

We have only one motto at Interplanetary Procurements 'Greed is our Co-Pilot.'



# Interplanetary Procurements

A Tale of Future Business

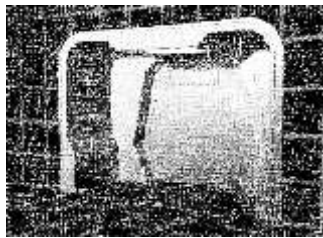
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Space is vast. But this simply means there is an endless number of business opportunities. The Federated Union of Planets may be growing, but no matter how big it gets there will always be worlds outside its borders. Planets and cultures in need of an introduction to the galactic marketplace; the unity of business opportunity. Most importantly, no matter how big the universe gets, there will still be some people who have things and other groups of people who want those very same things. This is where Interplanetary Procurements come in.

While the members of the Federated Union of Planets are off selflessly exploring the universe, Interplanetary Procurements is leading the way, promoting aggressive expansion. Going far beyond established trade routes and explored regions. Finding those who are leading a life of unfulfilled desires and teaching them the grandeur of business opportunity. We live by the phrase “all that glitters is not gold.” And in exchange for this and other valuable knowledge, we’ll keep the gold and gems and they can keep all the other glittery stuff. It’s our mission to show these people the value of their resources; while at the same time removing some of the pesky rare ones from their inventories.

My name is Janet Pose, CEO of Interplanetary Procurements and I’ve been around. What I’ve seen of the universe would make Al Capone and all the Chicago syndicates look civilized. I come from a long line of business people. The Pose name is known on many different worlds. But although I have the looks for it, I’ve never wanted to be involved in the family business. At least not after I discovered the well-paid life which existed on the far edges of the galaxy. If you’re interested in working for us, there are numerous internship available. There’s a high amount of turnover, but the business opportunities are tremendous even though the death benefits are a little limited. Believe me, I can make it worth your while.



While most of the Federated Union of Planet’s Fleet is off taking its merry time traveling the enormous distances of space in pressurized metal coffins, Interplanetary Procurements is traversing the universe with far less bulky traveling portals. Our portal is a nicely designed arch. Although I hear that some of our competitors have round portals which spin. Total waste of energy and time if you ask me.

As CEO of Interplanetary Procurements, it’s my job to maximize shareholders investments, increase the brand’s visibility, enhance our corporate reputation, keep profits high, and if I have time ... and I’m in an exceptionally good mood ... concern myself with the well-being of the employees. You have to look out for yourself. No one else will. We have only one motto at Interplanetary Procurements ‘Greed is our Co-Pilot.’ We’ve long ago grown out of the simple garden-verity resource reallocation with the accompanying general disregard for the well being of other species. Now we’re playing the big time. Okay, there have been a number of sudden terminations in the firm recently, but our cloning operations are second to none.

Right now, our prime team is assembling. It all started when there was a knock at the portal door. Well not a knock really, it more of an annoying buzzer. When I opened the sliding doors, in stepped a gentleman with astoundingly good taste in clothes. He was extremely tall, with dreamy green eyes. He had a very traditional set of pointed ears, which I always find attractive. His hair was a shiny dark brown, and, as I said, his eyes were green like jade, innocent and expressive.

“Is this the Pose Company?” He asked in a lilting voice.

I pulled out a chair from the conference table. “No, this is Interplanetary Procurements. Why don’t you have a seat.”

As he sat, I noticed his eyes were avoiding my gaze. Not typical for most of my male visitors, especially in this outfit. His gaze turned down to look at an empty conference table. His eyes looked hazy and wide. “My name is Prime Minister Noray. I really hate to bring this to you. It’s such a small matter.”

“This is our busy season ...”

His eyes slowly browsed around the room, A blush appeared on his long oval-shaped face. “His majesty has had some irregular behavior of late. Some of the populous have even taken to referring to him as ...” He gulped loudly, “the Mad King.”

Another headcase; just what we need. “Perhaps I could give you some recommendations for some excellent physiological firms. We keep a number on retainer to assist with a few of the more valuable interns.”

I jotted a few names down, but he continued without taking in more than a breath. “He’s now decided to give away the ancient lost treasure of my people as a prize in a tournament.” He paused.

“You were saying? Please continue, I’ll all ears.”

Water started to well up in his eyes. “The games are organized as duels between the participants. The last one standing will be given the ancient lost treasure as a reward.”

I smiled. No one can fake a smile or an interested glance as I can. “Well, at least it will stay on your homeworld; that’s something.”

He continued unabated. “There are some precious stones and minerals in the treasure, of course, but the centerpiece is the Galactic Death Beam. A device of monstrous power which can be used to destroy entire worlds many parsecs away.”

I tried to hide my expression. A device like that could be worth a huge fortune on the open weapons market. “Are they allowing off-worlders to take part in this competition?”

“Absolutely,” he practically moaned, “it’s our worst fear. Imagine the devastation to my world if it is won by an outsider and turned against us. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth over half the sector. We’ll be fine, of course. The government has a fleet prepared to take us to a safe destination. But just think of all the mines which will be lost. The wealth. Not to mention the loss of a highly trained, put pliable and low-cost workforce.”

I gave him my best sympathetic look. Sincerity is one thing, but if you can fake sincerity, you have it made. “We’ll be happy to look into it,” I suggested.

“Perhaps you could steal it before the games begin? Or, failing that, you might have a suitable hero who can be assured victory.” He almost sobbed. “You can bring your own weapons, you know.”

I directed him out of his seat and led him towards the side door. The one which led to the outer office. “Why don’t you let my assistant take down the particulars. There are quite a few forms to be filled out.

My assistant can help you with those. In the meantime, we'll just pop over and scout the situation out. If you don't mind."

"We would be most grateful if you would." He took a deep breath. He shook what sounded like a bag filled with heavy coins. "I have some funds here for a retainer. It's not much, but I'm sure I can get the council to approve a higher stipend."

I released a real grin. "And my assistant will be taking that off your hands. We can talk about the fee later." As the door to the outer office closed behind him with a hiss, I yelled out, "Jason, get your cute butt in here!"

In the years since Interplanetary Procurements started, I tried to collect the best looking and the brightest staff available. Unfortunately, due to a limited budget, I have often had to choose one over the other. Jason was a characteristic team building move. Classically handsome, with a mane of wavy blond hair, he was exceptionally appealing. On the job, he wore a ninja-style outfit since his expertise was corporate espionage. Few people had seen his face, except for his icy blue eyes. It was the only feature you could see behind his dark hood and black scarf. Since I had conducted his *personal* interview, I had been privy to a slightly better view. He was remarkably well developed. Although I have to say, the uniform did nothing to hide his delightful ass.

Jason entered with his typical silence. I'd always thought that any entrance he made should have been accompanied by an angelic choir, but it wouldn't have been good for business. He was an expert at sweet-talking reluctant receptionists, female security guards, and women in rival organizations. It made him a powerful operative. Jason is one of my longest-running interns. But just in case, I removed a few of his cells without his knowledge. I keep them stored in our underground cloning facility.

"We have a Class A potential contract," I told him, "Who do you want along as back up?"

Jason gave me a look with those sky-blue eyes. "Well," he said, "if things go wrong you can always send reinforcements through the arch, can't you?"

Now I'm fond of Jason. He's been entertaining. But it's an expense to run the arch and there might be some other business opportunities elsewhere. We were already far over budget for the month. I smiled my famous wink of a smile. "Sure, kid. Sure."

Jason put one hand on his hip. I wasn't fooling anyone. "Who can I take?"

A weapon of mass destruction is always good for a big payday. So, I decided to give the kid a break. "I'll give you first choice. Take whoever you think is best."

"OK, I'll need Bernie. In case we actually have to fight one of these duels."

"How do you know about the duels?" I asked.

"I'm corporate espionage," he replied. "What good would I be if I didn't know what was going on behind closed doors?"

"Hum. Okay, Bernie then." Bernie Williamson was my personal bodyguard. Six foot, nine inches tall, Bernie's scarred face towered over everyone. The laser rifle he likes to use was five feet long and weighs

25 pounds. Bernie could often win battles, just by showing up. He was the company's first paid employee, mostly because I was afraid *not* to pay him.

"Ok, who else?"

"I'll need Sugi and Omi," he replied. Sugi and Omi were inseparable. If one went the other one had to go. There was just nothing you could do about it. Don't get any bright ideas, they are brother and sister.

"What do you need Sugi and Omi for? You already have Bernie." I wasn't just trying to keep the cost down. Okay, I was doing that, but Bernie's a one-man army all by himself.

"Backup," Jason declared. "In case I need extra hands. Bernie's good, but he only has two of them. Besides, you'll want them on the job when you hear who else I'm taking along."

I grunted. "Who else do you want?"

"Moonlight and Clarke."

"That's the entire prime team!" I complained.

"We'll almost," Jason reflected, "I'm also taking you."

"No, you're not."

"You said I could take whoever I wanted."

I must learn how to stop offering people deals. It is, however, a risk of being in the marketplace. "If you think taking me along is going to *decrease* your chances for advancement, you couldn't be more right."

"Never the less, you're going."



I wore my favorite slacks. They were low riding around my hips and made of a vinyl which can stand up to a lot of punishment. Plus, the shiny black color perfectly matches my hair. The fact they were skin-tight only added to their effectiveness. They had four holes cut in the thigh, to let folks see a little leg. I have quite the set. I called them my get-away sticks.

In addition to our gear, I'd decided to bring along Pieces. He was a small robot about the size of a capuchin monkey. He even had a tail, although in his case it was an antenna. He had a rectangular head which held more information than your average computer encyclopedia. Two camera-like lenses were placed so they resembled eyes. He was cute and liked to sit on my shoulder.

I pressed the code into the control panel on the arch. The doors slid open with a hiss. I was immediately knocked back by the moist air and high temperature. On the other side of the door was an over-heated jungle. I checked the numbers on the display. They were what the Prime Minister had told us. Admittedly this was a good place to keep the archway out of sight from the locals. I stepped through the portal, followed by the others.

The jungle had a tart smell from the rotting leaves. With the temperature, we all started to sweat as soon as the arch doors closed behind us. I checked the bag. Inside was a control with a single red button

on it. You didn't want to lose this. It was the emergency recall button for the arch. I didn't need it now. The arch could stay here, so I put the control back in my bag.

We headed off down the only trail, hoping it would lead us in the right direction. I felt like I was a blacksmith standing in front of a forge. My whole body was drenched in sweat. The whole thing was a green nightmare. The air was filled with the sounds of birds and insects. I started to envy Sugi and Omi. The environmental suits they were wearing were made for this type of environment. Omi was busy scanning the horizon. I could tell because you could see her pigtails flopping around.

Everyone was suspicious. The path was open. Which means someone had traveled through here recently. You could tell from the broken branches and the trampled leaves. And any moment we were expecting lions and tigers and ... are there bears on alien planets?

We found them in a clearing just ahead. There were about twenty of them. Primates, about five feet tall, but thin, not heavily muscled like a gorilla. I was hoping this wasn't the welcoming committee. They seem intent on eating some berries from the local fauna. Good. Vegetarians rather than carnivores. They'd be less aggressive. Pieces beeped in my ear. Unfortunately, the ape-men heard it too. In a second all eyes were turned toward us. I'm guessing from their faces they weren't fond of intruders.

Shouldn't be a problem though -- non-aggressive vegetarians are more likely to run away than face danger ... in a blink of an eye, they were rushing toward us. It was then I recalled what Pieces 'beep' meant -- *hostile*. Bernie opened up first, followed quickly by Moonlight. She always carried the world's smallest blaster. I mean really. The thing didn't even have a grip. It was just a barrel. But when Moonlight pointed it at something and pressed the stud, they disintegrated. It also didn't seem to have any kick. Bernie spent half his firing time realigning the barrel with his target. Although Bernie's gun tended to take out four or five to Moonlight's one.

Several more tried to attack our flanks, jumping down out of the trees in the jungle. Sugi and Omi were taking care of those. Jason? Well, Jason wasn't anywhere to be seen. It's the nature of the job description for corporate espionage; not being seen. Clarke and I were protecting the rear. I mean someone has to keep an eye on the big picture and protect the brand. The air was filled with screaming and the cries of attack. Okay, Okay, I was the one doing the screaming. The cries were coming from everything else. The weapon's fire made the clearing smell like ozone. And a little bit like the smoke you get from a lighter.

Then there was an ominous patch of silence. The jungle floor was littered with the remains of pre-sentient, ape humanoids. Pieces beeped the all-clear. Slowly people lowered their weapons. Smoke was still coming out of Bernie's barrel.

"I hate this part," I grumbled.

"What?" asked Clarke. "The part where we're still alive and our opponents aren't?"

"No, the loss of market share," I protested. I picked up one of the berries the ape-men were eating. "We never got to find out what they wanted. Who knows? We might have lost a bundle cornering the local market on berries." I tasted one. It was sour. Not a lot of market for sour. I spit the remains out as Clarke gave me a dirty look.

“Shall we go now,” Jason suggested.

We were soon back in the never-ending green of the jungle. We’re talking green here. And not your average green either. This is green you can still see when you close your eyes. Up a hill and down into a valley until at last we came upon the temple.



“The ancient lost treasure is supposed to be stored here,” Clarke Blinds announced. Clarke was out titular ginger. She was also the corporate gambler. Expert at determining the odds. The only problem was, every once in a while, she’d get it completely wrong.

Once, in Monti Carlo, I watched her sashay over to a roulette wheel. She gave the operator a sultry glance and then placed over a million credits on number 34. It was an insane bet. The operator had to tear himself away from looking at her. She looked awesome in filling out her white dress. So much so, it was hard to take your eyes off her. The dealer started sweating. Not from the dress mind you, but the size of the bet. If the house lost, they’d have to pay off 53-to-1. It was the kind of fiscal deficit which would destroy your profit margin for more than a year. Not to mention put you out of business. For the operator, a job at a fast-food franchise was looking pretty good about now.

He spun the wheel. The ball rolled around and around as the numbers on the wheel flashed in the opposite direction. It was a blur of motion and the ticking of the wheel’s rotation. The ball made its classic sound. The tone only a rolling metal ball can make. Finally, the crack of the ball hitting the wheel. It jumped from hole to hole, crashing around the game in a chaotic manner. The wheel began to slow, and the numbers could now be brought into focus. The ball started jumping less and less, racing towards the point where it would meet its final landing site.

“Four, black,” the operator announced as the ball came to halt in the spinning wheel.

Clarke batted her pretty eyes at the operator. “I don’t know why I do that. I just can’t help myself.”

Like I said ... sometimes she gets it completely wrong.

Clarke looked up at the rest of the group. She was wearing one of those one-piece latex catsuits. You know the ones with the single zipper down the front. Not the best of jungle attire. She also was wearing a pair of knee-high black boots which were to die for. I couldn’t really pull that look off. Who am I kidding, I could totally pull that look off! She flashed Jason an easy smile. “So, the plan is we crash the place, make off with the goodies and be gone before the duels even start.”

We had to spend some time finding the entrance. There were stones everywhere, covered in growing vines and leaves. but nothing which even resembled a door or a window. Moonlight Blake went to work. She was a well-built blond with a short, pixie haircut. It gave her oval face quite the distinctive look. Moonlight is a specialist in altering reality. You could call her our techno mage. The things she could convince a circuit board to do was simply astonishing. I didn’t understand any of the things she did. Neither did anyone else in the company. She had a smile which made you wonder if demon possession was still a thing.

I swear, when she was doing her thing, she looked more like a witch doctor rolling chicken bones across the floor than anything else. Only her bones had high-tech flashing lights and hummed. There was a bright blue flash and parts of a rock face disappeared. There were holograms covering the entrance. Nice trick.

The inside didn't look like a ruin at all. On the contrary, the place looked like a mad scientist's lair. All the walls were lined with computer banks. Enough hard drives and memory storage for a whole ... well, let's simply say there was a lot of memory storage. The floor was raised for the cabling. In the center of the room, there were a series of tables. With enough test tubes, beakers and glass tubing to look like a transparent *Mouse Trap* game. Or at least some kind of see-through Rube Goldberg device. Flames and Bunsen burners kept several the concoctions in the beakers boiling. Gasses rose and then condensed into other containers. The air had a fruity smell to it.

Clarke put her fingers into one of the collection jars and licked the liquid off her fingers. "Hum, cherry."

My eyes narrowed to slits. "What?" I asked, a bit aghast at the failure of adherence to laboratory safety protocols.

"Cherry," Clarke repeated. "You brilliant Prime Minister has sent us to an unlicensed Jell-O factory. This is Cherry Jell-O. Well, it will be after you put it in a refrigerator."

"I'm sure this is merely a distraction," I remarked, pointing to an opening in the walls which seemed to lead deeper into the structure. The walls of the cavern were covered in moss and the water was dripping from the ceiling. It was cold and damp, with the type of smell which masks all other odors. Pieces started beeping frantically.

"Yes, I know," I replied, "Water and circuits don't mix." Pieces started getting even more frantic. I really should work on my hexadecimal beep language skills. But, wouldn't you know it, Pieces has an accent. I vaguely recall saying, "What do you mean gas?" just before my face hit the floor.



When I awoke, I found my self in a compromising position. I was tied, spread eagle on a table. Overhead was a classic swinging pendulum blade, dropping ever closer. I looked around until I saw him. He was leering in the corner. He was rather unremarkable, dressed in a white lab coat, oversized glasses. Although the tiny goat-tee and the mustache were a nice touch.

He noticed me looking at him. "I know, kind of takes your breath away, doesn't it? I cut quite the figure, don't I? But just remember, under this unassuming exterior lies the heart of a merciless psychopath."

I laughed. "I've seen better."

"What do you mean?" he protested strongly, putting his hands on his hips.

"Well, this is all rather time-consuming isn't it?" I stated. "Sort of tedious, don't you think? I mean you're required to stick around to ensure your victim doesn't escape. I can sell you a much better apparatus than this."

His face lost its grin. Then he stormed up to the table and flipped a switch. The blade kept swinging, but there was a loud click and I was released from the bindings. Sitting up I rubbed my wrists; they were a



little sore. He must have been standing on a box. He now seemed much shorter than he first appeared. He might have been four-foot-six if he was lucky. Typical. Overcompensation by grandeur due to a diminutive status.

“Roarvix,” said the little man, “Dr. Roarvix actually.”

“Janet Pose, CEO of Interplanetary Procurements,” I announced.

“One of *the* Pose’s?”

I scowled. “No, not those Pose’s.”

“Strange, you look just like Jill.”

“I should, she’s twin sister.” His eyes lit up and he wiped his upper lip with his tongue. “Okay, I’m related, but I not in *that* business.”

Roarvix looked disappointed. “So, what business is Interplanetary Procurements in?” he asked.

I turned on all the family charm. “We can get you all manner of things: status fields for unlimited captive storage, shrinking rays, electronic stun and incapacitating weapons. We’ve got a nice room we can sell you. One where the walls close in. Self-cleaning too, you’ll like it.” I put my arms around Roarvix’s shoulders.

“I don’t have a lot of funds at the moment.” He sounded sad.

“Not to worry,” I tried to cheer him up. “We have all sorts of payment plans. I have a special deal going this week on our ‘Pay as You Go’ option. I led him over to the table where he had Moonlight and Clarke restrained and pressed the buttons to release them. Sugi and Omi were at least about to be cut in half by a slowly progressing laser beam. No points for creativity, but at least it had a little more class.

We proceed around the room and I regaled him with all the special offers we had this month. As we passed the other tables, I released the rest of my crew. We were getting along well when Bernie slugged him over the head with his rifle butt. Roarvix fell like a ton of bricks.

Bernie spun the weapon around to start putting holes in him when I pushed the weapon’s barrel down. “Don’t hurt him, we could do some business later.”

“Why not,” Protested Moonlight. “He’s a little pervert.”

“I like perverts,” I replied in all seriousness, “They have hobbies. Very expensive hobbies. Supplying them can be a lucrative business opportunity. Sometimes you can even get them to give you all sorts of information – with the right persuasion.” I gave Bernie a look. If I’d been wearing my glasses I would be looking over the tops of them. “That is when you don’t hit them over the head.”

“Sorry,” Bernie muttered.

“Just tie him up on one of the tables. Just make sure the blades are off.” I directed Jason and Bernie to a table with adjustable restraints. He was, after all, a bit on the short side.

As Jason was lifting him up to the table, Clarke belted him one across the face. I was giving her the eye when she turned around. “What?” she protested. “He deserved that. I broke a nail when I hit the floor in his gas chamber.”

Everyone got cleaned up and back in order. I found Pieces over in a corner, hiding behind some of the equipment. There were three exits out of the room, but we had no idea which one we’d come in. Pieces jumped up and down indicating one of the passages. “Okay, so now we know which door we came in. Question is, which of the other two do we take now?”

Clarke raised one shoulder and gave her red hair a serious flip. It was her good luck charm. If you ask me, it was a lousy good luck charm. It attracted all sorts of low life, but she believed in it. She indicated the right-hand exit, “This way.”

This hallway was significantly less wet than the first one we ventured down. It had a raised floor and the walls were cleaned of moss. The air was kept fresh through the use of numerous ventilation fans and didn’t have the damp smell I was beginning to associate with these tunnels. Still, I kept a wary eye out. One can’t be too cautious. At his point, Jason came back to get me. “Don’t you think it’s time to take at least one step?”

I glanced around and found I was still at the hallway entrance. Okay, so maybe you can be too cautious. It turned out to be a winding tunnel, perhaps carved out of the rock by the ancient inhabitants using primitive tools and carry loads of bedrock out on homemade carts. Around the next corner, there was an alcove. Parked in it was a well-used Aston 3000 laser miner, good for clearing 150 feet of tunnel per day or up to 300 feet if you didn’t mind rough walls.

Yea, Okay. maybe the tunnels were not as old as I supposed.

At the end of the tunnel was a vault door with about twelve different levels of electronic security. It looked like we’d taken the right path. “Okay Jason, this is your department.”

Jason pulled some electronics out of his pocket and started scanning the door. He made some adjustments to the unit. Pressing a few buttons here, flipping a few knobs there. He was making his final adjustments when a bolt of blue lightning shot out from the door and sent him flying across the tunnel.

He shook his head as he regained his feet. “Well, that’s not right.”

He was a little more careful from then on. A couple of times he flipped a switch and then took several steps backward. There was no more lightning. He tried decrypting the protocol, demagnetizing the door locks, and forcing the door to go through a manual factory reset. Nothing seemed to work. I couldn’t see his eyes – or anything else on his face – but from his body language, I could tell he was getting frustrated. Finally, he shook the device at the screen shouting, “What do I have to do? Cry ‘Open Sesame’ at you?”

The vault door made a loud click. It opened slowly, causing a gust of air to seep in through the cracks as the door opened.

Jason threw his hands up in the air. “Okay, then. I guess I do have to say it.”

Inside was a storeroom will with all sorts of electronic paraphernalia, spare parts, and one large chest. You know the kind. They type your average megalomaniac keeps his planet-killing weapons in.

The funny part was, it didn't seem sealed or even locked. Either the owners were expecting the vault door to keep intruders out or it was booby-trapped in some way.

"Not much in the way of protection for such a dangerous device. Do you think it's a trap?" Moonlight was reading my mind.

But before I could answer her, make a determination, or even yell for her to stop she opened the lid. Everyone ducked. Most of the group threw themselves behind shelves or heavy equipment. Now don't get any bright ideas. This has nothing to do with the rash of wrongful death suits which had been filed against Interplanetary Procurements lately. I mean, things tend to happen to interns. I wouldn't say its part of the business. After all, we keep a cloning facility around just for such occasions. No, I'd say it was the universe's way of deleting non-profit producing elements of the workforce. You have to admire the universe.

Moonlight dropped the lid and it landed with a thud. "Of course, there is one other possibility," she remarked.

"Which is?"

"It's empty."

I ran up to the chest like a sprinter after the starter gun fired. Checking inside, I found she was right, it was empty. My face went red, my eyes narrowed. "The little twerp," I muttered in a furious tone, "I'm going to kill him. Then I'm going to clone him – just so I can kill him again!"

It didn't take us long to work our way out of the tunnels and back to the ruins on the surface. Although we did have to take one short detour, so Clarke could punch Roarvix again. This time, I didn't protest. The sun was still shining through the trees and the temperature still resembled an oven. We stopped for a few minutes for Sugi and Omi to determine the best way to get to the palace. Then we were off.

I turned to Sugi and Omi "If you can find a path which leads by a floater we can steal, I give you a bonus. I'm getting tired of all this walking around. Too primitive for my taste." Everyone grumbled in agreement. Of course, in my case, my high-heeled boots weren't doing me any favors. I mean they look great, but they were not built for walking as they say. Even less so in a heat-blasted swamp.

"You'd think with this kind of heat; the water would dry up." Clarke protested.

"You think," Moonlight agreed, pulling her shoes out of the muck.

Bernie simply snickered.

Sugi and Omi are my best scouts. They learned their trade the hard way, by getting lost. In fact, once they were so lost they ended up eating things which are not technically food. Well, in those days there was only one of them, the original. I activated their clone when they didn't return. Okay, so there was a little incident. Every once in awhile it happens. There was only one of them, but when they came out of the chamber there were two. Don't even ask me how one of them became female, because I have no

idea. Yea, Omi is also shorter. Get used to it. I had them tested. They have the same DNA. This is why we call them brother and sister. Yea, okay they have the same DNA except for the one chromosome.

Look it's a commercial cloning unit. They can sue the manufacturer.

As we got out of sight of the ruins, we heard a commotion up ahead. Bernie waved us down and everyone crouched. Sugi and Omi started flanking the noise. We crept up closer using as much stealth as this group was capable of – meaning not much. Fortunately, the group ahead were too deeply self-involved to notice our approach. It was a gang of insectoids. The tall ones with the big bug eyes. Seven feet tall, oversized triangular head. Emaciating thin bodies, long arms with the six-fingered claws at the end? I forget the species. They had one of their own on his knees. There was a heated discussion going on – which in this environment was redundant.

You could tell the four who were standing up were getting their way in the argument. It was probably the result of the fact they were armed. At a signal Bernie, Jason, Sugi, and Omi each took down one. It was a messy affair, all the green blood spirting and flying everywhere. Heads sailing through the dense jungle air. Fortunately, I didn't get anything on my pants. I hate those dry-cleaning bills.

The survivor was very thankful. I'll call him Jerr. It's not his name, but there are too many clicks and buzzes in his name for me to pronounce it – let alone spell it. So, we just call him Jerr.

"Are you here to acquire the weapon?" asked Jerr.

I tried not to look surprised. "You're familiar with the weapon?"

"I don't like to brag, but I'm an expert."

"So, you're here to acquire the weapon too?"

"Heavens, no," protested Jerr. "I was hoping to get a look at one of them."

Now I really was surprised. "One?"

"Oh yea, there's a whole group of them," Jerr announced. "Most governments don't like to advertise their existence much. What with the large number of them in possession of paranoid and unstable personalities. It doesn't do much to promote a feeling of public safety."

"So, you wanted to ..."

"Get a closer look at it," Jerr grinned joyfully. If you can call what a bug's face does grinning. "I've seen five other designs so far. This will be my sixth."

Moonlight gave him an odd look. "I had no idea death weapons had groupies."

"Connoisseurs, please," Jerr protested, "Groupies is such an unrefined word. It lacks dignity and class for so serious a scientific pursuit."

Moonlight snickered. "Of course."

"Why don't you come along with us?" I suggested. "We could use your expertise. We going to have a *little chat* with the Prime Minister about his invitation."

Jerr took a step back. "You were invited?"

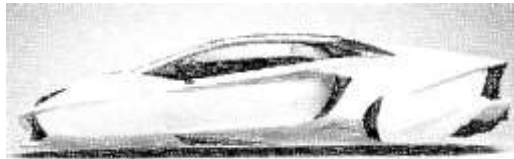
"Why, what's wrong with being invited?"

Jerr's head bobbed like a doll on a spring. "It's just every few years the local Azanzi government invites people they think are dangerous to compete in public duels for the weapon. The Azanzi's are strict pacifists, but they have no problem watching others kill themselves. They are a little voyeuristic in a chaotic violent sort of way."

"So, no one has ever won these contests?" Clarke asked.

"Not so far," explained Jerr.

My face was starting to turn red again. "Yea, we're definitely going to have to have a *little talk* with the Prime Minister. Come on, folks. Jerr you can join us. I promise you a look at this thing when we find it."



The central city was a sprawling urban area, it's streets filled with floaters. Jason directed us down a small alley and then he gassed one of the passing vehicles. After Sugi and Omi removed the sleeping occupants, we all piled into the floater. It was nicely laid out, comfortable with all the

amenities. It was slightly used but in good condition. Normally I prefer to steal new rather than used. This was not turning out to be one of my preferred expeditions.

Bernie took the controls. As a driver he had a bit of a reputation, none of it good. His previous employer used him to eliminate rivals. Bernie preferred to get them involved in floater wrecks. It looked less suspicious. But the result was he had more points on his license than there were stars in the sky. We sailed down the main traffic route, skimming past the normal circulation. The government quarter loomed ahead, and we sailed right past the checkpoint.

"Odd they didn't stop us," I remarked.

"I stole a floater with diplomatic plates," Jason explained.

"Good thinking." I couldn't say if I was proud of my intern or a little annoyed he was more devious than me.

The government quarter as a series of tall crystalline structures which towered over the rest of the city. It reminded me of one of those crystal growing kits you got as a kid. Bernie brought the floater around back and I hopped out. Bernie tried to follow me, but I held my hand up. "No, you stay here." I gave him a curt smile. "I want to handle this myself. Besides, I need you here keeping the getaway floater warm."

The hallway outside the Prime Minister's quarters was plain, almost austere. Inside, the Prime Minister was waiting for me. He didn't seem at all perturbed by my entrance. I gave him a raw smile. He waited for me to talk first and maintained eye contact. I worked on directing his gaze a little lower. I pointed at myself, then pointed at him and then pointed back to myself. His eyes tracked my gesture. At least he

was humanoid. It's much harder getting my message across with non-primate species. Finally, he got the message and started to approach.

When he was close enough, I gassed him. This stuff only has a limited range. He tottered on his feet, a broad smile on his face. Then he fell over, face first. At the sound of the thud, Bernie and Jason rushed into the room, weapons at the ready.

"I thought I told you to say with the floater."

"Yea," Jason smiled, "but I'm only an intern. You gotta pay me before I follow orders."

I gave up arguing with him when the rest of the group crowded through the doorway. "Okay, everybody start looking." Jerr's antennae started waving as if he had no clue what I meant. I put my hands on my hips and gave him a stare. He gazed back at me with those impossibly big compound eyes.

"Oh," his mandibles started squirming, "look for the device."

Clarke leaned over and whispered, "You sure he's an expert?"

I grinned. "He's an unpaid consultant, so who cares."

The room had started out as a model of order and neatness. Expensive furniture, fine carpets and just the right amount of nick-knacks. Not a speck of dust anywhere. The Prime Minister must have been an anal-retentive. But now the room looked like your average tornado aftermath. It's funny how the stuffing in chairs expands as soon as it gets outside the upholstery.

Pieces beeped.

"Okay, it's not here," I remarked.

"How do you know?" Jerr inquired. Pieces beeped again. "Ah, sensor robot. Got it."

Moonlight gave me a sly look. "So, does this mean we need to search the mad king's rooms?"

"Probably."

Jason stopped tearing the room apart and headed for the door. "Well, we better get going then." Jason had an anxious streak running through him. He never likes to ransack a place for too long. It tended to lead to a high chance of getting caught. Okay, maybe it wasn't his nerves. Maybe, just maybe, it was the flashing red alarm light on the wall. Following closely behind Jason we all hurried out. Not counting the slight delay caused by everyone trying to get through the door at once.

We got out to the place where the floater was parked, and it was gone. "Alright," I exclaimed, "What *is* wrong with this planet? Don't they have any security?"

Jason appeared around the corner with another floater. "Get in," he suggested stealing glances behind them. "Come on, come on, you guys. Get the lead out."

"What's the rush?"

"Security is right around the corner."

“Right, everybody in ... now.”

Floaters usually don't have anything in the way of acceleration. After all, when you're dealing with anti-gravity generators, you can have a little trouble pushing against things. Jason, however, managed to get the floater moving faster than a nasty boss can get you thrown out on the street. But I will remind you, despite all the pending lawsuits, I would never do anything of the sort. But, I am proud to have inspired my interns to make quick getaways.

We made a quick left around a watchtower and hustled off down a side street. Right behind us was the security forces floater, lights flashing, sirens screaming. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to have made the turn at the watchtower ... you know ... in plain sight. I glanced around the dashboard. When are they going to start equipping the new models with cloaking devices? Probably when they invent them. Jason took a quick right around a slow-moving cargo hauler. Then he went around the back of the hauler, so we were now going back the direction we had come.

Unfortunately, the drivers of the security floaters were much better than Jason expected. I felt okay about it. I was kind of getting used to them being behind us. Bernie leaned out the side and cocked the weapon. It began to start its energy whine. It smelled a little like ozone. Jason took out a smoke grenade and pulled out the pin. Smoke began pouring out, obscuring the street, the chase cars, and half the buildings.

“Are you using a company smoke grenade?” I demanded.

Jason appeared disturbed. “Me?”

“Yes, you.”

Now he appeared insulted. “Of course not. It's something I stole from a supply closet.”

“Good,” I replied. “Ours are intended for sale to customers and they tend to run out early.”

Jason took a quick right turn as the smoke grenade sputtered and dried up. Fortunately, the chase cars kept going. Ironically if the smoke grenade was still working they'd probably be following the smoke and the lights would still be behind us. Bernie shut down the gun. It sounded like the grenade as it sputtered out.

I gave Bernie a serious glance. “You didn't get that from a company supply closet, did you?”

Bernie cringed. “No. This is mine. I brought it from home. Why do you ask?”

“Never mind.”

The royal palace was right around the corner. We pulled up to the loading dock. Things would have been fine, except for the half dozen security guards who were there to meet us. Bernie started struggling with his weapon. It was just building up to its energy whine when guards started to close it.

“Wait a minute,” Bernie protested. “I'll be right with you.”

He went back to prepping the gun and they went back to advancing to arrest us. A flash and six puffs of acid-smelling smoke appeared where the security guards had once been. Sugi and Omi were smiling like

two little boys who'd found a frog to play with. Smoke was pouring out of their gun barrels. Let this be a lesson to all you MBA's out there. Always have a backup plan.

The king's apartments were a 200-room complex filled with ornate furniture, overstuffed chairs and more wall hangings than your average museum. It's embarrassing how much money and wealth some people collect. We barely made it past the first hallway when we were stopped by a rather tall insectoid. He was dressed all in black. Cape, gloves, menacing leather coat ... the works.

"I was wondering how long it was going to take you to get up here." He chuckled. At least it sounded like a chuckle.

He raised a rather impressive looking weapon, but Bernie fired first. His beam was absorbed by a defense shield. It glowed blue around the insectoid's body for a moment before it dissipated. He smiled. "I wouldn't be much of a Chief of Planetary Security if I simply let people like you kill me, now would I? Now the locals have an intense fear of killing anyone. Which is why they run the games; to bring people like you here. That's where I come in."

He raised his weapon and a sharp-looking dagger appeared sticking out of his chest. Blood spurted everywhere. He fell to the ground with a thud. Standing behind him, holding the hilt of the dagger was Jerr. "Those shields are only good against energy weapons." He shook his antennae. "Come on, I found the device." He waved us into the next room.

Inside was a large crate, similar to the one we found in Roarvix's lair. Pieces started beeping like mad. This was the one. The crate we come all this way for. The prize. The payoff. I opened the lid and stared down at a piece of paper laying on the bottom. I picked it up. It read, "Kelrog was here!"

Kelrog was one of our competitors. I hated his guts. A real pervert.

"I going to kill that dweeb," I muttered, "If I can find him."

Moonlight cocked her head. "Why wouldn't you be able to find him?" She was curious.

"He's a Keplin," I spat. "They are only about four inches tall."