

Century Smith Tales

Mama Browns

A tall figure in scorched spacer leathers walked from the silver needle-nosed rocket. The exterior of the ship reflected a ruddy glow as the sun slipped towards the Martian horizon. The figure walked without looking left or right until he entered the overhang of the gantry docks that surrounded Grissoms Landing. He turned and looked back fondly at his ship. His ship! Century Smith reached into the inner pocket of his jacket. He took out a silver cigarette case, thumbed the catch, and looked down at the contents.

Three cigarettes, the tobacco and the paper that held them light brown in color which was one of the reasons they were called "Mama Browns." Smith smiled as he took one of them out. Of course, the other reason they were called 'Mama Browns' was because they were made by a little old Earth woman that everyone called Mama Brown. Mama Brown grew her tobacco in an exotic collection of ancient Martian pottery on the roof of a four-story building in Nodu Gordii known as Mungo's. Tobacco was expensive so putting a light to one was about the same as burning a ten-dollar bill from the old days, not that anybody used bills anymore.

The building housed Mungo's Reef-Bar and Grill on the bottom floor. The next floor up were apartments, of a sort, that were rented out by the hour to some of the local ladies. It took a sound sleeper to rent one of these rooms for the night. That floor could be noisy.

The next floor up were real apartments and were well insulated from the raucousness below. That's where Mungo himself had his own private digs, occupying a quarter of the floor. Mungo's pair of Venusian bodyguards had a smaller place that protected the only entrance to Mungo's rooms. Other rooms on this floor could be rented by long term by carefully vetted occupants. On the top floor were the offices and living quarters of the Black Star Line.

Black Star was a consortium of independently owned cargo rockets that had formed a company to help their owners survive against the bigger lines that were always trying to undermine their trade. Shipping could be a cutthroat business, sometimes literally. If things went wrong out in The Black it was hard to prove fault and the independents rarely had enough money to take perpetrators to task.

Mungo's was where Smith was heading... Sooner or later, just not right now. Smith closed the case and taped the cigarette down on its end, reversed it and taped it down again firming up the tobacco. He then inserted it into a cigarette holder that had been clipped to the side of the case. Making sure the cigarette was secure; he placed the holder into his mouth. With both hands he lifted the case and flicked the built in lighter, holding the flame to the cigarette and inhaling deeply.

After three months without a cigarette, the light headiness from the smoke felt almost euphoric. "Better than drugs." Smith thought, taking another drag. Not that he indulged in drugs. No decent spacer took them. The Black was too unforgiving for that, and for that matter, so were your

crewmates whose lives depended on you. It was a good way to end up outside your ship with your air tanks running out. And that was if your mates were feeling kind.

Smith looked up at the ship, his ship; he still found it hard to believe that she was his. At thirty-eight years of age, he was the youngest captain in the Black Star Line. If it hadn't been for his inheriting Captain Raj's share and co-owner Ben Corfresi agreeing to sell his, Smith would likely still be quartermaster on the Salambo rather than her Captain.

She was an old ship, 'Hell, she's older than I am.' Thought Smith. But she had been built well. Originally constructed by Deckard Space Ways before the final war, she was one of four sister ships all named after the queens in a card deck. She had been the Queen of Hearts. Over the years, the various owners had cared for her meticulously and she'd been upgraded and improved so much so that she was as good as any modern ship, maybe better. It was Captain Raj who had renamed her the Salambo.

Smith drew some more smoke into his lungs. "Back then." He thought. Back before some lunatics started throwing atomic bombs at each other, poisoning most of the earth. Back before the nascent Martian colonies became the United Federated States of Mars. "Yeah back then." The words came out of his mouth with the smoke he exhaled. If anyone had been watching and had seen the grim look on his face they would have sworn he had just cursed something or someone.

His calm came back when his eyes refocused on the Salambo. He could almost make out the art on her side. A beautiful woman sitting on a crescent moon her dark hair and diaphanous clothes streaming back as if in a wind. One arm was outstretched and reaching for a couple of stars. Or were they leaving her hand? It could be either. Smith smiled. Gordii might be home port for the Salambo but there was only one home for Smith, and he was looking at it.

Smith felt the last of the tobacco burn away as he dragged in the last of the smoke. As he exhaled he took the holder out of his mouth and lifted his foot and banged the residue out of the holder against the heel of his boot. He looked once more at his ship then turned and walked towards the travel tube that would take him into Gordii.

Story Two

Smith slid down the rails of the cargo holds ladder well into the ships hold, one of the few pleasures he had enjoyed when he was a cargo ape in his youth and it still felt good.

“Moses, where the Hell are you, you big gorilla!” A large black man with well-trimmed short white hair and an equally well-trimmed and white goatee stepped out from behind some crates.

“No need to yell captain. I may be getting older but my ears still work just fine no thanks to you bellowing at me.”

Smith walked across the cargo holds deck smiling broadly at the man. “Hell Mose, if I quit yelling at you you’d probably think I didn’t like you anymore!” Smith came to a stop a few feet away from the man still holding his smile.

Moses scratched his chin for a second then smiled back at Smith. “Yeah you’re probably right about that, that and with my poor old eyes and all I might grab you by the ass and toss you out the cargo bay doors.”

Smith gave a pretend grimace. “Does that mean you want me to quit yelling at you?”

Moses looked questionably at Smith. “Does that mean if I said yes you’d stop?”

Smith gave a shrug and smiled. “No, not really.”

Moses took a slow playful swat at Smith which Smith easily avoided. “Then why the Hell you asking me for you young ass pup!” Smith just kept his smile and shrugged.

“Yeah I know. Just to get the old man’s goat, right?”

Smith stepped forward putting his hand on Moses shoulder “Of course since I don’t have anything much better to do right now except to ask you if you could possibly move those creaky old bones of yours to find me the manifests’ for customs.” This time Smith danced away quickly from Moses somewhat faster swat.

“You know maybe you’re right skipper there was a time I would have caught you with that one.”

“Yeah well I was younger then and wasn’t use to your wily ways.” Laughed Smith. “And you know you weren’t really trying. You just want me to feel sorry for you till you lure me in range.”

With that Moses started to laugh himself. “Yup the trouble with working with someone for too long. They gets to know you. Come on then I’ll get the manifests”

They both walked over to a fold down shelf on the wall that acted as temporary table for Moses paper work. Moses picked up a clipboard. “Here you go skipper.”

As he took it Smith looked over at the two blue skinned Venusians who were hitching the cables to the skid to be lowered. Smith nodded in their direction. "How are the new apes working out?"

Everyone who worked in the cargo hold was called apes. It was a name Smith had been called for two years of his life as he worked his way up onboard one ship or another.

Moses looked towards them. "David and Cagney?" Their real names were Didev and A'gney But Moses used the names he was more familiar with. Almost all the ships did it the Venusians never seemed to mind or if they did they never voiced their disapproval.

"They're alright. They do a good job and don't bitch about it like some we've had and they get along with the Mercurians which is saying something!"

"Yeah I noticed." Smith looked towards them and back. "I've got to say that's a bit unusual."

"You know Captain I think it's because those two believe in some sort of religion on Venus... Something to do with the rain...I...I think that's what they said."

Smith nodded to Moses. "Oh Yeah the "Rain Walker" faith."

Moses looked curiously at Smith. Smith grinned at Moses. "You should get out more Mose. It's reasonably popular on Venus."

"Hell Captain I don't need to no nothing about some heathen religion! The Good book is good enough!" "Damn heathens!" Thought Moses. Then He felt slightly embarrassed. "Well I shouldn't be thinking that after all Jesus said to be kind and do right by others even if the others are aliens. "Right is right." His Mama used to say. "You treat folk's right and it comes back to you tenfold. Says so in right in the Good Book and don't you forget it." Well Mama was mostly right...So...Ok.

Smith could see the struggle going on in Moses mind. Moses had been raised a Clear Water Baptist and sometimes that showed very strongly whenever someone brought up religion. "It's a Venusian religion Mose don't take it too seriously. They believe in a lot of strange stuff there." With that he gave Moses a playful punch in the arm.

Moses grinned back at Smith. "Yeah you're right Captain those apes there." He pointed towards the two Venusians. "Haven't done me any harm and are good workers." Moses paused for a moment. "So what is this "Rain Walker" thing?"

"Well." Smith stroked his jaw. "As best as I can figure they believe after everything in the universe was made by the great maker, or whatever, sent a being or something, to bring rain or water to all the worlds He thought was worthwhile and from the water came life. So every world that has water holds something sacred so these worlds must hold some secret and sacred Mystery to be discovered. That's why so many Venusians leave Venus to work on Spaceships to search out these Mysteries."

Moses brow furrowed. "So you mean it's sort of like a pilgrimage?"

“Yeah I guess you could say that. At least for some of them.” Smith looked over at the two Venusians. “Hell Mose I don’t care what they believe in as long as they keep working hard and keep their nose clean that’s good enough for me.”

“A’bney glanced over at Smith and Moses as he tightened and checked the cables on the skid. “They are watching us Didev.”

Didev did not look down as he checked the cables hook. “Of course they are A’bney. It is the job of all Shabosh (Venusian for Boss) to make sure their Shramkas (Venusian for workers) do their work properly.”

He looked down at A’bney. “You worry too much about others my friend it is best to do your best and let others worry about themselves.”

A’bney rose up from his kneeling position and looked at Didev raised his arm to his waist palm out and dropped it which was the same as a human shrug. “The cables are secure”

Didev nodded back. “So is the hook.” They waved to Riley the winch operator who stood by the cargo bay doors. He waved back and punched the remote to lift the skid. Didev and A’bney stepped away till the skid was raised about two feet off the floor then proceeded to shove the cargo towards the bay doors.

Smith watched the procedure just as he had watched it or performed it for the past ten years. Some of the big and rich ships had automatic or robotic handlers and winches to do this work and that was fine if you had the money. But Smith had seen them break down and cost you money and time getting them operating again. Once again that was fine if you were big and rich enough to afford it but the smaller ships were neither and as Ben his old Captain and now boss said. “Machines can fail and usually they will do it at the most inconvenient time...But people...Well they can fail too but usually they will try a lot harder if their life or a paycheck is involved...Machines... Well they just don’t give a shit!”

Smith had to smile at that because just last week he had heard about some gaff where some robots had left five tons of ice-cream out on a launch pad in the sun because some programmer had punched in the wrong code. Well two days later they had five tons of goo messing up the pad and closing it down for a whole day as they cleaned it up. Well maybe the “Big Boys” could afford that it but it would probably break the back of a small owner to afford the loss and cover the cleanup expense.

Smith headed towards the moving skid clipboard in his hand. “I’m going to ride the skid down and head to customs,”

“Damn skipper I wish you wouldn’t do that. We have a perfectly useful ramp sitting there why don’t you use that?”

Smith did a little run and hopped onto the skid seizing one of the cables as his feet caught the edge of the skid then swung to look at Moses. “Because this is more fun.”

Moses took long strides to catch up to Smith. "Yeah and what if you were to slip and fall and break your neck?"

"Well Mose I guess you would get a new Captain."

"Yeah well I would rather keep the dumbass Captain I have now than get a new dumbass Captain I don't know!" Mose stopped by the doors as the skid swung out over the side and hung almost a hundred feet from the ground.

"I'll be fine Mose. Ok Riley lower away!"

As the skid started its slow decent Moses yelled out "Oh by the way we have a new Port Authority officer showing up today apparently they moved Carmichael on."

"Well good that asshole has screwed everything up for almost two years. What's the new guys' name?"

"Oh It's not a guy it's a woman!"

Smith almost slipped off the skid "WHAT!"

"Have a nice trip Captain see y'all later!" Moses turned and walked away grinning and laughing to himself. "You're used to my wily ways huh? Well "Wily Coyote" got nothing on me skipper!"

Smith smiled to himself. "That slick old bastard pulled another one on me." His smile however disappeared as he started to turn to some serious thinking. Moses was getting older and he was concerned for the man's safety. Mose was pushing sixty and that was old for a spacer and he had noticed that after the last run to Mercury Moses had some dried blood left on his moustache. Because of its proximity to the sun it's a little tricky pulling into orbit and you have to pull a lot of G's. Do it wrong and you could be on your way to the sun and no amount of tanning lotion is going to fix that. He'd have to talk to Ben Corfresi about how to move Moses into a job at the offices of Black Star without causing a mutiny. Smith took a deep breath. Ah... the pleasures of being Captain. Oh well if you can't take the heat... Yeah, yeah he's said and heard it a hundred times. Well we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

As the skid got half way down Smith could see the customs agent waiting for him he was glad to see it was Dave Arnold. Dave was a good guy and never pressed to hard about a few "irregularities" on the manifests unless it was way out of line. At that point he would give the manifests back to you and tell you to go and "Rethink" your paperwork. Since that meant he was moving on to the next ship it could take all day or even several days for him to get back to you depending on how many ships he had backed up. But like all customs agents he too had to follow orders from the Port Authority and for the past two years that had been Major F. Y. Carmichael. Most ship captains felt the F. Y. stood for what Carmichael would say to you if you complained that he was acting more like the Gestapo than a representative of the Port Authority.

Needless to say there was a lot of bitterness and uncooperative ships captains over the past two years and all the captains even including the well-off big companies were feeling the pinch. Shipping schedules were all over the place anymore and in some places product had almost dried up.

At that moment Smith also noticed seven people dressed in the black uniforms of Port Authority approaching Dave Arnold and then glancing up as Dave pointed towards the lowering skid he was on.

“Great!” thought Smith. “Just what I need a visit from the new head Honcho of the P. A. first thing!” Smith gave a mental shrug and resigned himself to the coming ordeal.

As the skid touched down he stepped off and headed towards the waiting group. As he approached he gave Dave a small grin then looked at the person standing next to him. Smith saw she was a tall straight backed woman with a Majors insignia on her shoulder tabs who seemed to exude an aura of relaxed discipline. Standing next to her was First Sargent Arnold “Bull” Krueger a short thick set man whose thickness was mostly muscle. Smith gave him a respectful nod and received it back. Smith had no quarrel with Krueger who he knew was a tough but fair man. He wished he could have said the same about his ex-boss.

“Captain Smith.” She stepped forward and Smith almost thought she was going to extend her hand to shake. Smith stopped abruptly and gave her his best poker face. She smiled as she said. “Oh don’t worry Captain I’m not going to offer you my hand. Sargent Krueger has informed me not to do that unless I don’t mind being insulted by you not taking it.”

Smith could not hold back a small grin as he eyed her up and down. She was an attractive woman with high cheek bones, dark brown eyes and a tan face that said she spent some time outside instead of sitting behind a desk. He put her height at about five foot eight give or take and from the way she carried herself he would say she worked out at a gym or ran and struck him as a woman someone should not take too lightly.

“Yeah, I kind of have a thing about that.” Smith kept his grin. Smith thought “If she wants to keep this pleasant, I can do pleasant.”

“Well from what I’ve heard I understand.”

“Understand?” thought Smith. “What the Hell is this? First the F.S. sends us a dick like Carmichael now we get little miss sunshine here. If they’re trying to confuse us they are coming at it the right way!” Smith simply nodded.

“Well I may as well introduce myself, I’m Major Katerina D’Angelo.” Smith noted that she said her first name distinctly with emphasis on the first syllable and no running together of the other two syllable’s either.

“You know Sargent Krueger and...Oh my God!” She was now staring past Smiths shoulder. Smith whirled reaching for a non-existing sidearm expecting some sort of trouble till he noticed what she was staring at. Coming down the ramp was Crank. Crank was a fully grown Venusian

Shuck Dog and was about fifteen feet long from nose to tail tip with six legs and six eyes and was at that moment slowly changing his colour from shipboard grey to the Martian reddish sand colour that he normally wore when on Mars. Smith relaxed.

Smith turned back to the Major and noticed she had her hand on the butt of her automatic. He smiled at her. "It's okay Major that's just Crank." Smith noticed a couple of the other P. A. Officers with her had also reached for their weapons.

"Okay guys if I were you." Smith said as he held up his hands. "I would take my hands off those weapons unless you've made out your wills recently and don't mind dying a messy death."

Krueger turned and growled at the two. "Stand down!" then looked at Smith and shrugged "New guys." Said in a way that should explain their behavior. Smith simply nodded his acceptance of the statement. The Major was still staring at Crank.

"Um...Major?"

She shook her head as if to wake up or was coming out of a trance. "Oh sorry Captain Smith...It's just that I've heard stories... but I never gave them much credence till now. I mean I've never actually saw a Shuck Dog except in pictures."

Smith looked back at Crank with fondness. "Yeah raised him from a pup and I'll tell you that's a story in itself." Although they were called Shuck Dogs Cranks species were more catlike in their movements and looks than doglike but what the Hell thought Smith he hadn't been the one who named them. They also came from eggs and were considered amongst scientists as warm blooded reptiles. What most people mistook for fur was actually very fine scales. Shuck Dogs were also very capable of changing colours to match their surroundings and doing it very quickly as, someone once referred to them as "Super Chameleons."

All in all Cranks species was very good at what it did which was surviving and killing to remain so. They were predators of the first order and were respected as such. Venusians largely left them alone and humans who took to hunting them either never came back or came back physically or mentally maimed. Smith only knew of three survivors. Two of them barley had a scratch on them and suffered more from dehydration and malnourishment when they were found.

However they are both now in a mental ward having suffered complete mental traumas of some ill-defined nature that is still puzzling their psychotherapists. The third one has only one real arm and one real leg and swears to this day that the only reason the Shuck Dog let him live was that after attacking him the creature realised that he had only a camera and no weapons. The man said the Dog sniffed him up and down after looking at his camera then staring into his eyes as if he was telling him that he was lucky before the creature walked away. Most people feel that he was exaggerating that the Dog had that kind of emotion and simply wasn't hungry.

Crank had been with Smith for three years now and Smith had his own theories about Shuck Dogs and he didn't feel the need to share them with anyone, except maybe Crank himself who always listened patiently to Smith during which Crank usually yawned, farted, bugged Smith for food half way through or simply went to sleep. Or as Smith thought, pretended to go to sleep, it was hard to tell because Crank always left one pair of eyes opened. That's why Smith thought Crank was more like a cat than a dog, he was annoying but in cute sort of way. Well cute if you could get past the almost foot long teeth and claws that could put holes in one inch steel plate with seemingly little effort.

Crank stretched and yawned at the bottom of the ramp which elicited a couple of "Holy Shits" from the P.A. troopers.

Smith looked at the Troopers "Don't mind him he's just showing off and trying to impress you."

"Well I think he's succeeding!" That came from Major D'Angelo.

So for the first time in any body's memory they saw Smith smile at a member of the U.F.S.

As Crank walked towards them Smith looked at the major. "So was there anything I could do you for you Major? I don't want to waste your time and you're probably a busy person and ..."

"Not that busy really. Mind if I had a look at your Manifests." She held out her hand.

Smith tried not to lose his smile. "Sure thing no problem at all." Damn it! Smith thought as he handed over the clip board with the manifests attached. Crank approached and sat down beside Smith and looked at the Major as he cast his nose about taking in everyone's scent. Then Crank stretched out his neck towards the Major all six eyes focused on her as she seemed to nonchalantly continue to study the manifests.

Then the Major shifted slightly and as she still studied the manifests reached out with her left hand and putting it on the top of Crank's forehead started to scratch it. Smith's eyes moved from one to the other of them not wanting to move or even breathe heavily. He had never witnessed anyone even trying to do this outside of himself or some of the crew who had known Crank from when he was a "Pup".

Crank closed his eyes and gave off a throaty kind of sound that was a cross between a purr and a hum. With that the Major looked up from the manifests and stopped scratching Crank. After looking at Smith then noticing everyone around her was staring at her with mixed expressions on their faces that looked like a cross between shock and horror except for Smith who looked more bemused than afraid.

"I'm sorry, was I not supposed to do that?" She directed the question towards Smith.

"Well since you are still alive and have all your body parts I would say it's probably alright. Crank?" Crank turned his head slightly and gave a muffled "Humff"

"Is it okay with you?" Crank gave another "Humff" then shoved his head into the Major's hand.

"Yeah with that I would say it's definitely Ok!" Smith Laughed lightly.

“Well forgive me Crank.” The Major gave Crank one last scratch but I need my hand here for a moment.” She flipped the pages on the clipboard looking at each briefly.

“Everything in order Major?” Smith asked trying to strike a tone between curiosity and nonplussed.

The Major glanced up then looked back down at the clipboard. “I see here you’ve been to Olympus then Europa then back here.”

Olympus and Europa were LaGrange colonies. Olympus was an American colony and the new capital of what was still called the United States of America. It was an O’Neill style colony while Europa was based on the Bernal style colony. There was a third station it had no name as yet since it had been started just before the war and since then had been worked on sporadically and as resources and manpower had become available. It was based on what was known as the “Stanford Colony Habitat.” All these Colonies were built at L1

The Soviets had built a Space colony as well but had opted to build it at L2. They had also helped the Chinese build another at L2, The Soviets, ever secret, had released little information about these colonies but from any pictures they sometimes released they seemed to resemble the Bernal style.

“Yeah.” Smith nodded. “You familiar with the “Triangle Run” Major?”

The Major looked up from the clipboard. “Yes I served on the “Charybdis” for six months.” The “Charybdis” was a patrol cruiser that usually covered that run.

Smith nodded. “So she’s not a total “Dirtsider.” Thought Smith as he started to calculate the trouble that could cause. Carmichael had virtually no knowledge of space and you could bullshit him quite often but this could now be a problem.

“Well that’s good to know Major. It’s good to be able to talk with someone who at least understands some of the problems out in the Black.”

The major lifted her eyes from the clipboard and met Smiths. “Oh I’m well aware of the problems Captain.” Smith thought he caught a glimpse of humor or perhaps a bit of mischief lurking in her eyes, he wasn’t quite sure which.

“I noticed you have a shipment from Locke and Hoare that weighs in at eight hundred pounds?”

“Yes.” Smith answered in a noncommittal tone. “Is there something wrong there Major?”

“No...No not at all I simply thought that Locke and Hoare always shipped there goods in five hundred pound loads which means you should have a thousand pounds.”

Smith looked at the clipboard then back up to her “Really?” Smith put a smile back on his face “I wasn’t aware of that. You know I just haul what they give me.”

The Major dropped her eyes back down to the clipboard. “Yes...and Krane as well as Yvon and Marshall seem to be shipping their goods in slightly different weights per package than I remember.”

“Oh Oh!” Smith thought “It looks like I’m going to have to pay customs more than I was expecting.”

Smith like all the other ship Captains had found that Carmichael never checked the weights he just ripped the cargo apart looking for contraband of some sort. Hell thought Smith he even tried to nail me for a pack of cigarettes I had picked up on Europa and had shoved in my jacket pocket. It was because of that that all the ship captains started to doctor their manifests weights so they could make up for the delays Carmichael cost them.

The custom agents knew this but Carmichael had pissed them off so much that they simply started to look the other way when the captains filed false manifests. Carmichael’s early success at catching some illegal goods had made him think that his way, “Smash and Grab” the Captains called it was the way to go. In fact all it did was slow down commerce and create shortages everywhere. Smuggling, Black marketeering and all manner of crimes increased dramatically. Making Carmichael a bit of a Pariah amongst the other Law enforcement agencies such as the Sheriff’s Department, Rangers and even the local Metro cops who normally had little to do with the Port Authority.

“Outside of that everything looks just fine and I’m sure Inspector Arnold here will agree there’s no need to do much else.” She handed the clipboard back to a somewhat surprised Smith. “However I would recommend that you check the weights more carefully NEXT time...You know just to be sure. We wouldn’t want any problems now would we?” Smith could and would be accused of many things but stupid wasn’t one of them.

She held Smiths eyes in a steady gaze. Smith returned her look in the same manner. “Of course Major we wouldn’t want any...misunderstandings to happen would we?”

The Major smiled. “No WE wouldn’t.” With that she turned to the Sergeant Kreuger. “Well Sergeant I think we can move on. Good day Captain.” She reached out her hand and scratched Crank one last time. “Good day to you too Crank.” Crank gave her another “Humf.” as she turned and strode away followed by the P.A. Troopers. Smith was sure he saw Sergeant Kreuger give him a sly wink.

Inspector Arnold took the clip board from Smiths hand and proceeded to put the customs electronic stamp on the manifests. When he was done he looked up at Smith who was still watching the Major.

“You know Smith I always thought you had horseshoes up your ass and this just goes to prove it!”

Smith took the clip board back from Arnold. “Thanks Dave you’re a Prince amongst men.”

Dave snorted. “Yeah right! I bet it’s going to be interesting at the “Reef” tonight.” He gave a chuckle as he walked off towards the next ship the Major was heading for. He doesn’t know the half of it thought Smith. Crank gave off what sounded like a small whine. “Crank cut it out! So you like her, big deal! Do I have to remind you she’s F.S. She’d probably put our heads on the block in a heartbeat!” Crank turned his head towards Smith and gave out another “Humf.”

“Yeah, well I don’t care what you think! Let’s get back to the ship.” Crank followed reluctantly. Moses was waiting for him. “Saw you talking to the new P.A. Commander how is she?” Moses caught the look

on Smith's face. "OH oh! Trouble?" Smith smiled and put his hand on Moses' shoulder. "Let's just say life may get to be interesting."

"Interesting"? Thought Moses. "Isn't that some kind of Chinese curse or something?" As Smith walked away. "Damn I'm getting to old for interesting!"

Smith made sure to get a big table at "Mungo's Reef" that night ordered up a drink then sat and waited for the fallout from P.A.'s visit to the other ships to arrive and they did all at the same time. Smith grinned to himself as he watched them scan the room looking for him. It was Jake Dawson of the Vagabond who spotted him first. "That figures." Thought Smith. "Jake always had a good eye for dames, trouble or just plain Hell raising and tonight it could be two out of three." Smith also noticed since there wasn't any women close by that the last two were most likely candidates for the evening. Jake, leading the pack strode purposely towards Smith's table. Everyone in between Smith's table and the obviously determined ships Captains got the Hell out of the way quickly as the noise level of the bar dropped dramatically. Some of the tables close to Smith's picked up their drinks and headed to what they hoped would be safer places.

Jake stopped at the opposite side of the table from Smith the other Captains fanned out on both sides. Smith noticed that two of the Captains, John Chang of The Tao and Isaac Seymour of the Sara both part of the Black Star Line moved closer to him. While John Reid of the Rascal and Kaishu of the Wokou. stood on each side of Dawson.

Chang and Seymour both wanted an explanation from Smith why he got off tax free while the rest of them had to pay full customs tax. Since they and Smith were part of the same company however they didn't come looking for a fight unlike Dawson and the other two.

Dawson put both of his large hands on the back of the chair in front of him and leaned forward. "All right Smith." Dawson growled. "I think you know why we're here and you better have a damn good story or things are going to get real messy around here." With that Dawson gripped the chair a little tighter.

Smith calmly picked up his drink and took a sip then put it back down changing his grip on the handle so he could use it as a weapon if needed he just hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Jake just cool your jets and sit down and we'll talk."

"I don't want to cool my jets and I don't want to sit down! I want some answers!"

"Well Jake I'm not about to give you any till you take your hands off something that can cave my head in!"

"Well...well." Jake sputtered. With that Smith knew that Dawson really didn't want a fight after all the last time they fought it ended up in a stalemate with both of them bruised and bloody but he needed an out.

“Ok Jake listen. Why don’t I order up some drinks and we all sit down and I’ll explain.” Dawson hesitated. “C’mon Jake if you’re not happy afterwards you can always beat me up then!”

Jake stood there for a second thinking and staring at Smith till Kaishu nudged him. Dawson turned his head then lowered it to let Kaishu whisper to him.

Kaishu was Japanese and had a reputation as a smart but dangerous business man. He also considered himself a student of Sun Tzu and believed that winning negotiations was better than winning a battle after all they could always fight later if talks did not go well. Which is why Smith had suggested talking first, he knew Kaishu had a cooler head than Dawson.

Smith felt that Chang and Seymour would stand by him in a fight but they had no real stake in this and were a little upset with him so initially the odds would be with Dawson and Smith knew that in a bar fight the first few seconds would count. He took another sip of his drink and tried to look calm as he watched Dawson and Kaishu. “Stay cool.” Thought Smith. “Never let the Sharks smell blood. That never works out well.” Not that Smith had ever seen a shark but he had seen videos on them when he had been in school.

Finally Dawson turned back to Smith. “Ok Smith we’ll talk... for now.” With that Smith took his hand off his drink and gestured with both hands. “Have a seat gentleman.” He looked over To Molly, a barmaid who he had told earlier to keep an eye out for his order and nodded to her. She headed to the bar to get the drinks. As the captains sat down the bar sounds started to return to their natural volume.

Molly brought two pitchers of beer and enough glasses for the captains. Molly looked at Smith as she finished putting down the last glass. “Thanks Molly if we need more I’ll give you a yell.”

Molly gave Smith a wink and a smile that hinted at naughtiness. “Well you know me Smith I’ll be waiting.” Smith gave her a deliberate leer back. “Always good to know Molly.” As she turned to leave Dawson reached towards her ass but before he could touch it she stopped abruptly and without even turning to look said. “Dawson you grab my ass and the next pitcher I bring you’ll be wearing it!” Dawson withdrew his hand.

As she walked away Dawson looked at Smith. “Jeez you think she knew me or something.” That brought a round of laughter from the table and helped ease the tension down a notch.

Smith decided to keep the tone rolling. “Really Jake? You think?” That produced another round of laughs and rude comments. Jake laughed at himself and downed half his glass of beer.

“Ok Smith now that we’re all feeling a little friendlier what’s the story here.”

Smith eased back into his chair. “Well Jake let me ask you.” Then Smith swiveled his head to make eye contact with all the Captains. “Actually let me ask all of you... Did our new P.A. Inspector nail you for all your cargo or just selected loads?”

With that the Captains started looking at each other. "Well." Chang was the first to speak. "Come to think of it she nailed me for about...Maybe twenty-five percent of my load." With that Chang looked at the others.

Seymour was next "Yeah now that you mention it she got me for about the same amount."

Jake looked at Klaishu then at Reed both nodded to him. "Well that is interesting. She seems to have nailed us all for about the same amount."

Smith took another sip of his drink and waited a moment for that to sink in. "So." Smith started "Don't you think that's a little odd. I mean when was the last time an Inspector found something wrong with the cargo manifests then only checks part of the ships load."

Dawson finished the rest of his drink then reached for the pitcher of beer. "You know Smith I've a feeling you're about to tell us."

"Right you are Jake. You guys figured I ratted you out and cut a deal with the P.A. didn't you?"

Dawson smiled at Smith. "It may have crossed some of our minds."

"Not mine." That was Chang again. Chang was sincere in his statement he didn't think Smith would stoop that low. Especially within his own company and certainly never with the F.S.

Smith grinned at Chang and held his glass up to him. "Well John You're probably the only one here that thinks that way."

As Dawson sat there he started to think about what really went down. Dawson always thought more clearly with a drink in him. Now he was starting to smell something that wasn't rat and more like a fishy smell as in the Shakespearian sense.

"So Smith are you telling us that you were set up?"

"Exactly right Jake. I think we're dealing with a very clever new P.A. Inspector."

Dawson looked at Smith. "Ok let's hear the rest of your take on this if nothing else it sounds like a good story." With that he leaned back in his chair.

"Alright... She checked my manifests and spotted the fake loads right off but she told Arnold to stamp them correct and moved on. I'm betting Arnold told you guys that he didn't understand why you guys got nailed and I got a free pass...Am I right?"

The other Captains looked at each other again and nodded then looked back to Smith.

Dawson leaned forward again. "Ok Smith let's say we buy this...So why the Hell would she do this?"

"To have us right here right now doing what we're doing...Which...Just in case you all haven't figured out is talking about what the Hell is going on."

Kaishu steepled his fingers in contemplation of Smith's words, like many Japanese he enjoyed the intricacies of thought and it pleased him to think that they actually had a "Gameplayer" to deal with someone perhaps to cross swords with. He almost snorted when he thought of Carmichael, that dull witted moron who felt that a club was a real weapon. Now this...This could be interesting if not fun.

Smith could see that all of them were trying to figure out the why. Smith thought "Now's the time." And he hoped he was calling it right.

"Jake asked me for my take on this and I'm going to give it..." Smith paused, partly for dramatic sake partly to let it sink in and partly because he just enjoyed doing it.

Dawson banged his fist down on the table. "Oh c'mon Smith... Cut the drama! I hate it when you pull this kind of shit!"

Smith held up his hand "Ok Jake calm down...She's sending us a message. The message being...Play nice and turn in proper custom manifests and I won't hassle you."

Smith watched as they all digested this. Kaishu was the first to speak. "That is an interesting deduction Smith but the question of why still remains."

With that Smith once again caught the eyes of all the captains. "Because she has to get the cargo moving." Smith paused again but only for a moment. "C'mon guys look what's happening, Cargo is backed up all over. Here we are unloading this month's load and last month's load is still sitting out on the clearing pads, the transport tubes are filled with goods that are going nowhere, the ware houses are filled to the rafters and from what I heard the "Jackers" actually got bold enough to try to make a hit on them and got in a shootout with both the Rangers and the Sheriff's Department." Everyone paused for thought on that one. Shooting it out with either of those two meant an automatic ten year trip to the Silica mines out in Painted Canyons which at fifty percent casualty rate for the criminal workers was almost a death sentence. That was if you survived the shootout, which with those two departments wasn't all that likely. Both had a high ratio of F.T.S. (Failed to Survive) reports handed in and no one ever asked why or at least thought it best not to ask.

Kaishu pondered on that and so did the rest of them. Criminal activity had indeed gone up in the last two years since Carmichael was running the P.A. here in Gordiii and lately violent crime had increased dramatically. Even Kaishu had to send some of his men to "Insure" that his goods were not molested which had added to the body count of late. At one time no one would have even thought of bothering him or his business "Partners" but now that everything was stalled so badly even stealing a little and moving it raked in high profits with no questions asked.

Dawson looked hard at Smith "So are you saying we just put in the correct weights and she's going to look the other way at whatever else we um... Slip in?"

"Yeah...I think so...At least temporarily till she clears the logjam but in the meantime we could pull down a nice little profit on some "Special" goods." With that Smith gave a big wink at everyone.

They all smuggled a little but Smith knew Dawson, Reid and Kaishu were the real professionals at this table but with the "Jackers" getting more numerous and more violent their clandestine drops in the desert and filing navigation errors was costing them fines and cargo. Lost cargo they couldn't report or file insurance claims on.

Everyone sat there for a while nursing their drinks. A silent island as the bar sounds and music swirled noisily around them.

Finally Dawson broke the silence as he poured the last of the pitcher of beer in to his glass and putting the pitcher down more heavily than necessary. "Ok Smith I'll buy it." He turned his head from side to side. "Kaishu, Reid?"

Kaishu nodded acceptance. Reid nodded as well. "Sure, what the Hell it can't be much worse than what we have now."

Both Chang and Seymour also nodded. Smith looked around and grinning raised his glass. "Well gentlemen the next thing we do is get the word out to as many other Captains we can and see what happens. So it may be a little premature but let's have a toast to our new P.A. Inspector."

As they finished their drink and put their glasses down Dawson looked at Smith. "You know Smith if what you say works out we're dealing with one foxy lady."

Before Smith could say anything Kaishu spoke up. "There is a saying that a Fox is but a Wolf that sends flowers."

Smith lifted his glass to Kaishu. "Well said Kaishu and I think we all should keep that in mind."

A month and a half later Smith was on the landing/launch pad again talking with Arnold when he saw the Major and her escorts heading towards him. This time Crank was sitting next to him and Smith felt a stir from him as he caught her sent. He thumped his tail just once but it threw up the fine Martian dust in a huge cloud enveloping Both Smith and Arnold..

"CRANK! Do you mind! Get a grip before you totally embarrass yourself!" Crank wagged his head at Smith. "No...No you're wrong, I understand it's just what's next, you going to pee yourself!"

Crank looked at Smith. "Humff"

"Yeah...You heard me alright so just chill Ok!" Smith looked at Arnold who seemed to be amused at the situation. "Don't say a word Dave...Not a word."

It took all of Dave Arnolds control not to crack up as the Major approached. "Well Captain Smith It's good to see you again."

"Yes major it's good to see you too. Mister Arnold here was telling me you got the transport tubes cleared and the warehouses are starting to get space in them."

“Yes things are finally moving.” She looked at Arnold. “So Mister Arnold how are things going here?” She glanced at the clipboard in his hand.

“Fine Major, Just checking Captain Smiths Manifests.”

She held out her hand. “May I?”

Arnold handed it to her. “Of course Major.”

She gave it a quick once over. “Looks good Captain, all weights seem in order. She held it out for Arnold to take back. “Why don’t you just stamp these and let Captain Smith get on his way.”

Arnold smiled. “Of course Major.” As Arnold proceeded to put the stamps on she looked at Crank. “Crank I have something for you.” She smiled as she reached into her belt pouch and pulled out a plastic bag.

Smith could feel the urge from Crank to want to thump his tail again. “Crank, what did I tell you about behaving?” He felt Crank tone his emotions down a notch.

The Major looked at Smith. “I hope you don’t mind Captain.” She opened the bag and took out a Venusian fish called a Sailhalee. “I’m not sure if he would like this, what do you think?”

Smith laughed. “Are you kidding...Just when he takes it be prepared to let go real quick!”

Just to prove Smith wrong Crank opened his mouth and extended his tongue about three feet. The major carefully placed the fish on it. Crank just to show how much control he had slowly rolled his tongue back into his mouth like a carpet.

The major looked at Smith “Well I hoped he liked it.”

“Trust me Major he did.”

“Well then I should really get going.” She turned to leave but stopped as Smith spoke to her.

“You know Major I think you made a friend for life.” Smith nodded towards Crank.

She smiled at him both with her lips and those soft brown eyes that seemed to hold both mystery and mischief. “Really Captain...I was hoping I made two.” With that she continued her turn and walked off with the P.A. troopers following. Arnold watched Smith as Smith watched the major. As soon as she was out of ear shot he spoke.

“Wow... Smith what are you going to do about that?”

Smith said nothing but kept his eyes on the major till she disappeared behind some crates. Then he turned to Arnold and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Well Dave right now I think I’m going to go and have a cold shower. C’mon Crank I’ll probably have to hose you down as well.”

Arnold watched as Smith and Crank headed back towards their ship. "Yup!" he thought. "Definitely going to get interesting around here."

