

Night at The Beta Lyrae Lounge

Stanley mostly felt bad for the poor creatures. “Dumb little farts,” he grumbled as he stepped in through the air lock. It wasn’t their fault their main food source happened to be the specialized mineral compound that was used to seal the station against the void. It also wasn’t their fault they happened to convert that compound into a neurotoxin as they digested it, or that the gas they excreted was potent and incredibly deadly at just a few parts per million.

One simple biological process and he had to come out here on his day off.

He listened to the hissing, clicking, and beeping that signaled the decontamination cycle. That seemed to be functioning correctly. That meant one of two things: either nothing was wrong, and someone screwed up (pretty common for these resort stations, some rich dumbass probably assumed the airlock safety protocols didn’t apply to them), or something was very wrong, and in a way that would be hard to find.

As the interior airlock door opened a voice greeted Stanley through the comm in his helmet. “Hello,” it said, “and welcome to The Beta Lyrae Lounge, your trusted relaxation station. Please make yourself at home.”

“Fat chance.” Stanley replied. The second he took off his suit he’d be exposed to the neurotoxin, lose consciousness immediately, and be dead in a matter of hours.

“That is your choice. The comfort of our guests is paramount here.”

“Oh no. One of those annoying A.I. concierges?”

“Precisely. I am your Caring and Automated Relaxation Liaison. Please call me Carl.”

“Just don’t get in my way. Okay, Carl?”

“I have no physical presence, and no intention of providing obstacles. I am here to help you relax. My programming dictates that I do my utmost to ensure all guests are taken care of. That includes providing outside assistance in the case of pests.”

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That sounded about right to Stanley. “So you’re the one that brought me out here,” he said. He’d been wondering why there was so little information about the job from dispatch. It seemed like it might have been some kind of automated response. “Look, I really don’t get paid enough for this. Can you just be quiet while I clear the bugs out of this place and leave?”

No response. Good. At least Carl listened. Stanley entered the station. It was an eyesore. Gold everything. Little shops where you could go spend sickening amounts of money every few feet.

The bodies were more disconcerting. Everywhere Stanley looked a person was lying, unmoving. He went to the first one, a young woman in a chair. She may as well have been just lounging. As Stanley watched, her chest rose and fell slowly, but steadily.

These people were still alive. If he did his job right, they wouldn’t even realize anything had been wrong. They would think they had just dozed off.

He continued walking through the station, passing bodies. Mostly, it was easy to ignore them. Just lazy rich people sleeping at a resort. What bothered him were the workers. The waiters and cashiers, slumped over counters or lying on the floor. If any had fallen into an awkward position he went to adjust them: an arm here, a leg there, just making sure they were comfortable.

He made his way to the central hub of the station. Then he stopped and stared for a few seconds, saying, “Oh, come on.” What would have been an average swimming pool anywhere else, here, had to be a spectacle. He was standing in a massive chamber, the top of which was a glass dome through which you could gaze at the binary stars the station orbited from the comfort of one of the many lavish chairs and couches that littered the floor. Around the perimeter were restaurants and bars where you could order refreshments to enjoy under the light of the celestial

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display. And in the middle of the chamber, glittering like some strange, liquid gemstone, was the “pool,” a huge globule of perfectly clean, clear water floating in the space above the ground.

“Carl,” he sighed deeply, “what am I looking at?”

“Just one of the wonderful amenities we have to offer. We have crafted our artificial gravity net to exclude the swimming area. Simply step into the zero gravity zone and push off the ground to dive in and swim to your heart’s content, free from the pesky constraints which the laws of physics ordinarily impose.”

“Ridiculous.” Stanley began taking equipment out of his pack. “They’re lucky none of them were in there when they passed out.”

“True. There would have been little I could have done to help them. This is why I instructed the life-guards not to allow guests into the swimming area shortly before they all lost consciousness.”

Stanley was in the process of constructing a small container. “Hold on. You knew about the infestation?” He finished screwing a fastener into place and set the apparatus down.

“I am aware of all that happens in The Beta Lyrae Lounge. It is my responsibility to ensure the comfort and safety of all guests.”

“Well, I guess you’re doing an okay job then.” As he was putting the finishing touches on the trap he couldn’t help but wonder about Carl’s programming. It was incredible he was here in time to save these people. He’d done similar jobs in the past that didn’t turn out as well. This was, of course, through no fault of his own. Everyone knew there was a short window of time that anything could be done. Either you found the bugs and got rid of them in the days before they began to digest, or you cleaned up the mess afterward. He marveled at the fact that this job was turning out somewhere between the two. The timing was impeccable.

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He clicked a button, saying, “That should do it,” and brought his hands together as if clapping the dust off his gloves, although there was no dust to be seen. “This kajigger will emit a signal that’s irresistible to those little guys.” He began walking to one of the bars. “Nothing to do now but wait. Soon enough, every critter in this place will be in that box, and I’ll toss them out an airlock. Where they belong. Let them munch on some passing asteroid.” Stanley stepped behind the bar. “Then it’s just a matter of cycling the life support systems. Get rid of all that gas. You don’t mind if I help myself to a drink while I wait, do you, Carl?”

“It is in my programming to ensure the safety and comfort of all guests. Therefore I must insist you enjoy your beverage of choice.”

“Well isn’t that nice!” Stanley said as he poured. “You know, I might have misjudged you.”

“I must also warn you that I am monitoring your vitals and will not allow you to become too inebriated to perform your duties responsibly.”

Stanley replied, “Oh, don’t you worry about that. Just one drink for me.” He raised his glass before inserting the straw into the port in his suit, and taking a long drink. He sipped in silence for some time, watching the binary suns dip momentarily behind a planet above him. The colors, drifting over the surface and through the atmosphere of the strange world and reflecting off the massive water droplet in front of him, were mesmerizing. “You know, jobs like this don’t usually go this way for me.”

“That is unfortunate. I was under the impression, you were highly rated in your field.”

“What? No, that’s not what I mean. I always get the job done. Just never been to a fancy place like this. I’m usually in some dank spaceport with a quantum-rat infestation. Trudging through sewers, digging critters out of waste piles. But this.” He finished his drink, placing the

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empty glass on the bar. “Don’t get me wrong, there’s some gaudy shit here. But I can see how a person could get used to this kinda thing.”

“I am glad. Relaxation--”

“Quiet!” Stanley hissed at the voice in his helmet and ducked below the bar, startled at the sound of footsteps approaching. “Carl, have any other guests arrived since I got here?”

“No. I have rescheduled any deliveries and arrivals due to the current situation.”

“Then who is--”

He stopped talking as three figures stepped into the bar. “I told you this would be easy.” The voice was high-pitched. Stanley heard the door to the back room swing open and the voice continued, “We just hafta finish loading the money onto the ship and we’re outta here.” He could hear the sounds of bottles clinking into a bag.

“That’s great boss.” Creeping around the side of the bar Stanley could see the two people who hadn’t gone into the back. A man and a woman, both wearing some kind of gas mask. The woman went on, “But shouldn’t we hurry? We don’t need more booze.”

The high, raspy voice came from the door. “Calm down, baby. We can’t let this go to waste. Besides, we got loads of time. Come time anyone finds these rich snobs, their bodies’ll be cold, and we’ll be across the galaxy. They won’t even know who to look for. Shit!” There was the sudden sound of shattering glass. The two lackeys rushed through the door.

Stanley took his chance and snuck out of the bar. He rushed away and ducked into a shop, whispering, “Carl what the hell is going on!?”

“It appears you have crossed paths with some other guests staying at The Lounge. I hope they were not unpleasant.”

“Other guests? You knew they were here?”

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“I am aware of all that happens in the Beta Lyrae Lounge.”

“Were you planning on telling me there was a *heist* in progress!?”

“It did not seem necessary, but it would now seem that, in addition to murder and larceny, these guests have a predisposition to alcoholism.”

“What do we do? Get help!”

“The guests have cut off any communication beyond The Lounge. I was able to engage your services just before they put their plan into action. As for you, I recommend you finish your job as planned.”

“What? There are murderers running around this station, and you want to continue business as usual? Do something!”

“Unfortunately, my programming forbids me from harming guests, or indeed interfering directly in any way. They paid to stay in The Lounge and have been here for approximately 48 hours. They discussed their plan in great detail just after arrival. From that discussion I was able to learn they had smuggled onto the station a particular kind of bacteria which they then set loose.”

“You knew about this days ago? I only got the call this morning. Why did you wait so long? Why did you only call an exterminator? Why not the cops? This could have been handled before there was any real danger!”

“It is my responsibility to ensure the comfort and safety of all guests. Calling the authorities would undoubtedly have caused a panic among the guests. I could not allow that while there was another alternative. These individuals planned to murder every guest in The Lounge in order to rob the bank located here. As we deal with very particular clientele, the bank is well stocked in various currencies, hence their interest. I did a search of the galactic net and

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saw that your services were highly rated. You seemed to be skilled at dealing with unwanted guests.”

“Well, sure. But we’re talking about criminals here, not bugs!”

“The criminal’s tools are bugs. And your task is nearly complete.”

Stanley looked at the trap. The indicator was blinking. It was done.

“It seems that every ‘critter’ in this place is now in that box,” Carl repeated Stanley’s own words back to him, emphasizing how simple this all was. “All that remains is to ‘toss them out an airlock.’”

There was a deep silence as Stanley felt sweat dampen his brow.

“It may interest you to know that these criminals happen to be docked in airlock 3.”

This silence felt deep as a chasm. Stanley was on the precipice. “Carl,” he began. “What are you saying?”

“I am merely sharing information pertinent to your task. I might also add there is limited time to act. Unless the oxygen is cycled in the next 5 minutes, many guests will not survive.”

It was a long few seconds before Stanley finally said, “Shit, alright!”

Moving quickly, he went back to the central chamber and retrieved the trap. He made his way to airlock 3, setting the device to open in one hour. He found their ship right where Carl said he would, docked in the airlock with its cargo bay door wide open. Cautiously, he approached. No one was here. Stepping into the cargo hold, he was faced with the most money he’d ever seen. Stacks of bills. Piles of coins. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“Alright, that’s the last of it.” It was the same raspy voice he heard in the bar earlier, and it was getting closer. “Get it into the ship, and let’s ditch this place.”

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Stanley could feel his heartbeat in his eyeballs. He dived behind a pile of credits, as someone wheeled in a crate and tossed a duffle bag in. He could hear the clinking of bottles. He hid his own dangerous cargo on a crate to his right, as he heard footsteps retreating down the loading ramp. Then came the mechanical whine of the ramp retracting, the door closing. He darted from his hiding spot, thankful to see someone's leg disappear to the right of the closing door.

He leapt left, barely making it out of the ship, and sprinted toward the interior airlock door. Once inside the station he ducked behind the wall, listening.

“Hey! Guys?”

“What is your problem? Did you load the stuff or not?”

“Yeah, it's in there. I just thought I heard--”

“Well then, will you get in already? Let's go!”

In the tense silence which followed, he could hear the heavy footfall of someone taking a hesitant step in his direction. More silence. Then: “Right boss. Coming.”

The airlock door began to hiss closed. Stanley watched the ship leave.

“That was crazy. Carl, why did you do that to me? Can you start the life support cycle? People should start waking up again soon once they get some fresh air.”

“I have already begun the process. You too should get to your ship.”

“What? Why? Shouldn't I be here to answer questions or something?”

“You have done your job well. No one need know anything happened at all. I believe everyone will be more comfortable that way.”

“But all that money! Won't they--”

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“The bank is, of course, insured. Most of the people here wouldn’t even blink at as paltry a sum as what was on that ship. As ruthless as they were, those guests had a good plan. It would have been a victimless crime if they hadn’t decided to interfere with the safety and comfort of my guests. Such dangerous people should not be permitted to get away with their crimes, but while they were on the station I was obligated to treat them as guests as well. Of course, now that they are off of the station they are no longer guests, and none of my concern. And indeed, they will be in quite a vulnerable position very soon, thanks to your ministrations. ‘All that money’ will be sitting in that ship, adrift as its crew sleeps peacefully.”

Stanley blinked. “Carl... what are you saying?”

“I am simply trying to convey my gratitude for a job well done. Thank you, Stanley.”

As Carl stepped back onto his ship, he found himself thinking about the future. He thought he might take a vacation. It had been a while since he was able to have some leisure time. He found himself thinking back fondly on those little bugs he just dealt with. Poor little guys. It wasn’t their fault they produced a deadly neurotoxin. He thought he might give it an hour or so, but he should really check in on them. He smiled to himself, “dumb little farts.”