

It's Not Nice to Point!

*An excerpt from the journal of Jerome Derkson, planet hunter.
Galaxy date 3849.*

When the alien wrapped his tentacle around my throat, I knew it was all over. My uniform was ripped. Scratches and abrasions on my disheveled person. An ignominious death seconds away, on an obscure planet.

Or so I thought.

Some guys are slow to learn, and I must be one. Company protocol clearly specifies that planet hunters must carry their weapons upon disembarking on a newly discovered planet, regardless of whether the organoscanner says there is life or not. It doesn't matter even if it is a stone-cold rock.

On this particular planet, newly discovered a few days ago by yours truly, life existed but only vegetation. No fauna. Plenty of oxygen, a bit too warm for my taste, but a few nice forests. Ripe for terraforming.

You can't blame me for taking a stroll in the woods after being cooped up in a scout ship for weeks. The company would blame me, that's for sure. Breaking protocol is grounds for dismissal.

So I had taken a stroll into the woods, admiring the almost earth-like structures of the trees, fantasizing I was back on earth, when a roar in the distance jerked me out of my reveries.

No mistaking that sound. It was a ship, maybe another scout but not one of ours. The noise was different.

I jogged out of the forest in time to see a small ship, a bit bigger than my own, slam down hard onto the dusty gravel-strewn ground. "*One lousy pilot,*" I said to myself, *whoever or whatever he is.*

Friend or foe, I asked out loud. Not that he could hear me. The ship was at least a couple of hundred meters away, and the engine was still running. The idea of "foe" accentuated itself in my consciousness the moment I realized it was situated between my scout ship and me.

The term "oops" also asserted itself when I remembered I was unarmed. I wanted desperately to apologize to someone for my stupidity in the vain

thought that this would cause my weapon to appear magically at my side. Weird thoughts tend to cross one's mind like that when faced with danger.

My subconscious at the moment had just about had all it could take of me as it reminded me I was standing out in the open stupidly when I could have ducked back into the trees.

I took a deep breath to calm myself and said it was probably a friend. We humans have few enemies in the galaxy. Certainly none with which we were at war at that moment. Some occasional squabbling over discovered planets but not much else.

It was what happened next that caused my annoyed subconscious to run out of words. The descent ramp of the alien ship opened and descended to the ground with a solid thump. I thought again of ducking into the trees but realized he must know where I am or would not have landed where he did.

The creature started down the ramp. The term "creature" is an understatement. "Ugly" covers a lot of ground here. It was about my size but bigger around, more or less upright but with four legs under it, two long and two short, that gave it a forward lean. Four tentacles. Two at the waist, two at the shoulders next to a round head, puke green with two blue-green bulbous eyes.

It looked around, saw me, and pointed all four tentacles straight at me. It made a sound, not exactly a scream, more like a high-pitched growl, and then it proceeded down the ramp at a good clip.

That's when my subconscious won me over. I bolted for the forest. Whatever it was or wanted could wait until I managed to find a way back to my ship. Maybe skirt around in a circle.

Adrenaline is a wonderful thing. So is curiosity. While the adrenaline voted for speed, curiosity strung itself out like a bungee cord, slowing me down and wanting to find out if the creature was following. The curiosity cord broke when I heard the crashing of branches behind me about twenty meters back. The adrenaline said *I told you so* and cast a vote for more speed. Curiosity was outvoted.

I thought of climbing a tree but realized that four tentacles probably had me outvoted there too. I cut right, hoping to circle around and throw him off. This caused my sleeve to catch on a twig that I assumed would break. It had no more give than an iron spike, so it was my uniform and a small amount of skin that did the giving.

The rip in the uniform was louder than I wished, so I continued on a left angle to my original direction, hoping the alien would breeze past. He didn't.

I made a sharp left turn to get back on the original direction, trying to keep oriented as to where I was relative to my ship. I was trying to be as quiet as I could, but some of the bare spots under the trees had gravel that made a noise when I ran through it.

The forest was not thick by earth standards. The trees were about five or six meters apart, so it was hard to stay out of sight.

I decided on another turn to the right because there was a small copse of trees, closer together with no gravel under them. Maybe I could lose him if I went through it quietly or hide. I slipped sideways between two bush-like plants, tripped on a root, and fell on my face.

Grabbing the root, I shoved myself up, scrapping my hand, leaving some blood on the root. Too late to worry about that now. I knew I was headed back in the general direction of my ship. The sun overhead gave that away. My wits were returning, and I felt a twinge of confidence.

I twisted my body through the trees, ripping my uniform a couple more times, and spotted an opening out of the forest dead ahead. I glimpsed a bit of the ramp of the alien ship off to my right and figured I could hit the open ground and sprint around it for my ship. I had no idea how fast the alien could move, but there was only one way to find out. Maybe he would slow down or get tangled trying to follow me in those trees.

That thought caused my hopes to soar a bit. They would have soared even higher had I not run smack into a tangle of tentacles. The creature had anticipated me, doubled back, and set up an ambush.

I recall from ancient Earth documentaries about a sport in which riders on horses roped a small bovine and then jumped off to see how fast they could tie it down. I don't know what the world record was for that, but I can guarantee my alien broke it when those tentacles grabbed me. He would have made a fine competitor back then if the audience could have put up with looking at him.

The end came swiftly. I do not mean my death because this diary would not exist. My struggles came to an end when I realized I was trussed up tighter than those young cows. He had not taken to squeezing my throat yet, and

the silly thought crossed my mind that maybe he was not going to kill me right off. Torture? Curiosity to see what I was?

He tried to pick me up and carry me. This succeeded only for about 20 seconds before he plopped me back on the ground. Obviously I was just a shade too heavy for him. He dragged me a bit with my back to the ground, but a root caught on my uniform and ripped it. He heard this and stopped. From that moment, he did no dragging.

It was carry for a bit, then thud. Carry, thud. This process continued for about a dozen thuds as we progressed back to his ship. Maybe this is a meat tenderizer, I thought.

At the ramp, he paused a good while, obviously resting for the final push. Finally, he lifted me up and scampered with his load up the ramp into the interior of the ship.

He was evidently played out because we both collapsed inside the door of the ship. His grip loosened a bit, and I contemplated making a break for it right then. Evidently he anticipated this because the grip tightened.

He lay there for about the same amount of time as when he had stopped at the ramp of his ship. Then he got to his feet and looked down at me for quite a few seconds.

Well, here it comes, I thought to myself. He just kept looking at me. Since he was a sentient creature, I knew he was thinking through options. Maybe it was, "Shall I eat him now or save him for a snack on the long trip home?"

He released the tentacle binding my legs. I didn't move until he started to hoist me up. *He wants me to stand!* I muttered.

He muttered back. Not copying me, but a softer version of that alternating growling and whining combination that obviously passed for his language.

Maybe if I get on my feet I can give him a good kick and knock him out or something. I had a gut feeling that would not work, so I passed on that idea. Curiosity was starting to take hold again, so I stood up and stared at him.

He started his growl and whine language again. I can do a pretty good whine myself in some circumstances, and this was one of them. I refrained because I thought he might take it as mockery or I would accidentally say something regrettable.

With my arms still pinned by a tentacle, he pulled me gently toward the interior of the ship. Yes, I said "gently." That was unexpected. Curiosity seemed to be winning this round, and adrenaline had simply given up the argument. *If I was going to die, I thought, at least it was going to be interesting.*

The interior was well lit. We entered a corridor, turned right through a large open passageway into a small room littered with gadgets of all sorts. I recognized some of them as typical ship parts.

He went over to one apparatus, poked at a button with a loose tentacle, and the machine came to life. He poked another button, and the machine made a peculiar gurgling sound. He looked at me and said nothing.

He poked the machine again, which made another kind of sound and looked at me. This persisted for a while until I recognized one of the noises. It was the Aartuk dialect. I had an Aartuk partner on another planet-hunting trip once. I knew no Aartuk, but I now knew what was going on. This was the alien's version of a translator machine. He was trying to find a language in which we could communicate!

About thirty tries later the machine said, "Galactic Standard." I could not help it. I shouted, "Galactic Standard! Galactic Standard!" The alien squealed and released me.

I was so overjoyed that before I could think of what I was doing, I hugged him. My subconscious, or at least a second thought, shot its mouth off in the back of my cranium again and seemed to say, "Oh, that was a really smart stunt, now wasn't it?"

The alien hugged me back. Then he spoke. "I beg you. Please help me!"

"Come again!?" I said. The machine spoke in his tongue, but evidently the idiom did not translate well. "What mean?" So I said, "Explain more."

Well, it was a long and involved speech, and I won't go into the details, but it went something like this: "Did you see how I landed?"

"Yes, and I assume you are a very bad pilot."

"No," he said, "I'm one of the best. But the computer that runs my entire automatic star drive system has failed along with my communications. This happened many revolutions of this planet ago. I have a backup but cannot figure out how to attach it. I picked up your signal to your orbiting satellite

for communication with your ship, scanned, and saw where you are. If you do not help me, I will die stranded here."

I was so dumbstruck I could not speak for a bit.

He said, "Please help me. I will pay you anything you ask." Evidently he had taken my silence as a request for payment.

"No, you need not pay me anything. I see you are a planet hunter also, and we must help one another in trouble. Let me see your computer, and I'll try to fix it. If I cannot, I shall take you aboard my scout ship, rendezvous with my mothership, and then communicate with your race to pick you up at the earliest convenience. I would never leave a fellow sentient stranded."

A long and repetitive speech from the alien ensued, replete with profuse apologies and a perfectly sensible explanation of his conduct. "I knew that when you fled, you were afraid of me. This I do not understand because I pointed at you with all four of my appendages."

I asked, "What does that mean when you point like that?"

"It means I am begging for help," he replied.

"In my culture, it is not only rude but may signal hostile intentions."

He paused before speaking. "So we both had our exercise today. Since you were my only hope of survival, I had no choice but to pursue and capture you."

So it turns out he had a sense of humor. This started to warm my attitude toward him a bit more, especially since I was no longer trussed up in tentacles.

He also expressed apologies for my ripped flight suit and said he would somehow make restitution for it. I told him I had a spare, which was a lie, but didn't want him to feel any worse than he already did.

The second option turned out to be the one. We could not fix his computer because the configuration was too alien for me. None of the parts from my ship worked.

It was at least a full week on our mothership before a scout from his own ship picked him up. We had our own translator box that worked better than his after we identified his species.

I learned it was the custom of his race to sing the praises of a rescuer. I mean, literally make up a song and sing, if you can imagine that. If you can't imagine it, then try alternately growling and whining at the top of your lungs for a while.

The captain ordered me to like it, if you catch my drift. It was getting on my nerves. I was fantasizing of complex ways to hog-tie him, tentacles and all, when his rescue ship rendezvoused with us.

We got a dispatch from the alien captain after my new admirer transferred over. The captain said, "We will help if ever in trouble. We will travel across the galaxy if necessary."

I replied, "Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I shall add your signal to my repertoire of distress calls with great anticipation of your presence and assistance in any danger and shall do so without hesitation."

That's not the first time I have lied to an alien. It was, however, a lie told with great enthusiasm.

THE END