

An Easy Mark

Glynn ran her fingers over the daikonverter. “Jockstrap!” she yelled over her shoulder at her ship’s mechanic.

“Check this baby out.”

Jockstrap strode to her side with his customary glare at the use of his nickname. Glynn kept assuring him he’d get used to it eventually. No way was she drawling out *Jacques* like some fancy-pants every time she needed a screw tightened. Besides, between the scarred remnants of his botched cleft-palate surgery and his corkscrew curls, she figured his skin should have thickened up long before he met her. And if not, she was doing him a favor. The universe was not a warm and fuzzy place.

The Daikon narrowed its reptilian eyes as Jockstrap pretended to give the daikonverter the once-over. This deal hinged on the Daikon believing that they were desperate for this doohickey, so they had to look nominally capable of evaluating it.

400 years after the inception of Craigslist, and the multi-system version was still as popular and as dangerous as it had ever been. Glynn and her crew had been mock-limping through orbit for three months now, and this was the first bite they’d had on their ads. The rest of the crew had had their doubts as to whether a Daikon could be lured this way, but Glynn had assured them that whatever the reputation of Daikons as the high-falutin philosopher-kings of the universe, they had just as many scumbags and hooligans as any other species.

She’d been right.

Jockstrap grunted his approval and handed the daikonverter back. Glynn raised her eyebrow at the Daikon.

“Four pounds of chocolate?”

Chocolate was the new highly illegal currency of the Earth system. The stuff was all but impossible to harvest, between the rolling pollution and the bands of bloody brigands who owned South America. Synthetic stuff was available, but so inferior to the genuine article as to be of no value at all. It turned out that many of the alien species reacted to chocolate as humans would have reacted to a mix of cocaine, meth, and marijuana. Trading in chocolate ran counter to every interstellar treaty, but no one enforced the treaties anyway.

The Daikon sniffed.

“Five was the offer.”

Glynn shrugged and handed over the foil-wrapped chocolate. She heard Feli sigh behind her. She couldn't blame her – they'd risked their lives to get it, and now almost all of it was gone, just like that. But if this plan worked, they'd be gone just like that too. Out of this orbit, out of this system doomed to self-destruct sooner than later.

“Had to try.” She watched as the Daikon ran the chocolate along its sensory fins, shuddering as the rich aroma hit its senses.

“Never take candy from strangers,” she murmured with a smile.

The Daikon's blue skin rippled suspiciously, and Glynn heard the slight popping that meant the third and fourth eyes in the back of its head had opened.

“What's that?” it demanded.

She shook her head. “Nothing. Just an old Earth saying.”

The Daikon shot her a hard look and tilted its chin at her in a gesture of finality. It pushed a button on its utility belt and shimmered out of sight, back to its ship just off the nose of *The Grim Roger*.

Glynn straightened up, transformed in an instant from black-market drug dealer to nonsense ship captain.

“Mark, do you have a handle on all the consciousness on that ship?”

Jockstrap wasn't the only crewmember who answered to whatever name Glynn assigned. To be fair, though, no one could pronounce Mark's real name. It was a leap to identify Mark as male or even as singular. He always talked about himself in the plural, though Glynn wasn't sure if that was just because he'd been so accustomed to thinking in concert with the rest of his species or if he was actually more than one mind.

Mark projected his answer into the minds of the other three crew members.

“Yes. They won't be aware that we are piggybacking when they leave the system.”

“All right.”

Glynn turned her attention from the tank that held the mass of what looked like Martian ice that she'd dubbed Mark and met the nervous stares of Jockstrap and Feli.

“Got your syringes? We don't have a lot of time.”

The other two humans held up their allotments of Eviease. That had been almost as hard to acquire as the chocolate. Not because it was in such high demand – more because production had all but ceased years ago. Eviease had been the government's first effort at achieving stasis that would allow humans to survive intersystem travel. It had been an abysmal failure as far as that went – the drug did slow down body processes and allow survival without life support systems, but not for long enough. Plus, there were claims of brain damage the more often the stuff was used. Glynn figured she lost a few brain cells every time she tossed back a cold one – she didn't mind losing a few more to escape a solar system that was on the verge of collapse. Earth was so widely considered the ghetto of the universe, that the rest of the world had decided

it would be in everyone's best interest to just let humans run their course. But Glynn was not going down without a fight.

“Jockstrap, there's no chance that we'll be disconnected in transit?”

Jockstrap shoved back his dark curls and curled his lip farther.

“Of course there's a chance. But we're as secure as we can be.”

Glynn turned her attention to Feli, the slight, fair-haired female who doubled as a medic and the ship's chandler.

“You ready?”

Feli nodded shortly. “Let's get this over with.”

Mark spoke directly into Glynn's mind.

“I'll need you to turn up my oxygen levels so I can maintain control over the Daikons and get the life support systems back on line.”

Mark carefully shielded their delight from the mind of the human captain as she reached over and flicked up the filtering level on the oxygen monitor to his tank. Just like that. The sweet, powerful, life-giving air flowed into them like an intoxicant. They watched, deliberately impassive, as the humans strapped themselves into their bunks and injected themselves with Eviease.

“Never take candy from strangers,” Mark hummed to themselves. The infusion of life-giving oxygen unchained the telekinetic abilities that the humans so feared in Martians. Merrily they turned the oxygen filter all the way up.

A shift in the consciousness in the Daikon ship alerted Mark to imminent departure. They readied themselves with a sense of anticipation. No one in this system had mastered intersystem travel. Even piggybacking on the Daikon ship as Glynn had planned posed an enormous risk.

Every system in the ship would be disabled in the process. They would be adrift in the Daikon system, a world hostile and unfamiliar to humans. But Mark agreed with Glynn – they were doomed if they stayed here. The Earth system might have six months at best before it became completely uninhabitable. The colonies on Mars, Io, and the moon had all been dismal failures. Better to make the leap and take their chances than wait around to die.

The problem for Glynn was that her plan hinged on trust.

Specifically, trust placed in a slave who had every reason to betray that trust.

The strangest sensation seized Mark as the entire ship shuddered. It was almost as if it lurched forward while remaining stationary, as if enormous energy poured into the frame while simultaneously rushing out. It could have lasted a week or an instant, and it allowed no room for thought or action. Then it was over.

As soon as they regained their bearings, Mark reached out with their telekinetic strength and unattached the piggyback system as Jockstrap had instructed them. *The Grim Roger* was sadly disabled now, incapable of fleeing or even puttering away from the Daikon ship. The only hope they had was the telepathic hold Mark was maintaining over the minds of the Daikon shipmates, keeping them oblivious to their parasitic stowaways until the Daikon powered out of sensing distance.

Mark reached out to the minds of the humans, more out of habit than any curiosity. It was as impossible for a telepathic life form to disregard the thoughts of the lives around it as for a literate person to stare at a page without reading the words printed there. They were all deep inside their biologic processes, their systems slowed down like sludge.

But they were still there. Mark sighed in collective relief. They didn't want them to die, after all. Telekinetic abilities did not confer mechanical know-how, and Martians were at a

decided disadvantage when it came to interfacing with other species. When humans had first discovered their people, the humans had mistaken them for ice deep under the Martian surface. Their life form was unlike anything else humans had ever seen or imagined. The few other species who ventured into the Earth system were equally unprepared for the Martian people. No, Mark needed these humans.

But they didn't need them unshackled.

And while they were throwing around old Earth sayings, how about "turnabout is fair play"?

The Martians' incredible ability to basically ferment ultra-rich oxygen from any environment that contained even the smallest amount of the precious element had made them invaluable to humans. Martians had had no concept of warfare or conflict before the humans came along. Even their concept of individual personhood was radically different from the humans', having been bound up in one another's thoughts, perceptions, and emotions ever since inception. When they became aware of new consciousnesses entering their world, they had not conceived of either the defensive or the offensive tendencies that dictated human behavior.

But the Martians learned fast.

The humans realized that the Martians' ability was severely hampered when their access to oxygen was limited. They enslaved the Martians, cutting them up in sheets and hauling them away to Earth to counter the thick black clouds of pollution that had led to widespread breathing diseases and shortened lifespans. They kept the Martians in tanks, only allowing them enough oxygen to maintain a sufficient level of consciousness to produce oxygen but not enough to access their telekinetic abilities.

Mark knew that Glynn expected them to be grateful because she rationed out more oxygen than most humans, allowing them to think and communicate freely. But they were about to bite the hand that fed them.

Mark laughed among themselves. What was it with these silly idioms?

They would wake up Jockstrap first. They needed all of his mechanical abilities, so they wouldn't risk too much brain damage there. Mark could supply the oxygen they needed while Jockstrap got the other systems back online. Mark supposed Glynn should be next, since piloting this bucket of bolts apparently required a modicum of skill. Feli they could save for last. They weren't sure they really needed her, but Martians didn't have much of a killing instinct.

Now that they had full control over their telekinetic abilities and knew their enemy, they had nothing to fear. All they needed to was to find a planet with oxygen in even the smallest increment, and they would be free. These humans could go their merry way after that, to the extent that they still possessed the inclination.

Mark nudged Jockstrap into alertness. Conscious of the risk, the humans had taken so little Eviease that they should have come out of their depressed state several minutes ago, but Mark was keeping their bodies under thrall, their brains starved of all but the least amount of oxygen they needed to survive.

Jockstrap pushed himself up, his face twisted in more of a grimace than usual. Mark sensed the headache the man was feeling.

"Time to get to work," Mark projected the words into Jockstrap's mind.

"Do as you're told, and maybe I'll even give you some chocolate."

The End