

## Cargo Check

The Rapier shakes. Artificial gravity lightens up as the actual gravity starts to get a hold. Kyra's violet eyes were wide and fearful as fire licks around the edges of the viewscreen. Poor babe's never seen a bareback landing before. I let out a little confident laugh, and grab her hand. Even though yeah, we *could* totally die, there was about an 11% chance.

The atmosphere of Ruulio is shrouded in smog--not great for the planet, but a good indicator of civilization. Some buildings and floating structures come into view. Billboards and holo-advertisements sparkle and shimmer with low-power and skippy framerate. And every thousand feet looms a round megastructure touching the sky. The extranet connection comes online once the Rapier hits atmo. Logs updating with the planetary feed, directing our ship towards the designated flight zones.

"Apparently," Kyra leans over the data console, still dressed in the torn and re-fit cloth of the Catabasi fleet banner, fashioned like a toga. *Roman slave is a move up from where she was.*

"A few years ago, their government fell into decline, so they sold the planet to fifty-eight different corporations in twelve systems. All these megastructures go all the way down to the planet's core. Lots of tunnel networks for their miners. In about seventy-three years this world will be picked to pieces." Six years ago, even after the xenoplague, Ruulio could've sustained a civilization for a whole Millennium.

*Well, at least these people have jobs again ...*

"Any ties to the fat man?" I ask. Not that I didn't know the answer, any planet that does business with Pirate Space has ties to our dear Master.

"... Not directly," Kyra answers. *Good enough.* I guide the Rapier to the nearest starport. Despite the poor shape of the planet, the port is filled with extravagant ships. Likely investors coming to inspect their goods.

Kyra and I take to the streets, uncomfortably aware that we both look like we're on their way to perform a Greek tragedy. Carrying some goods from the Rapier we could sell-off. A few of the less-than-optimal guns, gold, jewelry. The real trouble was finding a shop that would have use for it. Hell, the richest visitors on this world get their goods straight from the tap from their miners, fashioned by smiths right there and then as a souvenir. I couldn't settle for any less than 3,000 credits, but when the sun goes down our stomach protests. We sell them all for 1,479c. Taking a little off the top for some new clothes--a nice black tank top and jeans for myself, and a nice fluffy white jacket for the Princess—she didn't *know* cold, existing in the pyre heat of Master for so many years. Also bought a meal now that the food stores were gone.

With roughly 1,400, we were now faced with the challenge of making that become 5,000. The minimum needed for a mediocre core. But one able to get Kyra delivered home at least.

Selling or abandoning the ship would be possible, though, perhaps leaving a trail wouldn't be wise. Neither would be abandoning it and using the credits for tickets off-world. *Possible*, but perhaps not for the best. It would be ideal to take the ship and any trace of our presence here.

Then again... I always did love corporate worlds.

Sure, it completely wrecked and ravages the natural beauty of worlds like Ruulio, filled with jumped-up assholes who think they can buy anything or go wherever they please. But whenever I found myself on planets like this it always came with the potential to rip-off, profit off of, or--in the best case, kill said assholes. This is where the *real* money is made. Though Roloug took care of most of my deals after I made it big, I still had an eye for *opportunity*.

Hell, I could name over five or six methods people used to get rich in places like this, it's half the reason I had a job. So, this only makes sense, doesn't it? The transition from hunting criminals to becoming one? At least I know how not to get caught so easily.

So, the sort of scum I'd question to find criminals seemed like a logical place to start looking to do some crime. Anyone who needs their little secrets moved on or off world.

I stash Kyra in a rented room a few blocks away from the spaceport, a little above what we can afford, but my olive-skinned babe deserves nothing less. Also helped they have plenty of cameras and monitoring equipment around that I could tap into. If Soddorom has eyes here, I don't want her alone in the *Rapier*. The poor girl has already demonstrated that she doesn't have the nerve for a serious fight. And with that, I hit the financial district. Working the cantinas and bars, introducing myself to the bartenders as a "courier" and asking if they know anyone offering work. The first either plays or is dumb, suggesting that I head to the mining hubs to look for work.

The second fixes me with a hard stare. "I don't let that kind of thing go on in my bar." I slide a twenty cred chit across the polished bar and she palms it so casually I can't see the gesture. "If I were an out-of-work courier, though, I might go see Milosh at Glassbar in the Telegenix tower. I don't vouch for the man."

Glassbar is exactly what it sounds like -- a top-story glassed-in terrace, offering a slightly queasy panorama in every direction, including straight down. Even though it's early, just past the supper hour, the bar is already packed with men in pricey looking businesswear. That makes sense -- this is a great setting for peacocking. There's no better way to get the measure of a rival than offering him the view he'll have as he hurtles to the ground.

Milosh is not the bartender, as I expected, but the DJ. He is visibly high on some kind of stimulant, which might explain why his eyes light up when I ask if he knows anyone who needs a package delivered discreetly. "Sure, I know somebody who could get you a gig. If you think you can work with a Qoiran."

I shrug. I know many humans find ooziform species unsettling, but they've never particularly bothered me. "I'm no bigot. Point me to et."

Milosh points. "Name's Rk'ti. Try to pronounce it right or et'll get pissy. If you work out, remind et I'm owed a finder's fee."

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You get a good look at him over the corner of your eye. A lime pile of jello smoking a hookah in the corner. You thank Milosh, and approach the gentleman. Taking a seat.

"*Rk'ti*? Hi, I'm Yuki."

"That's me, and it's *Rk'ti*," a synthetic voice answers. It takes you off-guard, then it occurs to you that the Qoirans communicate through pheromones, and the voice sims were implanted. His voice of choice is authoritative, yet with a slightly posh accent. "If you can't pronounce it correctly then don't. What can I do for you?"

You try to make eye contact, but since he has no eyes you just focus on his center, "I'm told you're offering work of a special kind."

He takes a puff with a tendril, "Have you been given any details?"

"Not much."

"Do you have a record?"

"Not here."

"You know how to fly a Dyson 67 Transport?"

"I flew a Dyson 63 once."

"But you're a pilot?"

"Yes."

The blob leans back somewhat, "Maybe you are more than a pretty face. I have some associates with a cargo ship and no pilot. They need it in Ruulio at the coordinates specified by tomorrow by twenty-eight hundred hours, Dyonia time. You know much about Ruulio?"

"Not much."

Rk'ti sighs, and with his tendrils taps onto his holo pad. And a hologram rises. A rock, orbited by enormous ships and fleets of little ones. Structures and lights cover the rock on every flat surface. You've visited many asteroid stations before. While crazy good for business you've found them too ... unpredictable. Despite their recognition as cities, they are privately owned rocks ruled and run by rich overseers. And the authorities answer to them. And rather than spending the extra funds to imprison or to offer judiciary, they let the cops handle things as they see fit. Needless to say, you aren't fond of those kinds of places.

"We'll pay you five hundred now, ten thousand once you're back--and we get confirmation that you did the job. And if you think that's too low, Kooliasa is hiring. It's a popular strip club downtown, I bet you'd be popular there."

There's a sort of bitterness you get from creatures like Rk'ti. Humanoids for the most part are the standard of beauty throughout the galaxy. Icons for physical perfection and beauty. Though that attention hardly gets returned to the more inhuman species, such as the Qorians. And looking the way you do, non-humanoids tend to let slip some of that sexual frustration when confronted with you.

"Well, you interested sweetheart?" He places a jagged bar key onto the table. "'Cause once I tell you where the transport is, and the drop site, I'll take it as your acceptance."

"I'll take it."

"Terrific. It's in Kritz Shipyard, Unit R13. The route is pre-set. Don't deviate from it."

You reach for the key. He grabs your arm with a tendril.

"Twenty-eight hundred hours."

He lets go. You stand.

"Don't forget to give Milosh his finder's fee." And with that, you leave Glassbar. You find the shipyard on the dump edge of town. Literally. Only a few blocks down you can see a junkyard spreading as far as the eye can see. And judging by the conditions of the ships in the yard, it would spare them the trip.

The Dyson 67 is a boxy industrial ship, its mustard yellow paint chipping away. Quad-lights on the front and rear, two broken. And that's its prettiest feature. Inside you find its cushions stained with various textures. Torn in others. A whole spectrum of bad smells in all three rooms traveling the musty hot air.

But the cargo bay is a different kind of hot altogether. It's vacuum-sealed. And settings aside the door are set to ninety degrees, and moisture pours in from the vents above into the bay lined with crates. In your experience, employers don't like you here. But just to be certain you shout 'hello'. Wondering if there was life. The lack of answer gives you some validation as you seal the door shut.

It would appear Ruulio is a nine-hour trip. It's nineteen hundred hours now. The clock's started. You drive the keys in, and the supralight core squeals to life.

Without company (not to mention your VI games), it will prove to be a boring trip. You press the dashboard, looking for some features. *Tohigrian Feet XXX*. Music. *Qoiran Opera Classics Vol. 1*.

*Even Soddorom wasn't this cruel.*

You awake once the alerts come in. Asteroids are lightyears apart from each other, the ships stand little chance of collision, but it indicates you're closing in on the city of Ruulio and it's time to wake up.

Your destination route transitions into the traffic routes along the X-axis of the station. And you take a deep breath. Hoping this will be a short affair.

*Twenty-seven hundred hours.*

The vehicle behind you accelerates. Flashing its purple and green lights. It hails you. A snouted hairy pig-like creature with pierced tusks appears on your screen, "This is Ruulio Administrative Enforcement Officer Pondo. We are sending you a destination to pull over."

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"Of course, Officer," I say, with my best butter-wouldn't-melt-in-my-mouth sobriety. "I hope you can tell me what the problem is."

"Just pull over." He snorts and blanks the commlink.

I accept the officer's coordinates, judging that it's better to risk inspection by one (potentially bribable) customs officer than it is to bail on the job entirely. Well, at least at this point. Rk'ti wasn't intimidating enough for me to be afraid to dump his cargo and skip back to Dyonia. Hoping for a little luck, I rummage through the ship's various nooks and crannies in search of a cargo manifest. I can't even find a ship's registry. Here's hoping Officer Pondo isn't too much of a stickler for details.

Despite my nervous irritation, I can't seem to stop smiling. The Oneidas always said, growing up, that cops were pigs. It's nice to see they're right about one thing.

As Pondo docks, I conceal my sidearm underneath the pilot's chair and stand to wait for him. He opens the lock and strides inside, casting his small suspicious eyes over everything, especially me. He's larger than I would have expected from a xenoswine-type organism, tall and moving with a graceful swagger that is somewhat undercut by a curly pink tail sticking out the back of his uniform.

He is unsettlingly silent, crossing the small living area and toward my cockpit.

"I'm afraid there's not so much I can show you, Officer. Cargo is herbs and flowers from Lan'xiu, and they told me I have to keep it hot and sealed or it'll ruin the wedding.

"Is there anything else you need?"

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The Officer snorts, "I just pulled you over because two of your lights were out," he points his flashlight at you, "But *organic* cargo, where's your permit?"

You stammer, keeping your cool. Checking the dash and every room. You are positive you have nothing, so you just play it cool and maybe he'll let you off.

"Disable the ship."

*Shit.* This isn't like switching off the supralight core, disabling the ship would take out all systems. Including the moisture and heat for the cargo. But ham here isn't giving you much choice--and until he communicates your presence or brings out cuffs, you weren't going to start anything. So you select "SHUT DOWN" on the dash. The subtle hums all go silent until even the dash itself says goodbye. Pondo switches on a flashlight.

"Alright toots, outside. Now."

Your ships are parked in an alleyway between two skyscrapers. A dim light from the street pours in. The city life faded to the occasional zooming speeder and billboard advertisement. Pondo leads you behind your Dyson. "Open her up."

You unclasp the cargo door and slide it up. Revealing the crates. The product.

"Mind showing me what's in one of these crates?"

He hasn't called it in, he hasn't cuffed you. You are in green still. But something tells you whatever's in one of these boxes would win you a free trip to the station. From there, identified and sold for a bounty--possibly to the Oneidas, Jizzaro Brothers, or worse, Soddoram. Be forced to undergo a "strip-search" with this Christmas ham in the interrogation room before being thrown out of an airlock. Or, possibly sold to a private prison.

And for this eventuality, the chaffing the B9 Cricket in your shoe gives you will be worth it. At least for three shots.

You unstrap them and lift one of the heavy plastic boxes. It's heavy. And when you bring it to the floor with a thud you can't help but mutter "Fuck". You swear you hear something, like a stomach gurgle inside.

"Those flowers too heavy for you?" Pondo asks.

You drag the crate out of the ship and onto the street. Kneeling in a perfect position to open it--and if necessary pull out the Cricket and make bacon.

The locks on the crate are tight, you have to rotate the lock three times before it pops. Letting you lift the top with ease.

You can't see it yet, but its stink nearly makes you retch. A round fleshy shape quivers under Pondo's flashlight. Veins and what looks like puss spread across the top. A tendril dances along the top of it. Its translucence gives a peek through the top layer of flesh, at a ... *thing* in a fetal position. An egg.

*And there are at least twenty of them.*

Pondo steps forward with his flashlight, "Well how the fuck do you explain *that*?"

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As I rotate the locks, I'm wondering who set me up -- the pig himself, or Rk'ti? A smuggling rig doesn't just *happen* to have a couple of popped tail lights. Either Pondo is up to some kind of scam, or my erstwhile employer wanted to see me in a jam.

The locks crack. Oh merciful skies and seas, what the fuck even *is* that? I choke down my gorge and pretend to see nothing out of the ordinary.

"Well, that's the bride, of course. Haven't you ever been to a Lan'xiu wedding before?" I have no idea what the hell is coming out of my mouth, but it comes out in a reasonable, almost bored tone. The only thing I know about Lan'xiu is that the inhabitants look like waterbugs and they grow flowers the size of small buildings. "They fertilize the egg at the engagement ceremony, and then the bride hatches during the ceremony." I lower the lid of the crate again, hoping to keep the whatever-the-fuck alive long enough to drop it off. "It's bad luck for anyone to see her before the wedding."

I smile, hoping to keep the tone friendly. "Listen, I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but the groom is some kind of big deal over at..." What was the name of the tower I was in before?

"...Telegenix, and he told me if the wedding started late, he'd have me and my whole family shipped off to the glass furnaces." I shrug. "Three kids at home, Officer, and another on the way. You got kids?"

"Yeah ..." He says. You hear a pop of static, and an alien voice exudes through his radio. Irritated, he takes it out. "This is Unit Six responding. "

"Duty calls?" You suggest.

Pondo groans. But out of his back pocket, he plucks out a round device and approaches the Dyson. Smacking high onto the metal, and gives it a click. Flashing every one second a quick stark blue light.

"I'll be back. Mess with that tracer, and it's a punishable offense. Got it?"

Strange behavior for a Cop--but then again, they aren't cops. More like security for the administrators of Ruulio. And you doubted they were fully staffed. You wave as Pondo takes to his speeder. Blaring his siren as he takes off, blowing trash into the air as he does.

You quickly take the egg back inside. Shut the cargo door. And switch on the power before the cold dry air does damage the eggs. The tracer though will be tricky. You'd prefer an hour to handle that sucker, whether it be prying it out--for that, you would need to somehow keep it in the air without moving it more than a foot from its current place. Jamming its signal would work too, but you're working with a limited time budget here.

And no matter what, whenever Pigsy comes back, he'll know what happened. And when it does, security will be set to high alert.

Fail to remove the tracer, the same thing happens. Only *immediately*.

Thirty minutes till twenty-eight hundred hours.