

Cheese Runners  
By  
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Chapter One

Busted

Music blared through the tiny, cluttered bridge of the *Limburger*. Old music. Roiling guitar riffs that rattled my eardrums and would have curled Mozart's curly hair climbed and falling with the lyrics.

Not my favorite, especially when I'm being shot at.

"Man, I hate it when she plays that stuff!"

I hated to agree with Turk on any subject involving taste, be it concerning food, drink, music, literature (like he *read*), government, the opposite sex or any combination thereof, but here and now, I had to give his assessment the nod. I wasn't going to admit it, of course; I wasn't one to start narfing on Kik's choice of music at a time like this. After all, she was trying to keep us alive at the moment.

A huge ball of white blossomed ahead of us and slightly to starboard (I often wonder about those ancient sailing terms that we still use in space vessels.), and the shockwave expanded toward us. Forty megatons or so, just a love tap, a wakeup call from our pursuers, something to let us know it could have been 400 if they wanted it so, and right on our nose instead of a hundred clicks out. Well, at least that meant they wanted us alive; some consolation...

"Hope you've got your SPF one thousand on! That shockwave's gonna pack some rads!" That was Turk's idea of humor, about as good as it ever got.

"The shielding should suck up most of it." Probably not, but what's a little DNA damage between rival species. Oh, yeah, I forgot. We weren't rivals of the Farfnians; we were only peons, pests, flies in their ointment. I watched the fly-swatter approach in the form of a hyper-accelerated wave of radioactive dust. I thumbed the ship-wide intercom and said, "All hands, brace yourselves!"

I took my own advice and managed not to be tossed out of my seat.

Several ancient music disks, two coffee cups and a foot massager fell to the deck from the pilot's console as the *Limburger* yawed with the shockwave. Turk let out a stream of profanity, but Kik was oblivious to the clatter. Of course, she couldn't have moved if she wanted to. It never ceases to amaze me how oblivious a pilot is with the sensor net on, but I guess that's why I'm captain and not pilot. The thought of that neuro-conducting membrane pressing against my flesh (all of my flesh, as in every square nanometer) gives me the creepy crawlies. Kik doesn't seem to mind it, though, and has often commented that an exhilarating flight was "better than sex". I'll have to take her word on that, too, since her idea of carnal relations is different than mine. Kik's a xenophile (poorly repressed shudder) and never misses an opportunity to, uh, go where no man (or woman) has gone before, shall we say?

“I don’t mind the music,” I lied, cringing as another, more violent shockwave sent a new cascade of paraphernalia clattering to the deck, “when we’re not being shot at.” That one had been behind and to port. They had us perfectly bracketed and could kill us at any time.

“Jeez, you gotta be kiddin’ me, Harry!” Turk’s voice was beginning to get on my nerves more than the ancient music. I thought about offering to let him pilot the *Limburger* the next time we got caught by a Farfnian patrol cruiser, but then thought better of it. He might take me up on the offer, and that would undoubtedly leave us cavorting around space in a ship so dented and dinged that no self-respecting planet would let us into a parking orbit. Or worse yet, he might take it personally, and break my arm for me - again.

“TARGET CLOSING. DISTANCE ONE THOUSAND KILOMETERS.” Okay, I hate computer voices. They bring back really bad memories for me that I don’t care to relate at this particular time.

“Yea, right! Like *they’re* the freakin’ target!”

“Cycle it, Turk!” Well, I guess the prospect of a broken arm was suddenly less daunting than listening to his complaints.

I really don’t know why I put myself through situations like this. I mean, it wasn’t like we had a Popsicle’s™ chance in a supernova of outrunning the cruiser. The Farfnian ship was bigger, faster, better armed (We weren’t armed at all! Well, not precisely *armed*, anyway.) and more technologically advanced than our little courier-class freighter. That’s the trouble with the Farfnians, they’re *always* bigger, better, faster and smarter than us. (Us meaning the whole human race, not just myself and present company. Well, maybe *especially* not myself and present company.)

Seventy-five years ago they had *conquered* earth’s combined military might in a matter of two hours. Who knew they could just *turn off* every electrical thing on the planet? Then they had the gall to insist that we stop killing one another and form a single planetary government. I mean *really*! We told them that we were *quite* capable of handling our *own* disputes, thankyouverymuch!

The asteroid they dropped between the West Bank and Jerusalem was about twenty miles in diameter. The Dead Sea is now Mediterranean beachfront property.

Point taken.

The Unified Earth Government was then informed that all of our problems were hereby solved: no hunger, no pollution, no war, no crime, no addiction, no unemployment, no disease, no old age, and no money. How *dare* they! They pumped so much foreign aid into bringing our sniveling little backwater planet up to technological speed with the rest of the galaxy, that every human on the planet was left with their mouths hanging open for the next ten years. They have no idea how many humans they pissed off.

The rich were mad because their money was worth less than wallpaper, the poor were mad because they couldn’t blame the rich for being poor, the workers were mad because they were out of work, the unemployed were mad because their benefits were cancelled, the disabled were mad because their disabilities were no longer disabling (Modern prosthetics are wonderful. I’ve got one myself.) and the government was mad because it no longer wielded any real power to make everyone miserable. The entire world economy was worth about as much as a 1972 Dodge Dart with no hubcaps, simply because nothing that the Earth could produce was worth anything on the Galactic Market. Nobody was hungry, but nobody was fat either (obesity was cured), and absolutely nobody wielded any power. The situation was totally untenable!

Another near miss, this one at half the distance of the previous one, showed us that the gravity inducers hadn't failed (yet) by sending several more personal effects clattering to the deck. I'd had just about enough abuse for one morning, so I flipped open the protective cover on my armrest that hid several switches and thumbed one. An explosion rocked the ship, and stars skewed across the viewer as the force of it sent us spinning. Kik tried to correct and get us back on course, but I thumbed another switch and the starboard main drive cut out.

We could go nowhere now but in circles. Starships aren't like atmospheric craft; if half your thrust is cut, you can't compensate with the controls. You just spin like one of those whirly firecrackers they light off on the fifth of May, or whenever your local revolutionaries overthrew your local dictatorial government. Yea right.... Well, anyway, the gist of it was that all we had for locomotion now was maneuvering thrusters, atmospheric jets (useless in space) and a can of Jiffy-Whip™ that I was saving for emergencies. We were dead in space (Well, not literally, but we couldn't move.), and the Farfnian cruiser was closing in fast.

The pilot's control couch opened with a sound like parting Velcro®, and Kik shouted, "Damn drive's out!" before stepping out and reaching for her jumper. I fumbled the access hatch to my secret switches closed before she could see them, and managed not to stare at her. Well, okay, so she's a xenophile, but she's also got an awesome and quite female figure, so it's hard not to gape a little when she's getting out of the couch. (Did I mention that pilots can't wear clothes with the sensor net on? No? Well, you get the picture.) Kik is very striking, despite the fact that she hasn't a hair from her scalp to her toes (one of the fringe benefits of being a pilot), and the lack of eyebrows and even eyelashes makes her face look a little flat. Well, okay, so I stared a little.

"Overheat on the starboard side," I explained, as if I hadn't caused the whole thing. At times like this I find it easier not to tell the *whole* truth to my crew. They just wouldn't understand. "I don't think anything's blown permanently, but it'll take Zook a while to fix it." I knew better, but as I said, too much information can confuse things sometimes.

"That's assuming they don't just impound the ship and throw us all in the bio-cycler!" Kik said, sealing the last seam of her jumper and freeing up my eyes for other tasks. Well, okay, so I stared a lot.

"Well, they're not gettin' me without a fight!" Turk lurched from his seat (an impressive sight since he masses at least twice what I do) and leapt to the weapons locker. I said the ship wasn't armed, not us.

"Let's just see how belligerent they want to be before we lock and load, huh, Turk?" I was trying for my best diplomatic tone, but probably came off as sarcastic, if the muzzle of the small ion cannon pointed at my nose was any indication. I grinned my best "*please return to your seat, place your seat backs and tray tables in the full and upright position and don't vaporize your captain*" grin and opened the communications link that had been blinking for my attention since before the attack.

As the faces materialized on the viewer (three very ugly, at least to me, and irate Farfnian faces), I dialed my best "angry lawyer" face and let them have both barrels.

"You have damaged this ship and endangered the lives of all those aboard, I'll have you know! I've got full recordings of your unprovoked attack, and I can beam them to the authorities if you don't cease hostilities!"

"We *are* the authorities, as you well know, Captain Harold Eugene Fische."

Boy, he was really torqued! You can always tell when a Farfnian's mad: his mandibles clack together when he speaks and he uses the longest version of your name he can manage. Like your mother. Except for the mandible thing.

"You are suspected of transporting contraband of an illegal and narcotic nature through Farfnian Space." The whole damned Spiral Arm is Farfnian Space, so that was no surprise. "You will allow our boarding party to search your ship without resistance, or we will blast you to dust!"

"Harold?" Kik said with a raised (oops, no eyebrows), whatever.

"Eugene?" Turk quipped in with his usual huge, idiot grin, verifying that today could very easily get worse.

"Narcotics? That's ridiculous!" I was still trying for angry lawyer, but was probably only achieving miffed accountant. "Search all you want, but you're not going to find anything!" I flipped off the viewer, or rather *turned* off the viewer, since giving the Farfnian commander the finger would have undoubtedly killed us all instantly, and pushed myself up out of the crash couch (another term I'm not overly fond of).

"Whaddya think you're doing, Harry?" Turk bellowed, glaring at me and waving his weapon around as if it couldn't blow a hole in the hull. He gets a little tense sometimes, in case you hadn't picked up on that. He can't help it. Delayed Stress Syndrome. Six ex-wives will do that to you. "If they board us, they'll find the stash for sure!"

"And if they don't board us, they'll blow us to slag." I shrugged, looked up at him and said, "I'll let you decide whether you'd rather explain the loss of a shipment, or try breathing vacuum for a few minutes, but personally I'd rather be alive and poor, than dead and rich." I stopped on my way to the airlock and looked back at Turk. "So put that thing away and paint on a smile."

He didn't shoot me, so I guess he took the hint.