

Cut Me Kindly

*An excerpt from the journal of Jerome Derkson, planet hunter.
Galactic year 3840, Alpha Quadrant.*

When the alien pleaded with me to stab him in the heart, I hesitated. Not merely because he was my friend, but killing another sentient being without provocation is murder anywhere in the galaxy.

It took a few wars to get that law established. We humans used to put less value on killing an alien than each other. Then we discovered aliens disagreed. Enough inmates of a variety of species in prison planets can testify to the consistency in galactic law, and I did not want to join them.

So right there I had two good reasons to avoid stabbing my alien companion in the heart. A third reason was I could not bring myself to believe the portable language translator was accurate. I had never heard of a sentient alien pleading to be stabbed in the heart. Only a cold-hearted machine could make such a statement, excuse the pun.

The translator device automatically recorded the speech and kept it until I told it to erase. We only had one translator between us, and it worked for Galactic, my own native language, and the alien's Artaak dialect.

I went over the alien sounds at least fourteen times. That's probably an exaggeration because I was under pressure and the pleadings were intense. It was the word "please" that was increasing from the mouth of the alien, or what technically could be taken for a mouth since, in his case, the opening for speech and the orifice for food are different. I won't tell you where these are located because you would not believe me, and it would detract from the point of the story. Look it up in the galactic encyclopedia if you are interested.

The words "stab" and "heart" translated clearly. Maybe a nuance the machine missed meant, "Please don't." This was unlikely, considering I had made no gesture to indicate a desire to stab anything. In fact, Jartuk, my alien friend, had made the request before I had drawn my knife.

So I remained kneeling over his prostrate form, knife in hand, paralyzed to inaction by confusion.

We had sent down the organoscanner from orbit to search for life forms before venturing to visit us. Standard procedure in planetary exploration. It

discovered some primitive multicellular life and even a few viruses, but these checked out as harmless. So it seemed a green light for landing and claiming the planet as a potential future colony. That's our job. We're in real estate, so to speak. Planetary size. Finding habitable planets for the Galactic Colony Services.

In retrospect, I keep trying to figure out a way to blame the scanner. I can't. It is designed to find life forms and decide if any are dangerous, not to predict allergic reactions to strange chemicals in the environment. Some things we learn only by trial and error. And sometimes the errors can be permanent, if you catch my drift.

While kneeling over my writhing companion, I realized I had nothing but bad options. Do nothing and watch my companion die. Or do as he asked, and Prison Planet, here I come. So I did what the company training said. Go with your gut feeling when you don't know what else to do.

"Jartuk," I yelled, "where is your heart?" A writhing tentacle pointed at a spot on his anatomy. So I took the plunge; excuse the metaphor. A swift stab, and Jartuk went limp.

"I've gone and done it," I said to myself. Maybe an insanity plea might work. Or I could blame it on the translator box. Self-justifying notions whizzed around my cranium like alley cats in a panic, just at the moment Jartuk started to move and sat up.

"Get me to the ship quickly," he said. I did not question the translator box this time. I dropped my knife in the dust, grabbed one of his tentacles, and started to drag him back as fast as possible. He staggered along as best he could.

On the ship, he headed straight for the shower and was there a good long time. I stood outside the door and periodically inquired if he was okay. He gurgled something, and I don't know what he was saying, but it answered the question. He sounded alive, so I waited.

While standing there, I had weird thoughts of how to explain things if I went in the shower and found him dead. I could tell the truth: "First I stabbed him in the heart with a knife. Then I sent him in to take a shower." Something about that seemed to lack credibility, so I was fishing around in my head for a plausible lie when Jartuk came out of the shower. "Thank you for saving my life," he said.

An hour later, Jartuk and I were lounging in the ship's recreation room.

"Would you like me to explain what happened?" he asked. Artaaks have no sense of humor, so I discarded the sarcastic remark on the tip of my tongue and simply said, "Yes."

"I have two hearts," he explained, "a primary and a secondary heart. The secondary remains dormant until the primary sends out a chemical signal in case it fails suddenly. If it fails slowly, the chemical signal does not get sent, and we die of what you call a heart attack. Destroying the primary heart in such circumstances is a standard surgical technique on my planet."

He paused and emitted what could be taken for a cough, waved a few tentacles for effect, and continued. "I could feel myself having a serious reaction to something in the environment, and my heart started dying. Your action saved my life." He paused and lay back in the recliner to rest.

I decided this anatomical peculiarity made more sense than the location of his mouth, but I did not want to insult him by saying it, so I kept my own mouth shut. It took us the better part of a day of high-tech chemical analysis to discover the allergen in the dust that caused Jartuk's reaction.

That put the planet off-limits for his species but not for mine. So the company picked up another planet to sell, but almost at the cost of a perfectly good but weird employee.

I feel a twinge of guilt that I will only share with company headquarters and never with Jartuk. We are still good friends, and I would never want to hurt his feelings.

I'm going to put in a request for a partner transfer. Somebody with only one heart and maybe not so many tentacles. I know that sounds like interspecies racism, which is politically incorrect in our day, and the company won't like it. I'll risk the consequences.

Which reminds me. I must close this journal now because I just remembered something important I forgot to explain to Jartuk. I must tell him what NOT to do if I have an allergic reaction.

THE END