

THE TROUBLE WITH BIRDS
by
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He couldn't believe what it said:

JUT-JAWED, STEELY-EYED, SPACE JOCKEY NEEDED BY GALACTIC PRINCESS TO OVERTHROW TYRANNICAL, SPACE-CORPORATION CEO. OWN SHIP AND WILD STREAK A PLUS. CONTACT HER MAJESTY, LeMEGAN LEMEW, REBEL HEADQUARTERS, 14TH QUADRANT, 5TH ROCK FROM KORR-ENBRAUN IN THE ARTAXERES GALAXY.

Jeff looked down at Cru, his irradiated Dungeness crab. The break he needed. Jeff had been kicking himself since Cru had been diagnosed with feline leukemia. Cru sat atop his perch, Jeff's shoulder, where he rode like a pirate parrot.

"See that?" Jeff asked, shoving the paper at Cru. "Could be our answer."

Jeff had taught Cru sign language, after rescuing the animal from a research lab. The arthropod began signing an answer.

"It's not that far. Look, we'll scrounge up some fuel, bust the galactic rebellion wide open and then see about treatment."

Cru signed that he thought the therapy would be a waste of their resources, and the doctor's diagnosis was overrated.

Jeff knew better. He needed to get to Korr-Enbraun.

"You're credit's no good here no more Jeff."

"20 grams. I just need 20 grams." Jeff glared at the refueling station owner. "The Chromium Vulture's empty and this time I'm getting big bucks."

The owner rolled out from under the transport he had been repairing. "Like the time you were going to stop the totalitarian space dictator from controlling all the water in the universe?"

"Hey, it's not my fault that U-rik character stepped in and grabbed the mission."

The owner pulled himself up from his supine position to look Jeff in the face. "Sorry. Cash only."

Jeff smoothed his long, raven hair back in frustration. If this schlemiel knew who Jeff's dad was, he probably would have given Jeff the deed to the business. Jeff still needed currency. Cru tapped on Jeff's shoulder with his free pincer, then signed a suggestion.

"We are not doing the monkey and organ grinder thing again. It's humiliating. Besides, you need take it easy. The Doc said too much activity speeds up your leukemia."

Since Cru's only suggestion was unviable, and Jeff could dredge up no other alternatives, he was left with one choice- which was no choice since 'only one choice' is an oxymoron. Jeff had to pull great-grandpa's starship out of mothballs.

The Spruce Gander was the only wood-burning, intergalactic, space vessel in existence and, at the time of its invention, way beyond state-of-the-art. Jeff had to shelve the Gander at the end of the 22nd century. Nothing was wrong with the ship, but all the environmental regulations prevented logging timber on private land without a permit. He and Cru would have to stand in line at the Office of Ecological Standards. For two days. The pair would be able to leave in two and a half.

"Women are basically untrustworthy and over-emotional," Jeff explained to Cru on the trip to Korr-Enbraun. "Take LeMew, for example. I'll bet she's some spoiled brat, royalty head-case with no real comprehension of what people have to go through to make a life."

Cru, seated at the Nav panel, signed a sarcastic comment where Jeff couldn't see.

"She's probably had everything her way her whole life- silver spoons, body shaping, reconstruction, and the attitude that no man is good enough for her glance, let alone anything else."

Cru knew Jeff only felt like he did because his mom ran off, years ago, leaving the boy and his dad alone. Cru heard Jeff claim on a number of occasions that he had no use for women. Well, one use: to do the laundry. The Spruce Gander broke the atmosphere of the planetoid, and the ship touched down in the docking bay of the capital city. After a brief security scan, and a short story to convince LeMew's guards that Cru was not a space parasite, they were lead to the audience room of the princess.

Jeff knew the drill. "Permission to speak freely, Your Highness?"

She glared at him down her nose. "As if."

"I'm here to help the rebel cause. But I'm curious. Why are you interviewing people? Isn't that strange?"

"We had to place a notice on Cosmo's List. You think there's an intergalactic freedom fighters registry?"

A blank look washed over Jeff's face.

"Oh, gag me with turbo-bear. Do you really own your own ship? That was sarcasm, Jeff. Never mind. Just see if you can follow me. Our galaxy is going broke. I had to start an interstellar war to bring in some money and boost the economy. I never dreamed that some six-shooting, sky hopper *wouldn't* pop up from our own ranks to save the day. There's always some nut with a pistol or laser sword or some such with nothing more to do than wait for a bad guy to bust. Always. But, noooo! Not in my galaxy. So here we are."

"You're kidding right?"

"Where are you from? Montaxas? This kind of stuff goes on all the time. It's politicking honey, and the norm in any civilized society."

"So now I have to bail your keester out? I don't think so." Jeff turned to go.

"The job pays 7000."

Jeff turned back. "I *do* think so. What do I need to do?"

"That's what I thought." LeMew quickly explained the scenario to Jeff.

"You want me to take out a galactic CEO? Those guys have armadas working for them. I won't have a chance."

"Jeff, I don't have time for this. You're here, and I need help and I hate to do this to you-" LeMew jerked her head around as if to clear it. "Wait. Who am I kidding? No I don't. I don't mind a bit. We need you to work for us and you'll be paid well. I know this is going to give you a seizure, but I had my men grab your regular ship, the Chromium Vulture, bring it here to my planet and put a sonic charge in its super-structure."

Jeff's face flushed bright red. "What? Wait a minute. How did you know I was coming to answer your ad?"

"Because I'm a princess. Now, an explosion will go off in 7 days. You have that long to complete the mission before the Vulture turns to ashes."

"You can't do that!"

"I'm a princess, and can do what I want, and I'd watch my mouth. Now, I suggest you get your space scootin' bootie out of here and get busy. By the way, if you try to remove the charge, it blows and you're toast. If you don't return here in time with proof that the CEO is DOA, it blows and you're toast."

Jeff's anger began to subside and his tactical senses kicked in. "What's to keep me from parking the Vulture in a deserted place and leaving it there?"

"Nothing I guess if you want to lose it."

Jeff knew that she knew that he didn't.

"And I checked your background; you're tapped out. No one is going to do you any favors. You're on a payment up front basis. No technicians will be helping you."

"You're cold blooded."

"Listen Jeffy- my people are all that matter to me. They love me and I love them. You think its easy getting a princess gig with a face like mine?"

Jeff stared at her. She was horribly ugly. Bad teeth, pocked grey skin, greasy hair, eyes too far apart. Beautiful princesses were easy to work for. When you completed the mission, they offered laundry services to show their gratitude. Sometimes they even did your socks.

"I'm going to do what ever I have to do to help them. They loved me when I wasn't Princess material. BTW, that's by the way, cracker boy, your grampa's ship the Spruce Gander will be taken back to your planet. I wouldn't dream of letting any harm come to such a gorgeous piece of machinery. Now get lost. It's time for Ograh. She's doing a salute to quadrapeds in biped traditional roles."

Jeff, again, had no option as the armed guards escorted him to his waiting Chromium Vulture. Cru signed to him before takeoff.

He glared at Cru. "Shut up about what I said about women."

Jeff knew there was only one place to obtain information about the defensive weaknesses of the CEO's stronghold: THE GALACTIC GUNSLINGERS, SIDEKICK & SNITCH, CANTINA AND GRILL. Everyone who was anyone in the universe hung out there. The golden haired kid with that light sword thingy, that stainless steel rodent guy, and others like them.

Jeff sauntered through the slatted, swinging, double doors to various types of chaos and insanity. There was a man trying to suck a bowling ball through a cocktail straw, and a dwarf with a wad of money, a bowler hat and a cane ready to bet that he couldn't. But, the shadowy figure in the corner of the tavern was the one that most interested Jeff. He adjusted Cru on his shoulder while he moved closer for a look.

The universe was rampant with tales of the man's wisdom and verbosity. The legend, he had heard, was very elusive and granted few an audience. Jeff swaggered over to the cocktail table where the mystery man sat.

"Mr. Dick?"

Phillip K. Dick looked up from his dilithium-powered laptop, the glow from the screen barely lighting his face. PK Dick took a long drink off his Frost flavored SLAP Energy Drink.

"Mr. Dick, I'm Jeff."

"You're Jeff Shank, intergalactic swashbuckler, on a mission for the kind, but not-so-attractive Princess LeMegan LeMew from planet five from Korr-Enbraun." He handed Jeff a thick stick. "Here, run this over your body."

Jeff did.

"Ok, you're clean. Now... you have to find a narcissistic, nihilistic, and totalitarian CEO, and wrist slap him for LeMew. You need the money to cure Cru, your pet crustacean who is dying of feline leukemia. You come from a great bloodline, Dirk Ironspine being your father, but you have found out that there is as much shame being your mother's son as there is honor in being your father's, since your mom ran off with the Milky Way Man, your father having neglected her needs by taking too many adventures."

"Uh, right."

"Sit down Shank. You want to know some things?"

"Well-"

"I'm an author. It's my job."

"I thought you were dead. 80 years ago."

"You'd like to think that, wouldn't you? People don't age in space. PK Dick finished his SLAP and tossed the can into a nearby receptacle. He called over the din of the crowd. "Barkeep, SLAP me!" He turned back to Jeff. "Stick to the important stuff Shank."

"What?"

"Will you please play along with me here? This is back-story. It's where the reader finds out some of the inner turmoil that drives you. The struggles make you real to them. If you make me work too hard on this, what I'm saying will sound contrived and insincere. If this doesn't sound authentic, they'll become bored and won't pay attention to the details. It's important to your mission."

"Oh, yeah. Okay Mr. Dick." Jeff tried to concentrate on every word coming from P. K. Dick's mouth. "How do you know all these things, pertaining to Cru and myself?"

"It's 'pertaining to Cru and me'. Authors have a sense about what goes on in other people's heads."

"You're right!" Jeff said slamming his bent arm down on the cocktail table, and his forehead on the arm. "I do blame myself."

"Jeff will you work with me here? Readers are smart people. They can spot phony drama a lightyear away." Jeff looked up from the table.

"I guess you don't get it. This account will be read by my fans everywhere. I need to look good. My fans are expecting it. Now, I'm here to tell you something important about the CEO. Can we get through this thing about you blaming yourself, so we can get to the clue I need to give you?"

"Wait. I know. I'll go out and come back in like I was seeing you for the first time.

"I suppose. Let's just hope that not too many people saw us together."

Jeff stood, whispering to P.K. Dick with the side of his hand at his face. "Be right back."

He exited the Cantina, as P.K. Dick adjusted his chair. "Swashbucklers."

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"P.K. Dick?"

"Jeff Shank! Sit down, my boy."

Cru signed the equivalent of eyerolling as Jeff sat.

"Now where were we?" Jeff asked.

"Jeff, quick! Say 'rhubarb' six or seven times."

"What?"

"People are watching us and listening. It will sound like background noise and we can avoid suspicion."

Jeff did.

"Good. Now about that clue-"

Jeff leaned in. "Tell me. I need to defeat the CEO."

"That's right, you do. Now pay attention. There's only one way to defeat the CEO."

"How's that?"

"You have to figure that out for yourself."

"What? I thought you were supposed to give me a clue."

"That's the clue. That there's only one way. So you don't have to waste your time on a bunch of ideas that won't work."

"Do you know how I need to do it?"

"Of course. I'm an author."

"And you won't tell me?"

"Jeff this is an account of your conflicts. I'm just a support character. You have to do the swashbuckling, not me. If I told you, then the central focus would be shifted to me. I'd be the main character because I knew more than you. You'd look inferior. Your wits have to save you to give your legend credibility."

"I don't care about credibility. I just want Cru cured. If I could find anyone who would lend me the money, I'd forget all about this stupid mission."

"Well I can't do that either and keep my minor character status. There are rules about these things."

"So, I just have to guess?"

"No not guess. Reason. Deduce. You haven't relied on guessing to get you this far have you?"

"Sure plenty of times."

"What about that cosmic super-intuitiveness that swashbucklers are born with that always helps them make the right decision no matter the difficulty?"

"Yeah, I've read about that. In fact, there was an article in Heroic Brainsluts Monthly just a couple of issues ago. I suppose I was born handicapped."

"So, you just guess about things?"

"Yeah."

"Then guess."

"I would. But I just haven't been myself."

"Why not?"

"Worrying about Cru. He's been with me so long and I'm afraid of losing him. He's sick you know."

PK Dick leaned across the table and whispered, "Ooh, nice segue. This works much better."

Jeff leaned in. "Thanks."

"Well Jeff, if you complete this mission you'll have the money to cure him."

"Yes, he'll have a good chance."

"I'm sure you'll do it. You've flown 17 missions and haven't failed yet. You'll know how to handle the CEO."

Jeff stood with renewed confidence. "Alright Mr. Dick."

"Now get out of here before anyone else sees you with me."

Jeff saw ASAP that the CEO's HQ was a veritable citadel. In true space hero form, Jeff was inside the stronghold in just moments. He found the main floor and what looked like the door to the inner sanctum of the CEO.

The entrance was guarded by a nine-foot, solid looking 'borg. Jeff wasn't about to go toe to toe with the behemoth. The only answer (which was again not a choice, but this time was a solution) was Jeff's tried and true weapon: the Laserrang. Solid substance when in contact with human body temperature, pure laser light any other time. The armament could cut through anything and return to Jeff's hand in seconds.

He let the 'rang fly, aiming for the 'bots head. But before the Laserrang could reach its target, the mech raised a hand, firing a wave of blue light, trapping the 'rang in midair and dropping it to the ground.

"Blast! Stasis beam. Now what?"

Jeff imagined his weapon headed for the planet's core as he watched it burn a hole through the floor, and disappear. The 'rang would eat its way through the entire building, and past the planet's crust headed for magma, before being trapped in the planet's center. It was the second 'rang he had lost and he didn't have the currency to get Doctor Wonderly to build a new one.

Jeff scanned the room and spotted a crowbar leaning in the corner of a work area. A plan formed in his taxed brain. He whispered to Cru, who jumped off Jeff's shoulder and began scrambling sideways across the floor. One of the mech's eyes moved independently of the other and followed the crustacean as he moved. The other eye stayed on Jeff.

"Blast."

Jeff whistled softly for Cru, who moved back to his side in a moment. "If only I had two of you."

Cru looked around. He scooted slowly over to a supply closet and used one claw to open the door. Cru looked back to Jeff and signed a description of the closet's contents. Jeff's eyes lit up.

"That is totally workable. Grab that stuff and get one of the bot's eyes on each one of you. so I can do my thing."

Cru asked Jeff what his thing was.

"Watch."

Cru reached in and pulled out the poster board and old skateboard inside. Cru used his sharpened claw to cut out an exact replica of himself. He used tape from a nearby desktop to secure the cutout to the board.

"Perfect!" Jeff whispered as Cru set the cutout on the ground. He gently pused the skateboard holding the cutout one way, while moving off in the opposite direction. As soon as Jeff was sure that the two "crabs" had the sentry's attention, he bolted across the room, grabbing the crowbar and raced straight for the sentry, whacking it on the knee. The automon fell over and shorted out.

"Thank you, Tonya Harding."

Jeff retrieved Cru, who was panting heavily.

"You keep that claw pretty sharp, don't you?"

Cru nodded weakly.

"We shouldn't have done that. It was too much."

Cru signed for Jeff to shut up and get on with the mission.

"Fine, but you're not leaving your perch."

Jeff stepped thru the formerly guarded door and found a small, balding man with terrible skin, sitting at a desk.

The man looked up from his business. "Fair work, Shank."

Jeff tried to focus his eyes in the dimmer light. "Who are you?"

"I'm the CEO. The man you came for."

Jeff glanced over the man's appearance. Not what he had expected. "You don't look so tough."

The CEO stood to his full 5'4" height. "I'm not."

"So why are you feared throughout the galaxy?"

"You know how rumors go. Everyone perceives me as evil because I've got such bad skin. Eczema makes a person cranky. The peeling and cracking and burning. I can't sleep at night and no woman will have me. My rep went from cranky to vicious to maniacal in just weeks."

"So I don't have to blast you?"

"Heavens, no. I just want some happiness."

"Swell. I'm stuck. I'm supposed to take you out so that LeMew will disarm the charge on my ship."

"LeMegan? She put you up to this?"

"Who were you expecting?"

"Do you know how many times this place gets stormed each week? I can't get insurance on this place no matter how high a premium I'm willing to pay. That's why there's no windows. I got tired of paying for the glass out of pocket."

"LeMew said I have to eliminate you."

"Yeah. Right. She's one of the few people in the galaxy who's as cranky as I am. She started this stupid skirmish. Her moyl always has been bigger than her oyges. Which is saying a ton. By the way, how's the Prince?"

"I didn't think she was married."

"She didn't have some boychic sitting near her?"

"I didn't see anyone. What does this have to do-"

"Then, she's not married Shank. WELL. This does change things. We used to date you know."

"No I didn't." Jeff turned. "You know, you're not maniacal, but you are a fruit loop. I'm leaving. I'm going to tell her I couldn't find you."

"Just a minute Shank! I'm going with you."

"Alive?"

"Don't worry about your blood money. I'll take care of 'Meg."

Jeff returned to Korr-Enbraun, the CEO preening himself all the way. Immediately after touchdown, Jeff's passenger bolted off the ship.

Jeff found the CEO seated beside LeMew, both with lovers' gleams in their eyes.

"Permission to speak, your majesty?"

"What?"

"I wanted to ask a question?"

LeMew wouldn't quit staring at the CEO. "I'm so glad we decided to stop this little spat." She addressed Jeff without looking up. "So ask."

"So how about my pay?"

"Oh, of course. Here's 65."

"65? You said 7000!"

LeMew broke her concentration off her love. "Well it's not like you had to do anything. I expected that you'd have to storm the building, take out 300 guards, and fight mano-a-mano with a deadly and devious megalomaniac. I never expected you would just walk into the guy's HQ and talk him into surrendering." She smiled at the CEO. "But I'm so glad he did."

"What about the fight with the automated body guard?"

"Jeff, you hit him in the knee with a crowbar and he fell over and electrocuted himself. That's not fighting."

"But I was counting on that money for Cru."

"Look your ship is refueled, and I'm paying you 65. What you did is worth 65. Oh, and here's a couple of gift certificates for a KB Whomper. You boys are probably hungry."

The fury showed on Jeff's face

"Hey Shank," the CEO called. "Here's the card of a really good radiologist. Tell him I sent you. He'll let you work out payments."

The guards once again ushered him to the Vulture. Jeff pulled the starship into launch position, looking down at Cru.

"Let's go home. And forget about what I said about forgetting what I said about women."