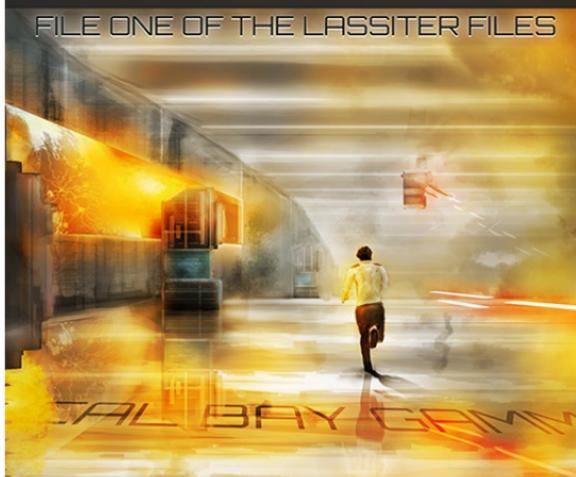


THE UNEXPECTED FUGITIVE

FILE ONE OF THE LASSITER FILES



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The Unexpected Fugitive

File One From The Lassiter Files

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The Goon

Lassiter attached his Z-Class Silencer to the underbelly of his target's cruiser. From an outsider's view, it would have been akin to a flea hopping on to the stomach of a Great Dane. Regardless, the security wonks would be notified of any change in hull pressure or heat, so Lassiter made sure to mark the area with his signet.

While not everyone in the known universe knew the name "Lassiter," those who did knew better than to tussle with him when he had a weapon handy.

"Cutting complete," said his ship's A.I. "Area contained. You may enter when ready."

"Thank you, Sally."

As Lassiter stepped through the tiny portal, he saw an overgrown, tattoo-covered man who had more muscle on his forearm than Lassiter had on his entire body.

The man was bald, except for two neatly cut lightning bolt-shaped pieces of hair that were on either side of his head; he wore a leather jerkin that matched his pants and tall boots; on his hands were a row of rings that were clearly intended to lay damage to whatever face they connected with; and the sternness of his gaze was enough to make the average man quiver and soil himself.

Lassiter, though, was not your average man.

"Ah," said Lassiter, keeping his hand on his sidearm, "we have an idiot."

The goon cracked his neck from side to side before responding.

"I'm going to crush you into a million pieces," the man said in a voice that matched his bulk.

“That would take quite some time.”

“After I do that,” the monster continued, “I’m going to rip your eyes out of your skull.”

Lassiter squinted and pursed his lips. “And you’re going to do this *after* ripping me into the millions pieces?”

“You heard me right.”

“I see.” Lassiter gave a small bow while trying to prevent himself from laughing. “Was just verifying.”

“Next,” said the burly beast of a man, “I’m gonna grab your throat and crush your windpipe.”

Lassiter fought to hold back his smile. The entire ordeal was becoming quite humorous.

“I’ll laugh right in your face as you choke to death.”

“That,” Lassiter said with a snort, “would be something to see.”

“Following you choking to death, I’m going to twist your head off and shit squarely down your neck while you watch in horror.”

No longer able to contain himself, Lassiter laughed outright while holding up a hand toward the monster before him. “Oh my.”

“What’s so funny?”

“Sorry,” Lassiter said after a moment. He then wiped his eyes. “Truly, I do apologize. I just need to get this straight. Your plan is to rip me into a million pieces, tear my eyes out of my head, choke me to death, twist my head off and do a doodie down my neck...while I watch it?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Logistics, really. Can’t be done.”

“Could if I did it fast enough.”

“Not really, no.”

“What if I told you that I’ve done it before?”

“I would truly doubt that.”

“Anyway,” the man said, getting that stern look again, “after I do those things, I’m gonna—”

“Listen,” Lassiter interrupted, “I’m sorry to interrupt, but what say we just get to this business of you destroying me instead of just talking about it? It’ll go much more quickly that way.”

“I’ve killed men for interrupting me before, you know? Just imagine what I’ll do to the likes of you.”

“No real need to imagine anything, my friend. You’ve done quite the job of detailing it already.”

“Yeah?” the big man said with a sneer. “Well now I’m going to get *really* graphic about it.”

Lassiter thought about it for a second. The smart thing to do would have been to pull forth his sidearm and place a hole in the goon’s head, but there was something about the big guy that gave him pause: he was funny. It had been a while since Lassiter had such a laugh. Thus, he decided on a different tactic.

Pointing behind the goon, Lassiter said, “What’s that?”

The moment his foe turned to look, Lassiter snagged the sidearm from its holster, jumped across and knocked him out.

“Sorry, friend,” he said as he set about grabbing some cabling from a loose spool that was laying nearby, “but believe me that the alternative was far more dire.”

The Lift

After tying up the fallen bodyguard, Lassiter walked over to the lift and pressed the “up” button. When it opened, he found two guards standing inside with their guns at the ready. A quick look past Lassiter showed them that the biggest guy on board had been incapacitated by the assassin. They quickly lowered their weapons.

“Wise decision,” Lassiter said with a smile as he stepped inside, standing between them. “I don’t suppose either of you would know where I could find...” He reached into his pocket, pulled forth a little notebook, and flipped through a few pages before saying, “Ah, yes. I’m looking for a Mr. Von Saul.”

The guard to his left gingerly reached out and pushed “4.”

“I thank you,” Lassiter said while replacing the book.

As the lift moved up, the song “Carly Girl” by The Holobees was playing. It wasn’t the original rendition, of course, but rather the muzak version that elevators tended to get. Still, hearing the familiar tune brought back memories.

“My mom used to play this song during the holidays,” Lassiter said. “Never really understood the lyrics, to be honest, but she seemed to rather enjoy them. Plus, she always played this song while making pudding.” He paused, feeling the pull of melancholy. “Loved that pudding.”

The guard to his right sighed and slouched a bit. “Nothing like pudding that ma makes,” he said. Then he stood straight up again. “Sorry.”

“Loving pudding is nothing to be sorry about,” said Lassiter. “Like I said, pudding is good.”

“Yeah, right.”

The doors opened and Lassiter took one step out before turning back toward the guards.

“Any idea which room Mr. Von Saul is in?”

“Should be 413,” said the guard on the left, avoiding eye contact.

“Yeah,” agreed the other guard. “Definitely 413.”

“I see,” Lassiter replied while chewing the inside of his lip. He scratched his forehead for a moment. “I sure would hate to go into room 413 only to find it was a trap. If that happened, I would end up having to kill everyone inside, and then—knowing me—I’d be harboring a grudge against a couple of guards that lied to me.” He bounced his head around and said out of the side of his mouth, “I’m finicky that way.”

“Uh.”

“Once I build a grudge,” Lassiter continued, “I just can’t seem to shake it. I’ve tried all sorts of things over the years. Meditation, long walks on the beach, etc., but I’ve found that the only thing that puts my grudges to an end is to hunt down whomever I have a grudge against and kill them.”

The two guards just stood there, slack-jawed.

“You two do rather seem like nice fellows, though, so I’ll just have to put my faith in you and hope sincerely that you haven’t attempted to trick me.”

“Did I say room 413?” the guard on the left blurted out, all the while holding the elevator door open. “I meant 419.”

“Yeah, right,” the second guard agreed while nodding vigorously. “It’s 419. Don’t know what we were thinking with 413. Definitely 419.”

The assassin smiled sweetly and gave a quick bow. “You gentlemen have been most helpful. I thank you both.”

Lassiter moved through the corridor, checking each of the room numbers while making his way to 419. As he passed by room 413, he opened a couple of DeathDiscs, slid them under the door, and then continued his stroll while whistling “Carly Girl.”

Von Saul

Lassiter walked up to Room 419 and stopped.

His first thought was to just throw in a couple of DeathDiscs and be done with it. But where was the fun in that? Besides, he had to have proof of the kill or he'd have to refund his client's money. DeathDiscs tended to melt DNA. Effective, but not the best thing to use if you needed to retain the identity of your target. Still, Lassiter was growing tired of the tried-and-true busting into the room bit, so he decided on a new course of action.

He knocked.

"Go away," said a whiny voice.

"Sorry, can't," Lassiter replied. "I have a contract to kill a Mr. Von Saul. Would that be you?"

"Uh...no. He left the ship about an hour ago."

"Ah, what a shame. I don't suppose you'd mind my coming in to verify that?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Understood. I'll just slide these DeathDiscs under the door, then. Have a nice day."

"No, wait!"

"Yes?"

Lassiter heard the familiar sound of weapons being set in place. Based on the clicks and adjustments, he assessed there were four guards. Two on the left and two on the right. That would put Von Saul in the middle, likely crouching down behind a table.

"Okay, you can come in."

Lassiter opened the door and stepped inside. He'd been right about the four guards but wrong about the table. Von Saul was standing firmly

between the guards, looking defiant.

“Something tells me that you *are* Von Saul,” Lassiter said with a knowing grin, wagging his finger accusingly.

Von Saul just yelled, “Fire, boys!”

In the time it took them to hit their triggers, Lassiter had pulled his sidearm, dropped into a crouch, and fired four shots. All the weapons dropped to the floor.

“Holy shit,” said Von Saul in shock as he looked around at the still-standing guards.

Each of them had a hole directly between their eyes. Each, except for the one on the far left. The hole in his head was just above his left eyebrow. Lassiter frowned as the guard’s bodies finally caught up with the fact that they no longer had brains to run them.

They toppled to the ground.

Lassiter went over his motions mentally. He’d obviously miscalculated that last shot. This was worrisome. Three out of four wasn’t bad, mind you, but it wasn’t perfect. Perfection of a kill was paramount. Without perfection, Lassiter was nothing more than a hack.

“Look,” said Von Saul, “I’m sure we can—”

“Just a moment, please,” Lassiter said as he returned his sidearm to its holster.

He stood back up and reset his stance. Then he went through the cycle again. Pull the weapon, drop to a crouch, fire four times. But that last one was correct this time. Something had changed the dynamic.

“Ah hah,” he said standing as Von Saul appeared visibly shaken by Lassiter’s actions. “Would you mind saying ‘Fire, boys!’ again like you did before?”

“What?”

“It’s just that I missed that last guard of yours. Well, not missed, really, but I didn’t hit him where I’d wanted to.” Lassiter leaned in conspiratorially, lifting an eyebrow, “I’m somewhat of a stickler for details, you see?” He then shook his shoulders for a moment. “Okay, I’m ready. Go ahead.”

“You’re insane,” Von Saul said, blinking.

“Now, that’s not nice,” Lassiter replied, admonishingly. “Just because I strive to be an expert in my field gives you no right to judge my mental stability. I’ll admit that I’m a tad eccentric at times. But insane? That’s just impolite.”

Von Saul seemed utterly confused. “Sorry.”

Lassiter looked away for a moment. Finally, he took a deep breath and nodded to himself.

“Consider it forgotten,” he said with a wave of his hand. “Usually I hold quite the grudge over these things, but I’m honestly trying to pick my battles these days, if you know what I mean. Now, please do the ‘Fire, boys!’ thing so we can get on with this.”

“Uh...okay. Fire, boys.”

“No, no, no. You have to put some heart into it. Just like you did when I came in the room. *That* was passion. Please, try again.”

“Fire, boys!”

Lassiter pulled the sidearm, dropped into a crouch, let off four rounds, and froze. He *was* off! It was his damn left foot. The toe had not turned to the same degree as it should have, but it only happened when he felt the rush of the kill. He would have to work on that.

Standing up, he grimaced. “Seems I have some work to do on my footing.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, it’s fine when I’m just practicing, but in one of those this-is-not-a-drill situations, it’s just not

perfect.”

“I’m sure there are plenty of other rooms you could go to and practice,” Von Saul suggested. “I hear room 413 has a few people with weapons.”

“Not anymore,” Lassiter replied apologetically. “Kind of regretting that decision, but you can’t re-attach a head, as they say...at least not with today’s technology.” He then pulled out his sidearm and aimed it at Von Saul. “Now, where we?”

“Wait,” Von Saul said, putting his hands up. “I’ll pay you double to kill the guy that put this hit on me!”

Lassiter lowered the weapon momentarily. “Double?”

“Triple!”

“That’s a lot of money. I could get a decent ship off of GalacticBay with that.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever you want.” Von Saul fumbled around in his pocket until he pulled out a data pad. He started typing on it as the sweat poured from his face. “Just give me your bank account information.”

“Hah!” Lassiter said, pointing at Von Saul. “I think not. You’re just trying to con me into withdrawing money from my account. This has happened to me before. You know, you should never believe those people that say you have some long-lost relative that died and has left you money. It’s simply not true.”

“Huh?” said Von Saul. “No, I’m not a scammer. Well, I mean, I’m a merchant, so...”

“See?”

“But I’m not scamming you now. Honest.”

“Sounds like something a scammer would say.”

Von Saul seemed taken aback.

Lassiter snapped his fingers. “How about if I just

give you my AssassinPal account ID and you can just send it there? Safer that way.”

“I don’t have an AssassinPal account.”

“BootleggerPal, maybe? I have one of those, too.”

“Sorry.”

“KidnapperPal?”

“No.”

“OddJobsPal?”

“I don’t have any of the Pal accounts. Tried the MerchantPal one for a while, but the percentages they wanted per sale were outrageous.”

“Really? I’m only paying 2.9% on average. Not too shabby considering all the work they do for you.”

“Right. Well, I don’t have one, so I’m not sure what to do here.”

“Well, you’ll have to choose one to sign up for if you want me to set up a contract for you,” Lassiter stated. “Since we’re doing the assassin thing with this job, let’s just use AssassinPal. Go to Intergalactic.AssassinPal.com and it’ll walk you through the process.”

“Uh...”

“It’s okay,” Lassiter said. “I’ll wait.”

As Von Saul worked on setting up his account, Lassiter took the time to work on his footing. Pull, crouch, spin. Pull, crouch, spin. It worked just right every time. He would have to put together a few simulations when he got back to his station. While he *had* taken out all four guards, the flaw of that last shot was unappealing.

“Okay, done,” Von Saul said finally.

“Great,” Lassiter said, standing back up. “My ID is LassiterTheAssassin.”

Von Saul squinted. “Seriously?”

“Need to know how to spell it?”

“No,” Von Saul replied and then shrugged. “How much?”

“Well, I was paid 1Million credits for your contract, so you would pay me 3Million to...” he changed his voice to sound theatrical...“*exact your revenge!*”

“Sending it through now.”

“Excellent.” Lassiter signaled his ship. “Sally, can you check my LassiterTheAssassin account on AssassinPal and make sure I just received a 3Million credit pay from...sorry, what was your ID?”

“VonSaulTheMerchant.”

“VonSaulTheMerchant,” Lassiter said to his ship while giving a thumbs up to Von Saul. A couple of moments later, his ship’s AI replied that the money had been received. “Funds received. Thank you for your contract, Mr. Von Saul. I know that you have many choices when choosing an assassin to work with these days, so I appreciate you putting your faith in me.”

“Whew,” Von Saul said as he wiped his brow. “That was close.”

“What was close?”

“Being killed,” said Von Saul. “I’ve been a target many times, but never by the hands of someone quite as adept as you.”

“You’re too kind,” the assassin said with a small bow.

“Your skill with that weapon is mind-boggling.”

“Aw, shucks. You’re embarrassing me.”

“No, seriously. Your reputation pales in comparison to seeing you in action.”

“Honestly, you’re going to make me blush,” Lassiter said with a shake of his head as he pulled forth his sidearm and pointed it at Von Saul.

“Whoa! What are you doing?”

“Finishing my contract, of course.”

“But we had a deal. I just sent you 3 Million credits!”

Lassiter gave him a heart-felt look. “And you should know that I will honor that contract, Mr. Von Saul. I’m a firm believer that a man’s word is his true reputation. I hope you believe me when I say that.”

“Sure, I suppose, but—”

“Say, before I forget,” Lassiter said, re-holstering the weapon for a moment, “what’s the name of that big brute you had downstairs to meet me?”

“The one with the tattoos?”

“That’s him, yes.”

“Biff.”

“No! Biff? Truly? We are talking about the gentleman with the lightning-bolt hairdo and the rings on his fingers?”

Von Saul shrugged.

“Huh...I suppose that explains his rage issues.”

“Probably. Why do you ask?”

“I rather like him. He’s funny.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Von Saul. “Listen, I’ll pay you everything I have to not kill me.”

“Sorry,” Lassiter said with a sad grimace. “My current client also filed a contract with me, and as I said before, a man’s word is his reputation.”

“Can I at least know who hired you?”

Lassiter thought about this for a moment. “Client confidentiality is a mainstay of an assassin. I think the OddJobs Union would frown upon my betraying my client.”

“But who am I going to tell?” complained Von Saul. “I’ll be dead!”

“You’ve got me there, Mr. Von Saul,” agreed Lassiter. “Top-notch point, that. Still, though, I just wouldn’t feel right about it. Goodbye, Mr. Von Saul;

and don't worry, you won't feel a thing.”

“No!”

Lassiter pulled the sidearm, dropped to a crouch, and placed a hole perfectly between Von Saul's eyes.

Biff

Lassiter headed back down the lift, checking the picture he'd taken of Von Saul so that he could prove to Mr. Neusewetter that the job had been done. He stopped in front of the lift and confirmed his latest GalacticBay purchase with a smile. Of all the ships he'd bought over the years, the Galien Clunker had continued to elude him...until now. Once he finished offing Mr. Neusewetter per the Von Saul counter-contract, he'd be able to pick up a Huzian Frigate... possibly one in working condition.

He stepped in and pressed the button to take him to the basement. This time the lift was playing *My Dear Suzy* by *Catch-90*, another one of Lassiter's mother's favorites. Honestly, it almost pained him that he'd had to take out Von Saul. The man had possessed a decent taste in music. He shrugged. A job was a job.

The doors opened and Lassiter stepped out to find Biff struggling against his bindings.

"Let me out of these, you pencil-necked prick, or I'll gut you as sure as you stand there."

Lassiter laughed. Even in his current situation, the goon was bountifully doling out brutality.

"Keep laughing, you scrawny punk," shouted Biff, "and I'll put my boot right through your chest."

Lassiter was laughing harder. He hadn't had this much fun in years.

"Come closer, you little shit. I'll bite right into your damn neck, I will!"

"Stop...please...stop," Lassiter said between laughs as he held his stomach. "You're killing me."

This only served to anger Biff further. He was

grunting and thrashing, but to no avail. The only real accomplishment he got out of his struggles was a bloody nose.

Finally, Lassiter had calmed down enough to take a deep breath. He wiped his eyes and looked over at the goon, seeing the rage in the man's eyes. It was all Lassiter could do to not laugh further.

He stood up straight and said, "Biff, I like you."

"Who told you my name, dickworm?"

"Your former boss."

"Von Saul?"

"The one and only."

Biff suddenly looked worried. "He fired me?"

"Not that I'm aware of," replied Lassiter, looking up and to the left. "Why would you think that? I mean, you did fail to stop me from getting to him, so I could see why he might terminate your employment, but he didn't say anything to me about it."

"You just said he was my *former* boss."

"Ah, yes." Lassiter nodded quickly and pointed at Biff. "That's because I killed him."

"Oh," Biff said, and then all the tension fell from his shoulders. "Dammit, what did you go and do that for?"

"It's kind of my job. You know, the whole assassin thing. Not my *only* job, mind you. I do other things like kidnapping, maiming, liberating goods—"

"Shit," Biff said to the ground. "Now what am I going to do?"

Lassiter stood up and walked behind the man. He pulled out the sidearm and aimed it at the back of the goon's head. It was such a shame to have to do this, but he couldn't leave loose ends that were this large and capable. Lassiter had been hunted by men like Biff before. It was no life to always look over

your shoulder.

“Story of my life,” Biff said sadly. “I just can’t keep a job. Vera was right, I *am* a loser. How am I going to make my monthly payments to her now?”

Lassiter stilled his hand. “Who is Vera?”

“My ex.”

“Child support?” Lassiter asked.

“No, no kids. She didn’t want ‘em.”

“Alimony, then? That’s even worse. I’m assuming Vera was a stay-at-home wife?”

“No, she was a bigwig at one of them Intergalactic companies. Made twenty times the money I make. I just had a bad lawyer is all.”

“Unfortunate.”

“Yeah, and now another job down the drain. I just can’t seem to keep one to save my life.”

“Your bosses get killed a lot, do they?”

Biff laid his head back on the ground. “Every one of them.”

“Hmmm,” said Lassiter as he tucked the gun back into its holster. It went against his better judgment, but he felt mildly responsible for Biff’s newfound situation. Killing him would solve that problem, obviously, but Lassiter knew of a way to let the brute live while ensuring no vengeful intent. “How much was Von Saul paying you?”

“Standard. 500 creds a month, plus meals.”

“I’ll give you 1,000 a month, plus meals,” Lassiter offered as he started untying the massive man.

“What?” Biff said in shock. “You honestly want me to be your bodyguard?”

“Heavens no,” Lassiter said quickly. “Based on your self-proclaimed capability in that position, I’d be dead within a week.”

Once the binds were off, Biff stood up and wiped his bloody nose. Then he rubbed his wrists

where the cable had left marks.

“Then what am I supposed to do for you?”

“There are plenty of things you can do,” Lassiter replied. “I’m sure we’ll think of something. You’ll just have to fill out the standard employment agreement and all of that.”

“Wait a second,” Biff said, stepping backwards, “this ain’t some kind of weird sex thing, is it?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” replied Lassiter, who suddenly frowned. Then, he said, “No, it’s assuredly not. I don’t suppose you can cook?”

“Vera always said I did that good.” Biff’s eyes were beaming. “She loved it when I made Cressalokous Crawfish, but her favorite was Zemboof’s Zesty Zoolash. At least I was able to do one thing that made her happy.”

“Sounds scrumptious,” Lassiter said. “We’ll start with you cooking and see how that goes. Plus, there are always other items that need to be attended to on the ship and on various missions.”

“Okay, but I don’t do windows.”

Lassiter frowned. “I don’t think that will be a problem.”

“Good,” Biff said with a thoughtful nod. “Good.” The he stood tall. “No, I mean great! I happily accept the job.”

“Am I safe in assuming that you no longer have plans to rip my eyes out, gut me, put your boot through my chest, bite my neck, or...let’s see...ah yes, tear me into a million pieces?”

Biff looked affronted. “I wouldn’t do none of that to my boss.”

Lassiter nodded and rubbed his hands together. He walked over to the ship and opened the hatch, motioning Biff inside.

“Sally,” he announced to the ship, “this is Biff. He

will be staying with us for a while. Please check all of his vitals, get his prints, scans, and all of that so that we don't inadvertently put lasers through him."

"Yes, sir."

"Also, draw up one of my standard employee agreements for him to sign."

"Of course, sir."

"Good," Lassiter said and then turned toward Biff. "Well, I have another kill to do, so why don't you let Sally get you all set up and then maybe we could have a batch of that Zemboof's Zesty Zoolash?"

"You got it...boss."

"Boss?" Lassiter said to himself as Biff walked toward the back of the little ship. "I've always liked the sound of that."

Synthobeef?

Biff scooped a pile of Zoolash onto Lassiter's plate. It smelled a bit odd and looked even odder, but Lassiter had spent the last week eating protein bars, so he was looking forward to something homemade.

The first spoonful filled his mouth with a bounty of flavors. Some good, one not. He tasted oregano and garlic, which were mixed masterfully. The sauce was the proper consistency, having a tinge of sweetness without being sugary. But something in the flavor profile was foul indeed.

Biff looked hopeful as Lassiter continued chewing.

"It has a good spice to it," said Lassiter. "I'll give you that."

"But?"

"There is an odd flavor."

"Yeah, I figured you'd catch that. There's no actual beef on board, so I used what I could."

"What is it that I'm eating?"

"Synthobeef."

"Huh," Lassiter said, searching his memories for the last time he'd brought Synthobeef aboard. He'd never been much of a fan of the stuff, after all. It was grainy and tasted like cardboard. How this Synthobeef did not taste like cardboard was a testament to Biff's culinary skills. Of course, the fact that it tasted *worse* than cardboard was bad. "I didn't even know there was any Synthobeef on board. You must have dug pretty deep into the hull to find this."

"Not at all," replied Biff. "There was loads of it in the little red containers near the front of the storage hull."

Lassiter suddenly turned green. He jumped from the table and ran to the sink, where he started spitting and rinsing out his mouth while saying “ugh” and “ick” multiple times.

“What’s going on?”

“That’s *not* Synthobeef, Biff! That’s recyclables for fuel. I knew that this tasted like—”

“What are you talking about?”

Lassiter rinsed his mouth out again and scrubbed his tongue with a napkin.

“I bought a recycler a couple of years back so I wouldn’t have to stop off for fuel so often.”

“So we just ate shit?”

“Broken down, but yes.”

Biff’s head fell into his hands. “Sorry, but these are things you should tell me about before I start cooking.”

“I didn’t know you were going to rummage around looking for Synthobeef.”

“I had to find something—”

The ship’s speakers chimed, interrupting their discourse.

“Yes, Sally?”

“Sir, I’ve just gotten word that Mr. Neuswetter’s flotilla has been destroyed.”

“How unfortunate,” Lassiter said, sitting down again.

“Is that the guy you said Von Saul contracted you to kill because he contracted you to kill Von Saul?”

“One and the same,” Lassiter answered while pushing the food around with his fork. “Seems someone beat me to it.”

Biff sat back and pulled out a package of Soonders. He stuck one in his mouth and grabbed for his lighter.

“Sally, what was the cause of the explosion? Any

idea?”

“The news report said that someone was smoking near the recycler when it blew up.”

Biff stuffed the Soonder back in the pack and shoved it into his pocket.

“No smoking allowed on this ship anyway.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s unhealthy.”

“So is having me around for too long without the release of having a smoke, boss. You need to have a designated area or something.”

“Fair enough,” Lassiter countered. “I know the perfect place. Deck two, near the back. Open the door, go inside, shut the door, and then press the red button.”

“Ha ha,” Biff said slowly. “Good try. Look, I’m serious here. You have to make accommodations for employee needs, boss.”

“I suppose I could more simply fire any smokers who work for me.”

“You do that and I’ll file a formal complaint with the Bodyguards Union.”

Lassiter shook his head. “You’re not a bodyguard anymore, Biff, and unless you’re quicker than I imagine you are, you’ve not had time to join the Chef’s Union either. And from tasting this, I’d argue you might want to brush up on your skills a bit before putting in an application.”

“What union are you a part of?” Biff asked.

“The OJU: Odd Jobs Union.”

“That’s odd.”

“Correct.”

“Well,” Biff said, thinking, “if you’re a part of them and I work for you, then that makes me a part of them, too. So I’ll file my complaint with them.”

“Nicely played, Biff. A good point of logic you’ve

deduced there.” Lassiter continued pushing his fork around. “I suppose I could just create a new employment policy that allows me to kill any employee who smokes.”

Biff grimaced.

Lassiter, knowing he had the upper hand, raised his eyebrows victoriously as he took another bite of the Zoolash. Then he jumped up and spat again.

“Ugh. Forgot!”

“Serves you right.”

“Sir,” Sally said through the speakers, “there is a new posting on the main boards. It is a Person Pickup.”

“Hate those,” Lassiter said with a grunt after he finished rinsing his mouth out.

“What’s a Person Pickup?” asked Biff.

“Someone wants someone brought somewhere. Usually it’s just a ferry type thing. It could also be a kidnapping, or retrieving a person who’s running from the law.”

“So you’re acting like a bounty hunter instead of an assassin?”

“Sure, I suppose,” Lassiter said. “Like I said, I don’t just do assassinations...even if they do tend to be the most fun.” He shrugged. “Sally, what’s the status on the pull?”

“Three others have accepted the job already. Shall I put in the fourth bid?”

“Hmmm.”

“What’s the problem?” Biff asked as he started dumping the food in the trash. “Obviously Von Saul paid you to kill this guy that’s already dead.”

“You mean Mr. Neusewetter?”

“Yeah, that guy. Since he’s dead and since Von Saul is dead, why don’t you just keep the money?”

“Because, my dear Biff, that would lack ethics. I

may be a lot of things, but lacking in ethics is not one of them.”

“You kill people for a living.”

“Touché, and remember that’s not all I do. Regardless, I can’t keep the money from Von Saul because I never finished the job he paid me to do. I’ll just have to donate it to the OJU Assassins Retirement Fund.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s precisely what the name states: a fund to help older assassins make their way after retirement. You know, health care, canes, scooters, money for playing bingo...that sort of thing.”

“That’s kind of twisted.”

Lassiter did not see how taking care of the elderly was twisted, irrespective of what they had done for a living.

“Well,” Biff continued, “you still have the money you got from killing Von Saul, right?”

“Sort of.”

“What do you mean?”

“I used it to purchase a ship off of GalacticBay.”

“A ship?”

“Yes,” Lassiter said with a shrug. “I can’t help myself. I love ships. All kinds. Big, small, fast, slow... all of them.”

“How many do you have?” asked Biff.

“Including the Galien Clunker I got this morning?” Lassiter asked, eyebrows up. “173.”

“Holy shit! What do you need 173 ships for?”

“Like I said, I can’t help myself.”

“I’ll say,” Biff said. “You’d be better off having a drug addiction.”

“I beg to differ,” countered Lassiter. “I can re-sell the ships, should I need the money.”

“Would you actually do that?”

“Not likely,” Lassiter admitted. “Throw in our bid, Sally.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Also, see if you can get Hounddog on the line for me, please.”

Hounddog

Lassiter was in the cockpit of his ship, looking out at the debris left by Neusewetter's flotilla. The story about the explosion being caused by someone smoking near a recycler was preposterous. It had to have been the work of an assassin. A sloppy one, obviously, but an assassin nonetheless. Killing everyone on that little city was pointless and downright wrong, at least to someone of Lassiter's exacting point of view. To be fair, though, it could have been that the assassin was hired to destroy the flotilla and everyone on board. He could only hope that were the case.

"Sir, I have Mr. Hounddog on the line."

"Thank you, Sally," said Lassiter, and then, "How have you been, Hounddog?"

"Can't complain," Hounddog replied in a gruff voice. "Whatcha need, Lassy?"

Lassiter hated it when Hounddog called him that, but as always he let it slide. There were few people in the universe that had the tracking skills of a man like Hounddog. Killing him was not an option.

"I'm seeking a mark named 'Nora.' Not sure if that's her real name or not. I'm feeding pics and details through a carrier channel now."

"Same chick from the Person Pickup on the wave?" Hounddog asked.

"Correct."

"Already have feelers out on this one. I figured I'd get a call or two. Meet me at Ballentine in two days. 7:00pm at the pub. Don't be late."

Lassiter blinked a few times at the veiled accusation. "I'm never late."

“You’re always late, Lassy.”

“I am not. I will be there precisely at 7:30pm, Hounddog.”

“7:00pm, Lassy.”

“Right, that’s what I meant. I may even be early.”

“I’m sure. See you then, pal.”

After the signal had cut off, Lassiter sat thinking. He’d been late a few times in his career, sure, but it wasn’t something that should warrant being called out for...or was it? He looked at the time, set a course for Ballentine, and pressed the FTL button.

Ballentine Pub

Two days of nothing but sleeping and eating Biff's grub would be enough to rattle anyone, but Lassiter found he enjoyed the company. He'd had employees before, certainly, but none like Biff. Unlike the rest, Biff was *not* a yes-man. If anything, he was a constant irritant. Somehow that made the time pass more quickly.

Ballentine Space Command signaled them in without a fuss and they latched into a landing bay not too far from the main pub.

"I'm going to need you to come with me, Biff."

"Why?" Biff asked.

"Because I do."

"Fine," Biff said with a sigh, taking off his apron. "What do you need me to do?"

"Just be prepared for anything."

"Expecting some rough stuff, eh?"

"Always."

Biff nodded sagely and started humming. He started at a low pitch and moved his way up in steps a few pitches higher, then he repeated this process until he was hitting higher notes each time.

"What are you doing?" Lassiter asked, looking at the huge man as if he'd lost his mind.

"Scales," answered Biff before he started bubbling his lips along with the humming.

"May I ask why?"

"Just warming up my voice."

"And you're doing that because...?"

"In case we're looking at a fight. It's important to be prepared."

Lassiter pinched the bridge of his nose for a

moment. “Wouldn’t stretching your arms and legs be more useful?”

“Than scales? Couldn’t hurt, but I find a lot of fighting is based on who is the most intimidating, so I like to use my size and my threats to really set the tone.”

“You do have quite the list of dastardly situations to befall a man,” Lassiter acknowledged.

“Thanks.”

Getting through security was a snap since Ballentine was on the list of the Odd Jobs Union Special Donations Center. All Lassiter had to do was show his membership card and pay a couple of hundred credits and they were walking toward the pub.

“Where we headed?” Biff asked.

“The main pub. That’s where we’ll find Hounddog.”

“Think we’ll have time to pick up some foodstuffs? I’d like to get some genuine beef, or at least some decent Synthobeef.”

“I doubt we’ll have time to do it manually,” Lassiter replied, but he had to agree that they were in need of something other than protein bars. “Contact Sally and give her a list of what you need. They’ll deliver it to our holding before we get back, I would imagine.”

They stopped for a minute while Biff made his list of needs. From the sound of the requested items, Lassiter feared that his new employee had extravagant tastes. It could have explained why his ex-wife had troubles with the beast of man. Well, that and the fact that Biff was trying on the nerves.

“All set, boss. Ready.”

Lassiter checked his sidearm and walked into the pub.

It was your standard fare space station watering hole. Dank and smoky with a bunch of empty tables, a cheesy band that barely knew what music was, and a couple of dark corners where the riffraff hung out.

“Hard to see in here,” Biff said, lighting up a Soonder.

“Seems fine to me,” Lassiter replied while waving the smoke away. He spotted Hounddog sitting in a booth near the back. “There’s our man.”

Hounddog looked like he could be Biff’s long-lost brother. Big, with tattoos and leather attire. The biggest difference was that Hounddog had long, wispy hair and he wore a red bandanna.

“You’re late, Lassy.”

“I beg to differ. You said to be here at 7:30.”

“No,” Hounddog said as he smashed a Soonder out in an ashtray, “I said to be here at 7:00, not 7:30. That makes you doubly late.”

“What?”

“Come on, Lassy, it ain’t that hard. You thought you were supposed to be here at 7:30 when I clearly said 7:00, so right there you’re already late. But since *you* thought you had to be here at 7:30 and it’s currently 7:45, that makes you doubly late.”

“Lassy, eh?” Biff said with a giggle. “I’ll have to remember that one.”

“I’m sure you will, Biffy.”

Biff grunted. “Biffy? That’s how it’s going to be, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, okay...I’ll stick with calling you boss.”

“Good,” Lassiter said icily before turning back toward Hounddog. “I would say that it’s nice to see you again, but I think we both know that wouldn’t be true, so let’s just get down to business.”

“100,000 credits, Lassy,” Hounddog said,

seemingly unperturbed. “Then I’ll tell you the whereabouts of your little Miss Dora.”

Lassiter contacted Sally and set the transfer in motion. Hounddog verified the funds were in place and then he pointed across the bar.

Sitting at the other side of the room Lassiter saw a beautiful blond woman with medium-length hair, perfect skin, and a tight-fitting orange outfit. There were two men sitting with her, both of them facing away from Lassiter. But he didn’t need to see their faces to know who they were.

“Isn’t that Brett and Curly?”

“Yep,” Hounddog replied.

“I don’t understand.”

Hounddog shrugged and threw back a shot of whiskey. “They got here at 7:15. Sorry, pal, that’s how it rolls when you’re late.”

“I just paid you 100,000 credits, Hounddog.”

“So did they,” Hounddog said with a grin. “You paid me to know her location, and I gave it to you. They did the same thing. The only difference is that they got here first.”

“Wait a moment,” Lassiter said while rubbing his chin. “You asked me to meet you here two days ago.”

“Yep.”

“So when I was talking to you the other day, you’d already found her?”

“You always were the bright one, Lassy.”

If there was any one person that Lassiter wanted to hold a grudge against, it was Hounddog. At some point, maybe as retirement closed in, he would indeed put a hole in the man’s head.

“Thank you for your service,” Lassiter said testily. “I look forward to working with you again soon.”

“Anytime,” Hounddog answered, holding up his shot glass for a second before draining its contents.

Lassiter nodded and pulled Biff with him, waving away the Soonder smoke as he coughed. Biff rolled his eyes and put the Soonder out at another table.

“Don’t seem fair that the guy just collected 100,000 creds for giving you information that he’d already given to someone else.”

“Fair is all about perspective, Biff. It just means we’ll need to improvise.”

“How so?”

“You start a fight with Brett and Curly while I sneak our mark back to the ship and get away from here.”

Biff took a deep breath and gave Lassiter a disappointed look.

“What?”

“If I’m standing here with those two guys while you’re flying away from the station, that kind of leaves me stranded, right?”

“Ah,” Lassiter replied. “Good point. Hadn’t thought of that.” He mused for a couple of moments before saying, “Well, I’m sure you’ll come up with something. Just don’t take too long.”

“Gee, boss, thanks a lot.”

Taking the Mark

Once Lassiter had moved to a spot behind a pillar so that Brett and Curly couldn't see him, he signaled for Biff to do his thing. Biff saluted in a way that seemed mocking to Lassiter, but he had never been very good at reading these things, so he shrugged it off as a misunderstanding.

Peering around the post, he watched as Biff strolled up and tapped the two goons on their respective shoulders. They looked back and then up, and then up some more. Lassiter couldn't help but smile at their faces as the realization that someone the size of Biff was standing there menacingly. But Brett and Curly weren't rookies. They could handle themselves.

"You two got a problem?" asked Biff.

"What?" said Brett.

"You heard me, meathook," Biff said as Lassiter stifled a laugh. "You look like a couple of boobs that need a good ass-kicking."

"Is that so?" Brett said, pushing his chair back and standing.

"Yeah," Curly agreed while joining his partner in standing up to face Biff.

Biff pointed back and forth between the two while talking.

"Let me tell you what I'm going to do to you guys," he said loudly, his voice a steady timbre that Lassiter had to admit would require a proper warm-up to maintain. "First, I'm going to step on your neck and then I'm going to kick your pal here in the balls so hard that his grandkids will be sterile."

Lassiter snorted at that. His new hire was

priceless at this. But he had a job to do, so he turned his focus on getting Nora back to the ship.

He moved to the wall and began slipping to the side of the table until he was in earshot. Nora was watching him curiously the entire way.

“I’m here to, uh, save you.”

“Who says I need saving?” she asked.

“Oh, I just, well...uh—”

“I’m fine,” she said sweetly. “But, hey, thanks.”

Lassiter frowned. “That changes things, then.” He pulled forth his sidearm and pointed it at her. “I’m here to take you somewhere.”

“That does indeed change things.”

The two started moving smoothly along the outer wall of the pub toward the exit while Biff kept Brett and Curly busy, raising his voice even further.

“Next, I’m going to grab your kneecaps and twist them until they snap.”

“You and what army?” asked Brett.

“Yeah,” said Curly.

“I don’t need an army to take down you two wimps.”

“Who you callin’ a wimp?”

“Yeah.”

“Anyway,” Biff said as Lassiter waved and pointed toward the door, “once I’m done removing your kneecaps, I’m going to stick your finger in his eye and stick his finger in your eye.”

Brett pushed out his chest. “Is that right, tough guy?”

“Yeah.”

“And another thing—”

“Wait a second,” said Brett as he looked back, “where’s...” and then he glanced toward the exit.

“Hey, ain’t that Nora?”

“Yeah,” said Curly looking past Biff.

Lassiter looked over his shoulder and cursed under his breath. It was going to be a run.

“And ain’t that Lassiter she’s with?”

“Yeah.”

The two goons looked at each other as realization set in. Lassiter pulled Nora’s arm hard.

Brett looked at Curly. “We’ve been duped!”

Curly looked at Brett. “Yeah!”

“Run!” Biff yelled as he flipped up a nearby table into Brett and Curly.

Lassiter was dragging Nora along as quickly as he could when Biff came cannoning out of the pub, leaving a mass of chairs and tables in his wake. At least the oaf had set an obstacle course for the two competitors. That was solid thinking.

But it wasn’t enough.

By the time they hit the main stairwell, lasers started flying.

“Not good,” Lassiter said as they bobbed and weaved while running up the steps.

That’s when Lassiter heard the sound of flesh getting struck by a laser, which was followed by a yelp as Nora flew forward onto the stairs. The beam had hit her square on the rump.

“What happened?” Biff yelled as he approached them.

“She took it in the butt,” Lassiter explained.

“That’s a bit personal—”

“I’m talking about the laser, you overgrown idiot.”

“Oh,” Biff said. “Right.”

“Son of a bitch, that hurts!”

In the distance, Lassiter could hear Brett yelling at Curly. “Watch where you’re shooting, you moron! You just hit our payday!” Just then a laser struck the wall directly between the two goons and they jumped

apart. That meant that station security was now involved. Brett looked up at Lassiter as if to say, "I'm going to catch you." Curly looked up at Lassiter as if to say, "Yeah."

"Pick her up, Biff, and get her to the ship. I'll be right behind you."

Biff picked up Nora and continued the run back to the ship.

One of the security guards yelled out, "Stay where you are and nobody gets hurt!"

"Maybe some other time," Lassiter yelled back before pulling his sidearm and placing a perfectly aimed shot at the sign that sat near the guard. It crashed to the ground, pushing them back. "I'm in a bit of a hurry at the moment," he muttered.

Once he reached the top of the stairs, he spotted another guard crouched behind a planter box about 50 feet away.

"Halt or I'll shoot."

Lassiter dropped and rolled as a laser flew over his head. With a quick pull of the trigger, he struck the planter box twice before finally hitting the guard's weapon, knocking it from his hands. The man screamed and jumped back, holding his hand.

He rolled back up, wanting to re-run the process. It shouldn't have taken three shots to hit the weapon. He stifled a curse as another beam flew passed his nose, and then he turned sped down the corridor.

"Sally," he said into the comm, "are Biff and Nora on board?"

"Biff is on board, and he has brought in an injured female."

"That's Nora."

"As you say, sir."

"Food delivered?"

"Already in the hold, sir."

“Excellent. Get the ship unlatched and ready for take-off. I’ll be there in 10 seconds.”

Sensing trouble that only a seasoned veteran at this game could, Lassiter dove to the right just before a beam of light entered the path he’d just been running in.

“Make that 30 seconds.”

“Yes, sir.”

With a level of grace that few before him possessed, the assassin set his weapon to one-quarter power, spun around and let off 10 flawlessly placed shots, and 6 not-so-flawless ones, all while running backwards. The beams that struck hit the boots of each of his pursuers. They all fell to the ground, grabbing desperately at their feet. It wouldn’t cause any permanent damage due to the power setting, but it would give him the time he needed to get into the ship.

“I’m in,” he yelled as he cleared the hatch. “Close us up and get things rolling.”

“Yes, sir,” affirmed Sally.

Lassiter reseated his sidearm and looked at Nora. “How is she?”

“She seems hurt pretty bad.”

“Go in the back and get her patched up while I get us out of here.”

“What? I can’t do that. I’m a married man.”

“Biff, please do as I say.”

“Boss, it hit her in the butt. I can’t touch her butt. What would Vera say?”

“Didn’t you tell me that Vera divorced you?”

“Well, yeah, but I ain’t quite over her yet. You never know, things could work out.”

“Oh, for the love of...patch her up, Biff.”

“Well, it’s just—”

“Do you know how to fly this ship?”

“No.”

“Do you want to get blown out of the sky?”

“Not really.”

“Then I would suggest you let me do my job and you get to doing yours.”

Biff swallowed hard. “But it hit her butt, boss.”

Lassiter pointed at the back room. “Patch her up. That’s an order.”

The Story

The latches came off without a hitch, but Ballentine sent drones out to capture Lassiter's ship.

"Three drones closing in, sir," Sally said.

"Payload?"

"Lasers only, sir."

"They're going to target the engines," Lassiter guessed. "What level of burst do we have, Sally?"

"We can do a full burn for one minute, sir."

"Will the drones catch up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I suppose I'll need to take them out."

He pressed the button to take manual control and set the ship into a controlled turn. Its trajectory stayed the same, but the nose swung around so that he could more easily target the incoming vessels.

Pulling up his screen he saw that two of them were spreading out. They obviously wanted to drop his propulsion so that they could tow him in. He could take out the main one, but that would only prove to allow the other two to set their positions. Once in place, he couldn't face one without showing the engines to the other.

Clever...in a two-dimensional way of thinking.

He pressed the throttle forward and zipped directly at the lead drone. Four shots later and he was flying through a small cloud of debris.

The other two drones were laying down fire toward his rear, but he'd seen enough silly space movies to know that if you're able to suspend the reality of physics for a while, you can make your ship fly in vacuum with even more control than you could inside of an atmosphere. Fortunately for him, the

engineers of these space-faring vessels had also impossibly figured out how to make that work just like the movies. Their motto was “Accurate physics be damned!”

Lassiter fired the top thrusters, dropping the ship quickly as the two drones flew overhead. Pulling up the nose, he released a volley of lasers that destroyed them both.

Then he took a deep breath and slowly released it.

Setting the ship back to auto-pilot, he said, “Sally, could you put us on course to Saent, please?”

“Yes, sir.”

He headed back toward the galley to see how Biff and Nora were doing.

Nora was sitting at the table with a pillow affixed to her rump. Biff was busily putting away the foodstuffs he’d ordered. He was already cooking up some grub.

“I take it you’re feeling better?”

“Biff gave me a shot of Tooakoos and put salve on my wound,” she said with glassy eyes. “He has nice hands.”

“Good to know.”

The Tooakoos would keep Nora loopy for about 15 minutes, but it was the best stuff for managing fast healing. That mixed with the salve should allow her wound to superficially heal within the hour, but it would still be a few days before she was back to 100%.

“Anyway, Biff,” Nora said, “that’s probably why they’re after me.”

“Sounds pretty rough,” Biff said between stirs. “Can’t say I blame you for running.”

“A woman has to do what a woman has to do. Especially in a situation like that.”

Lassiter looked back and forth between the two, getting mildly worried.

“Biff, please tell me that she didn’t just provide you the details on why she’s the target of a Person Pickup.”

“I can tell you that if you want,” Biff said with a shrug, “but she just did.”

The assassin sat back and dropped his head into his hands.

“I know you’re new to this, Biff, but we don’t talk to the marks about these things. You don’t want to be interested in them. You don’t want to know what they have to say.”

“I’m sitting right here, you know?”

“Sorry, dear,” Lassiter stated, “but to me you’re nothing but a piece of furniture.”

“Do you always talk to your furniture?”

“I...” he paused, shook his head, and then turned back toward Biff. “We can’t afford to build a soft spot, and you never want to be privy to information that makes you the next target. So whatever she told you, I order you to forget it.”

“Okay, boss,” Biff said, adding some vegetables to the pot of whatever it was he was making. “I’ll forget that she ran away from a convent after witnessing a crime of passion. I’ll forget that the chancellor of the place was jealous of some baron who married a woman that the chancellor was in love with. I’ll forget that the chancellor killed the baron, which is what she had seen happen. I’ll just forget all of that stuff.” He stepped back and wiped his hands on a small towel. “Happy now?”

Lassiter just sat there with his jaw hanging open and his eyes blinking in disbelief.

“Thanks for that, Biff. Now I know the story, too.”

“Oh, sorry,” Biff said after a moment. “When I’m cooking I tend to get lost and not really think things through.” Biff started chopping up what Lassiter could only hope *was* Synthobeef this time. “It’s not a big deal, though, boss. We don’t know where all this happened or anything.”

“Yuspian,” Nora offered. “It happened on Yuspian.”

“Great,” said Lassiter. “Thanks again.”

“On the main world,” Nora added. “Not the moon. But not to worry, who will believe you got this information from a piece of furniture?”

Biff laughed along with Nora as Lassiter considered handing her back to Brett and Curly so that they could deal with the problem. Some things just weren’t worth the money. And if it weren’t for the amazing smell coming from the pot of liquid that Biff was working on, Lassiter would have considered dumping the oaf off at the nearest fuel depot to boot.

The Fed Ship

Zooming through space in a Z-Class Silencer was one of the best ways to travel. It was light, relatively small and cozy, and it had decent speed and maneuverability. It was also great for attaching to larger vessels and, with Lassiter's updates, it had some decent firepower.

But when it was nose-to-nose with a Federation Regal Class Warship, which it currently was, it felt very tiny indeed.

"We're being scanned, sir," Sally said in her monotone voice.

"We have nothing to hide."

"We don't?" asked Biff.

"Nothing they'll find with their scans," Lassiter replied. "I have secret areas of this ship that scanners can't penetrate."

"Sir, we're being hailed."

"On comm," he said and then cleared his throat. "This is Captain Lassiter of the *Ass-1*. How may I be of assistance?"

"This ship is called the *Ass-1*?" Biff asked.

Lassiter turned back and gave him the shut-the-hell-up sign.

"Captain Cyprian Lassiter of the *Ass-1*," came the voice of the Fed contact, "you are hereby ordered to cut engines and prepare to be boarded."

"Your first name is Cyprian?" Biff whispered.

Lassiter covered the mic. "Your name is Biff?"

"Fair enough."

"Federation ship," Lassiter said, after a moment, "may I understand the nature of this boarding?"

"You have a known fugitive aboard."

Both Biff and Lassiter looked back at Nora. She just shrugged sheepishly.

“First time I’ve ever heard of a witness to a crime of passion being considered a fugitive to the Feds.”

“Yeah, right?” Nora replied, still looking a bit glassy. “Odd, eh?”

“Well, I’m just losing money left and right today.” He set about shutting down the engines and clearing coordinates and navigation history before uncovering the mic again. “Federation ship. I have powered off systems per your instructions. We are unarmed and will be waiting for you in the connection room.”

The connection cut and Lassiter pushed himself out of the chair, motioning the other two toward the connection room.

“Wait, boss—” Biff started, but Lassiter cut him off.

“No, Biff. Not another word, unless you want to join our fugitive here on that Fed ship.”

“But, the *Ass-1*? I’m serving on a ship called the *Ass-1*?”

“It’s short for Assassin. I also own the *Cargo-1*, the *Kid-1*, and the *M-1*.”

“Okay, I get the assassin one, even if it does sound ridiculous, but what does *Kid* and *M* stand for?”

“Kindap and Maim.”

“Then why not call this ship the A-1?”

“Because that’s a steak sauce, Biff.”

The Fed Captain

The three stood in the connection room as the final clank of metal sealing to metal sounded. Lassiter waited for the green light before pressing the button to open the door.

A number of Fed guards poured in, wearing their black outfits and having their weapons at the ready. Following them, a middle-aged man with a sour look walked in. He wore a gray uniform that matched the color of his hair, and his face showed a level of surliness that only a mother could love.

“I’m Captain Nancy of the Federation ship *Galant*,” he said, looking them over. “Which one of you is Nora?”

Lassiter and Biff looked at each other. Biff shrugged.

“That would be the female,” Lassiter pointed out.

“I suppose that makes sense,” Captain Nancy said with pursed lips. “Why does she have a pillow on her backside?”

“She was shot at Ballentine Station.”

“And what are you doing with her, Captain Lassiter?”

Lassiter was prepared for this question. “We saw that she was being chased by a couple of mean-looking chaps, so we tried to help her out.”

Captain Nancy squinted at him for a moment. Then he began pacing back and forth in the small space, giving him only two steps per direction.

“You expect me to believe that you were merely being a good samaritan, Captain Lassiter?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Captain Lassiter, you should know that I’m

essentially a human lie detector. I can spot falsehoods from a light year away. In interrogation training I scored top of my class." He paused. "That said, let me ask you again, do you *honestly* expect me to believe that you were simply trying to help this woman out?"

"Yes, sir," Lassiter replied smoothly, "I honestly expect you to believe that."

"Good enough for me," Captain Narcy said with a trusting nod. "Boys, take the fugitive to our holding room. I'll be there in a moment."

Two guards stepped forward and grabbed her by the arms. Lassiter held out a hand to keep Biff at bay, slowly shaking his head at the hulking man. Once they were alone with Captain Narcy, the Fed spoke again.

"You boys were carrying a really dangerous person with you."

"She was just a witness to a crime of passion," Biff argued. "How can you guys consider her a fugitive for that?"

"That's what she told you, eh?"

"Exactly that," Biff affirmed.

Captain Narcy shook his head. "Were you born this gullible or did you cultivate that trait over the years?"

"What?"

"Son," Captain Narcy said dramatically, "she is no more a simple witness to a crime of passion than you are a five-foot albino with inkless skin. She lied. That's what she does."

"Oh," Biff said, looking hurt.

"Sorry, friend," Captain Narcy added softly. "You can't believe everything people tell you. They lie all the time. You have to have a nose for sniffing out those who try to pull one over on you. Not many people have that skill. I'm one of the fortunate few."

“Jeepers,” Lassiter said. “She was really as dangerous as you say?”

“More than you would imagine.”

“Good thing you stopped us when you did, then,” Lassiter said with feigned relief. “So, are we free to go?”

“That depends, Captain Lassiter. You’re sure you weren’t engaged in that Person Pickup job that was available on the wave?”

“No, sir,” Lassiter said. “I’m not even sure what a Person Pickup is. Could you explain that to me, Captain Narcy?”

“You know, boss, it’s—”

“I asked Captain Narcy a question, Biff,” Lassiter said through clenched teeth. “Would you please allow him to answer it?”

Biff seemed to get it. “Right. Sorry.”

“Better that you not know the particulars, Captain Lassiter. You can get into trouble knowing too much these days. Ignorance is safety, as they say.”

“I thought it was bliss,” Biff stated.

“That too, I suppose,” Captain Narcy replied. “Well, I suppose your story checks out, Captain. I’ll leave you two to your—”

A crashing sound resonated on the Fed ship, followed by the sight of lasers flying. An instant later, one of the guards backed into view and Nora flew through the air and placed her outstretched foot directly against the side of the man’s head. Obviously she was healing faster than Lassiter had expected, though she did still have the pillow strapped to her bottom.

Captain Narcy spun toward Nora and began reaching for his sidearm.

Lassiter took the opportunity to jump toward the Fed captain and clobber him on the back of the

head, knocking him to the ground.

“Is that your only move?” asked Biff as Lassiter checked to make sure Captain Narcy was indeed unconscious.

“What are you talking about?”

“Hitting a guy on the back of the head when he ain’t looking.”

“Pretty much, yes,” Lassiter said as he stood back up.

“You ain’t a good fighter, huh, boss?”

“I’m great with weapons...probably the best, truth be told.”

“Ah,” Biff said and then looked away.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Biff?”

“Nothing.”

Takedown

Biff and Lassiter walked into the Fed ship and looked at the mass of bodies on the floor. Obviously Nora had the hand-to-hand skills that Lassiter lacked.

Lassiter set about checking the pulse on each of them. He sighed in relief—they'd only been knocked out. This would put Lassiter in the sights of the Feds, of course, but it was far better than a murder charge.

Regardless, this was not the type of attention that Lassiter wanted. Ever.

He stood up and turned toward Nora, only to find that she was holding a sidearm and it was pointed directly at him.

"I couldn't let them take me," she explained calmly. "Their lockups are far too secure."

"Are they dead?" Biff asked, looking at Lassiter.

"They're just incapacitated," Nora replied before Lassiter could answer. "I'm not a monster, Biff."

"Sorry."

"But I won't be caught by them," she added as she looked back at Lassiter.

Biff moved to stand between the two. Lassiter was shocked at that, but better the oaf be the target of the sidearm than him.

"I don't know your real story, Nora," Biff said softly, "but we'll take you wherever you want to go. There's no need for further violence."

"We'll do what?" Lassiter said as his eyebrows shot up. "Did you suddenly get a promotion that I wasn't told about? Last I checked, I was the *Ass-1* Captain, not you."

Nora lowered the weapon, dropping it to the ground.

“I’m not any threat to you. I just don’t want to be left here with the Feds.”

“Did I say I was going to leave you here?” Lassiter asked incredulously, feeling emboldened by the fact that she no longer had a weapon. Then, realizing that he didn’t have one either, and noting that he was no match for her, his resolve diminished. “My goal,” he continued, “is to drop you off at the location that I was hired to drop you off at. I just want to collect my pay and be done with this mission.”

“That’s settled, then,” Biff said.

“You’re something else, Biff,” Nora said with a shake of her head.

“That’s an understatement,” Lassiter said.

They pulled Captain Narcy’s limp form through the hall and into the holding area. Nora snatched the man’s badge off of his jacket before they entered the connection room. Lassiter set about sealing their room so that they wouldn’t be harmed when the ships decoupled while Nora accessed the Fed ship’s main computer system.

“Room is sealed,” Lassiter said as he wiped his hands on his pants. “We can go now.”

“One second.” Nora continued working on the computer for a moment before the lights went dark and the distant sound of engines faded away. In less than a minute, the entire ship was quiet. “There, that’ll give us about 3 hours. It takes roughly that long for the computers go through their boot sequences, do self-diagnostics, and clear lockouts.”

“What about life support?” Biff asked.

“It’s intact. 10 hours on boats like this.”

“That won’t stop their security crew from getting down here and taking shots at us,” Lassiter noted. “Let’s go.”

The three jumped back into the *Ass-1* and Lassiter set about unlocking them from the Fed ship. Metal creaked as the ships pulled apart. Two minutes later, they were drifting away from the *Galant*.

Lassiter reached into one of the side panels and pulled out a small sidearm that he'd kept stashed away for just these sorts of situations.

"Okay," he said as Nora turned around, "you're a slippery one. I don't know what your real story is and I don't want to know. But I believe it'll be better for everyone if you spend the rest of this trip in a cell."

Biff took two steps forward and grabbed the gun away from Lassiter, taking the assassin completely by surprise.

"What are you doing?" asked Biff hotly.

"I have a more pressing question," Lassiter replied with equal ferocity, "what are *you* doing?"

"We made a promise, boss."

"No, *you* made a promise...employee. Nora and I came to an agreement that instead of leaving her here with the Feds, I am going to drop her off as planned."

"And now you're just going to throw her into a cell?"

"That's right."

"So all that stuff you said about ethics was just a load of crap, eh?"

"What's this got to do with ethics? She's not a person, Biff; she's a mark."

"Excuse me?" Nora said.

Lassiter ignored her. "You need to start treating her that way, too."

"Never mind," Biff said with a grunt, handing back the weapon. "Here, take your damn gun. Do whatever you gotta do. But wherever the next stop is, I'm getting off this boat. I quit."

“You can’t quit.”

“I can and I have. I’ve had a lot of bosses in my time, but none like you.”

“You’re talking about all those bosses that died, right?”

“Nice,” Biff said. “Go ahead and make your little jokes.”

“It wasn’t a joke.”

“You know, I always thought all bosses were the same, but you take it to an entirely new level. All bosses are assholes in one way or another, that’s expected, but you’re the only one that went back on a promise.”

“Did you just call me an asshole?” Lassiter said with a start.

“I just called you a liar,” Biff stated coldly.

“But I never promised anything!”

“An agreement is based on trust,” Biff argued. “If you throw her into a cell, that’s not trust.”

They stood in a stalemate as Lassiter weighed his options. He knew what the smart thing to do was. It was simple. Take Nora to Saent, collect the money, and drop off Biff at the same time. Be done with the both of them and go back to his normal life of running odd jobs. But having Biff around was convenient. The food alone made it worth it; aside from the Zoolash incident, of course.

“Fine,” Lassiter replied, keeping his eyes on Biff’s, “but she’s your responsibility. Anything goes wrong and you’ll be short one head. And you should know that I don’t appreciate being ordered around by my chef.”

“Won’t happen again, boss,” Biff said with a big smile as he smacked Lassiter on the back.

“And I now get the feeling that when you say ‘boss’ what you really mean is ‘asshole.’”

“I could just start calling you that instead, if you’d prefer.”

Lassiter grunted.

The Galley

The *Ass-1* was moving at faster-than-light speed while Biff, Nora, and Lassiter sat in the galley eating Biff's latest concoction. The Fed ship delay had let the pot of stew simmer for a while, bringing more flavor to the Synthobeef and also creating a delectable aroma throughout the ship.

"So the story about you witnessing a crime of passion was a lie, right?" Biff asked as he ladled a helping of stew into Nora's bowl.

She merely shrugged in response.

"Can you tell us what really happened?"

"Biff," Lassiter said between bites, "didn't we already go over this?" He paused. "Good heavens, this is delicious. I've not had the likes of this flavoring except at the most expensive restaurants."

"Thanks, boss," Biff said with an enormous grin. "It's all in the spices."

"Didn't help with the Zoolash, and how did you mean that 'boss' moniker just then?"

"Okay, not *all* in the spices," Biff said, not answering the question, "but it makes a big impact."

Lassiter sighed, and then savored the bite. Synthobeef had never tasted so tender.

"Either way," he continued, steeling himself back into reality, "as your employer, I must insist that you refrain from meddling in our mark's stories."

"At this point," Nora interrupted, "you may as well know the real story."

"Nope," Lassiter said sharply. "Don't want to know. Neither does Biff, no matter what he tells you." He took another sip of the broth, amazed at the taste. "Still, it's obvious you're in a heap of

trouble. The Feds don't typically track down a fugitive using a Regal Class Warship. Of course, it could have just been serendipitous that they ran into us. Or maybe they know you a lot better than we do. After seeing the way you handled those guards, a warship was probably their smartest move." He dropped his spoon into the bowl. "And, though I have no idea why, that part has piqued my curiosity."

"I'd be happy to explain," Nora offered.

"I doubt we'd get the real story anyway," Lassiter said as he considered things. Then he shook his head. "I have these rules for a reason. No storytelling on this boat."

"Awe, come on, boss? What's it going to hurt?"

"I'm growing tired of your insolence, Biff," Lassiter said tiredly. "You're a good cook, but you're not irreplaceable. You signed a contract and you need to keep to the rules as stated therein. That means no stories from the marks, no getting involved in their lives, and no constant questioning of my orders. Are we clear?"

"It says that I can't question your orders? Must have been some pretty fine print."

"Are we clear, Biff?"

Biff looked about ready to argue, but instead he sighed. "Yeah, we're clear."

"Thank you."

Saent

The planet Saent came into view as the FTL drive shut down. From their location in space, Saent looked like a brownish marble with patches of blue. It wasn't exactly a water planet, but it had enough patches of liquid to keep a small set of communities running. Plus, there were always off-world deliveries to keep their supplies up as needed.

Most planets in the sector were lax on security, but Saent was known to carefully monitor landings and takeoffs. They wanted to know who was on their planet at all times.

In order to avoid suspicion, Lassiter opened a channel to their security group immediately upon coming out of FTL.

"Saent Space Control, this is Captain Cyprian Lassiter of the *Ass-1* requesting permission to land."

"*Ass-1*, this is Saent Space Control. Please state the purpose of your visit."

"We are dropping off a passenger by the name of Nora—" he stopped and looked questioningly at his passenger.

"Jefferies."

It was the same last name of the man that had posted the Person Pickup job. Was this his daughter? Sister? Wife? He decided to keep the question to himself for now.

"Jefferies," he said into the mic. "Nora Jefferies."

"I'm assuming you mean the wife of Carlson Jefferies?"

Wife, then. Interesting. "One and the same, Saent Space Control."

"Stand by."

The signal dropped as Lassiter thought things through. This just didn't make any sense. Nora had to know that her husband had been the one who'd put the job up on the wave. But if that were true, then why would she be complying with the delivery? It could have been the lesser of two evils: Fed ship vs. irritable husband, but something seemed amiss.

"Hey," Biff said while scratching one of the lightning-bolt-shaped pieces of hair on his head, "ain't Jefferies the guy that put that Person Pickup job on the wave?"

Lassiter leaned back into his chair and shook his head in disbelief.

"Honestly, Biff, I'm starting to feel the urge to rip *you* into a million pieces and put my boot through *your* chest."

Biff's eyebrows went up. "What did I do now?"

"You gave away what I already know," Nora answered with a smile as she patted the oaf on the shoulder. "It was my husband that put out the warrant for me. Happens every time I leave."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's simple, really," Nora explained, "you two got me away from the Feds...sort of. Getting away from Jefferies is easy, though I'm sure he's upgraded his cells since the last time I escaped. No matter, though. Whatever he's done it'll be cake compared to the Feds."

"I don't understand, Nora. You're just going to turn yourself in?"

"No," she answered. "Lassiter is going to turn me in."

Biff pushed his back up against the wall. "I'm so confused right now."

"It's pretty simple, Biff," Nora said. "You guys are going to turn me in. Jefferies will pay you for the

delivery. Then I'll figure out a way to escape.”

“But why would you do that after going through all the trouble to escape from him in the first place?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” she replied. “Each time I’m here I get something I need. Then I leave for a while, come back, and get more. This is the first time I’ve ever been successfully delivered, though.”

“Which I doubt would have been possible were you not willing to be delivered,” Lassiter put in. “You’re up to something.”

“Honestly, I’m not.”

“I’ve been in this business a long time, Nora,” Lassiter said, leaning his chin on his fist. “People never do anything without expecting something in return. It’s just not natural.”

Nora shrugged and nodded casually toward Biff. “Let’s just say that I’ve grown kind of fond of the big guy.”

Lassiter snorted. “That makes one of us.”

“Hey!”

“Captain Lassiter,” the Saent Space Control contact said over the comm, “you may proceed to coordinates 179.36, 33.11. That will bring you to the Jefferies Ranch. They have been notified of your impending arrival.”

“Thank you, Saent Space Control.”

The *Ass-1* broke through the atmosphere and headed down toward the specified coordinates. Once they got in visual range of the ranch, Lassiter’s eyes widened.

It was enormous. Miles of trees in all directions with buildings sporadically laid out, all of different sizes, but all connected through tube structures that Lassiter assumed were monorails or something similar. In order to have built such a monstrosity, Jefferies had to have been more than loaded. And

this was only what was visible above ground. There was no doubt even more underground.

“Sir, we are being hailed by the Jefferies Ranch.”

“On comm. This is—”

“Proceed directly to the coordinates you were given, Captain Lassiter,” said a grating voice. “Any deviation will result in your ship being shot down.”

“I highly doubt that,” Lassiter replied, “considering we have Nora Jefferies on board, but I will comply nonetheless. There is no reason to be testy about it.”

“Once you have landed, we will lower your ship into the docking compartment and you will then be escorted to meet with Mr. Jefferies. No weapons will be allowed.”

“Understood.”

The speaker went dead and Lassiter looked back at Nora.

“Are they always this friendly?”

“Nicer than usual, actually,” Nora answered, looking worried.

That made Lassiter doubly worried.

Honey, I'm Home!

The hatch to the *Ass-1* lowered and Biff, Nora, and Lassiter walked out to find two heavily armed guards standing there.

"Walk through the scan station," demanded one of the guards.

They did as they were told. Once everything checked out, the guards motioned them toward a door at the far end of the room.

"I'm assuming you know where we are?" Lassiter asked as they walked along.

"Main house."

That didn't really help Lassiter put together a mental map of the place, but seeing that he was essentially at the mercy of the goons escorting them, he decided that the best course of action was to trust Jefferies as one businessman would trust another businessman. That thought gave him pause.

They walked through the door and found themselves in a large foyer. It was almost big enough to fit the galley on the *Ass-1*. The decorations matched the ostentatiousness of the room. Golds, platinums, hand-carved woods, and robot-welded metals. Everything was top-of-the-line.

"I can't fathom why you would have left such a fabulous home," Lassiter said in a voice of awe.

"House, not home," Nora said.

"I assume there is some distinction that I'm unaware of."

"It's a feeling," Nora replied. "Like being in your own ship versus being in someone else's ship."

"Ah, yes, I see. I love being nicely nestled in the *Ass-1*."

“Okay,” said one of the guards who nudged Lassiter along, “none of that dirty talk while we’re in Mr. Jefferies’ house. Show a little respect.”

Lassiter gave the man a funny look. “I’m sorry, but what?”

Nora groaned and just said, “Idiots.”

They turned the corner and walked through a couple of mahogany doors that opened into a library. In the middle of the room sat a solid desk that was occupied by a man who looked to be in his mid-50s.

“Hi, honey,” Nora said sarcastically, “I’m home.”

“And you’ll be in a cell soon, too,” Jefferies replied as he finished signing a few papers. He laid the pen down after a few moments and said, “Oh, and I have a surprise for you, Mr. Lassiter.”

“For me?”

Jefferies snapped his fingers and two men walked out from behind one of the massive bookshelves.

“Surprise,” said the goon named Brett.

“Yeah,” his counterpart, Curly, chimed in.

“Shit,” said Biff.

“Looks like we got the better of you, after all, Lassiter.”

“Yeah.”

Lassiter rolled his eyes. “I fully anticipated this, gentlemen.”

“You did not,” argued Brett.

“Honestly, I did. You two are rather predictable, after all.”

“No, we’re not,” complained Brett.

“Yeah,” agreed Curly. “I mean, no.”

Lassiter turned back toward Jefferies.

“A deal is a deal, Mr. Jefferies. We brought Nora here. They didn’t. We deserve payment; they don’t. You wouldn’t want the Odd Jobs Union to be against you, sir.”

Jefferies pushed himself up and walked around the desk. For a man in his 50s, he appeared to be in fantastic shape. It was Lassiter's experience that as soon as a man reached 51 he would become a slobbering mass of chubbiness, but this man's physique betrayed that stereotype. While his hair and weathered skin gave him away, his body could have belonged to man half his age.

"The problem, Mr. Lassiter, is that Brett and Curly here weren't riding with my dear Nora. That means that they don't have the information you have."

"I assure you, sir, that we have no information." Lassiter gave a quick glance at Biff. "Isn't that right, Biff?"

Biff opened his mouth, but stopped himself from replying too fast. He looked over at Lassiter and then slowly nodded.

"Not a word," he said with a wink.

"Oh really?" Jefferies said with a laugh. "You honestly expect me to believe that she didn't tell you about the treasure?"

"Treasure?" said the combined voices of Lassiter, Biff, Brett, Curly, and the two guards.

"Oh, please! I'll bet you'll also have me believe that she didn't give you the exact location of the bounty? You know, Arden-3 at coordinates 112.37, 77.43, right?"

"Actually, dear," Nora said with a wicked grin, "I didn't."

"Hard to believe."

"What I told them was that you were just an overbearing husband that tried to keep me caged in and that I always ran from you."

"So that wasn't true either?" asked Biff, looking annoyed.

“Actually, that is true,” Nora answered soothingly, “but the reason he wanted me returned is because I have this.”

She slowly pulled up a chain that was tucked under her shirt. On the end of it dangled a small silver key.

“You brought the key to the treasure with you?” Lassiter said unbelievably.

“No, dummy. This key opens the lockbox where the actual key to the treasure is hidden.” She then pointed at Jefferies. “He just doesn’t know where that lockbox is.”

“Pretty clever,” Lassiter admitted.

Nora turned back toward Jefferies and said, “But I didn’t tell them the location of the treasure, Carlson. I couldn’t have.”

“Why not?”

“Because you never told me the location, you dullard! Until just now, obviously. Why do you think I came back?”

“I knew it was too good to be true,” Lassiter said.

“Damn,” Jefferies said, taking a step forward. “Sadly, this means that I’ll need to kill you all.” He looked over at Nora. “Even you, my dear.”

“But the lockbox—”

“I’ll find it based off the key you have around your neck. I’m sure there is someone out there that can help me find it for the right price. A Mr. Hounddog, for example.”

“Just don’t be late,” Brett said. “He hates that.”

“Yeah.”

Nora backed away, looking around for a way out.

This did not bring any comfort to Lassiter.

“You seem afraid of him,” he whispered. “I saw what you did to those guards on the Fed ship. Surely this old man is no threat to you, or even Biff, Brett,

or Curly.”

“Or you,” Biff added, leaning in, “assuming you can get him to turn his back for a second.”

“I’d love to agree with you on that, boys. The problem is that he’s the guy who trained me.”

“Oh,” Lassiter said, finding a brand new respect for Mr. Jefferies. “Well, that’s not good.”

Jefferies jumped forward, throwing his foot in the air and cracking Curly on the side of his head. Curly spun around like a top, coming to rest facedown on the marble floor.

An instant later, Jefferies had doubled over Brett by sinking an elbow into the goon’s gut. Then, he spun around and knocked Brett’s feet out from under him before bringing down a hammer fist squarely onto the goon’s jaw, knocking him out cold.

Lassiter looked for a way out, but only got two steps before Jefferies cannoned into him from the side, sending the assassin sailing into a set of bookshelves. It didn’t knock him out, but he was certainly not in the mood to do much beyond groan. Jefferies punched him in the nose anyway, causing Lassiter’s vision to blur as his nose began pouring blood.

Jefferies then stood up, reached into his pocket, and pulled forth a couple of throwing stars, which he threw at his own guards, catching each of them in the throat. They died gurgling.

“You’re next,” he said to Biff. “And after him, I’m going to kill you, Nora. You’ve been nothing but a pain in my ass for years. It’s time to end that pain. And do note, my dear, that I plan on making your death slow and exceedingly uncomfortable.”

“Nope,” said Biff with a seething look.

“What?”

With a speed that made Jefferies look like he’d

been standing still during his recent rampage, Biff stepped forward and slammed his gigantic fist directly down on the top of Jefferies' head. It was like watching a sledgehammer hit a watermelon, expect that Jefferies' head stayed intact. The entirety of it, though, did indeed move. It had sunken down into Jefferies' chest cavity to the point where his eyes were now at shoulder level, meaning that his chin, mouth, and nose were no longer visible. The crunching sound alone nearly made Lassiter gag. The gurgling that followed, *did* make Lassiter gag.

"Oh my god," Lassiter said with a cringe. "That's horrible! I'm going to have nightmares about that for months!"

"Ugh," said Brett while rubbing his jaw. "That's the most disturbing thing I've ever seen, and I've seen a lot of disturbing things."

Curly, too, was back up. He said, "Yeah."

"He had it coming," Biff said sadly as the form of Jefferies keeled over. Biff looked up at the ceiling and softly added, "Sorry, ma. I know I promised."

Lassiter pulled himself up and wiped his bloodied nose on the nearest curtain.

"Biff, you do realize that simply using that little move would have saved a number of your bosses over the years, yes?"

"I don't like doing that," Biff replied. "Hurting people, I mean. I'd promised my ma that I would start using words instead of violence. She said anything could be solved by words." Biff looked back down at the lifeless form of Jefferies. "But he was going to kill Nora and I couldn't allow that."

"Words, eh?" mused Lassiter. "Well, I have to admit that you did indeed use quite the repertoire against me when we first met."

"Against us, too," said Brett.

“Yeah,” Curly said.

“I had to make a living somehow,” Biff said with a shrug. “Not easy for a big guy like me to do much beyond fighting. Would have been good at fighting, though.”

“I’ll say,” agreed Lassiter, pointing at Jefferies.

“Just couldn’t, cause of that promise and all. So I figured that intimidation alone would be enough with the way I look.” He sighed. “Came up with a bunch of disturbing ways to kill people, found a vocal coach, and started making that my gig.”

“Explains why you lost a lot of bosses,” Lassiter said.

Biff just nodded.

“Then why did you do this?” Nora asked, pointing at her deceased husband. “I mean, you promised your mother you wouldn’t, but you did.”

“Couldn’t let him hurt you, Nora. Ma would understand that.”

Nora reached up and kissed him on the cheek.

“Ugh,” Lassiter said at their syrupy exchange, “and I thought watching Jefferies get his head smashed in was sickening.”

“Exactly,” Brett agreed.

“Yeah,” said Curly.

Now What?

A group of guards burst into the room moments later. They had their weapons drawn and were moving their sights from person to person as another man strolled in and surveyed the area.

He was younger than Jefferies had been, but still had that pompous look to him. He wore a red cardigan and khaki pants and his salt-and-pepper hair was set perfectly.

Looking down, the man guffawed for a moment before pulling out a handkerchief and bringing it to his mouth. After a few moments, he regained his composure and looked around the room, settling his eyes on Nora.

“Put your weapons down,” he said to the guards. “What are you going to do, shoot the new owner of the estate?”

The guards lowered their weapons as Lassiter and Biff both looked shocked.

“I’m terribly sorry for the ineptitude of the guards, Mrs. Jefferies,” the man said.

“It’s quite understandable, Charles,” Nora said with an uppity voice that Lassiter hadn’t heard her use before.

“May I ask how this happened, Mrs. Jefferies?”

Nora glanced over at Biff, who looked defeated. “No, Charles, you may not.”

Charles glanced at her briefly before nodding. Obviously he was a man who knew that it was more important to keep one’s job than to ask questions. No doubt he had also considered the possibility that he may end up in a similar predicament to Mr. Jefferies if he pushed the point.

“Guards,” Charles commanded, “remove these bodies from the main area while I work with our new owner for a few moments.” He then turned back to Nora. “Am I to assume that these gentlemen are with you?”

Everyone in the room held their breath for a moment.

“They are.”

“Most excellent,” Charles said with an accepting smile. “Madam, we will need to update the records promptly in order to avoid any rifts in financial matters for the estate. I trust that you will wish to run the day-to-day operations directly?”

“Actually, Charles,” Nora said as she walked over to the desk and ran her fingers across it appraisingly, “I don’t plan on running it, no. In fact, I plan on donating it.”

“Pardon me, madam?”

“Not to worry, Charles. I’ll be sure to include a clause in the donation that will stay your position within the company. In fact, I am likely to recommend to the new owner that you be placed in charge of operations, seeing that you have more knowledge than anyone else about the nature of my...” she stopped and cleared her throat. “The nature of my deceased husband’s business.”

“Indeed, madam? I would be honored.”

“The only difference, Charles, is that you would be changing the environment of this place into one of philanthropic pursuits, not one of greed and mayhem.”

Charles blinked a few times. “I shall embrace the challenge, Mrs. Jefferies, I assure you.”

“Good to hear, Charles,” Nora said. “Our first order of business will be to pay these gentlemen for their work.”

Lassiter was glad to hear of this. So far this entire adventure had been nothing but a waste of time, and it nearly had cost him his life.

“Us too?” asked Brett.

“Yeah,” said Curly.

“Sorry,” Nora said, “but no. However, I have a job for you that will pay you double what you would have made, and I’ll give you half up front.”

“Oh? Well, that’s good, then.”

“Yeah. Good.”

“I want to make double,” said Lassiter.

“You will,” Nora replied swiftly, before taking Brett and Curly aside and setting them off on a mission that Lassiter didn’t want to know about.

Biff had tried to listen in, but Lassiter pulled him away and admonished him again for trying to know too much.

Lassiter’s nose was still hurting from the fight he’d just been in. At some point he would need to either invent a way to hide his weaponry from scanners or actually improve his hand-to-hand combat skills. Not that it would have mattered, considering the prowess that Jefferies had shown, but this wasn’t the first time that he’d gotten his nose bloodied.

“That was incredibly disturbing the way you killed him, Biff.”

“I know.”

“But, I have to hand it to you...you actually saved one of your boss’s lives.”

“Huh,” Biff said with a thoughtful look. “I guess I did, didn’t I?”

“Indeed.”

Biff puffed out his chest. “Not bad for a chef, eh?”

“Clearly a more functional profession choice than

bodyguard, I'd wager."

Nora broke away from Brett and Curly a couple of moments later. She went to talk to Charles while Brett and Curly crossed over to Biff and Lassiter.

"We're out of here," Brett said.

"Yeah."

"It will be such a shame to see you go," Lassiter said charmingly.

"No grudges from our side," Biff stated. "Just doing business, ya know?"

Lassiter did know. It was the nature of things.

"Agreed," he said with a sigh. "Safe travels to you both."

"Yeah," Biff said.

Curly just looked at the big man funnily while raising an eyebrow before they walked out of the room.

"Now what?" asked Lassiter as Nora came over to them.

"Now we get that treasure," she replied with a wicked grin.

The Trip

Lassiter was glad to find that the *Ass-1* was not only in fine shape when they had returned, but it had also been refueled and the outside had been cleaned.

“Don’t be too chuffed by that, Lassiter,” Nora said, “Carlson only took care of the ship because he had plans to sell it after your demise.”

Lassiter frowned.

“I’ve seen him do it many times,” she pointed out.

“Bastard,” Lassiter said grumpily, then added, “Smart, though. Can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same thing myself.”

They got clearance from both the Jefferies Ranch and Saent Space Control before lifting off and heading out to space. Lassiter entered the destination for Arden-7 and signaled Sally to hook in the FTL.

“We’re only about an hour away,” Lassiter said as he entered the galley, “but isn’t there a problem with this picture?”

“What?” asked Biff.

Lassiter looked at Nora. “The key you’ve got around your neck is for a lockbox, right?”

“Yep,” she said, “and it happens to be on Arden-7. Just lucky, I guess.”

“At least someone is,” Lassiter said. “I don’t suppose there is any of that stew left?”

Biff smiled and set about re-heating a few bowls for them to share.

“So what’s the deal with this treasure?” Biff asked.

“Biff, Biff, Biff,” Lassiter started, but Nora stopped him.

“It’s okay. I’m not your mark anymore. Frankly, I don’t need either of you. I have a fleet of ships, as you may recall.”

“Then why not use them?” Lassiter asked without thinking.

“Because you two know about the treasure. Nobody else does.”

“Except for Brett and Curly,” Lassiter noted.

“They’re sworn to secrecy,” Nora stated. “I gave them a lucrative deal with the promise of more work if they keep their mouths shut.”

“They won’t say anything,” Lassiter said. “They’re both old-school, like me.”

“Especially Curly,” Biff said.

“Yeah,” Nora and Lassiter replied in unison.

They all laughed for a moment as Biff doled out the heated up stew.

“You still could have just taken one of your own ships and done this run on your own,” Biff said as he sat down.

“I could have,” Nora agreed, “but I’ve been on my own for a long time now and I kind of enjoy you two. You’re odd...in a good way.”

“Gee, thanks,” Biff said with a laugh.

“Besides, the best way to ensure your silence would be to cut you in on some of the treasure, right?”

“No,” Lassiter said. “The best way to keep us quiet would be to kill us.”

“I prefer her way,” Biff said quickly.

“As do I,” agreed Lassiter, “but it’s not the *best* way.”

“Fair enough,” Nora said between bites. “Unlike my dead husband, though, I’m a fair person. I learned that fairness growing up in a convent.”

“The place where you witnessed that crime of

passion?” Biff asked.

“No, that wasn’t exactly true, Biff.” Nora put her fork down. “I *did* witness a crime of passion, but it was when I was serving as an ensign on a Fed ship. An admiral had fallen in love with the wife of a captain and so he’d had the captain killed. I was doing routine maintenance on the ship’s records and I found documents that linked the admiral to the crime. He learned what I had discovered and I ran. I wasn’t interested in becoming another casualty of his love affair.”

“And the Feds put you on their Most Wanted list,” Lassiter said.

“Correct.”

“But why wouldn’t they have just gone to Jefferies to get you back?”

“Because they don’t know about my link to Jefferies.”

“Then how—”

“When they scanned your ship,” Nora said, interrupting Biff, “they caught my Fed ID chip. It’s not something that can be easily removed. Many have tried over the years and they ended up with brain damage. Once a Fed, always a Fed, as the saying goes.”

“Ah,” Lassiter said, recalling a few stories about past friends who had tried to all sorts of measures to remove their chips. All of them failed. “But aren’t the Feds going to see that you are the new head of all the Jefferies businesses? Your face is going to be all over the wave.”

“Already thought of that,” she replied, picking up her spoon again while giving him a wink. “Charles will be that face. Besides, I’m donating the business to the convent where I grew up. They’ll use the money wisely.”

“But you could retire,” Lassiter stated unbelievably. “You’re incredibly wealthy! Why would you give that up?”

“It’s not all about money, boss,” Biff said with a grunt.

“It’s not?”

Another Fugitive?

Arden-7 was one of those planets that Lassiter loved to visit. It was a beautiful blue marble that had a single moon rotating around its moderate size. Land masses could be seen from space, of course, but only someone who had been to a planet like Arden-7 would know that loads of water typically meant trees and grassy knolls. Beaches, too.

He studied the surrounding areas and aside from Arden-3, a smaller planet that had also been settled by humanity, the system was just your standard 14-planet layout.

“Sally, open a channel to Arden-7 Space Control, please.”

“Channel opened.”

“This is Captain Lassiter of the *Ass-1* requesting —”

“Yeah, yeah,” said an irritated woman, “you’re cleared. Head down to standard docking and don’t cause any trouble while you’re here. If you do, you’ll be shot. Got it?”

“Got it,” Lassiter replied. He looked back at Nora after the connection dropped. “Nice place.”

“They don’t have much in the way of ship-to-ship controls,” Nora said, “but their land security is pretty top-notch.”

“About that,” Biff piped up, “I can’t leave the ship.”

“Why not?” asked Lassiter.

“I’d rather not say.”

“Did you witness a crime of passion or something?” Lassiter asked sarcastically while glancing briefly at Nora.

“No. Just...I'd rather not say.”

“Spill it, Biff.”

Biff sighed heavily and grimaced. “I'll be arrested if I step foot on Arden-7. Just leave it at that.”

“As your employer, I need to know about this.”

“Actually,” Nora said, “no, you don't. If you wanted information on him you should have asked *before* hiring him.”

“I don't recall anyone asking your opinion,” Lassiter said with a sneer.

“I'm no longer a piece of furniture, Lassiter.”

“Which is a shame,” Lassiter countered. “Biff, I have to know what's going on. There are many planets that I land on during the course of regular business. If you're unable to join me on certain missions, I need to be prepared for that. Now, spill it.”

“Again, he doesn't—”

“No, no,” Biff said with a slow nod. “He's right, Nora. If I'm going to be a problem, he should know about it.” Biff took a deep breath and explained. “I grew up here. It's where I learned to fight...where I learned to sink a guy's head into his chest cavity.”

“Ah,” said Lassiter.

“Self-defense?” asked Nora hopefully.

“Sometimes,” Biff answered. “Sometimes just because a guy looked at me wrong.”

“Wow.”

Biff looked away. “I ain't proud of it. It's why I promised ma I wouldn't do that any more. But it was already too late by the time I made that promise. Sank a guy's head once in a bar fight and it was caught on the security cameras. I took the first transport off Arden-7 about 15 years back and haven't returned since...until now, of course.”

“I grew up here, too, Biff,” Nora said. “I know a

lot of people in the area, maybe—”

“If you grew up here, Nora,” Biff interrupted, “you know that the law don’t forget things like this. I’m sure my picture is still hanging on every wall on every police station.”

“True,” she agreed. Then she looked him up and down for a moment and said, “I think I may have an idea.”

Biff the Monk

They landed per Space Control's instructions and Nora slipped out of the ship to get the real key.

Lassiter had taken a quick walk around the *Ass-1* to make sure nothing got messed up during the trip. It almost never did, but he liked to check things on his own from time to time. Once he was satisfied that all was good, he walked the grounds to acquaint himself with the area in the event of an emergency.

Instead of a nice, grassy area, they were in a region that was snowy and cold. Still, the air was fresh and clean. Much better than ship air.

Just as he was about to check out the local waves, he spotted Nora returning with a few people who were wearing brown robes. Monks. He bolted back across the courtyard to see what was going on.

Sitting around the galley table were Nora, Biff, two men, and a rather lovely lady. The visitors were clearly monks, which was somewhat unfortunate since that meant the female of the group would have posted a vow of celibacy.

Lassiter had nothing against monks, except when they were on his ship.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"Hey, boss," Biff said, "Nora figured out a way I can help with the treas...uh...the mission."

"Is that so?"

"He's got to become a monk," Nora said. "If he does that, then he'll be under the church's protection."

"Seriously?" Lassiter said. "The police will just let him walk around, even though he's a wanted murderer?"

“The man has confessed his sins, my son,” said one of the monks.

“I’m not your son,” Lassiter said sternly, “and it makes very little sense to me that simply confessing his wrongdoing is going to put the law at ease.”

“Confession is taken very seriously on Arden-7, boss,” Biff said. “You have to have grown up here to understand.”

“Glad I didn’t, then,” Lassiter said. “So you confessed...why become a monk?”

“That’s part of a true confession,” Nora stated. “You can’t just say you’re sorry and get away with murder. You have to prove your sorrow by joining the monastery and working to improve the lives of others.”

“I see,” Lassiter said, though he didn’t. “So does that mean you’re all murderers?”

“Of course not,” said the one man. “I chose to live in the church because I believe in peace and love.”

The second monk said, “And I chose to join because I wanted to help others.”

“And I chose to join,” said the woman, “because I was a nymphomaniac and I needed to correct my ways.”

Lassiter gulped. “Did it work?”

“I still struggle,” she admitted. “Especially when I see a man who knows what he wants and—”

“Sister Agnes,” admonished the older monk in the group, “keep your wits about you.”

“Yes, yes, you’re right, Brother Josef,” she said, waving her hand too cool herself. “I sincerely apologize, Mr. Lassiter.”

“Hmmm,” Lassiter said while impure thoughts raced through his mind. He’d never been with a convent woman before. “Well, uh—”

“So Biff just has to join the order and he’ll be free to walk around,” Nora said before Lassiter could continue his line of questioning with Sister Agnes.

“I see,” said Lassiter as he shook himself back to the moment. “Won’t he have to take a vow of celibacy?”

“That’s not a requirement,” said Brother Josef.

“It’s not?”

“No.”

Lassiter looked at Sister Agnes. “Did you, by chance—”

“I took a vow of celibacy, yes.”

“Damn.”

The monks put Biff through the process of monkification, which included readings, confessions, signing of documents, a blood test, and a plethora of other requirements. By the time they had finished and Biff was officially inducted into their order, it was nighttime.

The oaf donned his new robe and followed the procession of monks out of the *Ass-1* and into the darkness of *Arden-7*.

Lassiter and Nora went along, too, but stayed back so as not to impede on the ritual.

“Some sort of party we’re going to here?”

“Not exactly,” Nora answered. “They’re going to dip him in a pool and then the monks will do a couple hours of mantras with him. After that, he’ll get a tattoo to signify he’s a member of their order.”

Lassiter recalled the number of tattoos Biff already sported. “Where are they gonna put it?”

“On the males, they usually put it on their—”

“No, no,” Lassiter said with a cringe. “That’s okay, I’d rather not know.”

Nora furrowed her brow. “Thumb.”

“Oh.” Latter looked at Biff’s hands and saw that

his thumbs were ink-free. “Anyway, I’m only asking because of the treasure. Wouldn’t want to keep it waiting.”

“I don’t think it’ll mind, Lassiter. What’s your hurry, anyway? It’s not like the treasure is yours.”

“Hey now,” Lassiter said, affronted, “I’m just trying to do my part to help out.”

“...and make that 5 percent I promised, too, no doubt?”

“That’s not very much,” Lassiter stated. “If we’re talking 1 platinum bar, that’s not very much at all.”

“I told you it’d be worth it,” she said as Biff entered into a large, brownish building. “You’ll just have to be patient.”

The Treasure

Lassiter awoke the next morning to the sound of chimes. They were peaceful at first, but grew quickly irritating as the winds picked up.

The brethren had set him up in a modest room with a small cot and a private lavatory. It wasn't much, but he'd been in tighter quarters during his youth. One of his first ships had been a Dinky-11, which was only marginally larger than the Dinky-5, which was nicknamed "The Dorm." Compared to the Dinky-5, this little room was spacious.

He splashed some water on his face and checked his hair. Once he was happy that all was in order, he walked out into the main area to find that Nora and Biff were sitting together at a rickety wooden table.

"We were wondering when you were going to get up," Nora chided.

"I have to admit that, aside from those damnable wind chimes, this place is rather easy to sleep in." He looked Biff over appraisingly. "Comfortable?"

"Freeing is a better word, I think."

Lassiter yawned and stretched. "Well, don't go getting any ideas about me calling you Brother Biff. That won't be happening."

"Wouldn't expect you to, boss."

Lassiter eyed him suspiciously at how he said "boss."

"Have a seat," Biff said with a grin.

"So what's the plan, then?" Lassiter asked as he sat with them.

"I have a Skiff lined up already. It's got a decent storage bay and a number of bots to help with loading whatever we may find."

“Someone’s got high hopes,” Lassiter said.

“Why would anyone have low hopes?” asked Nora.

“I...uh...hmmm...nevermind.”

“As soon as you two are ready,” Nora said, “we’ll get to it.”

“I’m ready,” Lassiter said.

“Me, too,” said Biff.

“You two do realize that it’s freezing at the location we’re going to?”

“Coats?” Lassiter and Biff asked at the same time.

“Coats,” Nora affirmed, and then added, “and boots, Biff.”

“Right.”

An hour later they touched down in a small clearing by the base of a mountain. Snow came up to their knees as they exited the ship and made their way toward the coordinates that Carlson Jefferies had inadvertently provided. The exact point was inside of a cave, near the back.

Lassiter shook himself to relieve the cold. It didn’t help. Being out of the wind was nice, but at these temperatures, even the still air was ridiculous.

They had their lights out and were fishing around for any spot they could find to put the key.

“Got it,” Biff said, calling them over. “You can barely see it, but it’s right in there.”

Nora moved in as they pointed their flashlights at the keyhole. She pressed the key in and the wall began to light up. A whirring sound soon filled the air and they all stepped back in awe as a panel slowly slid to the side to reveal an entire room filled with platinum bars.

“I don’t know what to say,” said Lassiter hoarsely.

“That’s a first,” said Nora.

Lassiter nearly choked at what he was seeing.
“You said 5 percent, right?”

“That was our agreement.”

“Something is bound to go wrong,” Lassiter whispered. “It simply has to.”

“Where’d all this come from?” asked Biff reverently.

“Jefferies stole it from the Brethren. They had amassed it over the years.”

“Confessions,” Lassiter said.

“Yes,” Nora agreed, “and donations, of course.”

The robots were brought in to start hauling bar after bar back to the Skiff as Lassiter stood near the cave mouth looking for signs of trouble. Nothing ever went easily for the likes of him. Whether it happened today, tomorrow, or a week from now, the universe was going to figure out a way to separate him from his newfound fortune. It was just the way things worked.

“Damn universe,” he said under his breath.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing, Biff. Was just talking to myself.”

And then it was there...that feeling he always got when something was off. It was like a crackling in the air. A shift in the molecules of peace. The proverbial shit hitting the fan.

“Get down,” he yelled as he attempted to tackle his overgrown chef.

He failed, but his efforts succeeded in blocking Biff from a deadly shot to the chest. The beam struck Lassiter’s arm instead. To say it was painful would be understating the point and Lassiter let the world know that fact by becoming rather angry.

“You okay, boss?” Biff asked worriedly.

“No, I’m not okay. I’ve just been shot!”

“You saved my life, boss,” Biff said.

“Now we’re even,” Lassiter replied while clenching his teeth from the pain.

“Please tell me that’s not your shooting arm,” Nora said as she peeked around the corner. “Looks like there are at least 5 men out there. Probably more.”

“It’s not my shooting arm, and the jacket protects me from permanent damage anyway. It just stings like hell.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a PainDropper shot, pressed it against his left shoulder, heard a pop, and felt a rush of warmth as the pain dissipated. “Where are they?”

“Outside,” answered Biff.

“I know they’re outside, Biff. I mean are they on a hill, behind trees, taking over the Skiff? Which is it?”

“All of those places,” interjected Nora, after grabbing another peek. “And there are two closing in on us from either side.”

“Stand back,” Lassiter commanded.

“Wait, boss,” Biff said. “Maybe you should let me handle this.”

“What are you going to do, Biff?” Lassiter said hotly. “Yell out all the ways you’re going to kill them? There’s no chance in hell you’re going to be able to run fast enough to impact their heads before you get shot, after all.”

Biff shrugged and sighed.

“Both of you are good,” Lassiter said, “but this is where your hand-to-hand combat fails to be of use.”

He dropped to the ground and crawled forward until he was at the mouth of the cave. Reaching out, he used the reflection off of his perfectly shined sidearm to get the location of the bad guys. He pulled back, stood up, nodded at Biff and Nora and jumped out, laying down shot after shot.

Then he stopped and surveyed the area once more.

Nora and Biff walked out and saw a mass of bodies laying all over the snow.

“My god,” Nora said, “you weren’t kidding when you said you were the best.”

“Gee, boss, that’s some impressive shooting.”

But Lassiter wasn’t happy. There were only 11 goons out there, but he’d shot his gun 15 times. He’d missed 4 shots. Sure, one of the guys had tried to dive behind a snowbank, but even that wouldn’t have caused him to slip up in his younger days.

“Even if you didn’t get them all, I’ll bet the rest of them ran like hell.”

“I missed 4 times,” he said as if it were a curse. “Honestly, I must be losing my touch. I just don’t understand it.”

“You killed 11 people in 20 seconds, Lassiter,” Nora stated with shock.

“It took 20 seconds? That’s awful. Should have been no more than 1 per second, which means I not only missed 4 of the shots but I also have lost a fair amount of speed.”

“On the plus side,” Biff said, “you’ve just saved all this platinum.”

Lassiter slowly turned his frown upside down and eventually said, “Yes, there is that.”

“Still,” Biff said, “who sent those guys? Brett and Curly?”

“I know who sent them,” Nora said. “It was the guy that rented me the Skiff. I know him really well. This is his style. I’ve worked with him before.”

“Then why did you work with him again?” asked Lassiter in disbelief.

“It’s not like you can just rent a Skiff anywhere, Lassiter. He’s the only guy in town.”

“And you couldn’t have warned us of this potentiality?”

“I thought maybe he’d turned another leaf,” she said. “He *is* now a member of the Brethren.”

“Shows how meaningless that actually is,” Lassiter said and then turned toward Biff. “Sorry, Biff.”

“No problem, my son.”

“Let’s stick with ‘boss,’ shall we?”

“Okay, boss.”

Lassiter frowned at the way Biff said it. “And when we get back to the ship, you’re ditching that robe.”

Another Employee?

Once they returned to the Church of the Brethren, a couple of robots wheeled a concealed case of platinum bars toward Lassiter's ship. He had his sidearm at the ready in case of trouble, but for once in his life there was none.

He loaded the bars into a holding area and slid a safety shield in front of them. With those bars, he'd be able to pay off a number of his ships, get the *Ass-1* updated, and maybe even have a new galley installed that Biff could really get cooking in.

He walked outside to find Biff and Nora heading up the ramp.

"Everything loaded in, boss?"

"All set," Lassiter said while scanning the area. "How did the Brethren take the donation?"

"Excitedly," Nora said, "and it was a real load off my mind." She looked the two men over and then gave the ship a glance. "Thanks for all your help, boys. I have to say that, aside from being shot in the ass and the horror of watching my recently deceased husband's head get impacted into his own chest cavity, this was most fun I've had in years."

"What are you going to do now?" asked Biff.

"Honestly, I haven't a clue. I've been working on getting my hands on that treasure for ten years. I had to figure out who'd stolen it from the Brethren in the first place, then I had to seduce that man, marry him, play cat and mouse with him while I figured out the location and got the key, and so on. It's essentially consumed me."

"They must have done one heck of a job raising you," Biff said in awe as he looked back at the

convent.

“Yes,” she said with a sad smile. “They truly did.”

“Okay, okay,” Lassiter said with a pang of disgust, “stop with the sappy stuff.”

“Hey,” Biff said, snapping his fingers and pointing at Nora, “why don’t you join up with us?”

“Really?”

“What?” said Lassiter.

“Oh, come on, boss. You know as well as I do that she’d be good for the crew. She’s got mean skills.”

Lassiter took a deep breath. “I’m beginning to regret hiring you, Biff.” He paused. “No, that’s not right. I’ve regretted that for some time.”

“I don’t want to impose.”

“You wouldn’t be,” Biff stated.

“I think she might,” Lassiter countered. “After all, we have only one bathroom and I’ve grown rather fond of not having to put the seat down over the years.”

“But she’s a good fighter, boss, and you saw how she singlehandedly disabled an entire Regal Class warship.”

“Anyone could do that, Biff,” Nora admitted. “Each officer carries a card that brings up the ship’s menu. All you have to do is click on the ‘System Tools’ button and then select ‘Shut Down The Ship’. Pretty straightforward, really.”

“You’re kidding?” said Lassiter.

They stood on the ramp in silence as the wind whipped through the corridor, causing them all to shiver.

“What do you say, boss? Can we keep her?”

“She’s not a puppy, you know?” Lassiter said as he looked up into Biff’s pleading eyes. “Oh, fine. But both of you have to agree to do what I say. I won’t

be an impotent captain on my own ship.”

“I have no problem following orders,” Nora said. “As long as they make sense.”

“Good. The first rule is that there are no relationships allowed amongst crew members.”

“Hmmm,” Nora said as she looked over at Biff in a hungry sort of way. “That may be a problem.”

“I won’t budge on this,” Lassiter said.

“Okay, boss,” Biff said with a wink.

“Whatever you say, boss,” Nora said.

Lassiter stepped out of the way and motioned them inside.

His two new employees walked up the ramp as he gave one final look around the area and took in a deep breath of fresh air.

With a sigh, he turned around to find that Biff and Nora were holding hands as they crossed over the hatch and into the *Ass-1*.

Dropping his head, Lassiter bolted up the ramp and jumped in after them.

“Okay,” he called out toward the galley, “but only as long as you don’t let your relationship interfere with your regular duties.”

He closed the hatch and pressed the button to pull up the ramp.

Sitting down in the Captain’s Chair, he said, “Sally, get us warmed up and ready to go, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

The ship’s engines rumbled to life.

Lassiter wasn’t so sure that having two employees was such a good idea, but a steady diet of anything beyond protein bars had to be a good thing in his estimation, and there was little doubt that Nora could be an asset. Of course, she was also a liability whenever the Feds were about...and they were always about. The biggest issue was that he knew

damn well that they were both going to question him at every turn. Oddly, he found that both irritating and appealing. It kept him on his toes. After the growing concern over how he'd slowed down and lost some accuracy with his sidearm, Biff and Nora could prove to be just the type of challenge Lassiter needed to push him back into proper form.

"Well, Sally, at least I know you're a solid employee."

"Thank you, sir."

"I can always vent my frustrations at you and know that you'll just take it as a real employee should."

There was no response.

"Anyway, set a course back to home-base. I've got a new Galien Clunker being delivered and that stash of platinum we just picked up is going to pop in a few more ships and let me do some fix-ups, too."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and Sally," Lassiter said after a look over his shoulder to make sure that he was indeed alone, "keep an eye on those two. Let me know whenever they're coming near to the cockpit so I don't get anymore surprises."

"Certainly, sir."

Lassiter took a deep breath and crossed his arms over his chest. It was nice to have Sally around. Where Biff and Nora were a study in defiance, Sally did what she was told. Plain and simple. No arguments. No hidden meanings in her speech. Just a straightforward, pedantic, computer program that was emotionless and able to take a verbal lashing whenever Lassiter needed to release his anger.

Feeling his oats, Lassiter smiled wickedly and said, "Let's get this boat in the air, you blasted computer. I don't have all day!"

There was a slight pause before Sally replied.
“Whatever you say...boss.”

THANKS FOR READING

Thanks a lot for reading this story in the *The Lassiter Files* series. We hope you had as much fun reading it as we had writing it!

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