black shells, speckled with blue that glowed, if allowed to absorb light. Human’s used them for decorations, whereas Lizarian’s enjoyed eating them.

The eggs sat out in open crates glowing brightly, Jackson wandered around the stacks of eggs. He was looking for empty cartons or cartons that were not quite full. His eyes darted all around while Durfor chuckled.

“Don’t laugh, Durfor these eggs are fifty credits a pop! Do you know what Leithgow would do to you, to us, if he found out you ate some?”

“Leithgow Louis, you mean the deadliest, most dangerous gangster in this part of the galaxy? No, what would he do?” he asked in a sarcastic tone.

Jackson gave his copilot a glare. Leithgow Louis, was a tall skinny man with wiry muscles and greasy brown hair. His forehead was always wrinkled and his nostrils flared with every breath he took, he wore custom tailored suits and his wife, Lady Louis, a tall dark long legged beauty, dresses made from silk not found in any near by system.

Rumor had it she was as vicious as her husband, though Jackson and Durfor only met Leithgow and that was for a brief moment, probably to size them up. He didn’t say anything to them, with The Laser was his pet Roseberry, a four legged dog like creature with red fur, long teeth and a mean disposition. She gave them a long throaty growl as Louis led her by a chain leash, saliva dripped like water from her jowls, Louis just nodded at one of his underlings who gave them the pick up and drop off details, and a forged packing list if they happened to be stopped by the boys in blue.

“Oh, come on,” Durfor said, giving Jackson a slap on the back. “Lelou will be too busy worrying about his wife’s birthday party and shit to fuck around with eggs, he’s gonna have a million different people making deliveries.”

“If he heard you call him Lelou, he’d cut off your tail and pluck your feathers.” Jackson said with a head shake.

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That was the nickname some of his enemies and detractors called him, which would send him into a rage. Jackson had heard that some poor sucker from another gang called him Lelou to his face and Leithgow cut off this guys limbs with a laser and fed them to Roseberry.

“Human, please. I’d whip him right in the balls with my tail.” Durfor said, trying to whip his tail but it flailed.

Jackson laughed though he was still worried about the egg count.

“Let’s just go to the cockpit, we’re almost at the drop off.

This was a basic job for these professionals, who for the right price would smuggle anything you needed, except people of course. The crime for smuggling these Ovo eggs was small compared to people trafficking. That was black market stuff and though these gentlemen were pros, they were small time at best.

Mostly they would go under the radar of such notorious figures as ‘Louis The Laser’ but small timers can luck into a big job once in a while. Case in point, Jackson’s worry about this job. If they did it right and ran one or two more for Mr Louis, maybe they could retire to a planet with booze, bud and women in bikinis, like planet Flashton, or the trio of dwarf planets in the nearby system of Warnock where the moon is always full and the night clubs never closed. But if they screwed this up, Lelou would remind them why he was called ‘The Laser.’

Leithgow was known far and wide as the most dangerous gangster who controlled the half dozen planets of the Populares system and the few million people residing there with brute force and a lot of star fighters and a few large war scale battle cruisers mounted with very big laser cannons. Though there was a government of sorts that was sworn to enforce law and order in the civilized parts of the galaxy, called The Space Force, their view was this was not a civilized part of the galaxy and ignored Louis’ military like fleet.

Jackson was thankful though the drop off was on one of the planets in Louis’ system, they wouldn’t need to worry about customs agents, inspection and all the other red tape that would take at least a day to complete. They’d drop off the eggs, get an envelope stuffed with credits and a thank you, be done before happy hour. They coasted slowly, approaching a small blue planet called Lexar-119, Jackson had a bad feeling and took a quick glimpse back towards the cargo hold.

“Jack, don’t worry. They’re not gonna know I ate a few eggs.”

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It was a small planet but much larger than a dwarf planet, to Jackson it looked as big as this system's sun but he swallowed his worry about the eggs. Dozens of non orbital satellites with automatic laser turrets were the line of defense for the space station just ahead, three of the satellites followed the Eagle 5 as they approached. Their twenty meter long noses were trained on them.

'Identify,' said a voice coming through their ship's comm speaker.

"This is Eagle 5, asking for permission to approach, access landing code: KTMA6-V981TC." said Jackson to the speaker on the control panel.

'Welcome, Eagle 5. You may proceed to dock at substation 14.' said the tiny voice.

The satellite turrets turned away from their ship once the code was delivered, the Eagle 5 coasted to the large space station that went around the entire planet like a large silver tube with thousands of docking stations of various sizes, many were currently in use. Mostly by cargo ships, it was Lady Louis' birthday and things were coming and going from all over the nearby systems bringing supplies, people and all kinds of goodies. Though the space station was packed, the docking only took a half hour, Jackson always said the mafia ran things better than the Space Force. After just a few minutes, a pair of burly workmen came aboard pulling hover jacks to remove the eggs.

The station was ordinary in appearance but hectic with all kinds of people, humans, Lizarians, and a few other species of people that were here as guests for the party or making deliveries for the birthday bash. Besides their ship was another cargo vessel that was operated by a group of people known as Precarrians, a species that closely resembled humans though they had pink skin and both male and females had no hair, and their faces always had the look of mild surprise. They also spoke in very demure voices, never yelling or raising their voices even when angry.

"One of you bald headed fucks needs to move this ship, I have two deliveries coming right now!" said a man wearing a blue bandanna and an oil stained T-shirt.

"Do you suck your mothers dick with that mouth?" asked a serene sounding Precarrian man sitting on a wooden crate who wore a truckers hat that said Captain Asshole.

Across from where the Eagle 5 was docked, a few humans were escorting a group of people known as Greys, short, stocky beings with gray leathery skin, oval heads, almond shaped eyes and the most social species in the galaxy. One was currently telling a joke as they passed by.

"And this human asks me, I'm not kidding, he actually asks... 'are you probing me for science?' I said 'no, I want to finger your ass because I'm in love with you.'"

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The group erupted in laughter which redoubled when the Grey telling the joke put up his finger which glowed a bright red. Jackson felt easy for a moment until the appearance of an irritable looking man with a digital clipboard under his arm and a stylus behind his ear arrived. He wore a jumpsuit but looked more like one of Louis' henchmen than some dock worker or mechanic.

Jackson gave the man the packing list. He looked it over with a scowl as the burly men carefully removed the eggs. He and Durfor stood quietly, waiting patiently when the man with the clipboard aimed his stylus at the stacks of eggs and frowned when he looked at his clipboard then turned his gaze on the two pilots.

"Did you take any eggs?" he asked them both though he looked mostly at Durfor.

"What?" asked Durfor looking horrified.

"What do you mean?" asked Jackson, sounding calm though his heart raced.

"There's supposed to be five hundred Ovo eggs here."

"There are." said Durfor defiantly.

"Oh yeah? You see this?" he asked pointing at his clipboard.

"You got a manicure?" asked Durfor.

"Fuckin smart ass, huh?" replied the man with a click of his tongue.

"What does your clipboard say, sir?" Jackson asked with a polite tone.

"It says the cargo weighs is nine hundred and sixteen pounds 7 ounces, five hundred Ovo eggs."

"Yeah, so?" said Durfor quickly.

"If there's five hundred full sized Ovo eggs, it should weigh nine hundred and twenty two pounds and 9 ounces."

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“Hey man, do you see any eggs missing?” asked Durfor.

“I don’t need to see it,” said the man with a huff as he placed his clipboard under his arm. “I just know what the exact weight of five hundred Ovo eggs is supposed to be.”

“Well maybe your stylus is broke?” said Durfor.

The man’s face turned red and he pointed a finger at Durfor about to reply when Jackson held up a hand and spoke.

“Look, sir. My copilot and I just got hassled by The Space Force before we arrived here and it put his tail up in a knot. I promise you, all the eggs are there and some were under developed, that’s probably why the weight is wrong.”

“Yeah,” said Durfor excitedly. “I get enough shit from the boys in blue. I don’t need some dick head with a clipboard...”

“I got this D,” said Jackson, putting an arm on Durfor’s shoulder. “can we just get our money and get out of here. You have our information right there if you need to find us for any questions. OK?”

The jumpsuited man eyed them closely as he used his stylus to write something on his clipboard, on his belt was a small black device which began to print out a thin strip of paper. He ripped it off and held it out to Jackson but Durfor grabbed it first.

“Take that to the payroll office, it’s in front of docking station 23.” he said to Jackson though he glared at Durfor.

They left and found the payroll office which was just a dark garage with two slightly over weight humans wearing wife beaters and jeans playing cards next to a star fighter on a hydraulic lift that was missing a wing. Beside the ship was a sofa where an elderly looking Grey was lying fast asleep, snoring quietly. Durfor showed the card players the slip and the heavier of the two pointed at the Grey.

“Hey, fuck stick. Wake up, these guys need paid.” he said to the Grey.

He snuffed and moved around on the couch, the wrinkles on his face became deeper but his snoring continued.

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“Hey, Fred, wake up. These dudes need paid!”

“The fuck,” the Grey muttered. “tell them to go to the foreman, he pays the pilots.”

“Fred it’s the egg guys, remember what the boss said, they’re special delivery. They don’t have that many credits on hand” said the other card player.

“Aw fuck, alright.” said Fred getting up roughly as he twisted himself and grimaced when his back cracked.

“Sorry you had to get up, Fred.” said Durfor.

“Hey fuck you, I don’t know you. Calling me Fred like you know me, what the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Sorry, just feeling good on pay day.” said Durfor.

“Ah,” the Grey replied with a flap of his hand, though he sounded more at ease. “let’s see the slip.”

The old alien squinted at the paper and brought it closer to his face.

“Why don’t you get your eyes checked, Fred.” said the heavier card player.

“Hey mind your fuckin business, Doug.” the old Grey snapped back, making both the card players laugh.

Fred shook his head in disgust then squinted while reading aloud the figure on the slip.

“Five hundred, fifty credits...uh...including per diem...did either one of you get shot at? By anybody, the Space Force, pirates?”

“No.” said Jackson.

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“OK, good. Would have made it a little harder to pay you all of it at once if you took damage...”

“So what’s the damage to Sir Louis’ pocket book?” asked Durfor, who was ready to get paid yesterday.

“Thirty five hundred credits.”

“Each?” asked Durfor with wide eyes.

“Did I say each, jack ass?”

“It’s still a good payday, D”

“Yeah, I know.” he said with an eye roll.

Fred stuck his long arm under the couch and removed a small photon pistol and a large steel cash box. He thumbed out thirty five hundred and told them to get the hell out so he could finish taking his nap. Though Durfor was hopping on his legs with joy, Jackson kept waiting for a couple of Louis’ henchmen to appear, asking about some missing eggs. Durfor was pounding on his friends back with excitement.

“First thing we do is, we hit a bar. Not an expensive one though, the cloaking device still needs fixed, but the bar first...what’s up, Jack?”

“You know if they count those eggs we’re fucked right.”

“They won’t, they had like a million deliveries...”

“...but how many special deliveries? They had some mean old bastard with a blaster pay us thirty five hundred...”

“Yeah but not each...”

“...that’s still a lot of money. Did you see how suspicious that dude in the jumpsuit was?”

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“Oh, that guy was just being a racist asshole. He don’t know I took those eggs, for him to suspect me because of my race is messed up and ignorant. You know me Jack I don’t put up with that shit.”

“You did take the eggs though.”

“Yeah but fuck him anyway. Cone on, stop worrying, let’s go to Cafe 42 to celebrate. It’s great, I went there a while back, there’s beer from all across the galaxy and women of every species.”

“Where’s it at?”

“It’s the next planet over, Lexar-121, we can be there in fifteen minutes.”

Lexar-121 was smaller than its neighbor but was the most popular planet in the system if you wanted to party. The planet was warm during the day and cool at night and had a plethora of night clubs, bars and casinos, there was always a place to party on this planet as all of the establishments on Lexar-121 never closed. Cafe 42 was packed with mostly humans, sprinkled through out were Lizarians, Greys and a pair of Grennards, a species of humanoid alien that were seven feet tall with dark green skin, hair and pale blue eyes.

Durfor and Jackson were able to elbow their way to the bar and order themselves a couple of pints. The bartender was a female human, with long hair, pouty lips wearing tight pants and a low cut blouse. She gave them their drinks and she smiled at Jackson before serving someone else.

“Hey I think she likes you.” said Durfor.

Jackson shook his head.

“You don’t think so?”

“No, man. She’s just trying to get tips.”

“Say something to her when she gets us another drink.”

“No D, besides you should never flirt with a woman while she’s at work.”

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“Why?”

“Because, they’re trying to earn a living not meet people. It’s rude, besides I doubt she’s interested in scum and villains like us.”

“I’m not scum, or a villain...an asshole sometimes...” said Durfor.

“Don’t be modest, it doesn’t suit you.”

“Aw come on, we’ve known each other since my tail first developed....”

“Too much information.”

“...you don’t think I’m too much of an asshole do ya?”

“No, of course not.” Jackson said giving him a slap on the shoulder.

“Fuckin a.”

The night was going well, they threw darts, drank a few shots of Black Hole whiskey, and played a round of laser billiards as well. At a table nearby were a pair of females, a human and a Lizarian. The human was short and curvy in a black mini dress.

“Check out the honey with the pink and blue feathers,” Durfor said about the Lizarian female. “I’d love to wrap my tail around hers.”

They were smiling and watching Jackson and Durfor play. The woman in the black dress said good job when Jackson pulled off a difficult looking bank shot. Durfor bought the ladies drinks, and they were introducing themselves when Jackson looked out towards the cafe’s entrance by chance.

There was the bouncer who had let them in, he was talking to a trio of dark swarthy looking sharp dressed men with faces that were chiseled with frowns. One was holding up what looked like a printout of a screenshot from a security camera on the Lexar-119 space station that showed he and Durfor talking to the man in the jumpsuit. Then the bouncer looked over and pointed directly at them, Jackson felt the blood in his veins turn to ice.

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“Durfor, we have to go.”

“What are ya talking about, we just...”

Jackson grabbed him by his snout and turned him away from the women to the trio of suits, they had tell tale bulges of large photon pistols under their jackets. Though the cafe was packed, the patrons parted for the three, knowing they were Louis the Laser’s men.

“Sorry ladies, we gotta fly.” said Jackson, pulling Durfor along.

“I fuckin told you.”

“I’m sorry.” said Durfor who reached into his jacket and pulled out an Ovo egg and shoved it into his mouth.

“Mother fucker are you really eating one right now?!”

“I’m getting rid of the evidence!” he said through a mouthful of egg.

“You’re an asshole, is there another way out of here?”

“I don’t know, I think there’s a fire exit behind that door.” he said pointing towards the back before shoving another egg in his mouth..

The crowd was not so kind as to part for the two pilots. They did manage to reach the back of the room before the suits caught them and rushed through the door which opened into a hall with only two doors. Both doors had digital templates on them, one said broom closet, the other said bathroom. Durfor opened the door closest to them, the bathroom, and found a human passed out drunk on the toilet with his pants covered in puke and possibly urine.

“Ew...um, broom closet.” said Jackson.

“Right.”

The closet was small and they had to maneuver themselves in order for them both to fit.

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“Damn it, the door, move your friggin tail.”

“Huh, oh sorry Jack....ow shit, you stepped on it!”

They were cast into near darkness, as their eyes finally adjusted to the dark, the door to the hallway opened. Jackson put a finger to his lips, Durfor nodded and held his tail in his arms. The footsteps coming down the hall sounded heavy and made the floor shake. They heard the door to the bathroom open and someone mutter in disgust, after a moment of silence there was a knock on the closet door.

“Um, just the check please, and we’ll be on our way, thank you.” said Durfor.

The door was thrust open and the two pilots were pulled out roughly by the collars of their jackets and held tight by two of the henchmen while the third held the printed screenshot. Though the other two were frowning, the one with the picture smiled a predatory grin. He was of average height but had thick muscles and ham sized fists.

“Hi boys, I’m Giorgio. I just have a simple question. Is this you?” he asked, holding up the screenshot with one hand while slicking back his dark hair with the other.

The two pilots glanced at each other, Jackson was at a loss for words but Durfor spoke up.

“I’m not sure, it could be my cousin Steve, he’s an asshole, always up to no good, plus it’s too far away for me to see.”

The one holding Durfor grabbed him by the snout and put his face right up to the picture.

“Is that close enough to see?” asked Giorgio.

“Oh, wow that is me. I heard cameras can add weight but I....uh...ow...thank you for letting go of my nose...kind of rough though, I might get another sinus infection, when that happens I start sneezing and just can’t stop and with this snout it’s really loud....”

“This guy likes to run his mouth, eh?” asked Giorgio

Jackson only shrugged.

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“Word of advice, bird head, don’t run your snout to, Mr Louis. He’s very busy tonight and he ain’t in a good mood.”

“Bird head. Hey we don’t have to stand here and listen to that kind of racist ass talk. Do we, Jack? We’re leaving.”

Durfor tried to move but the henchman pushed him back against the wall while Jackson rolled his eyes and sighed heavily.

“Or, I guess we’ll hang out here, I’m fine either way.” Durfor said.

Giorgio snapped his finger and the pilots were taken out of the cafe from a side door marked fire exit.

“At least we found the fire exit.” Jackson said bitterly.

“Sorry, Jack.”

They were led to a small transit ship and flown back to the space station. They didn’t enter at a normal docking station but went behind the space station and touched down on a landing pad which then receded into the station itself. Jackson and Durfor though sat inside a windowless stockade unaware of where they were going.

“This is your fault, you know that right?” asked Jackson, sounding cool though his heart was racing.

“Yes, I’ll take the blame on this. Just me.”

“Damn right, just you.”

“You’re really gonna let me take all the blame?”

Jackson only glared at him.

“I’ll shut up until we get there.” said Durfor.

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It was only moments later that the rear of the ship opened and they were let out. They stood beneath the transparent roof of the space station, above them star fighters and civilian vessels moved quickly while a few cargo ships lumbered along at a much slower pace. The henchmen shoved the pilots along to an elevator that descended briefly before opening up to a lavish office with dark silky wallpaper and a black marble floor that shined like glass.

At the end of the room was a desk made of dark materials where a pair of folding chairs sat in front of the unoccupied desk. They were led to the chairs and pushed down roughly onto them. Over on the far side of the office was Roseberry, chained to the floor quietly watching the pilots.

“Hi, puppy.” said Durfor nervously

Roseberry got up and started snarling and barking at them.

“Stop teasing my pet.” said Louis who entered the room approaching the desk.

His eyes were alight and focused, he was wearing a fine suit with shoes as dark and shiny as his office floor. He pulled his cushioned seat back and sat down without ever taking his eyes off them. He folded his hands into fists so tight, his skin creaked like leather.

“No, sir, uh I mean Mr Louis I wasn’t ruh-right Jack....”

“Yes...err no, he wasn’t teasing your Roseberry...your pet, Roseberry....”

“Shut up.” he said as the skin of his fists turned red and creaked loudly.

The two pilots were silent as Louis the Laser watched them. His eyes darted back and forth, then he unfolded his hands and removed an object from his dress shirt pocket. It was a pen laser, the one that Jackson had heard about being used to cut off the limbs of his enemies which he then fed to his pet.

He pointed the pen at a small metallic dish on his desk which held strips of raw meat. The red beam on the laser struck a piece of meat which began to glisten and brown. The smell was eye watering and made Roseberry groan. Louis took the strip and tossed it to his pet, who snatched it and swallowed it with a snarl.

“Did you steal any of my eggs?” Louis asked them both.

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The silence was thick, tense, after only a few seconds Durfor blurted out in a panic.

“Yes, sir I did...but it’s not my fault, I suffer from low blood sugar and I was faint and my friend was asleep at the time...”

Louis held up a finger and Durfor actually stopped talking. He used his laser pen to fry another strip of meat and toss it to Roseberry before speaking again. He put his laser down gently but then slammed his fist on the table making the pilots jump and Roseberry bark.

“Do you know how I found out you stole my eggs? Would you like me to tell you?”

“I mean if you feel it’s necessary...” Durfor said but went silent when Louis glared at him.

“I brought them to the caterers and told them to use the eggs to spell out my wife’s name on her birthday cake, a large one. Made of the finest chocolate, with sugars that I paid for by the ounce through the ass to smuggle in. Do you know how much sugar costs?”

Durfor opened his mouth but Jackson kicked him and mouthed no at him.

“It’s a fortune to make a cake that took up a third of the fucking ball room that most of the guests won’t even touch.” he said in a calm neutral tone, though his voice wavered into slight irritation when swearing.

“The eggs were used to spell out her first name, Cunbra, it’s an old family name, her grandmother’s name, but the caterers didn’t have enough eggs and they were Precarrians and as most humans and Lizarians know they are unfamiliar with particular words outside their own native tongue, slang words to be precise. So they spelled what they could with the remaining eggs and rolled it out to my wife and her three hundred party guests ”

Although Jackson understood what word Louis was implying, Durfor was confused.

“What word?” asked Durfor sincerely.

Jackson sighed and stuck his head down in defeat. Louis lifted his hand and Giorgio showed Durfor another screenshot print, this one of Louis’ ballroom and the cake in question.

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“Oh, that word.”

“Did you think you could steal from me and I wouldn’t find out who you were?” Louis said, getting up from his chair and leaning close to them.

They didn’t speak, Louis sat down again and opened a drawer and removed a bottle of water and drinking glass which he filled. He picked his pen laser back up and aimed it directly into the water.

“I see two options, for me to forgive your thievery,” he said as the water in the glass began to bubble. “I cut off your tail, boil it until it hardens and stick it up your friend’s ass before I shoot him out an airlock. Then I cut the rest of your scaly body into little pieces for my pet to eat, after that instead of scraping your ship I’ll have my star fighters use it for target practice. Or you can work off your debt, which would you gentlemen prefer to do?”

The...the uh...second thing...” Jackson stuttered.

“The other one...the uh later, the latter...is it later or the latter of the two, I can never remember these things. But who can, am I right.” Durfor said, shrugging his shoulders while nodding excitedly.

“Yeah, the one that doesn’t involve me getting penetrated, Mr Louis.”

Louis smiled, expecting nothing but full acceptance for this reprieve.

“Yeah,” said Durfor. “whatever you need from us, Mr Louis, we’re your guys. I’d be happy to act as a stud at one of your many fine Lizarian brothels on Lexar-132.”

“If you speak again, I will cut off your tail and feed it to my pet raw and make you watch.”

Durfor nodded and made the gesture of zipping his mouth shut.

“You’re smugglers, good ones, you’ve never been caught by the Space Force or raided by pirates. If you had, I’d know. I have friends both high and low, I know everything about every person that works for me. I need you to pick up a weapon for me, in the MB5-Hughes system, I can’t send one of my usual cargo ships, the Space Force officers stationed there know my fleet inside and out and would shoot it down automatically. I’ve made it a habit to avoid doing business in the Hughes system unless absolutely necessary.”

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