

Damsel

From the journal of Jerome Derkson, planet hunter, galactic date 3842, Delta Quadrant.

I was trying to figure out whether they were about to burn the alien girl tied at a stake, harm her some other way, or just leave her there for a while. The crowd of aliens dancing around her seemed to keep their distance, about eight or ten meters.

Several young males weaved in and out of the crowd, jostling one another for position, as though preparing to attack. The crowd seemed to be working itself into a frenzy. It always makes me a bit nervous when a crowd does that. Their intended outcome was still a mystery to me at that point.

I had been on that planet only about twelve days, enough for my translator box to pick up on the language, get some geometric readings for mineral deposits, and see what they might have to offer a galactic trader.

Trading is my business, sometimes under the galactic radar, to use an old Earth expression. These aliens, the Frachs, were not at that time on the Galactic Council's list of approved trading planets because their technology was barely into the industrial stage and had not yet qualified. So for me to trade with them was illegal.

Such details rarely bothered me because the fine for getting caught rarely exceeded a quarter of the profits. So I didn't care more than my customers did.

No, I was not a smuggler in the technical sense of the term because the kind of goods I traded in were legal anyway. If they had not been, I would be writing this from a prison planet. The issue was always whether or not the goods originated from an approved planet.

This policy is intended to avoid messing up cultures prematurely before they are advanced enough to handle the changes galactic trade would cause.

So far, I had discovered nothing more than a weak deposit of Terrillium, an expensive mineral that could be quite profitable if found in quantity. The odds of landing by chance near a deposit were slim, so that piqued my interest. It was likely more of it was around, and this required staying a while.

Once this planet became legal, maybe I could claim first rights and sell my stake to a mining company. The search was tedious, and I was considering leaving.

The Franchs are not much to look at. Heads like an aardvark squeezed in a vice, if you can imagine that. Of course, you can't. I forgot to take pictures. Just as well.

The food was great, though. The fruits and vegetables looked nothing like my world but were delicious beyond description. These aliens are herbivores. It seems eating flesh was unknown to them. I kind of liked that about them.

My organoscanner checked over a dozen kinds of vegetables and only kicked out three as unfit for human consumption. I mention this because the very nice young female that had been feeding me those days happened to be the one tied to the stake. That concerned me.

I had paid her with cloth, trinkets, and a few tools out of the ship storehouse—stuff we keep in case we need to trade with natives somewhere. Rations enough existed on the ship to keep me for a year, but sharing in native cuisine usually results in good relations.

The question nagging me was that maybe I was the cause for which she was tied up. Maybe all my fault. Perhaps she offended the village by feeding me.

The coincidence was too great, I reasoned. Tie her up like that, right at the time when she had been feeding me... there had to be a connection. Or maybe not.

Either way, I could not just stand there and see my hostess sacrificed for whatever reason. I owed it to her. Maybe I could snatch her, put her on

board my ship, and let her off somewhere else on the planet. At least I had the translator box, and we could come to some agreement or whatever.

The frenzied dancing of the crowd around the stake continued. Every once in a while, one of the armed young males would advance with a weapon held high and then dance back. The meaning of this was lost to me.

The dancing crowd seemed to be getting nearer the stake. It was time to act. Fortunately, I had been wearing a small blaster the entire time on this planet. This seemed unnecessary so far, but I had not forgotten the time I had been invited to dinner on another planet and it turned out I was the dinner. The blaster came in handy, so since then, it is my close companion.

Simple. Just fire the blaster in the air and get their attention. So I did. Nobody noticed. The problem? Blasters don't make any noise, just a peculiar swish drowned out by the noise of the crowd.

Shooting one of them was out of the question. Doing that to potential customers is hard on business. So, I had an idea. I grabbed a rock, threw it high in the air over their heads, and blasted it to pieces. That was noise enough besides splattering them with shards.

Attention gained. They stopped, turned toward me, and just stood there. I realized they were having trouble associating the incident with the blaster. So I picked up another rock, pointed to it with my blaster, and they got the message.

I waved my arms in a parting gesture, walking forward with the blaster, and they let me pass to the female at the stake. I untied her, and she meekly allowed me to lead her in the direction of the break in the crowd, and the crowd erupted in joy.

Now that set me back on my heels, big time. My cranium was in a whirl. I was clearly missing something.

"Why are you pleased at what I just did?" I shouted into the translator box. The answer came back, "You have chosen her, and she is pleased."

"She ought to be pleased. I just rescued her," I said in as sarcastic a tone as I could muster, although I was not sure the translator box would do justice to my sarcasm.

"Yes," they replied. "Now we can proceed with the marriage."

The translator box was taking a break at this moment because my jaw was hanging open and I could not speak. My subconscious kept saying, "I think I need a little more data."

The short of it is this: In their history, one of their damsels in distress was rescued by some hero guy, and they lived happily ever after. Sound familiar? I wonder if that historic scenario is common to male-female species. Somebody needs to look into that.

But getting back to the story: From then on, it became a custom for a marriageable female to be "rescued," so to speak, in a ritualized scenario. Nobody gets hurt. The young male who really wants her has to do the pretend rescue, and if she allows herself to be led away, he is the chosen one.

Now it was me who needed a rescue. I explained I made a mistake and thought she was being harmed. They assured me that made no difference, so I need not feel bad about that. I was the rescuer, so do not worry; we would be married.

I could feel my subconscious inside staring me down. No actual thoughts, mind you, just staring. You know the feeling. It translates as the word "idiot."

You need to understand I have this relationship with my subconscious on these lonely explorations. If it weren't for that, we would both go crazy. I call it "subby" for short, just so you know who I'm talking about.

"So, what happens if a male rescues her and then refuses to marry?" I asked.

Answer: "We make him so he cannot marry."

Now that got my attention. I considered making a bolt for my ship, blaster blazing, but one of my rudimentary and dominant motivations, for which I am well known, hindered me ... greed. I had made friends here, a term I usually elaborate as "potential customer." That terillium deposit would be forfeited, so I decided to try to talk my way out of marital bliss.

Subby said, "Somewhere in the depths of my mind, *I can't wait to see your offspring.*" I told him to shut up.

The more I talked to the aliens, the more they were determined to believe I was just being humble about the great honor I was about to receive.

That's when Subby finally threw me an intelligent thought. *Ask them what it costs to support her for a year.* Sure! That might do it! Then I could pay them off a year's worth of whatever and skip town with the lie that I would be back to pick her up later.

The answer I got was it costs about 5000 shillings. I don't know what that is, so I said I did not have any because I am a poor man. First lie. I have a nice stash from my profitable enterprise, mostly intact minus the occasional binge when I'm on leave.

The female kept glancing at the ship. Smart! A few of the others were looking as well. A poor guy doesn't have a ship like that. I caught on and said, "I am so poor, I don't even own my ship."

Lie number two. I'm the third owner of the ship and of a planet-hunting company with two other hotshot explorers.

They went silent for a while, obviously considering this unusual scenario. That inspired me enough to blurt out an embellishment on the fib: "I'm just a slave."

They erupted in shouts of glee and joy. "A genuine slave! What a great honor!" they shouted. A few reached out and touched me as though hoping some of the glory might be transferred to them.

This enunciation resulted in an immediate celebration and a big party, causing them to forget the marriage thing. Feasting and dancing followed.

Old Subby in the back of my cranium kept pestering me for more data with the old "this-does-not-compute" line.

I assumed a mistranslation and thumped on the translator box vigorously for a few seconds until my brain kicked in gear and suggested it might be better to leave well enough alone. Otherwise I might end up married to an aardvark.

Apparently in this culture, being a slave meant being a really swell guy, high on the alien honor roll. Don't ask for explanations. I'm still trying to figure that one out.

The End