

PHOBIA

by

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Sergeant Jake Sardona, the toughest sergeant in his regiment, jammed all four fingers of his aching right hand into the crack of the rock wall and hoisted himself up. His left clawed the surface above, seeking another hold.

He stretched out a bit more, scrabbling with both his left foot and hand, seeking a purchase. "It would be easier," he thought, "if the crack weren't so nearly vertical." One hand and one foot dangling in the air is dangerous! He lowered his hand, wiping the sweaty palm on his military khakis.

The climbing had been relatively easy 'till now. The cliff face was a steep slope of knobby alien rock. Not sheer, but over 400 feet high. Jake was getting exhausted. A climber could slip and still catch himself, unless he started to roll. Then it would be all over. The main danger was climbing in the thick fog. Worse, the rock seemed smoother the higher he climbed.

He stretched his arm out to one side, as high as he could reach. Since he had several feet of visibility in the fog, he decided to chance leaning back to look up. He adjusted his feet to allow for the heavy weight of the creature clinging to his back, then looked up. He could see the problem at once. The cliff face straightened up as it neared the top. And the rock was indeed smoother.

He was stuck.

Going back down was not an option. The dissection tables awaited him and his alien companion, the fate of all escaped prisoners. Continuing up seemed impossible. Jake leaned forward, resting his forehead on the rough rock. His fist pounded the cliff in frustration as he swore.

"Go down three body lengths and one to the right," came a shrill, squeaky voice from the creature on his back.

"Shut up, you little freak!" Jake growled. "If I hear another word out of you, I'll let go, and when we land, it'll be on my back! That voice can be heard from here to the next solar system!" Jake lowered his tone a bit and muttered to himself, "Risking my neck on this cliff is bad enough without a revolting..." He stopped in mid-sentence, realizing that insulting the little creep wouldn't help. After all, they needed each other. Neither could escape the prison camp alone.

So close, he thought. -Three, maybe four meters from the top. -

He started to stretch up again when it dawned on him that the alien Menx clinging to his back had said something significant.

"What did you say?" he muttered.

No answer.

Maybe he took me literally, he reasoned. "Answer me," he whispered. "I won't let go." The shrill voice started again, "Down and right."

Jake started down, fumbling for footholds he had used minutes before. Since the passenger on his back had the best eyesight of the three known alien species, Jake figured it was probably right. Vision from ultraviolet to infrared. Sees right through fog. From its vantage point, it must have sighted another route to the top.

Twenty minutes later Jake lay face down, panting on top of the cliff, exhausted. The Menx scampered off his back onto the dull-purple turf. Its movements caused chills of revulsion on Jake's skin that the balmy warmth of the alien sun could not assuage. Jake glanced at the Menx, then buried his face in the grass and groaned in horror.

An impulse gripped him. How tempting it would be to kick out with his right leg and send the hideous creature to the bottom! But conscience and practicalities restrained him. After all, the Menx were supposed to be neutral in this war. He could get court-martialed for that.

But why, why, did they have to look so much like giant tarantulas!? Coal black like a tarantula. Long, thick hairs. Three bulbous eyes in a triangle. Did tarantulas have bulbous eyes? Jake couldn't remember. He knew that arachnids had only 8 legs. This creature had 10, all of them prehensile, like tentacles. But this dissimilarity did nothing to alleviate Jake's revulsion.

The Menx moved off a few feet in front of Jake and squeaked a couple of times. Jake lifted his head. Why was it talking again?

Still on his belly, he looked back and realized that his size 11 military boots were protruding over the cliff. The enemy Vrinli guards below might see them, though that was unlikely in this fog. They didn't have the eyesight of a Menx. Jake rolled over and drew up his legs, listening for sounds below. He doubted if much noise could carry up 400 feet of cliff unless the alarm was sounded.

The Menx squeaked again, this time loudly. Jake stood up to see what was going on and stumbled a bit to the right on a knot of the purple Vrinli grass. The stumble saved his life.

The Vrinli guard's claw ripped past Jake's face, powerful enough to tear his head off had it connected. Jake regained his balance as the tentacle-like alien arm whipped around for another strike.

The two escapees had taken a chance that the Vrinli would not keep a guard on the cliff top. Since the Vrinli were too bulky to climb cliffs, perhaps they would assume that humans and Menx could not either. But the guard was there anyway, and they were in deep trouble. No human could match a Vrinli in hand-to-hand combat.

Jake ducked low, something the barrel-bodied guard could not do, and the move was therefore unexpected. He twisted his hip toward the alien, sending his foot in the most powerful roundhouse kick he could muster against the stumpy leg of the guard. It was like kicking an elephant.

The clawed tentacle swung back and down. Jake shoulder-rolled to the right, coming up on his hip, slightly to the left and behind the Vrinli guard. Bracing both hands on the ground, he thrust out with both feet and with all the force his 210 pounds could muster. This time, the impact jerked the bulky alien's leg from under it, and the creature slammed to the ground, rolled toward the cliff edge, and then over.

The thick, hooked claw of the Vrinli's right tentacle caught in the turf as the heavy alien hung over the edge. Its other tentacle, the prehensile one without a claw, pulled futilely at the cliff edge, slipping on the purple grass.

The short neck tentacles of the alien guard writhed hideously, the changing patterns of which corresponded to language for the Vrinli. Without adequate vocal cords, the Vrinli guard could make few sounds. But if any of his companions below saw him, they would know in a second everything going on from the patterns of the neck tentacles. This, thought Jake, must be the Vrinli version of a scream.

Jake was still on the ground, stunned to find himself alive, trying to assimilate what just happened. He leaped to his feet, eyes fixed on the claw that was saving the alien's life. He moved to the cliff edge and lifted his boot, preparing to stomp the claw and send the guard to his death.

"No!" came the shrill voice from behind. "It will warn the others!"

Jake lowered his boot to the ground. The Menx was right. The guard's fall would alert the Vrinli camp below, and they would be recaptured. Maybe if he saved the guard, it would spare them. Maybe they could outrun it. Maybe he could find some way to kill it. "I can't beat him!" growled Jake. "He's too strong! If I pull him up, I'm dead meat!"

"Trust me," squeaked the Menx.

Jake dropped to his hip and grabbed the tentacle with his left hand, just below the claw. Bracing both feet on a tuft of Vrinli grass, he pulled, the muscles of his strong back straining until he thought his shoulder was coming loose. The heavy Vrinli moved upward a bit, just enough for the left tentacle to wrap around a tuft of grass roots, and began to ease itself up.

The guard's central chest claw, short but deadly, scrabbled rhythmically on the rock of the cliff, caught its point on a nub, and the alien lurched up over the edge.

Jake let go of the tentacle, scrambled to his feet, and leaped back, giving the alien room to climb over the edge.

"Maybe he'll be grateful and let us go!" said Jake.

Wrong. The alien lunged, tentacles swinging.

"Keep backing up away from him," squealed the Menx. Jake was already doing that as fast as he could, but not fast enough. "Get him past the spot where I am," said the Menx

Jake didn't hear this last remark as the alien tentacle snaked out, slamming him to the ground. He kicked at the alien legs, staggering the Vrinli but not felling him. The Vrinli jerked him up and pulled him toward its chest claw.

The flight jacket held for a moment against the tearing claw, its metal-woven fabric, supposedly tear-proof, coming apart with a grating sound. Jake's right hand struck out at the central bulbous, insect-like eye.

The alien reacted violently, apparently in pain, swinging Jake around, stumbling. Both fell in a heap, Jake underneath. He thought he felt ribs crack. Pain shot through his body. The alien chest claw continued ripping at his jacket, while the tentacle claw slashed his scalp.

Suddenly the clawing stopped. The alien guard seemed to shiver, the writhing of its tentacles slowing. Then stillness, with only the crushing dead weight of the Vrinli body pinning Jake.

"Get up, Jake!" shrilled the Menx. Jake moved his right arm enough to get it under the alien's side and heaved. The dead guard rose slightly, and Jake managed to free his left arm enough to roll the body free.

He sat up, pain shooting through his chest. "What...? How...?" He looked around, scarcely believing what was happening, ignoring the blood running down his collar from the scalp wound.

"I bit him," replied the Menx.

"You WHAT!" shouted Jake as he stared in horror at his fellow escapee. "You...you...didn't tell me you're...!"

"My venom is the most potent of any known species. I thought it wiser to avoid mentioning it, Jake, after the conversation we had in the camp about your abhorrence of my appearance. I thought it might influence your decision to include me in the escape plan." The Menx seemed to squat lower in the grass as though apologizing.

Jake rolled over on his stomach, face down, and pounded his right fist hard and methodically on the turf. A growling, groaning sound came from his mouth, mixed with unintelligible words.

"Jake!" came the shrill voice. "I am alarmed! Are you dying?"

The human stopped groaning and sat up. Blood was trickling down his cheek and running down his collar. He looked at the Menx, groaned, and buried his face in his hands, elbows on his knees. The Menx heard a few sonorous, barely audible words from between the hands. "Hideous...ugly...venomous to boot...."

"I agree, Jake, the Vrinli are ugly!" shrilled the Menx. Its long posterior hairs undulated rhythmically. Jake glanced at the Menx and nearly shouted, "I was talking about YOU, freaky. Of all the hideous...! You have no idea what you look like! For Galaxy's sake, bite me and put me out of my misery!"

"Doing that would put us BOTH out of our misery, Jake. We need each other. We already discussed this in the prison camp. If you are in pain and hopelessly dying, I shall indeed bite you to spare you suffering. Then I shall launch myself

over the cliff to my own death to avoid recapture and torture. Shall I do that now, Jake?"

"Just hold off a minute and let me think about it."

"We don't have many minutes. Someone may come looking for this Vrinli guard we killed."

Jake started to get up. "Disregard what I said. I was only kidding...what we call a joke."

"I am aware of that, Jake."

Jake looked at the Menx, startled. "You understood that?"

The Menx ignored the question. "I am concerned about the red, viscous fluid proceeding from your head. This is what you call 'blood,' I presume?"

"Yeah, that monster slashed me a good one!"

"If your head contains the cognitive organ, and your blood is essential to its proper function, it can be deduced from the quantity you are losing that you are either dying or will shortly be insane. As I said before, Jake, I am alarmed."

"Hey, cool it, Freaky! It ain't that bad! I know more about my anatomy than you do. This is a scalp wound. It bleeds a lot but isn't serious. It'll stop in a minute. My brain is okay."

"Good!" exclaimed the Menx. "I was beginning to fear for your sanity." Its posterior hairs undulated again.

Jake took a deep breath, stretched his arms, and groaned in pain. "I got a cracked rib. It hurts, but it's not serious. I can walk fine. Let me check that dead Vrinli and see if he's carrying anything useful. Then we go." He stumbled over to the dead guard, fumbled around the body, and came up with an object about 14 inches long, similar to a spike, tapered down to a flattened point. A circle of metal on the other end seemed to serve as a handle. He jammed it into his belt.

"I think this is one of the keys they use for the prison gate. It ain't much of a weapon, but it's all we've got. Maybe we better take it along," he said. "Let's get going." He hadn't taken three steps when the Menx squeaked, "You're going the wrong way, Jake. You're headed toward the cliff. It curves toward the right."

The soldier turned around and mumbled, "O.K., you lead the way. This fog is getting thicker, and I can't see more than a few yards. How far can you see?"

"About two kilometers," said the Menx. "I can see both suns clearly. With my knowledge of this solar system and a little triangulation, we shall be well oriented. But I cannot lead the way. You will have to carry me. I cannot walk rapidly enough through this high grass. You MUST carry me."

Jake looked at the Menx and grimaced, fists clenched, trying to control himself. "Wait a minute, freak-o! I can't do that. You don't understand. You know about my phobia... I told you in plain language in the camp. I'm afraid of nothing. But I got this one thing, you know. Spiders. I can't stand..."

"I think you called it arachnophobia?" replied the Menx.

"Yeh. We all got a right to at least one phobia. Nothing personal, you understand. It's just that you are the most hideous thing that ever crawled out of a nightmare. Glancing at you makes me want to throw up. That's just for openers. A good look makes me want to die. No offense intended, freak-face! I CAN'T carry you. I would die of disgust. I made it up the cliff with you on my back, a three-foot-long hairy hang-over. That was bad enough. But there are limits..." This semi-hysterical speech tapered off to a sonorous sob.

"Facts, Jake!" shrilled the Menx. "You can't see through this fog. I can. I can't walk through this grass. You can. If we stay here and argue the matter, we will both be recaptured and sent straight to the dissection tables. Dominate your phobia or die right now! Do you want a bite?"

Jake's shoulders slumped as he turned his back toward the Menx. "O.K. Climb aboard. If I don't have to look at you, I can make it."

"That won't do, Jake. I must be able to see forward. You will have to carry me on your front."

Fists clenched, arms trembling, Jake blurted, "NO! Good Galaxy, NO! I'm a soldier in the toughest assault regiment in the Corps. But I never thought..." He paused, caught his breath, and thought of what the squad would say if they had heard him. "O.K., freaky. Climb aboard."

Jake turned around slowly, the color drained from his face, looking toward the sky as though pleading for supernatural assistance. The squeaky voice penetrated his consciousness. "Lie down on your back, and I'll just climb aboard, Jake."

The sergeant nodded, as though in defeat, and lay down long enough to allow the Menx to climb on his chest. It wrapped its ten prehensile tentacles, which to Jake seemed like legs, clear around to the man's back. "O.k., Jake. Rise and conquer!"

Jake rose, started to look down at the Menx, thought better of it, and asked, "Which way?"

"Turn slightly to your right, and proceed," replied the Menx.

About an hour later, with only occasional course corrections from the Menx, Jake stopped, his chest heaving. "I gotta rest. This grass grows in bunches, and tramping around in it is hard work."

The mini-translator on the Menx spoke. "I understand, Jake. At our average velocity, we should find your damaged scout ship in about 5 or 6 hours. The next feeding period at the camp is not for another 4 hours. That's when they will discover us missing. I dislike suggesting it, Jake, but we must do better. Minutes may count."

Jake sat down on a small undulation in the turf. He closed his eyes as the Menx crawled off beside him. The soldier sat quietly, his head on his knees, his breath short from the pain in his rib. He avoided looking at the arachnid-shaped creature, trying to convince himself that the Menx was not really a spider. Almost involuntarily he glanced at it and promptly pressed his palms on his eyes, as though doing so would remove the sight from his brain.

A few minutes passed, and the Menx's posterior hairs started waving again. "Hideous...ugly...the nightmares of the galaxy," shrilled the translator box. Jake's head jerked up, startled. "What are you talking about, Freaky?" The Menx paused, hairs still undulating. "The Vrinli. Hideous creatures. Enough to make one die of disgust."

"By Galaxy, you're making fun of me! You're repeating what I said about you! Don't tell me you have a sense of humor! You're nothing but a..."

"Another sentient species, Jake. Our scientists speculate that humor is intrinsic to intelligence. They expect to find it in most sentient aliens."

Jake laughed. "A giant smart-aleck tarantula with x-ray vision. I don't believe this!" Hand on forehead, he chuckled, "Right now my only motive for survival is to tell this to the guys at the barracks!" He looked down at the Menx, thinking, deducing.

"Hey, freaky! Those waving hairs. Is that the way you express..."

"Yes, Jake. You express humor through repeated explosions of sound from your voice apparatus. An obvious waste of energy. We express the same more efficiently by the movements of what you call our hairs."

Jake thought for a moment, recalling recent events. "Pick you up with my hands, you said!? Your hairs were waving. You've been laughing at me!"

"I observe that the drainage of blood from your head was not severe," replied the Menx, waving its hairs. "You are still sentient. Congratulations."

Jake lay back on the grass, holding his ribs, guffawing. In a moment he sat up again, shaking his head. "Well. At least there's one thing about you that isn't hideous. Maybe if you start telling jokes, I'll remain sane after all!"

"Rise and conquer, Jake," shrilled the Menx. Jake looked startled, remembering this as something the Menx had said just before they started out. He fell back on the turf and laughed. "O.K., Freaky. Cut it out. You're tickling my ribs!"

The Menx's hairs were still undulating as it climbed back onto Jake's chest.

Two hours to go, thought Jake. -At this pace, I ain't gonna make it.- He staggered forward, almost falling, catching himself. Since the thick alien grass grew in bunches, he had to decide whether to walk around the bunches, thus adding extra steps, or plunge through them. The latter was exhausting; the former was time-consuming. He compromised by pushing through the smaller bunches.

Then there were the ditches to avoid. The Menx could see them well ahead, despite the fog.

"Jake!" came the shrill voice. "Three ships overhead, just coming over the horizon!"

"Where? How high?"

"To your left, about 2000 meters up."

Jake looked around furtively. "Nowhere to hide, freaky!"

"Ahead about a hundred meters, there's another indentation. We'll try lying down in it. But hurry," shrilled the Menx.

Jake stumbled forward, gasping for breath. Twice he fell, catching himself with arms fully outstretched to avoid falling on the Menx. "More to the right," squeaked the Menx. He fought his way through a large bunch of grass and nearly fell headlong into the ditch. It was about half full of black, brackish water. Jake stopped, confused.

"Jump in the water, Jake!"

"What?! Are you crazy?!"

"The Vrinli's infrared sensors can detect us through the fog!" yelled the Menx. "The water will mask our heat!"

Jake jumped, hitting the water feet first. He expected to rebound off the bottom, but there didn't seem to be any bottom. Frantically he struggled upward, strong arms clawing for the surface. He broke the surface, gasping for breath, treading water. His boots seemed to weigh him down. He struggled for the sloping side of the ditch and got a foothold on the muddy bottom, keeping his nose just above the surface, hiding as much of his body under the water as he could. -

Where's freak-O? - he thought. The Menx's weight on his chest seemed to be relieved. He reached down and felt the fat, bulbous body still where it was when he jumped. -He'll drown! - thought Jake. -I can't make it without him!
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Jake grabbed at two of the tentacles wrapped around his body and tried to pull the Menx loose to get it to the surface. The tentacles tightened their grip. Jake pulled again. They tightened again, resisting his efforts to dislodge the Menx. He gave up. -If the stinking thing wants to drown, that is its own choice. - thought Jake. -Maybe I'll make it on my own, after all. -

He waited, listening for the sound of antigrav engines overhead. It came gradually. The ships were moving slowly. -Were they looking for them? -Jake asked himself. -But we shouldn't be missed for another two hours. - Maybe we were seen! Maybe they found the dead guard already! Or maybe it's just a regular patrol flight.

The engine noise increased, with a sound like sand in a cement mixer. Jake took a deep breath and plunged under the surface. The infrared sensors would

have a tough time tracking them now. Assuming, of course, that they were being tracked. -In which case,- thought Jake, -I'm wet for nothing.

Jake counted the seconds. He knew he could hold his breath for nearly two minutes. That should be enough time for the vessels to pass overhead. He relaxed, thinking about the Menx. A pity. The repulsive thing had wanted to live as much as he did. But it was surely dead by now, having been under water this long.

He raised his head slowly to the surface, taking in a deep breath. The engine noise receded in the distance. They were undetected. It must have been a regular patrol after all, or the Vrinli ships would have been moving in circular search patterns.

The sergeant waited another couple of minutes in the warm, fetid water, listening for the return of the engine sounds. None came.

He moved toward the slope of the ditch and managed to climb out of the water to a depth of about hip-high. This exposed the Menx, still clinging to his chest. He tried to pull the tentacles off. It would be easier climbing out of the ditch without this dead thing still on his chest.

"Why are you trying to remove me, Jake?" came the shrill familiar voice.

"Because you're dead, that's why!"

"Are you delirious, Jake, or is this humanoid humor?"

Jake leaned on the side of the ditch, trying to get his mental bearings. "How come you're not dead? Don't tell me you can hold your breath that long!"

"I do not require breath," replied the Menx. "That is a biological inefficiency, required only by creatures of your planet."

"I should have known," muttered Jake, as he struggled up the side of the dank, slippery ditch. He slid back, then tried again and failed again. "We got troubles, freaky. I can't get out of this ditch."

The Menx shifted its weight a little and said, "I have an idea." Can you throw me to the top?"

"Hey, that's not too neighborly, freak-o! You get out, and I stay here and die! We both get out, or we both stay here and die."

"Trust me, Jake."

"Why?"

"Because you have no choice."

Jake thought about that. "There's something about the way you think that I just can't fathom, bug-head."

"It's that I think logically."

"O.k. Here's how we do it. I can't scramble up higher than about three feet from the top," said Jake. "So I'll hoist you up on my right arm, and at the last second I'll throw you upward. You might be able to grab the grass at the top."

The Menx was silent for a few seconds. "We'll have to try. I see no other possibilities."

Jake crouched on the slippery bank, then lunged upward with a grunt, his powerful legs pumping in the thick mud. He threw the Menx as hard as he could...and failed.

The Menx came tumbling back down the bank, splashed into the water, and quickly wrapped a couple of tentacles around the human's arm. "Try again, Jake."

They tried again. Failed again.

On the third try, Jake realized that if he threw a bit more forward, rather than straight up, it should work better. As the Menx neared the top, one long leg-tentacle whipped around a clump of grass, and the creature hoisted itself to the top.

"Now what, freaky? Aren't you even going to say goodbye?" exclaimed Jake sarcastically. The Menx did not reply. It was still visible on the edge of the ditch. It seemed to be doing something in the grass. Jake couldn't tell what. The spider-like creature's bulbous eyes appeared over the edge at a spot slightly to the right of where it had gone over the top. The grass was thicker there. Several of its posterior tentacles seemed to be wrapped tightly around the base of the thick grass. Its front ones dangled over the edge.

"Jake! If you can leap up and grab my tentacles, I can haul you up!"

The sergeant didn't reply for a moment. "Hey, ugly bug. I weigh two hundred pounds. I would pull your tentacles to pieces!"

"Not so, Jake. Each of my tentacles can resist up to 150 kilos of pull. I'm extending four of them. Now jump!"

Jake jumped, ignoring the pain in his rib. Two tentacles whipped around his right arm. He felt himself hoisted. He couldn't believe it. His legs pumped at the slippery bank, and with the pull from the Menx, he managed to get his left hand around the roots of the tough grass at the top and pulled himself over.

At the top, he lay on his back beside the Menx. "You are one barrel of surprises, freak-head. You are stronger than I am!"

The Menx was silent for a while, then replied, "But you walk much faster, human. At least through this grass. On my home planet, the herbage is small. I suspect that there I could outrun you."

Jake didn't reply. He was falling asleep. But not for long. "Jake! Jake! Come conscious! We must get going!"

Jake awoke. "I can't make it, freaky. I'm through. No food. No water. Hard slogging through this terrain. I've had it." He rolled over on his side, back toward the Menx.

"I'm going to have to bite you, Jake," shrilled the Menx.

Jake sat up. "You what!? I'll kill you first, you little..." He started to struggle to his feet.

"No, Jake, it will only be a mild stimulant. I can control the dosage of venom. It won't kill you. It'll only give you more strength for a while. Then, of course, you will collapse from exhaustion, but by then we will be safe. The bite will be somewhat painful, but you will be glad for the extra strength."

The human ran his hand through his hair thoughtfully, wiping off the smelly ditch slime. He began to mumble to himself, "Let a living hangover bite me?" He turned briskly toward the Menx. "Get this straight the first time, stinkbug. I don't need any of your so-called stimulus. I might die of exhaustion, but..." The words trailed off as Jake lay down to let the Menx climb aboard. They were on their way again, Jake stumbling forward determinedly. The Menx rode contentedly on the chest of the human, its posterior hairs undulating gently, pleased that it had correctly guessed an aspect of human psychology.

Two hours later, the fog seemed to be lifting. Jake didn't dare stop. He knew he might not be able to get up again. He followed mechanically the monotonous orders of the Menx. "Left a few degrees, Jake. A little more. Stick to this course. Right a little. A little more."

"Hey freaky, when you're not giving me orders, I'll tell you some jokes. Maybe that'll help me from going nuts. You know what a joke is, eh, bug-buns?"

"Continue if you wish, Jake. Perhaps I'll grasp the essence of it."

"Well, here's my favorite," Jake continued. "This is one we tell only among the guys, you understand...or maybe you won't understand. Anyway, there was this barmaid and a spacer sitting on a stool. Yeah, that's right. Both are sitting on the same stool. Don't ask me why, 'cause that's part of the joke..."

Jake finished the joke, then another and another. Time passed, and he staggered on. After a while, he asked, "Did you get the idea of a 'joke,' freaky?" If you make it through this and I don't, I want you to carry home the essence and finesse of human culture. Ha! Ha!" Jake laughed deliriously. "Hey, this is sweet. Let's see your scientists analyze that!"

The Menx said nothing, indifferent as long as the human was making forward progress.

"Say, freaky, maybe I'm corrupting an innocent species here. You understand, of course, that I would never share my favorite jokes with any of our females."

"Does that mean, Jake, that you would share them with females of another species?" inquired the Menx.

"I hadn't thought about that, but now that you mention it, I guess not."

"I am a female, Jake."

The sergeant stopped dead, mouth agape. "Tell me you're jokin', freaky."

"I'm simply stating a fact, my human friend. But that, of course, does not mean I am not also joking."

Jake stopped talking, but the posterior hairs of the Menx didn't stop waving.

After what seemed an eternity of walking, they found the scout ship. Jake lunged forward like a thirsty man stumbling toward an oasis. He collapsed at the side of the ship, laughing hysterically as the Menx climbed down. "Let's

waste no time, Jake. Send the distress signal. I suspect that by now the Vrinli will have missed us. They will know we would head for the scout ship."

Jake walked around to the other side of the ship, looking for the escape hatch. He stared at where it should be, his numbed mind not grasping at first the problem. He knew he had crawled semi-conscious out of the downed fighter, having been too dazed to activate the distress switch that would bring a pickup ship to prevent his capture. The hatch should have been right there, just in front of the central glider fins.

He stepped back, trying to get a better view of the mangled craft. The simple fact dawned on him. The Vrinli had rolled the machine over on the hatch to prevent anything or anyone from getting into it. Apparently the capture of the human was more urgent than the inspection of the wreckage. They had wreckage of other downed fighters, but not many human captives.

Unless Jake could activate that switch, then all they had been through would be in vain.

The sergeant tried to look under the ship to see the hatch opening. He could see the edge of it easily enough. The ship was not quite on top of it.

He explained the problem to the Menx. The two of them weren't strong enough to roll the ship over. "Jake, if we can get even a small space between the ground and the hatch, I might be able to squeeze under and get in."

"Yeah, like dig a small, shallow ditch under the ship and you could squeeze through!" Jake looked around for something to dig with.

"What about the key you took from the dead Vrinli guard, Jake?"

An hour later, an exhausted sergeant lay on the ground, covered with dirt and sweat, watching the Menx squeeze its way along the narrow indentation leading to the hatch. Jake's arms could not quite reach the edge of the open hatch, but the Menx had the tool in hand, or rather in tentacle now, and was removing enough dirt to allow for the few inches necessary to get in.

It took about two minutes for the Menx to enter the hatch. It had to remove its translator box to make it, but that was no hindrance. The Menx already had instructions from Jake as to the approximate location of the distress switch. In a few minutes, it came back to the translator box and said, "I can't find it, Jake. There are switches all over this machine. Some are damaged."

"Just turn on every switch you see on the right side of the pilot's panel."

After a minute it returned to the edge of the hatch and said, "One of the switches started blinking yellow for a minute and then started blinking red. What does that mean, Jake?" The sergeant yelled and whooped. "The yellow means that the signal was sent. The red means our guys have heard it and are on their way!"

Two days later, Jake and the Menx stood together on the launching platform just outside of the advanced assault base. Rescued, fed, washed, and comforted, the nightmares of the escape drifted away in the fresh breeze of freedom.

An occasional dust cloud swept over the landing pad, stirred up when a scout ship took off. Jake coughed in annoyance, waving his hand in front of his face.

"Looks like we'll have you joined up again with your own kind in a couple of days, Squeaky. Free ride home on one of our best ships. The Colonel knows we owe you that much for rescuing one of the force's best sergeants. It was one heck of an adventure."

"Thank you for your assistance, Jake," came the voice from the translator box.

"Hey, squeaky, I'm the one who owes the thanks. Look how many times you saved my hide!"

The Menx shuffled slightly on its feet-tentacles. "It was a symbiotic relationship, Jake. Neither could have survived without the other."

Jake rubbed his scalp wound nervously. "Yeah, that's true. We really went through hell and high water." He shuffled his feet nervously, cleared his throat, and said, "You know, Squeaky, I said some pretty rough things at the beginning there..."

"I noticed you stopped calling me 'freaky,' Jake. 'Squeaky' is an improvement. I appreciate that."

"Well, you know how it is. We're aliens to one another, but we gotta try to get along. After all, we've been through a lot together. Who knows? Maybe our two governments will team up and whip those Vrinli."

"That could be, Jake. I think we have more in common with humans than the Vrinli."

"Yeah, Squeaky, if you weren't so ugly, I could almost think of you as human in a way. No offense intended, you know."

"I understand, Jake. Perhaps we'll meet again."

Jake chuckled and said, "Maybe I'll drop in on your home planet someday and pay you a visit."

"You're perfectly welcome, Jake. I'll introduce you to our young at the breeding hive, and after I explain who you are, they'll show their affection by crawling all over you."

Jake's mouth dropped open, head tipped to the left. "Well, it's quite a distance from here..." Then he noticed that the Menx's posterior hairs were undulating furiously, and he burst out laughing.

"You overgrown bug! If you had a neck, I'd wring it!" Then he paused and added, "Actually, if you had a hand, I'd shake it. That's what we do when we say goodbye."

The Menx shuffled again and replied, "I'm aware of your custom, Jake. Among our people, that gesture is performed by wrapping the tips of our front tentacles around each other."

Jake looked around furtively and knelt down, extending his hands. The Menx wrapped his tentacles around the fingers of Jake's hands. Jake looked at the Menx's yellow, bulbous eyes.

"Goodbye, squeaky."

"Goodbye, Jake."

Both let go. Jake stood up, and the Menx scampered toward the boarding ramp of the ship, with no further word.

Jake turned and strode back toward the debriefing building. A corporal raised a window from the barracks as Jake passed by and said, "Hey Sarge! For a minute there I thought you were gonna kiss that thing!"

Jake stopped, annoyed. "Haven't you read the manual!? Be friendly to all natives and alien allies. Don't forget that, corporal!"

"Sure, Sarge," replied the corporal as he shut the window.

Jake Sardona, the toughest sergeant in the regiment, turned and marched briskly toward debriefing... wiping dust from his eyes.

THE END