

Drug Runner

A sci-fi story
by
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The guard grabbed me by the throat with one hand and shoved me against the wall with the other. I wanted to lash out and hit him, but since his head was two feet higher than mine, I could not reach it. Even if I had, it would probably hurt me more than him.

"I hope you get the death penalty," he said. "I despise drug smugglers and would genuinely like to squeeze your miserable throat."

"It's not your call," I replied. It surprised me I was able to speak because he had my head against the wall, but his hand was so big his fingers were touching the wall and leaving a space for me to breathe. I suspected this was by design. I assumed guards were not allowed to execute prisoners on a supposedly civilized planet.

While I was not exactly terrified, my fear was skirting the fine edges of it. His planet, known as Argonia, was on the official list of civilized aliens, but I decided to challenge that ruling to the Galactic Council if I ever got out of there alive.

"Do you know that two of our children almost choked to death because of your stinking contraband?" the guard said.

"No, I was not aware of that. It was not me who gave it to them."

"Tell that to the judge tomorrow. I do not think he will believe you any more than I do."

His dog-like face inched closer to mine for effect. I knew then two important facts. He was not going to hurt me because he was thinking of a trial the next day. In some places they leave a prisoner in jail for weeks while communications and negotiations take place with the prisoner's home world.

On the other hand, I thought maybe they execute prisoners the same day as the trial. Well, I said to myself, we'll find out tomorrow. At least this guard is not going to kill me today, I thought.

The next day, I was brought into their courtroom. It was a large bare room.

Since the Argonians stand about two feet taller than us, everything seemed big. No one but the judge behind a desk, two guards, and I was on the floor, but the huge balconies were crowded. There's a lot of crowd noise outside.

I guessed this must be the first time an outworlder was going to be tried on their planet. It must have been a sensation on their news channels.

I stared at the judge, and he seemed to stare at me. The Argonians have faces something like a giant pug dog. Bug-eyed, furry with a squat nose. Expressions are hard to read if, for some strange reason, you may be inclined to peer at such a face long enough to try to read it.

The judge spoke. "Are you aware of the charge brought against you, merchantman?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. "I am charged with drug smuggling. I assure your honor, as I have said repeatedly, I did not know about your laws regarding this."

"You are fortunate, merchantman, in one respect. This dangerous element found in your possession has not yet been officially classed as a forbidden substance. Are you aware that two of our children nearly died as result of it?"

"I was told that by a guard," I replied. I didn't mention being roughed up in the cell. "That is tragic indeed," I said. "But it was not me who gave it to them."

The judge leaned forward. "We know that because it happened before you arrived. It must have been smuggled in by another merchantman."

The judge paused and looked down at his computer screen. I tried to read his expression, but there wasn't any. None that I could detect, at least. "Because of the unusual nature of the case," he continued, "I will not sentence you to death or imprisonment, despite clamors of the populace for the former. Therefore, I am fining you 1000 galactic credits and releasing you."

I started to laugh but thought better of it instantly and covered it up with a spat of coughing.

"Your dismay, merchantman, at the heavy fine is understandable," the judge declared. "But we cannot allow such a serious offense to go without punishment, despite the unusual circumstances."

The judge mistook my cough as an expression of dismay! I spend more than

that on a night's bash back on earth. So the judge assumed I was sufficiently shocked and humiliated.

The fine made sense. Executing tradesmen tends to be hard on trade. This little backwater planet had just been approved by the Galactic Council as sufficiently civilized for intergalactic commerce.

I have my personal opinion on that point, but then I'm not on the council. I'm just a common trader in galactic goods. The Argonians did not want to risk shutting down business just as it got started.

So I replied, "Your honor, your decision sounds reasonable and fair. Be assured I will communicate to all my colleagues that the Argonians are an honorable people with whom we can do business. And furthermore, I promise on my word of honor that as long as I live, I will never ever again bring chewing gum to your planet."

THE END