

Rumours and Spies

"I understand, Ms. Jenkins, that you were on Terra during the invasion. I would be much interested to find out why." "I had heard that you saved all the lawyers on Terra with naught but a particle accelerator and a small can cheese-whiz. I would much like to know the story of how you did this, and more importantly, why?"

Zara laughs a little too raucously and glances quickly over her shoulder.

"Yeah, i was there alright. Still cleaning up some of the fallout, as a matter of fact. I'll admit to saving all the Terran lawyers but when you've heard the full story, you'll see it sounds worse than it really was."

Turning to Pia she continues, "You're right. Those pesky Kalducians. Crooked as a Wolverine Willow but damn their magenta tape! They'd chase you half-way across the galaxy just to get you to sign the form to say you skipped the system with illegal goods which some quarantine inspector probably sold you on the black market."

She sighs before continuing.

"Anyway, I'd heard there could be something on Kalducia Prime that a client of mine might be interested in acquiring. Well, overheard might be more accurate - a team of miners passed through my bar about a month and a half ago on leave fro excavating the hell out of one of the Kalducian moons. The rumour at the forefront of everyone's mind was that Sam Du Fus had docked on K-Prime smuggling his usual shipload of exotic goods."

She motions across the room and a martini glass filled with an iridescent red liquid shimmers into existence before her.

Pia offers Zara a credit. "I'll wager your client was after something even more exotic than Sam's usual trade. I hear you made much of your fortune putting clients onto sources for exotica - but not so much exotic goods, as exotic... services."

The Tongue of Osiris

Smiling, Zara reaches for the credit and slips it into her leather bodice. "I wouldn't say *much* of my fortune, but definitely a sizeable portion. Hey. I just provide a service," she replies with her hands in the air.

"But yes, you're right in suggesting that this was no smuggled drum of moonshine. I'd come across information that Sam might have in his possession a certain ancient artifact of yes, a rather exotic nature, but also of great value. I'd heard that Sam might have inherited a certain long-sought after piece, the Chest of Golden Wonders - cleverly disguised in a wooden casing, battered and well-worn over the centuries. Better yet, I got wind that neither Sam nor anyone else on K-Prime had any idea of the priceless nature of his cargo.

As pointed out by Pia, there is much profit to be made in the trade of exotic objects and services. Like anything else, it's important to know your clientele. For the sexually kinked, The Chest of Golden Wonders is much like the Holy Grail - it's always been thought to be merely a galactic myth but the

idea that it might really exist and might actually contain the Tongue of Osiris, guaranteed to bring never-ending pleasure to it's master, and unknown wealth to the trader, was too much to resist. I had to see it for myself. I had to see it and I had to trade it."

"The Tongue of Osiris is indeed a legendary artifact", agrees Simon. "Of great reknown, and possible easier to find than the missing part of Horus"

"Horus's elbow?" muses Bobo, "Indeed, the Tongue of Osiris may well have been easier to find, but, I imagine, not nearly as satisfying."

"I'm sorry, but this I do not understand." puzzledly comments the purple-shelled ambassador, "But what is so pleasurable or satisfying about the tongue or elbow of mythical characters from Terran history? If my databases are to be believed. Is it for some form of soup perhaps?"

Zara turns to Bobo, "Horus's elbow? I've heard of that before but not in the erotic context. Tell me more Bobo." She pulls out a small, hand-held electronic notebook. With a quick flick of a switch, it lights up and she looks expectantly at Bobo, ready to take notes.

A moment of absolute stillness detectable even from a support-system that barely moves. "Ah. Not soup then."

A Wager

Ariel's eyes boggle slightly.

"Horus's Elbow isn't *that* hard to find", she mutters under her breath. "Although," smiling slightly, "I would also be most interested to hear how Bobo fared, if he cares to elaborate..."

She becomes more business like and addresses Zara.

"Sam might be a complete doofus, but I'm sure there were others who were able to recognise a Chest of Golden Wonder when they saw it. The Keepers of the Chest of Golden Wonders, for example. I heard they were pretty annoyed when one of their accolytes left it at the bus station - what was it? 700 years ago?? Heck, they've been trying to locate it ever since. I'll wager you faced a pretty nasty bidding war with them to secure it into your possession - if not worse..."

Keeping Great Chests Under Wraps

Looking sideways at Bobo, and more than a little disappointed, she quickly scribbles a few notes on her pad before slipping it back into the pocket from whence it came. Turning to Ariel, she continues,

"You are familiar with the sect. Yes, the Keepers of the Chest of Golden Wonders are great protectors of their loot, I mean religious artifacts. They place great value on a complete set and they've been searching for the Tongue of Osiris ever since Toby, nephew of the Chief Chest Keeper, wandered off in search of a hamburger at Great Central Station instead of keeping his eyes and hands on the Chest of Wonders. Meanwhile there have been rumoured sightings of the Chest and indeed the Tongue of Osiris in the house of various Squillionaires over the centuries. Or so the legend goes.

Needless to say, I was anxious to get my own hands on the Chest before anyone else got wind of its location. Making my way to the planet's surface and sitting next to the Du fus at his local watering hole was no mean feat. But then, there's no fun if there's no challenge. I put up with his lousy jokes for three weeks while dating him in an attempt to either win the Chest as a love trinket or to locate its whereabouts on his ship - Plan B was to whisk it away with me as I left one night after he'd fallen asleep. Unfortunately,

Unfortunately, both plans went awry. I'd pointed out my deep adoration for the 'pretty box' one night when he brought it out to decorate the living area in his quarters. He'd hinted that he might give it to me. Alas, by this time, the Keepers had heard the rumour and had made their way to K-Prime. They'd managed to find Sam one night in the bar he frequented and made a less than generous offer for the Chest - Sam still none the wiser as to its true worth. When he met me later on that day he mentioned the offer and I, displaying my disappointment, was forced into offering to pay the same. Sam, having descended from a long line of Du Fus's, did know how to do one thing - and that was to capitalize on what little he had. The smarmy dirtbag took my counteroffer back to the Keepers and we entered into a less than polite bidding war. Having lost all affection for Sam (he was a lousy lover anyway), threw myself into the negotiations determined to secure the Chest and regain my self respect.

"But surely," said Pia, "although Sam may have been a lousy lover, you were not? I'll wager that in your three weeks together, the Du fus had become completely infatuated, his feelings for you overriding even his strong mercurial sense. He never intended to sell the Box to the Keepers, nor to make you pay so much as a penny for a token of his love. No, I'll wager he had some other reason for starting this bidding war - a reason that became clear soon enough." An old-fashioned platinum penny appears from the recesses of Pia's pockets and is plonked unceremoniously on the table.

When all else fails, grab the Chest.

"Hmmm.. yes." Zara says, sliding the penny towards her and slipping it into her pocket.

"Whatever, Sam's intentions were, I didn't intend sticking around long enough to find out. I suspect that he thought that by starting the bidding war, he might pique the interest of the Keepers for some of his other goods - still not being on the same page as the rest of us. Once negotiations heated up, he began hosting cocktail evenings in his private quarters. Each night different pieces of furniture were scattered around the rooms and price tags were casually placed within sight. His intention regarding the Chest was to meet the final bid from the Keepers and keep it for himself - or perhaps, as you say Pia, give to me.

However, the Kalducians would have none of that of course. Having passed the Auction Regulations Bill two decades ago, they've been cracking down on dummy bids ever since. Apparently, the bill contains some clause banning the initial owner from placing bids and once negotiations have begun, a sale must take place. A somewhat official-looking Kalducian happened to be there the night Sam met the Keepers bid and tried to shut the deal down. Tempers flared and there was a little bit of scuffling. Things didn't look good for Sam.

I wasn't going to stick around and see the Chest confiscated into the hands of the Kalducians. I had no choice. I grabbed the Chest from the other room, snuck out the side door and ran."

"I would wager", says Simon, "that it is these afore mentioned bills that are the cause of your legal entanglements, necessitating your rescue attempt." A credit appears behind his ear and falls to the floor. "Damnit, I hate it when that happens." Simon places it onto the table after a brief scrabble.

"Although I'm not clear on why you would need ALL the lawyers as yet. Pray enlighten me."

"Whilst the escalation of my legal entanglements required strong and competent legal counsel, it's true that I did not need ALL the lawyers on Terra to handle my case." Zara nods at Simon before continuing from where she left off.

"Somehow I managed to get to the safety of my ship in the docking port where I'd left it without much notice. I was quickly cleared for take-off and made my escape from the planet, my precious cargo hidden away in a safe behind a restful painting of horses galloping along a beach at sunset. It's a Gasteaux original.

Not wanting to attract too much attention, I was reluctant to travel at full speed. Perhaps this was my downfall because not two days into my trip, the Kalducians had somehow figured out what I'd done and tracked me - they were only half a day behind me and gaining. At this point, I threw caution to the jet stream, risked a further charge of fleeing the scene by not filing the correct paperwork, and increased by speed. A day later, I received a warning that I had mail. After the alert signal, repeating every five minutes, finally got to me, I checked my inbox to find I'd been spammed with huge messages, marked 'highest priority' and demanding my immediate signature to attachments containing various forms. I must have received thousands - it was like some computer virus, for every message I did not reply to, I received 15 back, demanding I respond to the charge of not responding and fill in the related forms to my lack of response and so on. I'd have thought it was funny except that the large influx of mail was slowing down the whole system and I was online to a friend from home who was telling me about this guy she met at this fancy dress... oh never mind.

It was all rather irritating and frankly, the Kalducians had no right to enforce their so-called laws on non-Kalducian negotiations occurring in transit. I believe there was even a recent case that sits as precedent on the issue. Anyway, I decided my best chance of ending the whole farce was to head to Terra - famous for its method of settling such disagreements using their 'Possession is Nine and Three Quarters, Tenths of the law' I knew I'd receive a fair hearing of my side of the case.

Luckily for me I arrived a day before the Kalducians to discover that the Terran lawyers were meeting in New Hawaii for their annual Lawyers So Do Not Suck Conference and this year, attendance was at an all time high."

"Gosh," says Pia, again. "Were you able to get into the conference without an official nametag?"

Stalling for time

Zara looks at Pia and smiles. "Let's just say, I do things a little differently.... When I arrived, I surveyed the crowd - they were having their ice-breaker cocktail party following the first days session. I surveyed the room from my strategic position from behind a large potplant near the door and after a few scans was able to discover that John Rosenthal's wife had originally been scheduled to come but had broken her leg on their annual ski holiday the week before. Armed with this information, I was easily able to register as a late attendee to the conference, and the name tag was sitting behind the counter, all gleaming and waiting for me. It was just a matter of avoiding Mr Rosenthal - shouldn't have been a big deal. I entered the ballroom and grabbed a drink (not the best but you know those Terrans - wouldn't know a quality beverage if it was thrust upon them). I proceeded to survey the room, hoping to go unnoticed should the Kalducians look for me there and also to find adequate legal counsel, in the event that they did."

Zara rushes back to the table. "Sorry, thought I'd make it to the ladies and back without you noticing. The queue was so long I got caught in a time warp.

"Anyway," turning to Simon, "yes, as far as I know the invasion had not yet started then. But I must admit that I pretty much missed the whole thing, what with all the kerfuffle of the Kalducians storming into the mixer and demanding to see paperwork and whatnot. The whole thing was rather embarrassing - especially to see certain renowned lawyers cowering in the corner begging to be spared. I mean really, the arsenal of the Kalducian Black Market Inspectors are hardly comparable to the kind of technology sold on it. "

Weapons of a Paperwork War

"Well, never one to spend money on the latest technology, preferring to wait till they can legally confiscate arms, the Kalducians were armed with beta versions of the Particle Accelerator 64000. They are quite attached to these even though the firepower is so pathetic because they've managed to tweak them just a smidge so they can be used to speed up the paperwork."

Smiling briefly at the very weak pun, Zara slowly continues, "They stormed into the Golden Ballroom where we were all getting slightly toasted and demanded that they see everyone's docking papers. They started questioning random and superfluous people as to whether they'd declared all duty free items they'd brought with them in their ship. I thought I was in the clear when the lawyers started with their Fifth Amendments and questioned the Kalducians as to their exact jurisdiction but then a rookie happened to spot me just as I was making my exit via the back door behind the bar. He got two rounds shot off with his PA 64000 before I managed to come to my senses and grabbed the closest item to me - an aerosol can of Cheez Whizz. (Very tasty when mixed up with Viridian 5 Vodka and a shot of Earth Kahlua - although definitely an acquired taste.)

"But Cheeze Whiz is the most paranormally unnatural substance in the known universe!" exclaims Pia. Surely if that got in the way of the beam of a particle accelerator, the result would have been surpassingly strange... I'll wager that the interaction induced a brief separation of the dimensions of the space-time continuum and when things returned to normal, one group or another had been shifted to another galaxy." She offers a credit to back the wager.

Jeez Whizz

Zara's stance suddenly looks somewhat crest-fallen as she looks at Pia like she stole the thunder from underneath her. "Y..e...s," she stammers. "That's almost exactly what happened. How did you know?"

She beckons her small, canine companion and whispers something in his ear. She watches him zoom off before continuing, "In fact, at the exact moment that I grabbed hold of the cheez whizz, a Kalducian turned and discharged his weapon. I didn't realise it was a particle accelerator until after I had instinctively shoved the can in the beam trajectory to protect myself. The can reflected the beam at a somewhat odd angle and he continued firing at me. Within seconds the outer casing of the can had broken down and the particle accelerator came into direct contact with the cheez wizz inside. Instantly and for but a brief second, a hole was ripped in the time-space continuum and 6 of the 8 Kalducians were sucked inside.

The hole closed again before we could process what had happened. Clearly outnumbered, the

remaining Kalducians stopped firing and looked around stupidly, wondering what to do. My transgression forgotten, they proceeded to book people around us for the illegal removal of officers of the Kalducian Black Market, a serious but somewhat less offensive act. I filled in some paperwork and paid a menial fine. I also reluctantly agreed to sign the Expulsion from Kalducian Prime Trade Agreement, essentially banning me from legally trading on the Black Market. Frankly, I'm done with those Kalducians anyway."

Pia just looks smug, then listens with close attention as the story reaches its conclusion.

"So you really *did* save all the lawyers with a can of cheez whizz. Did you ever come to regret it?"

Back to [science fiction](#)

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