

Pillow Chatter

by
Roger Smalling

*An excerpt from the journal of Jerome Derkson, planet hunter.
Galactic year 3843, Beta Quadrant*

Torture? No. Unpleasant? Yes.

Since the aliens who pulled me out of my wrecked scout ship were anatomically similar, I had no doubts they could inflict real pain if they wanted. Arms can be twisted and joints strained regardless of species. They seemed careful to avoid that. The problem was, they would not let me lie down.

I do not know if any reader of this journal has ever been in a smashed-up spacecraft, but if so, he or she knows that lying down is an attractive option. This is especially true after hours of fighting a losing battle to stay in orbit long enough to send a distress signal and get a rescue tug from the mother ship, no more than a few light-years down the road.

I had enough power to attempt a landing but avoided it until I ran out of options. The planet had enough oxygen in the atmosphere but also a trace of methane gas. We humans do poorly with methane. Besides smelling bad, it has a tendency to provoke annoying symptoms if inhaled long enough, such as death, for instance.

The mass detector was supposed to warn of incoming meteors or other matter when in orbit. It did not always work, especially if the debris was traveling at several thousand clicks per second and its trajectory was between a planet's sun and the ship, making it tricky to detect. I figure that's what happened. Whatever slammed amidships hit hard enough to buckle that little scout ship like a piece of wire and spew most of my fuel out the back.

The hull held, though. Piercing a tritonium hull is nigh impossible. Good thing, or the only positive aspect would be that my death by sudden decompression would be painless.

As I fought the controls on the way down, I thought, *Maybe the ship will hit soft enough to avoid bursting open now that the hull has been weakened. Then again it might not.* The choice was to use the remaining power and try

for a landing or burn up in an uncontrolled descent through the atmosphere.

Choice made. Result? Crash! No, it was not soft either. As the craft plowed a long furrow along the bleak landscape, I could see the nose of the ship starting to buckle inward toward me. I tried to get out of the seat but the deceleration pressed me hard against the straps.

The moment it skidded to a stop, I released the straps and threw myself behind the seat just as the roof caved in. I was pinned in a small space between the back of the seat and the debris.

I could see a hill in the distance and was not looking through a window either. Burst open? That's an understatement. Tritonium hulls are tough but not invincible.

My last thought before I passed out was, *Yup, that's methane all right. Smells like a herd of cattle in a small barn feeding on pinto beans.*

<><><>

The next time I opened my eyes, I shut them again right quick. That's instinctive when we recover from unconsciousness and look up into an alien face. You probably knew that, so you know it took me a few seconds to process the usual survival-instinct questions. Friend or foe? Ugly or pretty?

Since they were Eniwerts, you know the answer. Friendly, but not all that pretty. I opened my eyes again and tried to look around, but that is tough to do flat on your back on a hard floor. I was hoping to see a human face. No luck. Just Eniwerts.

The Eniwert facial features give them a perpetual quizzical look, something like a kangaroo trying to ask a question, if you can imagine that. Their bodies are a bit bigger than ours, covered with tawny short fur, with long arms extending to short, squat legs. It would be a stretch to compare them to kangaroos, but if you've never seen a picture of an Eniwert, that will do for an analogy.

A great bunch of aliens, in my opinion. They had a good reputation around the galaxy. Never known to pick fights and interested only in trade.

My brain was still in decent enough shape after the crash to figure out I must be on their ship. The air was clean and breathable, the room small and spotless, with no furniture.

I started to sit up, and they chattered excitedly while reaching out to lift me. I was grateful for the effort, stood on my feet groggily and looked around. I smiled and said, "Thanks for the rescue, boys. I could not have done it without you," knowing they would not understand, but it seemed right to say it anyway. I had some bruises and a few scratches, and that was about it.

I deduced I must be aboard their ship. I knew this was not their planet, so they must have picked up my distress signal and dropped in to check it out. Good thing. I don't know how long I would have lasted. It would take four or five days for the mother ship to get a rescue out to me once they got the subspace distress call. I doubt if I would have lasted that long pinned under the wreckage and with that stinking atmosphere.

I was grimy all over and tried to brush it off. The Eniwert brought me water, and I drank it eagerly and tried to clean up the best I could. They just stood around and watched. Apparently they knew what a human was but did not know much about us.

They seemed interested in my ingestion of water and brought me more, and I drank some. We stood around and just looked at each other. I was hungry and made gestures with my hands and mouth to indicate eating. They simply brought me more water.

I rejected the water and continued my gestures, thinking I might have to fast until my rescue team showed up. That could be a while, assuming the signal got through.

The Eniwert continued chattering amongst themselves. After a while, two of them left and were gone a good long time. When they returned, they were carrying rations from my ship.

More water and a bite of rations and I was in great spirits. I thanked them profusely for rescuing me, though I knew they understood nothing.

Now for a good nap, dreaming of the rescue ship to come. Nothing like a good nap after a crash. They always make me sleepy.

I lay down on the floor, and instantly strong arms dragged me right back up. *Opps, I thought, maybe I missed a protocol here. Easy to do when you know nothing of an alien's customs.*

So I gestured to the floor, made snoring noises, bowed apologetically, and did every other inane movement I could think of to indicate I really did need a nap. They just stood around and gawked at me and each other.

I thought, *o.k, I'll do it slower this time. Maybe just sit down politely with a friendly wave and a smile and then stretch out.* I didn't even make it to sitting. Strong long arms dragged me back up.

I got it now, I said to myself outloud. *It's rude to lie down on the floor.* Maybe they did not want their nice clean floor dirtied with the grime on my flight suit.

So I removed my soiled suit. My ordinary jumpsuit was underneath anyway, so I put the flight suit on the floor, and they seemed to ignore it. That puzzled me. If dirt were the problem, they should have jerked it off the floor also.

I pointed at my jumpsuit, rubbing my hands on it, nice and clean, and headed for the floor again. Nope. Clean floor was not it either. This time they held me for a while until I quit struggling and let me go.

Let's try leaning on the wall, I thought. I did so for about 15 seconds, with my eyes shut. The eyes came open when they jerked me off the wall.

So maybe shutting the eyes was the problem. I stood there looking at them for a moment and then shut my eyes, still standing. Nothing. They didn't move. I opened my eyes and informed them of what I thought of their hospitality in words I was thankful later were not recorded.

This kind of bizarre scenario continued for endless hours. I was getting groggy. I even threw myself on the floor quickly and stupidly in the hopes of getting a couple of seconds of sleep. I found out a couple of seconds is not much for a dream because that was all they let me have.

Over what must have been a couple of days, I endured water on the head, loud chattering, and being shaken. Eniwerts left the room, replaced by others obviously called on to prevent me from lying down.

The room seemed to spin periodically. I recalled that a human can endure sleeplessness for only about five days, and then he dies. It was hopeless.

The craving for sleep was overcoming hunger, but I decided to grab a snack anyway, more out of boredom than anything else. I reached for a ration pack, and then it hit me. It took the Eniwert a long time to get me my rations. Why? If they had carried the rations off my ship, then it should be no more than a few minutes to get them for me.

I had assumed we were in orbit or somewhere in space. So maybe we were still parked on the ground next to my ship.

I opened a ration pack and picked out some sticky food, kind of dark. Maybe a roast. I walked over to the wall and began drawing a picture of a translator box. Lousy drawing, but the Eniwert did not interrupt me. They watched, chattering excitedly. They were intelligent and knew I was trying to communicate something.

I spoke at the drawing of the box in my own native tongue and then pointed at it, making a circular motion with my finger back toward the Eniwert and tried to imitate the sounds of their speech.

They looked at each other and chattered. Then I walked over toward them, turned, and chattered in what to me sounded like their speech, pointing to the picture; then I stood by the picture, made the same circular gesture in reverse, and spoke a few words in my own tongue.

This caused chattering, arm waving, and a mild bouncing motion I took as their way of expressing excitement. It looked like my tactic was not working until three of them skittered out of the room.

They figured it out. The three were gone a long while, and I nearly jumped out of my hide when they showed up with the translator box from my ship.

I was ecstatic. At last I could make them understand I needed to be left alone to sleep. I grabbed the box and saw it was smashed in on one end. This caused me to drop to the floor in despair, where I was immediately picked up again against protests that I confess had degenerated from anger to whimpering. I almost threw the translator on the floor in frustration and then had a thought.

Maybe I could fix it. Shaking it didn't help. I could not get the screen to show up on the face. Yelling at it didn't help either. Sometimes if you take a thing apart and put it back together, it will work even if you don't know what you are doing.

I had never seen the inside of a translator box and assumed it was beyond repair. I pointed at the seam, looking at the Eniwert. They just looked at me. I set the machine down on the floor, ran my finger down the back seam of the machine, and made a gesture of parting my hands. Pounding gently on it, I made all the gestures I could think of that could signal opening it.

An Eniwert left the room and emerged a few minutes later with a handful of

tools. One tool looked like a chisel and I used it to force open the back of the box. It took a miserably long time to get the back bent enough to see inside. No wiring, of course, just typical trilarium microcubes for the dozens of languages.

I was about to pass out again. When I tilted my head, the room seemed to tilt with it. I knew I was going into delirium, and this was my last chance. Poking around inside with the chisel seemed to do nothing until I rammed it clear to the other side of the box.

A flicker on the screen. Or was it my delirium and wishful thinking? I rammed the tool in again, and the screen lit, sputtering. I let my hand release the chisel very gently. It was apparently connecting something, and I don't know how. I fooled around with the screen trying to find Eniwert and could not. Maybe it did not have Eniwert. We hardly ever ran across them anyway.

I wanted to hit the machine but thought better. If I could not find Eniwert, maybe I could bring up something they recognized. I started reciting *Mary had a little lamb* while changing language settings. Weird sounds started coming out. The Eniwert bent down, listening intently.

Then it happened. Excitement! Loud chattering again. I spoke a few more words, and shortly one of the Eniwert came in with a small device in hand. I continued speaking, and the device in the hand of the Eniwert repeated the sounds of my voice and of the translator. Evidently I had stumbled on a language they recognized, though not their own. I have no clue to this day what it was.

In a while, we had a system worked out. I spoke into the translator; the Eniwert recorded the response of the translator, and their own computer then translated it into their language. Then back again to me. A tedious three-step process that was spelling out hope for me.

I thought it would be easy now. Wrong. They could not understand the word *sleep*. The words came back from them as *die*, and *death*.

Their first words were, *how we help more? You not die*.

I explained, with a bit of exaggeration, that I had been in a crash and needed to go unconscious for a long time for my internal organs to repair. If not, I would die.

Answer back? You won't believe it. The Eniwerts have never heard of sleep.

They said, in essence, *If we go to not aware, that is one step to die. Must never, ever let go not aware.*

So going unconscious means to them, about to die. Hence, stay awake at all costs.

I told them if I do not go unconscious within the next few minutes, I will die and never wake up. But if I go unconscious now for a while, I will get up and be healed.

Excited discussion, longer than I liked. It appeared some did not believe me. So I decided to try lying down again. They did not stop me this time. That hard floor felt like a king's mattress. All I remember is I dreamed deeply of chattering aliens and woke up a long time later with a stiff back and a bruise on my head. Translator boxes make lousy pillows.