



GALACTIC FEDERATION REBEL DILEMMA

By Luke Miller

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Granthar looked up as the cell door slid open. The bright light of the corridor was blinding but he could just about make out the shapes moving on the other side of the threshold. One of the shapes got bigger and closer--

THACK! A body slammed into him.

With the familiarity that only comes from living with someone in close quarters, even in the dark of the security cell, Granthar recognised the other person. It was that particular combination of movement, size, smell, texture and a myriad of other microscopic effects that humans use to identify the people they know.

Even the ones they don't like.

"Kaan! Get off me!" Granthar said, giving the prone human a shove.

Kaan rolled over on his back and into the corner of the cell. He made no attempt to sit up, remaining slumped against the wall. "Granthar, fancy meeting you here."

"There's nothing fancy about it."

"You're not pleased to see me? I'm pleased to see you," Kaan said.

Granthar turned his face towards the door. "Guards! I requested solitary confinement."

"Oh don't expect anything from them," sniffed Kaan, labouring to sit up. "The service here is terrible."

As his eyes re-adjusted to the dank light of the featureless room, Granthar noticed that Kaan was clutching his abdomen and his tunic was red. His right eye was also swollen.

"What did they do to you?"

"What do you think??? I asked them very nicely to not hit me but, as I said, the service here is terrible."

"Why is everything a joke to you? I always told you your sense of humour would get you in trouble."

"Oh, leave it out Gran, I'm not in the mood today. I've been chased, captured, tortured... and I haven't had a drink since this morning."

"Facing the world sober must be terrifying for you," observed Granthar.

“Have you seen where we are? Two kilometres underground in a GalFed maximum security prison. Of course I’m terrified.”

“I’m sure the others are on their way right now,” Granthar said.

“The others?!” Kaan let out a short laugh and then winced with pain. “I bet they don’t even know where we are. And besides, what makes you think they’d ride into rescue us?”

“Oh you know the gang, they love to swoop in and save the day. We’re all in it together, after all...”

“Would you rescue them if the situation was reversed? I’m pretty sure I’d write us off as casualties and fly on to somewhere safe.”

Granthar didn’t reply right away but then said quietly. “You don’t know what I’d do.”

“Yes I do! Because I’d do the exact same thing as you. Given the choice between almost certain death rescuing two comrades I barely like or retiring to the nearest dive bar for a pint and parma I know exactly what’d I do.”

“Perhaps.”

“Besides... you don’t even know if the others were alive.”

“I think they got out,” said Granthar, frowning. “The alarms went, there was a lot of shooting, troopers everywhere... an explosion.”

“I remember the roof collapsed... but I don’t remember which side everyone was on.”

“I think our current situation confirms we were on the wrong side of it,” said Granthar.

Kaan winced again and let out a groan. “Wrong side? Story of my life,” he said.

“Are you going to keep making those pitiful noises?” asked Granthar.

“I can’t help it! I think they broke a few ribs.”

“I meant your voice. You know I find your constant whining exasperating at the best of times and believe me, these aren’t the best of times.”

“At least you still have all your ribs!”

Granthar leaned over. “Kaan, listen to me. This is important. They don’t have proof. I saw the records before the explosion. The virus upload worked. We are a blank slate. If we say nothing, if we give them nothing, they have to let us both go. But if we talk.. if one of us blabs... Look, I know we’ve both had our differences but we have to work together.”

“You want me to trust you?!? You tried to throw me off a shuttle once to lighten the load! How the hell do I know you won’t sacrifice me to save your own hide?!?”

“Kaan, listen--”

There was a scraping from the corridor and the door slid open.

The room flooded with light as the wall illumination shot up to a high brightness. The cell went from a murky grey to near pristine white in a flash.

Two troopers entered the room and flanked by the door. Another figure entered.

As Granthar’s eyes adjusted to the light he struggled to get a handle on this non-descript person in front of him. The man had a casual air about him, his uniform was not particularly neat but neither was it dishevelled. He looked almost normal. That didn’t bode well, he decided.

“I’m going to level with you both... I only need one of you.”

The man looked at them both, seemingly to settle on Granthar. “You.”

The two troopers lunged forward and hauled Granthar to his feet and started to drag him from the room. The man followed.

Granthar saw Kaan try to scramble to his feet but falling on his side, clutching his ribcage.

“You need me too! You need me too!”

The door slid shut and one of the guards pulled a hood over Granthar’s head.

When they removed the hood from Granthar he was seated in a chair in another brightly lit room. He saw a table with an assortment of equipment on it. It was a classic GalFed interrogation room. Not the first he’d been in.

“Granthar, isn’t it?” The man asked. He was portly but not overly large, like someone’s amiable uncle.

“Perhaps.”

“That’s what your friend called you. We were listening.”

“He’s not what I would call a friend,” said Granthar coolly. “Acquaintance is more accurate.”

“You seem to know each other very well... and you were captured together. Breaking into the credit transaction facility on Braben I believe. Bold. Only one of the most important financial institutions in GalFed.”

“Wrong. Totally and completely wrong.”

“Oh?”

“We were breaking out. We’d already done our breaking in.”

“I see,” said the man. He paused. A trooper took a step forward and punched Granthar in the side of the head. He keeled over in pain but did not fall out of the chair.

“It would be interesting if your name WAS Granthar because Granthar Tolbec is one of the most wanted rebels in the Federation. Hacking, financial fraud, programming without a permit, the list goes on.”

“That would be interesting.”

“Kaan, too, is on the list.”

“Who’s higher?”

“Neither of you are top ten.”

“You ARE good at your job. Hearing that inflicts great pain.”

“I’m not here to torture you, unless I really must. In fact, it’s the opposite. We all know there is no loyalty amongst the rebels. The entire so-called rebellion is based on self interest. A bunch of malcontents and thieves with an esoteric range of grievances. It’s not a wide ranging rejection of the harmonious benefits of the Galactic Federation.”

“Don’t be too sure,” said Granthar. A trooper moved to punch him again but the man waved them off airily.

“I’m sure we can come to some kind of accommodation. All my cards on the table: I told my superiors this would end today. I’m taking a bet that you’ll sell each other out for a hot meal.”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“Does it come with a pot or a pint?”

For the first time, the man smiled. “Something can be arranged.”

He continued. “I’m offering you the first bite of the apple. All I need from you is a signed confession naming the other members in your cell and you will walk more-than-free. You will be showered with riches. GalFed can be quite rewarding for the right collaborator. I imagine your life on the run has not exactly been meat and gravy.”

"You have no idea," murmured Granthar.

"So that's the offer but, look, take some time to think about it." The man gestured and the troopers sharply pulled a hood over Granthar's head. They hauled him roughly towards the door.

The last thing Granthar heard was the man saying, "Bring me the other one."

The hood came off Kaan's head and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust.

"You look like a man not afraid to make a deal," said the interrogator.

"I'm barely a man, everyone always says so. And I'm always afraid. But I'll do any deal you want. Give me a form to sign and I'll sign it. Whatever you want. Any deal's a good deal I say."

"Well this should be easy then, I just need you to name the other members of your cell and you can go free..."

"Ah," said Kaan. "I'm not trying to be brave or anything but what did Granthar say?"

"He's already named a bunch of people, including yourself. I'm giving you the opportunity to name a few more," the man idly ran a finger along one of the devices on the table. It was a long metal spike, topped by something that looked like a dentist drill.

"Hmm, that does sound like Granthar. He's always been out for himself. A most unlikeable chap," murmured Kaan. "I've always said so."

"So you'll name names?"

"Uh, how can I trust you?"

"I'm a credentialed member of the Galactic Federation Security Services."

"Exactly. How can I trust you?"

"That's a hurtful thing to say, I'm on your side."

"Nobody's on my side," said Kaan quickly.

"You grew up on the streets of MegaPlanet, didn't you?"

"Clearly you didn't. There are no streets on MegaPlanet, just layers. "

"That must've been tough. I can't quite imagine. I'm from Apostilico."

“Ah.”

“Yes, people always say that when I mention Apostilico. Don’t think we don’t know what it means. ‘Ah.. you must be one of those religious crazies’... ‘Ah... you think you’re here to punish humanity for all of our sins’... ‘Ah... you must be no fun at parties...’”.

“Well your planet does have that reputation... I understand it though, of course,” Kaan added hastily. “Having half the GalFed fleet in orbit all the time would drive anyone to religion. Seeing one battlecruiser is enough to give me the creeps... having dozens overhead all the time must be downright oppressive.”

“You see, I’ve never really liked the link you otherworlders make. That being the home of the fleet has turned the population to religion. Isn’t it possible that we have found the righteous and pure path first and it’s our duty to spread the word?”

“Lots of people have claimed to be pure but you’d be the first.”

“A dose of religion would’ve been good for the youth on MegaPlanet, I’d wager,” said the man.

“Life was hard, true,” said Kaan, “but the last thing we needed was a holy man telling us we deserved it.”

“Perhaps a strong faith would’ve stopped you going down this unfortunate path. I’m told you’re a thief, a pickpocket, a lockpicker--”

“--I’ve also reliably been told I’m a drunk and a womaniser.”

“You don’t seem to have much shame.”

“No shame in having no shame. I know who I am,” Kaan gave a friendly grin.

“Kaan, I’m offering you the first bite of the apple. All I need from you is a signed confession naming the other members in your cell and you will more than walk free, you will be showered with riches. GalFed can be quite rewarding for the right collaborator. Name your price.”

“The offer is tempting, I wish I could give you what you want but there is no conspiracy, I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, I’m totally innocent,” said Kaan.

The man pursed his lips and without speaking a hood obliterated Kaan’s view.

The man watched as Kaan was dragged out of the room. He sighed and longingly looked down at the instruments on the table.

“Another failure?”

He turned to see Balaantra had appeared in the doorway. Her elegant silhouette was instantly identifiable against the light.

"V...V...Vice Admiral!" he stammered, startled. "This was just the opening round! My techniques are proven to work but a certain ramping period is required--"

"We don't have time for you to coddle our prisoners..."

"Psychological torture is hardly coddling!" The man said, forgetting himself with a moment of professional hurt. "Pressure has to ramp up slowly. It's an artform as much as a craft."

Balaantra's imperious gaze softened. "Yes, and I admire your work very much. My colleagues are convinced you are a butcher..." She stepped forward and grabbed his hands with her own. She raised them to her face and nuzzled them gently. "... but I've always considered these the hands of an artist. I've seen the pristine way you reduce men to their constituent pieces... in both mind and body parts."

"You have always been appreciative of my skills like no other," murmured the man.

"Alas," Balaantra said, stepping backwards. "On Granthar and Kaan I'm afraid we are out of time. We will have to use accelerated methods."

"This is low, even for you, Balaantra." said Kaan, protesting.

"Oh, I can go much lower," said Balaantra.

"I bet you can," murmured Granthar. His hands were already working the metal collar around his neck, feeling the design, searching for weaknesses.

"I wouldn't pry too hard, Granthar, you might lose more than just your fingers."

"My head?"

Balaantra gave a tight smile. "And what a shame that would be."

"I most definitely agree," said Granthar.

The Vice Admiral turned towards the door but stopped and twisted back. Her grin was now a ghoulish smile. "Oh, I almost forgot..." she said airily. "Here are the detonators."

From her loose sleeve, she pulled out two small grey boxes, each with a large button and green light.

She handed one of the small boxes to Kaan. "This will kill Granthar."

She handed the other to Granthar. "And this will kill Kaan."

Granthar raised his box to eye level and made as if to press the button.

"Not yet," said Balaantra calmly, although she had taken a small half step back.

"Hey!" said Kaan.

"You have one hour. The first to kill the other gets a full pardon from the Council, a mansion on the planet of their choice, and a generous lifetime supply of credits. The other... well... they get the satisfaction of knowing they remained loyal to the rebellion right up until the end. And in case the rebels have tapped our security feed..."

She glanced at the security camera in the top corner. "Hello, friends. I do so hope you'll join us here shortly."

"And if neither of you have pushed the button at the end, then you both die. So what are you going to do?"

Without pause, Granthar pressed his button. Kaan jumped back and let out an eep. Nothing happened. Granthar pressed it again. Annoyed, Kaan thrust his detonator at Granthar and jabbed his button several times too.

"You didn't think I would arm the devices with me still in the room?" asked Balaantra, pausing by the door. "Do try to last the full hour. I promised the Council a night of entertainment."

The cell door slid shut. A moment later the light on the boxes flicked from green to red.

"They're armed now," said Granthar, inspecting his box closely.

Kaan raised his box...

"STOP," commanded Granthar. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Why not? You tried to blow me up, several times in fact!"

"I knew they weren't activated. Did you?"

"Oh, uh. I'm not sure I believe you," said Kaan but he eased his finger away from the button. His features hardened and he moved back into prime position. "In fact, I don't trust you at all, Granthar. A full pardon and unlimited credits? There's not a single person in the galaxy you wouldn't sell out for half that deal."

In one swift movement, Granthar raised his box and also placed his thumb on his button.

"And I don't trust a coward like you. We seem to have a dilemma on our hands then."

Kaan frowned "... and around our necks. Now Granthar, let's not do anything hasty."

"Hah!" barked Granthar. "Tell that to the rebels."

"Do you think they'll come for us?" asked Kaan. "They wouldn't leave us here, would they?"

"We're 200 levels below ground in a maximum security prison on a planet guarded by a fleet of battlecruisers. Only a fool would attempt it. So... maybe. The movement is all about hope and hope is just a type of foolishness after all."

"Good deal though. A mansion would be nice," mused Kaan. "A lordly estate for Kaan. Maybe a vineyard. I could grow my own wine."

"Growing it is harder than drinking it," said Granthar. "And I've never seen you do any actual work..."

"Hey!" Kaan increased pressure on the button. "You better start being nice to me!"

"You fool," said Granthar. "Do you think Balaantra can be trusted? Kill me and you get nothing. It's as obvious as the plain nose on your rat-like face."

"I know something I would get. Satisfaction," said Kaan. "And I'd rid myself of a bully. And I would have this whole cell to myself. The more I think about it the more that seems like a pretty good deal to me!"

Granthar clenched his box tighter, his finger pushed up against the button. "It's a pity that Balaantra is a lying viper. Headless Kaan would be a much improved conversationalist."

"I've never liked you," said Kaan.

"The feeling is mutual," said Granthar.

They both fell silent for a moment.

"Do it," said Granthar, softly.

"What?" replied Kaan.

"Press the button, Kaan. I know you want to," said Granthar.

"Granthar..."

"Do it or I'll do it," Granthar raised his box and tensed his thumb on the detonator.

"Granthar!"

"3... 2... 1--"

"Granthar, please!"

Granthar grinned, lowering his box. "See, I knew you couldn't do it. Even under pressure you didn't do it."

Kaan lowered his box. "Only because I don't trust Balaantra. There's no pardon... and it wouldn't surprise me if my button blew off my own head! It's not because we're friends. We're not and never will be."

"I disagree, Kaan. About your button. I suspect they take off both our heads. You're much smarter than everyone thinks you are."

"Thanks," said Kaan drily. "Are we done here?"

"I'd say so," they both sat in silence for a brief moment.

Granthar walked over to the cell wall and pulled a tile off, revealing a small cylinder shape. He carefully removed it. He reached over and pulled a tiny strip of cloth off the end of his sleeve. It came free easily. He then wrapped it around the device. With a small fizz the material chemically bonded with the cylinder..

Kaan pulled a tiny loop off his sleeve and handed it to Granthar. It bonded when attached too, and the device lit up, activated.

Granthar waved the beeping device cheerfully at the camera. In the distance a security alarm began to sound.

"Ready, Kaan?"

"I really didn't like this mission," said Kaan. "It took months to set up. Smuggling it in piece-by-piece. It cost a lot of lives."

"You can't argue with results," said Granthar.

"I know. Just do it. Hope and faith and all that."

"Hope and faith indeed."

The detonation tore through the facility. Years later in the official history of the Galactic Commonwealth, the obliteration of the GalFed Security Services stronghold was recorded as the first major blow against GalFed, one that permanently degraded the dictatorship.

The End



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But there's one small crack in their unity... they can't stand each other!

Granthar is a smug computer hacker in it for himself and Kaan is a compulsive thief who likes the finer things in life. The situation gets more complicated when an old foe gives each of them a choice: Only the first one to rat out the other will get to live!

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