

He Who Laughs Last

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by Kyle Eggleston

Crimson Gamma, Brig

Grilka paced around the brig cell. It was a standard size for a brig, a bed in the corner, toilet behind a small partition. Just the comforts of home. Walking over to a water basin, Grilka splashed cold water onto her face. It had been two weeks since Jack had retaken the station. Two weeks since she had been placed in its brig. Two weeks and she hadn't even heard from Jack at all, not even once.

She wondered *if* Jack would ever come and visit her. In time maybe he would, but then again there was the slight chance that he wouldn't come for her. If he was holding a grudge against Grilka, he might never come visit and just leave her there to rot.

Jeff Killpack approached the brig force field. He stared into the cell making sure Grilka was behaving herself, which she was. Jeff had been checking in on Grilka every so often over the past two weeks. He needed to know that she was going to be alright.

"How are we doing today cupcake?" Jeff asked Grilka with a smile. He had taken to calling her different nicknames each time he saw her. Today's nickname was cupcake. It was a personal game he liked to play, it kept things interesting.

Grilka hissed at the nickname. "Do NOT call me that!" She yelled.

Jeff smirked at the thought. She didn't like that one. "Consider it noted." He said crossing the nickname cupcake off the mental list in his head. "I won't call you that again." He pulled a chair over to the force field and set it down. Sitting on the chair, he crossed his legs.

"Why have you come Lieutenant Killpack?" Grilka asked. "You've been checking in on me ever couple of days now. Nothing's changed. Jack hasn't stopped by or bothered to say hello. So, what are you my counselor?"

Jeff smiled. "In a manner of speaking. The good doctor and I switch off in that role. The station doesn't have an official counselor, so we make do." He crossed his arms and uncrossed his legs. "I am here for you actually. Talk to me, how are you doing? I am not a heartless coldblooded jailer as *some* would have you believe."

Grilka paced around like a caged animal. That's what she felt like now, a caged animal. All she was, was a rat in a cage. She didn't even know what a rat was, but had heard Jack speak of them. Some kind of Earth vermin that managed to get into places where it didn't belong. That's what she felt like, she felt like she didn't belong.

"To answer your earlier question about my well being." Grilka said. "I am as good as I can be considering." She let go a sigh. "When is Jack going to let me out of here? Haven't I suffered enough punishment for a lifetime?"

Jeff shrugged. "That I can't answer." He said. "The captain, excuse me, the *major* has his reasons for keeping you held up for so long. I don't have a say in the matter." He raised his hands. "Sorry darlin', no can do." Jeff said. "Is there anything *else* I can do for you?"

Grilka stopped pacing, stared at Killpack and shook her head. "No. There's nothing you can do for me. There's nothing *anyone* can do for me."

"What about me?" Jack's voice came from behind.

Jeff and Grilka looked to Jack with looks of shock and surprise on their faces. He was the last person they expected to come knocking. Jack hadn't said a word to Grilka since he retook command of Crimson Gamma. There was just too many things demanding his attention. Hell he hadn't even made a visit to Obshi or Norev since he had been back.

"I've come to talk with you Grilka." Jack said. He looked to Lieutenant Killpack. "Alone."

Jeff stood from his chair and left the room quickly.

Grilka continued to stare at Jack. "Major, you do care about your prisoners."

Jack walked over to a wall panel that controlled the force field and deactivated it. As the force field dropped, Grilka didn't flinch. She stood there like a statue waiting for Jack to speak or make a move, or *something, anything* really.

"I had to take some time." Jack began. "I had to know if I even *wanted* to see you let alone speak with you. What you did to me was cruel." He kicked the chair Jeff had been sitting on, it slid across the floor and hit the wall.

Grilka lowered her head. "I know major." She said. "I would offer an apology, but I have a feeling it would fall on, what is it you humans say? Fall on deaf ears? Yes that's it." She paused. "I will offer an apology if it will help. I am sorry."

Jack thought about it for a moment. Was her apology genuine? Was it meant for real or was it just fake so she could escape the cell? He would have to take a chance and just see what would happen.

“Alright, let’s say I accept your apology.” Jack said. “You’re free to leave this cell. I have quarters ready for you.” He paused. Did he have to say it? Yes he would have to say it. “You will be confined to the station for the time being until I can trust you again. Are we clear?”

Grilka nodded. She didn’t want to leave the station as it was. Her reasoning behind wanting to stay was because she wanted to fix things with Jack. What she had done was a mistake, a big mistake. Something she never should have done, but that was in the past and there was nothing she could do to change it. “Yeah, we’re clear.” She finally said.

“Good.” Jack said. He turned to leave the brig. “I’ll be in touch when I’m really ready to talk with you.” He said. “Like *really* talk with you.” Jack exited the brig leaving Grilka alone.

Dubor Orbit

Ketish stood on the bridge of his warship. He gazed around at his officers. “Today we embark on a most unprecedented adventure.” Ketish said. His voice echoed throughout the ship on the intercom. “Two hundred years ago, a Shukan by the name Nokev flew into space for the first time and brought the attention of outsiders from the fourth planet. We are going to pay them a visit. Take over their planet and make it our own.” He stood firm full knowing that he was going to win this conquest. “Hold firm to your values, you are going to need them.” Ketish finished.

Looking to the helm, Ketish gave the order. “Set a course for the fourth planet and engage the engines.”

The helm officer nodded in confirmation. “Understood My Lord.” She said. “Engaging engines.”

Conquest was in his blood. It was in all the veins of those who called themselves Dubor. He regretted Grilka was not there to enjoy this adventure he was about to embark on. Oh well, there was nothing he could do about that now. The mission had already started there was no turning back now.

Moments later the warship entered orbit over the fourth planet in the Comeki Star System.

“Now entering orbit of Ashlea.” The helm officer said.

Ketish smiled. “Good, open a channel.”

“Channel open.” The helm officer said.

“Attention people of Ashlea. This is Ketish of the Dubor Republic. We are in orbit of your home world. Surrender or be destroyed.” Ketish announced. “You have ten of your minutes to respond.”

Ketish waited. He hated waiting. What he wanted to do was train his weapons on the capitol city and just destroy it killing whoever was inside. But that would be taking it too fast he thought.

Minutes passed. Finally there was a crackling sound on the communication channel. "Hello? Yes we hear you. Please do not destroy us. We surrender." A female voice said. "I am Prime Minister Shalock of the Ashlea people. I speak for my people. We do not want to be destroyed."

Ketish grinned. "A minute before the deadline. You play a dangerous game with me Shalock." He said. "Prepare to receive ... a special delegation. Ketish out." The channel closed. Exiting the bridge, he got ready to teleport down to the planet's surface.

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Down on the planet's surface, Ketish walked into the main council chambers in the capitol city. With him was a crew of six soldiers all armed with guns. They were prepared for anything that might come their way. If anyone came up against them, they were ready to take down that threat.

Ketish walked up to Prime Minister Shalock and held out his hands. "You are now under Dubor rule." He said. "Congratulations on becoming Dubor citizens." He chuckled. "Citizens doesn't quite sound right does it? No, I didn't think so either. You are slaves nothing more than that. Cattle at best."

Shalock bowed her head slightly. "I am only accepting this ... takeover to protect my people. We are a peaceful people. War is not in our vocabulary. We do not wish a confrontation with your kind, so we will submit to your rule."

Ketish sighed. He knew there had to be a reason they gave up without a fight. No weapons to speak of, it really made for an easy takeover. Surrendering was their only option. He shook his head. Ketish had been hoping for at least *some* resistance. They made it too easy for him and his men. He gave the order for his men to stand down. They lowered their weapons.

"I'd like to talk about what happens next." Shalock said.

Ketish smiled. "I thought you might. We will surround your cities with dwellings of our own design. Our goal is not to make you forget who you are as a people. On the contrary, I believe we can learn a lot from your kind. You just have to live under our rule."

Shalock frowned at the thought. What had she done to her people? She had accepted an occupation to come upon them all. It was a dangerous reality that they were facing now. She was afraid of what was to come, but there was no backing out now. She had committed her people to death.

“Your first order of business is to broadcast to whoever will listen, that this planet is under Dubor control. Any attack on it will be an act of war against the Dubor Republic.” Ketish said. “Do I make myself clear?”

Shalock nodded her head. “Yes. I understand and will make the broadcast.”

Ketish nodded his head. “Good. Keep that positive thought process about you and you just might survive.” He grinned, all of his sharp teeth showing. It scared Shalock. The look on Ketish’s face was that of pleasure. Ketish had done something dangerous and only he knew just how dangerous that was.

Crimson Gamma, Command and Control

Commander Kate Monson watched as Shalock made the announcement of Dubor reign over her people. Kate frowned at the thought and made a recording of it to show Major O’Brien later on when he was available. She didn’t know where he was actually. That wasn’t anything to be concerned about, but it was different for him. O’Brien typically let her in on his whereabouts from time to time.

“And so any vessel entering our space will be subject to search and seizure of any contraband or weapons. Anything not on the approved list made by Ketish.” Shalock said as she finished her statement. “We welcome the Dubor people with open arms in this new age of life we are entering. Close communications.” The communications channel closed.

Kate whistled. It had been quite a lengthy message. Something Ketish obviously had written and forced Shalock to recite. Her eyes were speaking something completely different than what she was saying. They were scared. Ketish had simply gone from one world to the next doing what he always did, making things worse for those around him.

“O’Brien to Monson.” Jack’s voice came over the comm unit.

Kate smiled. He was alive. “Monson here.” She responded. “Go ahead major.”

“That son of a bitch.” Jack said. “He went on to conquer another planet. I saw the message that was just transmitted.”

Kate frowned. "Yes sir." She said. "Seems he acted in a very Dubor way. All they know is conquering other planets. First Shuka, then their attempted take over of Earth, and now this. Whoever these people are, they are in for a hell of a ride."

"Yes they are." Jack's voice came from behind. He had entered C&C. "Can you get me a channel to Ketish? I think he and I need to have a little talk."

Kate checked her communications panel. "I think so, sir." She said. "In your office?"

Jack shook his head. "No, put it through here. I want you all to witness this. There must be witnesses."

Kate nodded. She understood what Jack was asking for. The more witnesses the less Dubor could go back and say they didn't say what they were about to say. Yeah it all made sense to her. "I've located him. He's onboard his warship orbiting the fourth planet. Opening a channel now."

The forward monitor came to life. Ketish appeared on the monitor.

"This is Major Jack O'Brien of Crimson Gamma. Ketish what the hell are you doing?" Jack said. He was short and to the point. There was no reason for making a long winded speech about nothing. No, he just wanted to know what Ketish's plans were for that planet.

Ketish smiled. "*Major* O'Brien." He said. "They have given you your command back. Well deserved I might add." Small talk was not becoming the man. "I suppose you want to know why I have taken over this world. Enslaved it by your understanding." He paused. "It's not really an enslavement though. It is our way after all."

Jack was not amused. "We declare a truce and you go and do something like this." He scoffed at the thought. "When will you ever learn Ketish? You have got to learn someday that you just can't be taking over other planets and expect the rest of the universe to fall in line. First you took over Shuka. Look at how that ended, Obshi took care of your evil ways and drove you from their world."

Ketish sighed. "Yes that was a shame really. Obshi was ahead of his time." He paused as he thought about the Shuka planet. He regretted allowing Earth to make the decision that Dubor wouldn't go after Shuka again. That was a mistake on his part, one that he would have to live and deal with for the rest of his life. "You can't tell me you called just to talk about this unknown planet that no one really cares about. You really want to know what this means for our truce."

Jack frowned. In a way that was what he was calling about. Taking over a planet was not Earth's way of doing things. It went against everything Earth stood for, everything Earth believed in. "Yes Ketish, what does this mean for our truce? Are we just going to end back at war again?"

Ketish folded his arms. “Just don’t take any sides in this ... situation.” He said. “If you don’t side with those we have taken over, you will not be interfered with yourself.” Ketish smiled. “I still have plans for you Jack. Don’t do anything stupid.”

The channel closed.

Grunting, Jack turned to his first officer. “That is *not* how I expected that conversation to go.”

Kate shrugged. “I don’t know major, he seems pretty sure of himself. If you go head to head, I can’t guarantee that you’ll win.” Kate frowned at the thought but she was just stating the facts as she saw them. “They might win this one for a moment.” Kate said. “We’ll eventually liberate that home world, mark my words.”

Jack nodded. “Alright.” He said. “Maybe you’re right. But I can’t sit idly by while an entire planet is under their rule.”

“Agreed.” Kate said. “Ketish wants our truce to work, that’s why he attacked a neutral world. Neither of us have a treaty with Ashlea that I am aware of. They were in the open, Ketish saw a chance to move against them and took it.”

Turning around, Jack left C&C. On his way out, he spoke behind him. “I’ll have to give this some thought.” Entering the transport tube the doors closed behind him. Jack breathed a heavy sigh. How was he going to help the people of Ashlea regain their home world without crossing Ketish? Jack doubted that would be possible. One way or another he would eventually have to face off with Ketish and it would be a nasty battle. If Ketish wanted to keep the peace so Jack could fulfill his destiny, he would avoid war at all costs. Jack was counting on that.

The Rim

Bert McDuff looked out the window of his room. Below was a beautiful garden inside the dome shaped structure that kept an oxygen atmosphere on the small moon. As he sat there the door to his room opened and a small robot entered, it was carrying a tray of food on its back.

“Breakfast is served.” The robot said. It deposited the try and left the room.

Walking over to a small table where the tray had been set, Bert lifted the lid on the breakfast container. Eggs and waffles.

“Well, at least someone around here knows what a good breakfast is like.” Bert laughed as he prepared to eat the food laid out before him. Bert was starving.

There was a slight knock at the door.

“Enter?” Bert said.

Alyssa opened the door and entered. At the sight of Bert eating breakfast, she smiled. “Good the robot didn’t get lost.”

Bert raised a cup of coffee and smiled. At least he *thought* it was coffee. “Yes, so I have you to thank for this.”

Alyssa nodded. “Just a comfort of home. I figured it would be nice once in a while to have something that reminded you of Earth. I’ve yet to get the eggs cooked just right, but they’re close enough. The food synthesizer just doesn’t do them justice. I’ll get it perfected eventually.”

Bert took a bite of the scrambled egg and smiled. “Tastes good to me.” He said.

Sitting on the corner of the bed, Alyssa looked at Bert. “I know you’ve been here for a short while and the chances of you getting back to Earth are slim to none.” She began. “But my partner Alice thinks if we can find another wormhole that leads to Earth, well we could get you home.”

Bert’s smile turned into a grin. “That would be amazing.” He said. “Does Alice have a way to sniff out wormholes?”

Alyssa shrugged. “She claims she’s working on some kind of gizmo. I don’t have a clue. You’ll have to talk to her about it. I just came with the news.” She smiled and left Bert’s room.

I might actually have a chance of getting home. Bert thought. *This is the best news ever.*

Crimson Gamma

Norev sat in her quarters, she watched the clip of Ketish taking over the alien home world. In a way she was relieved, Dubor was no longer interested in Shuka; at least for now. With them moving onto another world she and her people could rest easy. There was the matter of the two Dubor scientists still on Shuka soil. She would have to call the Religious Government in the morning and have them taken care of. Norev wasn’t anti alien, but Toff and Coff didn’t belong on Shuka.

Ding Ding. Her door chimed. Norev had changed the chime to something more traditionally found on Shuka. It was a bit different than the normal door chime found in other quarters. It was unique because *she* was unique.

“Come.” Norev said.

Major O'Brien stood in the doorway. As he stepped inside, Norev ran up to Jack and hugged him like she hadn't seen him in a hundred years. It was true it had been like half a year she hadn't seen Jack, but he wasn't expecting her to hug him. It was so out of character for her.

"Good to see you too ambassador." O'Brien said taking a step back from her embrace.

Norev cleared her throat. "Yes, of course. Welcome back major." She said composing herself. "I had heard you returned, it's been a few weeks. I thought I would have run into you ... sooner." She looked away.

"Been busy." O'Brien said.

"Of course." Norev responded. "I understand with the war ending and all, you've got plenty of things to be busy with. Ketish has got you running around like a mouse in a maze." She stopped short before continuing the thought process she was having. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have."

O'Brien smiled. "No you're right, Ketish has got me coming and going right now. With this new takeover of a planet that we *should* have been protecting," He paused as he frowned at the thought. Crimson Gamma was the only Earth outpost in the sector. They were the first line of defense for the Comeki Star System. The *entire* system. He couldn't help but feel responsible for what had happened.

"There's nothing you could have done, major." Norev said as though she read Jack's thoughts. "Ketish is a madman. He wants one thing, power. If he thinks he can gain power by manipulating you? He'll do it."

"But the prophecy." Jack reminded Norev.

Norev chuckled. "The prophecy doesn't mean anything Jack. We have the same prophecy. Likely written by the same person a long time ago. A half ling will make peace between the people of Dubor and Shuka." She said reciting the sacred texts. "Ketish will bend them, shape them into *anything* to make them work for him. He has you wrapped around his finger, you just don't see it yet."

Jack scoffed at the thought. "Ketish doesn't have me wrapped around his finger." He said. "Ain't nobody have me wrapped around their finger." He folded his arms.

"Oh really." Jack said. "You think you know me so well."

Norev smirked. "Well enough. I've known you for over a year now. I'd like to think I know you somewhat major." She said. "Anyway, Ketish will eventually show his true hand. What he really wants of you. The prophecy can't be the only thing he's after. There must be something else." Standing up she crossed the room and poured two cups of tea. "Tea?"

Jack nodded. "Please."

Norev brought Jack over a cup of tea and watched as he tasted it. Jack about spit it out, it was bitter. Torek tea was a very acquired taste. She chuckled at the sight. "You don't have to drink it, it's okay."

Jack coughed. "No, no it's fine." He wheezed as he took another sip and choked it down. "Well if you're right about Ketish, then I'm in some trouble down the line." Jack sighed. The last thing he wanted to do was deal with Ketish anymore. But something told him he wouldn't be so lucky. *Damn him.* Jack thought.

"Yes, trouble always comes wherever Ketish is." Norev said. "But I have faith in you Jack." She paused. "If you'll excuse me, I have a meeting with the Tralosian ambassador. I don't want to be late." Norev stood up. "It is good to see you again Jack. Welcome back again."

Jack too stood up from his chair. "Thank you Norev. We'll have to speak again when you have more time."

Norev walked to her door and paused. "Yes we will. One last thing. Give Grilka a chance. God knows she needs it." She left her quarters.

Jack exited Norev's quarters. Grilka. He thought. Why would she bring up Grilka? Didn't she know what had happened? Surly Norev must have known what Grilka had done to him. How she betrayed him. But she still wanted him to give her a chance. Jack sighed as he walked down the corridor. Maybe it was time he and Grilka actually sat down and talked.

Reaching the transport tube, Jack entered and gave his destination. "Delegate quarters. Section five." The transport began moving towards its destination. Jack hoped he wasn't about to do something stupid, like really stupid.

He would find out in no time.

As the transport tube came to a stop, Jack exited the tube and walked down the corridor towards Grilka's quarters. What on earth was he going to say to her? Jack wondered how the conversation would go. Coming up to her quarters he sighed. Here goes nothing. Jack pressed the door chime gently. He quietly hoped she wouldn't answer. The station's computer would let her know who was waiting to speak with her if she wanted it to. It was a simple request.

The door opened. Grilka was standing there in a bathrobe. Jack froze. "I can come back if this is a bad time." He said.

Grilka shook her head. "No, it's fine. I'll just get dressed." She left the door and walked into the bedroom where she got dressed. Jack entered and sat down on a sofa. He looked around, Grilka's quarters hadn't changed at all since the last time he had been there.

A moment later, Grilka walked out of her bedroom dressed in some relaxing clothing. Her hair was still wet from the bath or shower she had just taken. "Sorry about that Jack." Grilka said. "Since I was in your brig, I haven't had a decent cleaning in a while." She paused. "You might want to look into that. I thought you took care of your prisoners." Grilka folded her arms across her chest.

Jack didn't change his facial expression. It was dead to the world. "Noted." He said.

Grilka shot Jack a look. "What are you doing here Jack? Why did you decide to finally come visit me?"

Jack frowned. "I'd like it if you would sit down." He patted the seat next to him.

Grilka stared back at Jack. "Oh would you." She said. "I've been in your fracking brig for I don't know how long. I will do as I please!" She sat down. Not because Jack asked her to, but because she *wanted* to. "Fine, I'm sitting." She said.

Jack wished that had made things better but it really didn't. No matter what, this conversation would be anything but awkward. Jack had thrown his ex-girlfriend in the brig for two weeks after all. How *could* it go good?

"You turned on me." Jack began. "Betrayed me. You went with Ketish, spied on me. How can I trust you now?" He paused for a moment. Grilka had really done a head spin on him. He wasn't sure *who* he could trust these days. His crew hadn't betrayed him *yet*, that was a good sign.

Grilka didn't know what to say. What Jack was telling her was the truth. There was nothing but truth in his statements. She finally spoke. "Ketish had me in his grasp Jack. There was nothing I could do to stop it."

Jack sighed. "What was it he was wanting to know about me? You were running surveillance right?" Obviously that's what she was doing, there was nothing else it could be.

"He wanted to make sure you were safe and well." Grilka said. "You may think he wants you dead, but this is not the case. Ketish wants you alive. He has a reason for wanting you alive."

Jack nodded. "Yeah I know what he wants me for. But for me to be alive, safe, and well?" He paused. "You have to admit that's a bit strange for the leader of an entire world and civilization to worry about *me* of all people."

Grilka placed a hand on Jack's leg. He reacted. Jack moved his leg out of the way of her grasp. Grilka clasped her hands together. Obviously touching Jack was not an option. "Because you are Dorf." She said. "You are the only Dorf that we know of, that is alive aside from your heritage."

“You obviously haven’t met my dad.” Jack said.

“I bet he’s a Dorf too.” Grilka said. “Ketish researched into him, but he is not interested in your father, only you.” She paused. “He has his reasons for not choosing your father.” Grilka shrugged. “I don’t know what they are.”

“Where do we go from here?” Grilka asked.

Jack leaned forward. “That’s what I’m here to talk with you about.” He said in a low tone. “Let’s be honest here, I wasn’t expecting to see you again. I figured you ran off with Ketish and that would have been the end of it. End of story.” He paused. “I was wrong, you *did* come back and I wasn’t ready to face it, so I locked you up.”

“And then you confined me to this room.” Grilka said. “I can’t even visit the Main Gallery to do some shopping!” She was disgusted. “I am offended. I came back to you to show you I want to be with you, not Ketish. Ketish means nothing to me! But if you can’t see that now, I don’t know what will. My parents said you would give me a second chance.”

Jack sighed. “What Ketish has done is unspeakable.” He said.

“It is our way.” Grilka said. “We are made to conquer. I’m not saying I agree with what he’s done, the fourth planet in this system has done nothing to provoke us. But it is our way.” She knew her explanation wasn’t going to be enough for Jack. But that’s all she had.

Jack knew she was telling the truth. There was nothing in her voice that indicated it was anything other than the truth. With Shuka and Earth safe from Ketish’s control, for now, he had to focus on the Comeki Star System first and foremost. He had a job to do it and by hell he was going to do that job.

“If you’re willing.” Jack said after thinking for a moment. “I’d like to try *us* again.” He held out his hand for Grilka to take hold of it. Which she did.

“Oh Dorf.” Grilka said. “I would like that more than anything. We’ll make it work this time.”

Jack nodded. “Yes we will. I’m lifting the ban on you from leaving your quarters. You are free to go as you please. I’d avoid Shuka though, they’re still kinda bitter.” He laughed. After so many years, Shuka was still apprehensive about *any* Dubor ship in orbit or on their planet. It was understandable. Pulling her in, Jack embraced Grilka in a hug and kissed her.

Ashlea Orbit

Ketish sat in his quarters aboard his warship. He was watching a computer monitor. On the monitor was Grilka and Jack O’Brien. He had watched their entire conversation. Ketish

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was pleased Grilka and Jack were getting back together. Everything was going according to plan. He smiled he smiled his big toothy grin that was a signature for Ketish.

He had Grilka and Jack wrapped around his finger and they didn't even know it.

Ketish laughed out loud. It was a big hearty belly laugh.

The End