

UNFAIR TRADE

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Especially when you don't realize who your competition is.

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The wind tore across Gren's face, ripping away at his lips and eyes. He snarled, but it couldn't be heard long above the storm. The Aldian pulled the fur collar tighter around his neck and checked to see if his companions were all right. Inside a copious pocket the Lyl trilled softly and burrowed deeper into the warmth. He closed the flap with a swift tug—it would be secure the remainder of the journey. Bre, just behind and to his right, was almost hidden by the swirling snow. He flicked his tail and kicked his mount forward. Fjen, the last, waved and adjusted the packs on his back. Ordinarily the three felines would not be out in weather like this. It was not good for hunting or traveling; such times were best spent drinking stek and fornicating before a warming fire. But it was time for the Trader, and they had been chosen to take the furs to him.

Gren couldn't see it now, but somewhere on the plain below stood the six-foot cube the Trader called home. He cursed and thought of the warm lodges and his friends' activities. Still, someone had to go. Just their luck the gods had decided to storm. Gren's mount shook its head and ice fell from its mane. The cherae did not like such weather either. Gren kicked it in the ribs. The animal squealed, then continued into the frozen blastfurnace.

One moonset later the travelers stood in front of the Trader's ship. Gren had seen it before, but still the vessel amazed him. The ship was no taller than he, gold and smooth-walled. Yet he knew that inside it was as large as two of his people's lodges. The Trader had said something about "non-Euclidian space" when questioned; then he had laughed and admitted most of his people didn't understand it.

Bre and Fjen looked at Gren for orders. He nodded and they dismounted. He tied the animals securely to a nearby tree while the others removed the packs, jogged quickly to loosen cramped muscles, and finally guided them through the opening that appeared suddenly on the golden wall before them.

Inside it was as warm as summer. Bre and Fjen had never visited the Trader; they stood in wonder at the doorway. A thick red carpet ran from the door twenty feet to the spacious banquet table manufactured from rare alien woods. Art works dotted the walls, and the table was piled high with delicacies; all from planets the Trader frequented. Gren was used to such miracles; he calmly doffed his traveling clothes and bid his fellows do the same.

"Welcome, my friends. I hope you found your journey not too unpleasant," the unseen Trader's voice called in their tongue. "I shall be with you in a moment. Relax yourselves."

The Aldians sat and hurriedly sampled the banquet. Gren had learned long ago that anything the Trader offered was safe and oftentimes delicious. He first tried a round, red fruit. It tasted like toasted sawdust. He spat and threw the offending vegetation on the floor. The carpet closed over it and seconds later the litter vanished. Bre and Fjen started; Gren merely grabbed some green and gray berries. They were more to his liking; he munched contentedly until their host made his appearance.

He arrived with the whistling of an opening panel. The Earthman, John Ma-lud by name, was five feet tall, fat and greasy. His hair hung in perfumed braids; rings sparkled on each stubby finger. His gold embroidered indigo robe stretched to the wall even as he sat at the table. The Aldians towered over him, six feet of gold-furred claw and muscle. But he was not intimidated. "Welcome again my friends," he began cheerfully. "I hope you have not waited too long?"

"Not too," Gren purred softly. The others ignored him.

"I trust your village had a very prosperous year. Very prosperous."

"Thank you." Gren continued eating, waiting for the Trader to open negotiations.

Ma-lud decided the time was not yet right. "I see you have brought some new friends. Tell me, what do you think of my humble home?" Bre and Fjen made no acknowledgment. His smile did not quiver. "Well, I see you are in a hurry. Shall we dispense with the formalities?" He pressed a button on the side of the table. Immediately all signs of the banquet vanished and they were faced with a bare bargaining area. Bre snarled, but a quick look from Gren put him back in his seat. "May I see the pelts?"

Gren nodded and Fjen emptied the packs on the table. The Merchant chose one and examined it. The fur was soft like chinchilla and long like mohair; yet each strand was a crystal rainbow, changing color with every ray of light. They were the rarest, most prized furs in the galaxy. The Trader ran his fingers through the pelt while staring at the pile before him. There were enough to make him a very rich man, a very rich man indeed.

"Excellent, my friends, excellent. I am sure we can do business." He pressed another button and mugs of steaming ale appeared before all. "How many pelts do you have?"

"Forty-five."

The Trader smiled and calculated rapidly. On the open market they would bring him almost two million solar credits. He pressed another button. "My friends, you deserve something special for this year's work." He chose three gold collars from a tray and presented one to each Aldian. "For your trouble getting here."

Bre and Fjen looked to their leader. He nodded and they placed them carefully in the packs. Meanwhile Gren opened his pouch and released the Llyl. The creature was only half a foot tall, a miniature kangaroo save for a single eyestalk and a beak. It hopped along the table twittering to itself, then took a perch on Gren's broad shoulder. Gren's gaze narrowed. "What do you have for us?"

The merchant watched the Llyl with little interest. He had seen them before—accursed creatures as far as he was concerned. But every Aldian party had carried one with it. For the life of him he couldn't understand why. "Whatever you desire," he replied quickly. A panel opened on the table, revealing bolts of brightly colored textiles, cooking utensils, jewelry, farming and building equipment, boots, jackets, and other clothing designed for the Aldian frame. "Help yourselves, my friends."

Gren's eyes widened at the booty, but he remembered his orders. "No, no more, not this time." The words were edged with ice.

The merchant smiled quizzically. "What is wrong? You don't like what I have to offer? It is not enough? There are other things; medicines, food, luxuries if you prefer. Ask and you shall have."

"Weapons."

"Weapons?" The Earthman scratched his forehead. "I don't have many swords, or crossbows, but I can get—"

"Not ours. Yours."

With difficulty Ma-lud kept his composure. It was against Federation law to sell anything to aliens they could not produce themselves—in theory at least. Supposedly this was to allow the cultures to develop at their own rate. In practice it kept them at the mercy of the Traders, a situation he applauded. Giving the Aldians weapons would alter it considerably. "My friends, I am sorry but I cannot. My people forbid me. But I'm sure that if you look through my other merchandise—"

"No!" Gren stood and his companions followed. "If we don't get your weapons, we don't trade." He told Bre and Fjen to repack.

The Trader paled. If he gave them weapons and the Federation found out, he would lose his license and spend years on Alomar. But the pelts were valuable; even on the black market they would bring more than enough for him to live in exile comfortably. Something else bothered him also. The Aldians were insistent upon weapons, his weapons. Someone else, a pirate or young wayfarer beginning his fortune, probably had found this world and talked to them. He disliked competition; not only because it was illegal but also because the felines might have learned the true value of what he gave in return. Whether he capitulated or not, these might be the last pelts he would ever see. And Ma-lud had no other prosperous territories.

The furs were packed and the Aldians donning their clothing when he spoke. "Do not be so hasty, my friends. I have always treated you fairly, have I not? I have always given you everything you desired? If it is weapons you want, it is weapons you shall have. If you will excuse me." The Aldians had not moved when he returned with an armload of assorted guns. "This," he chose one, "is a rifle. With it you can kill at one hundred yards."

He fired at a vase. Bre and Fjen jumped at the explosion and the Llyl screeched, but Gren was unimpressed. "Insufficient. Show us something else."

The rotund merchant chose an oddly-shaped pistol. "How about a laser?" A picture burst into flame for their benefit.

"No good for game." Gren's orders were clear; he was honorbound to follow them. "The distorter."

The Trader froze. He had been right; someone else had landed, had talked to the Aldians. The distorter was the most sophisticated and powerful weapon the Federation had yet invented; his garments, flimsy though they seemed, could stop any projectile or temperature ray; but nothing could be shielded from a distorter. When he left he would have to warn the Federation—anonously, of course. "I don't have one," he lied. "But I'm sure you should find these sufficient."

Gren turned and they headed for the door. The merchant made a swift calculation between greed and exile. "Just one moment," he said heavily. He disappeared and returned carrying a pistol with a prism for a barrel. "This is what you came for."

"Show me how it works."

The merchant carefully adjusted the dials. "Watch." He pressed the trigger. A vase quivered violently, then became dust. "You wouldn't want this. It would destroy your game, not just kill it."

"Yes," Gren snatched it away.

Sweat poured from Ma-lud's forehead. "I have always been your people's friend," he began, almost pleading. "Have I not always given you what you wished? If the distorter is what you want, then it is yours."

"Thank you," Gren said quietly and pressed the trigger. The distorter does strange things to flesh. The Trader's insides—bones, organs, blood—turned to jelly. His eyes exploded and blood poured from his gaping mouth. He made no sound as he collapsed on the floor. Gren placed the weapon carefully in his tunic and the now-content Llyl in its pouch. The carpet was already closing over the Earthman when the Aldians left, carrying their packs with them.

When they arrived at their village another six-foot cube was resting in the square. Its occupant, a lizard-trader from Xnglia-5, was relaxing in the lodge and greeted them when they entered. "I'm glad you didn't let John cheat you this time. What did he have to say when you told him?"

"He was surprised," Gren answered.

"Congratulations on keeping your wits about you. He always had a silver tongue."

Gren sat and quaffed some stek. "Are you still interested?"

The lizard gave his equivalent of a smile. "Definitely. I'll let you and your men have a chance to warm up and relax. I'm sure that was quite a cold journey you had. When you're ready come to my ship and we'll talk business."

"We know what we want."

"Really?" His enthusiasm was obvious. "I can guarantee you'll find me more than generous. Clothing? Metals? Medicine? Name it and it's yours."

"We want you to teach us how to fly your ship."

The merchant started. "Why? I mean, of course, but what good will it do you? After all you don't have any."

Wrong, Gren thought as he sipped. We have one. No. He fingered the distorter, the weapon the lizard had mentioned one careless, drunken, bragging night. Two. He had no idea what would be done with the ships, but then it was not up to him to decide. He finished his stek and purred. The Llyl would think of something.