

# THE BULBSQUAD CHRONICLES

A SERIES OF SHORT-STORIES

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## EPISODE TWO: A TEAM ASSEMBLED

A little less than a week ago, the sun blacked out. A scout named Quark Nodgers was sent in order to assess the “damage”, so to speak, and he had returned with a description that would utterly baffle the most imaginative drug abuser in the universe. The surface of the sun, you see, was, against all common sense, comprised of an immense number of light bulbs, all of which had burnt out. It was clear what they had to do right away. A team needed to be sent into the far reaches of space (and that’s really rather far) in order to collect new light bulbs. The team was dubbed The Bulb Squad. After a few days of considering the best candidates for the role of Captain on this mission, the executives in charge of Earth Station had sat down and voted unanimously for someone who was definitely not the former cab driver, and the scout who was sent to the sun in the first place, mister Nodgers. After he had delivered his report on the condition of the now defunct sun, Station Captain Schtankenfarten had duly noted to never allow Quark Nodgers near the BulbSquad. Granted, he was eager and, given a certain kind of crew, he could probably be a decent leader, SC Hause Schtankenfarten had to admit, as he knew he’d seen people with much less authority in their ways lead entire systems. The trouble is that this certain kind of crew would certainly have to be of the completely insane kind, as mr. Nodgers obviously was.

What Quark Nodgers didn’t know was that his application had been processed during the first hour of the first crisis meeting, when one of the executives had run out of toilet paper. What the board of directors didn’t know was that the Captain they had appointed, the famous and much-loved Cap-

tain Kysse Edwin Phase, was right now lying heavily sedated and thoroughly crushed between the wall and the mattress of his own fold-in bed. Quark had no problem with doing what he had done to get where he now was. It wasn’t as if he was a bad person, the board had obviously just overlooked his application in the chaos of it all, as well as his fifteen video-messages asking if they’d chosen him yet. Perhaps the anonymous threat he had sent in was slightly over the top. But that was beside the point. The point, as far as Quark was concerned, was that this was obviously the mission he had been born for, and if the directors failed to see that, he would just have to take matters into his own hands, or rather; his squishy, hand-like tentacle-ends.

All things considered, Quark Nodgers was quite satisfied with how he had tentacled things. Only a few hours ago, he had assumed command over the PMS Currency, the ship that was to venture into the far reaches of space and acquire 139 842 769 409 541 981 light bulbs to get the Sun up and running again. Looking out over the sleek and modern control room of the PMS Currency and supporting himself on some dramatically convenient railing, he thought about how easy it had been.

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Watching his reflection change from his own, positively gorgeous, visage to that of the smug, disgusting, muscled and inexplicably popular captain Kysse E. Phase had been a disconcerting experience, no where near as enjoyable as when he had last used his cheap HoloGuisse to “transform” into a beautiful, stark naked woman in order to lure the sexually hyperactive celebrity captain into his trap. He had tried running a hand across his “new” face, but had only experienced a flicker and splutter of light as he penetrated the holographic surface generated by the cheap device he’d had surgically inserted in his upper left nipple.

He had walked out into the corridor where he had bumped into a so-called Phase-hugger. The young, female officer had saluted him vigorously and enthusiastically blurted “Good morning, captain Phase, sir!” Nodgers had slung his arm up matter-of-factly and said, with a thoroughly practiced nonchalant voice, “Hey, sweet-cheeks!” As he moved on down the corridor, a small cluster

of thuds sounded as the female officer fainted with excitement.

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Captain von Schtankenfarten had been sitting in his office enjoying his fourth bottle of Swaï since the incident with the sun occurred. Well, he hadn't been enjoying the first bottle, but about halfway through the second one, he had started enjoying not only his drink, but also the patterns on his carpet. Shadron, his blue-skinned personal assistant, would have been worried if he hadn't seen the Captain performing his duties admirably in much worse stupors than this.

"Wh'nnn shoosh comessh t' povw... W-w-when boosh comsh... Wh'n ya g-get right down to it, Iyam really de besht damn ca... cabsh... spasche-shtashiun-runny-pershun in thish whole galaxshee." Shadron had heard the Captain say earlier that day as he was examining a particularly fascinating curve in the pattern, and Shadron really did have to agree. Not just due to the fact that he was contractually obliged to, either.

He remembered the day Hause von Schtankenfarten's wife left him. Between the moment she'd walked out and lunch four hours later, the Captain had consumed two entire bottles of Swaï and was rendered unconscious for an hour. After frantic ice-cold showering from Shadron, he finally came to, albeit without the use of his legs, arms or indeed eyes. Even in this state he managed to resolve five major employee complaints (two of which bordered on violent mutiny), sign one of the largest contracts in the history of Earth Station, deter two hostile takeovers, and assist in three births. Granted, most would agree that the sun suddenly switching off is a considerably bigger deal than being left by your wife.

As the high-headed captain approached the bottom of his fourth bottle of Swaï, the amount of alcohol in his blood-stream reached such heights that the alcohol cells had already formed a rudimentary intelligence and created two separate civilizations that were, in the spirit of alcohol, waging a war on one another, thereby killing each other off and leaving the host less and less drunk. Of course, violence never has a positive outcome, so the general destruction led to a rather thrashing pain in the aftermath of the war. It had started somewhere

inside his elongated skull and was now moving down towards his stomach. So if it wasn't bad enough that he was gradually becoming sober, he was also in a great amount of pain. The Captain was, in other words, not really ready to talk to anyone or anything.

Not long after the cells had laid waste to his entire head, making every little sound reverberate across the barren wastelands, Shadron walked through the door accompanied by a striking man sporting a chin the size of a small asteroid and the surface of a particularly hard baby's bottom. The fur-free kind. The barely distinguishable fwoosh of the door moving into the wall made the Captain cringe.

"Captain von Schtankenfarten, sir?" said Shadron quietly. Over the years, he had honed his skill in detecting various degrees of hangovers. This was clearly one of the more gruesome ones. Shadron turned the light switch to the far left, plunging the office into almost complete darkness.

"mmmmm- yes?" the Station Captain said wearily, shifting his gaze with a slow, deliberate movement from his feet to Shadron, then to the chin with a man attached to it. For a fleeting moment, he thought he saw a stark naked woman standing at the exact spot where the man was standing, but the moment passed quickly, and the Captain decided that he was now not only sober and in pain, but was having hallucinations. Great. The alcohol cells must have developed chemical weapons already, he thought very quietly to himself. The moment the man opened his mouth to talk, he just knew it was going to be painful.

"Captain Kysse Edwin Phase reporting for duty! SIR!" the man shouted as he threw a magnificently square salute, Shadron hushing him frantically. He pronounced the last word 'Sah'. He was one of those people. Hause summarily hated the guy's guts.

"If you don't get that coddling man out of here, I'll stab him to death with my splitting head." Hause hissed between his clenching and grinding teeth. He was considered by most people to be a man of great patience, but most people hadn't seen him with this much of a hangover.

"But your head isn't that sharp, boss! It'd take a really long t-"

"Exactly!" Hause spat viciously, his swimming eyes aflame "Now do

something about it!”

Shadron nodded and moved over to speak to Capt. Phase. Hause cringed as he heard the idiot start to talk, but noticed to his relief that the man stopped and removed himself from the room.

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Quark had a very good feeling about the meeting with Captain von Schtankenfarten. From the moment he stepped through the doorway, he immediately sensed a positive vibration radiating from the Station Captain. As Schtankenfarten looked at him for the first time (well, first time in this shape) he could see his eyes widening for a moment, clearly impressed by his appearance.

“Captain Kysse Edwin Phase reporting for duty!” he paused to draw breath for the finale; “SIR!” he said as he motioned his right hand towards his forehead in a perfect salute. No one could resist his salute.

He could see the strange little blue man with all the legs pitter-patter lightly over to the Captain, who seemed to be feeling quite ill. He was very red in the face and was clutching his skull with both hands. Must be quite a strain on a man when something of this magnitude happens, he thought. The little man whispered very quietly, for some reason, to Schtankenfarten. Quark could barely make out the words.

“Kysse E. Phase is the captain that has been appoint-”

“I know who he is, Shadron!” The broken man snapped hissing. “I was the one who appointed him!”

Quark was feeling kind of uneasy, as he always did when people weren’t raising their voices. You knew where you were when people raised their voices.

“SIR!”

The Captain seemed to have another violent spasm of pain.

“Sir! Is there anywhere in particular you want me, sir?” The Captain seemed to really be having a bad time with his illness as he spasmed yet again. He spoke a few indistinguishable (not only due to volume) words to the blue man. The man answered and the Captain spat something back at him, at which he nodded and ambled towards Quark.

“Listen, could you go... inspect the troops or something?”

“SI-” Shadron waved his arms frantically as the Captain clenched his eyes shut. Realization dawned, as it sometimes does, even to Quark.

“Right. I’m off then.” Quark said quietly and left the room to look for his crew. His own crew!

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Quark had then gone to see the people he’d be commanding. He stepped into one of the transportation tubes that ran along the core of the entire Earth Station, connecting every single module but one (this module consisted largely of small shops and pubs whose owners didn’t really like casual visitors.) and was swooshed away to the docking module. He slowly stepped out, wishing that they’d figure out this teleportation thing soon, and went to the debriefing hall where he was to meet the crew. As a wonderful start to things, none of the crew had arrived at the debriefing by the appointed time except for a gastropedestrian who was already inspecting the panels and the mass of coloured buttons with some sort of gadget, emitting an occasional “tsk” and “ooh”. The gastropedestrian had a cautious and extremely concentrated look about his wide face. Calling it a face, though is somewhat of an exaggeration, as it consisted of a mouth the breadth of Quark’s torso and two wet eyes stuck to the ends of some fleshy stalks. These features were more stuck directly to his torso than actually put on a head with a neck. In short, he looked like a gigantic, highly evolved snail. Still no hands, though. Obviously the technician, thought Quark, who figured anyone with strange devices must be technicians. Well, I’d better say “hello”, then. Impossibly straightening his already ruler-straight back, he drew in a breath of air and let loose his unlimited authority.

“A-Teeeen-SHUN!” he yelled with as much bravado as he could muster (which is a lot) and to his surprise, and admittedly great pleasure, the snail yonked its squishy body with incredible speed into his enormous spiral shell much like you, the reader, would see a regular garden variety snail do if you startled it, only with several thousand times more power. It made a sound like a small, inverted explosion and sent the gadget the snail was “holding” flying across the room and just barely missed Quark’s head. Coming from inside the

shell were a series of mumbled vowels and consonants that, despite not knowing the first thing about the Gastropedestrian language, Quark could immediately identify as swearing. After a bit of this came a muffled and apologetic voice.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir! Y’just startled me, ‘s all. Won’t be a minute.” The voice said, and the body slowly started emerging from the shell again, unfolding itself in a vaguely sickening manner until at last the “face” emerged and the eye-stalks pushed themselves outward and finally focused on Quark whom the eyes of course perceived to be Kysse E. Phase. There was something strange about the figure, though, but the snail couldn’t quite put his telekinetic finger to it. It was like he flickered. For a second or two, he even thought it looked like the Captain had turned into a naked woman, but he put this down to post-muscle-contraction shock.

“Chief Technician Furkle Terrence Brale reporting for duty, sir!” the Gastro said quietly, his vast mouth moving disproportionately much compared to the strength of the voice. He did his best to straighten his torso as a means of indicating a salute.

Quark was about to speak when a golden flurry of fur-covered limbs ambled past him. Half a second later, a woman of canine shape was standing at attention next to Furkle. The Hu’unt was standing on her hind legs, her back straight and her eyes keen. Her chest was heaving with heavy breaths, something that will draw the gaze of most men. Two breasts heaving is bad enough, eight of them will incapacitate even the strongest of men.

“Navigator L’an Morgafey reporting in, sir!” She said hurriedly, licking something red from her lip and adding “Am I late?” as a quick afterthought. Quark was sure he’d read the crew roster over carefully, and the navigator didn’t have fur, and wasn’t a woman.

“Are you sure you should be here? Where is Looke Clouddrunner?” This question obviously stirred something in the new arrival, causing her to anxiously shift her eyes around the room.

“He is... indisposed, sir. He said to send his regards and that he hopes his replacement; me, will be adequate. I was assured there would be no trouble with this.” She said, and Quark was sure he could just register a faint sound somewhat like a growl. The Hu’unt woman showed no hint of aggressiveness, but Quark felt the best thing to do was to not tempt his fate too much.

How smart a decision this had been he would come to find out later. Or at least suspect. Apparently, Looke Clouddrunner, the son of Randykins Clouddrunner, had been attacked on his way to the briefing. He was apparently in the infirmary ranting about snarling women with eight breasts and sharp teeth. He’d also been heard lamenting the loss of his right arm, but where his arm had gone was anybody’s guess. The surrounding corridors had been thoroughly searched but they hadn’t found even the slightest trace of it. No witnesses had been present, so it was hard to tell, but Quark made a mental note to be extra careful with certain employees.

Something now moved through the corridors that emanated such a sensual aura that even the light-metal walls seemed to swell and stiffen. Quark could feel it long before he could actually see the source. It was almost as if someone had such a sex appeal that it had become sentient and was floating around the place touching everyone. Even L’an and the snail seemed affected, though they were female and hermaphrodite respectively. L’an seemed particularly affected, in fact, and looked very confused, panting and growling as she moved backwards toward the wall, her tail securely placed between her legs. Furkle seemed to dry up as he strained his stalked eyes to see what was coming. The intensity grew, and just as Quark broke into a powerful cold sweat, a figure sauntered into the room with movements so suggestive they were almost not just suggestive any longer. Her hips gyrated just enough to make strong men weep and hands swaying around them in such a complacent way as to make the most sexually confident woman pack up and head home. There was more to her than her movements, though. Her skin was a sickly grayish blue that indicated advanced rot and her limbs all seemed to hang on to her body only by the thinnest of connections. Her eyes, perfectly half-closed in a seductive downwards gaze, were dead and grey and seemed to hold no emotion whatsoever. The impact of her raw sensuality was effectively almost cancelled out by the hideousness of her physical appearance, and the people in the bay were all left with the impression that they were simply looking at a very attractive woman. That’s not to say she didn’t have a fit body, of course. In fact, if you saw her in a dark room in which you could only see her silhouette, you might very well find her body to be quite a turn-on... that is, provided you didn’t notice the odd angle at which

her head was attached to her neck, of course.

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The man who appeared to be captain Kysse E. Phase appeared to wipe his forehead for no reason while underneath the HoloGuise projection Quark Nodgers was actually wiping a few beads of sweat from his forehead. His upper left nipple tingled slightly as a drop trickled down his chest and passed the nipple.

“Are you, uh...” Quark looked down at his charter “Reginae Londam Barner?”

“I am.” The woman answered.

“Uh, well. Um, welcome to the team.” Reginae purposefully strode past Quark and seemed not to notice his quizzical look as she passed him. He raised his laser pen slowly with a confused look passing his face before turning to a strengthened resoluteness as he seemed to make his mind up.

“You’re dead!” He exclaimed, almost sounding accusatory. Reginae looked at him as if he’d told her a trite joke.

“Really? I wasn’t aware of that.” She said, putting on an entirely unconvincing innocent expression.

“Excuse me,” Furkle the giant snail almost whispered in an apologetic manner and then seemed to cringe as everyone’s eyes turned to him.

“I’m terribly sorry to interrupt, but I also was under the impression that you were deceased. I mean, you are the famous physicist, right?”

“I am.” she answered again.

“But did you not die in that catastrophic accident fifty years ago?”

At this, Reginae cocked her head in a motion that is impossible to achieve with an unbroken neck.

“I’m here now, am I not?”

Furkle made an embarrassed bubbling noise and seemed to roll in on himself.

“uh... Yeah.” He said, eventually, further retreating into himself. In the silence that followed, a sound that had been there ever since the supposedly dead woman had entered the room was finally making itself heard. It was a low

growling, almost rumbling, noise and it came from the direction of the only one present with a tail and floppy ears. L’an had backed all the way up to the wall and was now ever so slightly sneering.

“Right!” said Quark, seemingly oblivious to the syrup-thick tension in the air.

“Everyone follow me to the docking bay! We are going to the ship and getting ready for takeoff!” he shouted, and though it seemed to have little effect on the mood of the small crowd, it did cause them to start shuffling awkwardly after Quark, who was already moving, into the docking bay module of the Earth Station. As they entered, a large window faded from black and into transparency to reveal what would have looked, to the layman, like an especially designed, and completely useless, luxury baseball. To the crew, it merely looked like an extremely luxurious, and completely useless, star ship.

It was completely spherical and gleamed with metallic red with bits of metallic green. A smaller and apparently almost completely transparent blob sat perched on top as if it was keeping watch. Kysse E. Phase, or the man who pretended to be him while the real man was stashed inside a fold-in bed, beamed with pride while he secretly sweated heavily under his projected good looks. He ignored the sizzling feeling on his cybernetically enhanced nipple and struck his arms out theatrically toward the window.

“Behold! The Pneumasonic Megadrive Starship Currency!”

The crew looked stunned, apart from the seemingly alive Dr. Londam Barner who seemed incapable of ever being stunned much like a rock would seem incapable of calming down. Furkle’s skin started oozing as he opened up the universe’s possibly widest and definitely most toothy grin while L’an Morgafey stood completely still with her tail between her legs as if stricken.

“We’re flying that?!” She prompted in a panicked voice. “Can it even move?!”

Engineer Furkle took a hold of himself and managed to answer,

“Quite so, my furry friend! I think you’ll find it a treat to drive! The driving mechanics are the most intuitive ever devised. It is said that even-”

“- that even a rich man’s idiot son could learn to fly it without flying lessons!” a voice interjected. A voice that seemed filled with confidence to such a degree there could hardly be room for any more.

“I don’t have much patience for that sort of thing, though.” The voice continued as it grew less echoed and more substantial and finally attached itself to an approaching figure in a suit. The best way to describe the figure would be to call it “well maintained”. It didn’t look particularly strong, nor did it look weak. It didn’t have a handsome face stuck to it, but rather a face that looked as if it was being held in place by all manner of girders and plastic holdings. In the middle of the face hung a bright smile. To say that it was toothy would be both very precise and wildly inaccurate. It seemed as though all his teeth had grown together into one big, white mass, which it had, in fact, through a long long time of evolution. He walked toward the newly arrived group with arms open.

“Welcome, crew! My name is Chadwick Con-Rahd The One Thousandth One Hundreth and Fourth! I’ll be your chaperone for this little trip!” Quark looked at him with disbelief as Chadwick moved towards him, and then turned his gaze to luck with disdain at Chadwick’s outthrust hand. He hesitated for a moment as he’s generally not supposed to touch anyone while his HoloGuise is activated, but his wish to crush the smarmy cod’s hand made him finally take Chadwick’s hand in his.

The suit-clad man didn’t look down at his hand, but he could sense a flurry of dancing light particles as their hands met, and he gulped as he heard a squelching sound when they locked hands. It was as if Kysse E. Phase’s hand had suddenly turned into a sweaty sort of putty. He looked up at the holographic face, struggling to keep his smile wide while trying to pull his hand free of Quark’s. Finally, his hand slid free and he shook it a few times while he looked towards the others. The assembled crew looked back at him with nervous smiles.

“I was not aware we were supposed to have a…” Quark bit back an insult “man of your stature with us on this mission.” Chadwick avoided the Captain’s mad gaze, not only because he was apparently trying to drill a hole in his head with his eyes, but also because he seemed to have a second set of beady, black eyes behind the big, blue, flickering ones in the front. Wait, flickering? He thought quickly. Nah. Furkle broke the silence.

“Pardon my saying so, but I think we might be late for our own launch? Should we get going, perhaps?”

Chadwick brightened, as did Quark, both men glad of the reprieve.

“The giant slug is right!” Chadwick exclaimed.

“Uh, snail, actually.” Furkle interjected ever so quietly, and he was promptly ignored.

“I can agree with that. GoodbyeChadwickNiceseeingyou!” Quark said without pausing for breath as he started running toward the docking pod. Chadwick gave a start and followed.

“YesQuiteI’llSeeYouLaterThen!” he blurted as he came up to quark. They were shoulder-to-shoulder now and for some reason or another were trying to push each other out of the way.

“Goodbye!” Quark spat through tight lips and clenched teeth.

“Yeah! Later!” Chadwick hissed with a wide smile and his two teeth clenched.

They both scrambled through the opening of the pod, barely fitting through the hatch and finally Quark kicked Chadwick in the leg and hurried to one of the chairs nearest the entrance. Chadwick sat himself down in the chair opposite him and they sat glowering at each other while the rest of the crew calmly sidled past them and came to rest in the pod. The hatch closed and just as the pod started moving, Capt. Kysse E. Phase briefly turned into a beautiful naked woman and back. By this time, everyone had already invented their own private psychosis to explain this visual phenomenon, and so they all ignored this.

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After a short trip, they reached the PMS Currency. Chadwick disappeared to his quarters to “freshen up” while the disconcerting doctor complained that her arms needed tightening. Quark and the two others went to the blob at the top of the ship which turned out to be the navigation deck. His navigator and technician seemed to get along rather well as the snail explained how the controls of the ship worked to the Hu’unt woman whose tail seemed to wag more enthusiastically with every passing moment.

Yes, all in all, Quark was satisfied with how he’d handled things. He’d keep the rich splitter in check, all right. And now, as the launch neared, he grew anxious and giddy.

A gigantic surface Quark hadn't noticed before flashed with the words "Incoming Transmission". Quark accepted it. The drawn and hung-over face of Captain Hause von Schtankenfarten appeared all over the wall and spoke to Quark, or rather, Kysse. He instinctively gave a start, as anyone would if a twenty-meter tall head spoke to them, but quickly gathered himself.

"Right, Kysse. Are you ready for departure?" He asked wearily but obviously with more vigour than he had shown the last time Quark had seen him.

"Ready as a space trucker for fleeg, sir!" He answered, an answer that seemed to make the good Station Captain frown suspiciously for a second.

"Good. Count-down starts now, with twenty seconds to go."

Twenty- nineteen- eighteen- A friendly, female voice drifted across the deck counting down from twenty. Just as it started, L'an quickly readied herself at the controls and Quark sat back in his chair.

Seventeen- sixteen- fifteen- fourteen- thirteen- twelve-

Quark leaned slightly forward and put his fist to his supposed chin. Light particles danced around the point of impact in his projected image of Kysse E. Phase. Hause, still on the big screen, frowned as he thought he saw exactly what he actually did see.

Eleven- ten-

Chadwick came in and sauntered towards the captain.

Nine- eight-

"Hallo, guys! Getting ready for takeoff? Just you wait! It's such a smooth ride, this thing! You won't believe it, man." The rich, young man said excitedly.

Seven- six-

"It'll go off like ZSSHWOOOM!" he continued and slapped Kysse E. Phase hard on the shoulder. He flickered.

Five- four-

The shape of Captain Kysse Edwin Phase disappeared in another flicker and left only the bemused shape of former taxi driver Quark Nodgers. On the wall, though, an even more bemused expression could be seen, and it was growing more furrowed and tightly knit by the second.

Three-

"What the-" Said Chadwick.

Two-

"Split!" Said Quark.

One-

"You!" Blurted Hause

- Nil!

"GO GO GO!" Yelled Quark, and the PMS Currency stretched into infinity.



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