

Sweet Meat

A sci-fi story

*An excerpt from the journal of Jerome Derkson, planet hunter.
Galactic year 3841, Beta Quadrant.*

When the dart slammed into my right thigh, roughly between the knee and the hip, I winced but did not cry out. It occurred to me in the next second that while such momentary discipline was laudable, it was also useless. Those natives would not have shot me unless they knew I was hiding in that thicket. I restrained myself anyhow on the chance it might have been a random shot to see if I was hiding there.

The dart barely penetrated my flight suit, just enough for the tip to embed itself under the skin. My hand was next to my hip, so it took another second to reach the dart and yank it out. All that happened in about three seconds.

I thought of poison darts used by some cultures, including on ancient earth centuries ago, and waited a bit to see if I was going to pass out. After a minute or so, I felt nothing and relaxed with a few deep breaths of relief.

As I lay in the undergrowth, I reached for the clasp on my belt buckle harness, opened the face, and fumbled for the emergency transponder button. It was unnecessary to see it. The button was the only one under the clasp. Good thing. The brush in which I was hiding was the thickest I could find. Dark, dank, and smelly, despite the bright orange vines twisted around rust-brown trunks of brush.

All I needed to do was press the transponder three times. Pressing once or twice would cause the computer on my scout ship's computer to ignore it as accidental. Three times, and my scout ship, parked some three clicks away, would relay the signal to a communications beacon I left in orbit over the planet and set off a blast of high-powered sub-light signals in all directions. How long it would take the mothership to get the signal and reach me was not clear. I only knew they were exploring a planet on the other side of this system while I explored this side.

I hit the transponder three times. Sending such a signal other than in a life-threatening emergency could not only get me fired as a planet hunter but might also buy me a year in prison and a hefty fine. Being chased through a

forest by a horde of armed natives with long sharp teeth counted in my book as an emergency.

At this point in time I would have been pleased to stand in front of a judge as long as I got a cell on the other side of the galaxy from these little monsters. I cursed myself for not sending the signal sooner because it looked like my career as a professional planet hunter was coming to an end.

I could take down any of these aliens in a flash. Maybe three or four. After all, they were only about half the size of a tall man. The problem was there were hundreds of them, all armed with miniscule bows and what I assumed was intended to pass for arrows, small but sharp.

The tangle of orange and brown vines was not so thick that I could not move a few aside and peer out. The natives were standing directly in front of my hideout. Dozens, looking straight at me. So much for my plan to hide.

I lay still for some minutes trying to figure it out. Why didn't they shoot me again? Why not pull away the thicket and drag me out? The answer gradually dawned on me. Their intentions were not as hostile as I thought.

After all, those little darts could hardly be deemed dangerous unless shot by the hundreds. Maybe it was just a warning to say they resented my presence. As I looked them over, I began to see beauty I had not seen before. The down-curved mouth reminded me of a girl I once knew on earth. Kinda cute, when you think about it. The fur matched the rust-brown tint of the brush I was hiding in. Small is often cute, is it not?

The elongated teeth might qualify as fangs if one insisted on applying our own prejudiced criteria, but set in rows like that, I could see they had a beauty of their own.

I had a feeling if I showed myself friendly, they would reciprocate. It took a couple of minutes to crawl backwards out of the underbrush, walk cautiously around it, and stand in front of them. I was not afraid. It was one of those gut feelings a guy needs to follow sometimes. I just knew they meant no harm. The dart must have been an accident, maybe an overzealous warrior.

When they spread their arms in welcome and grinned, I knew I was right to trust my gut.

They parted on each side of me, a path to follow. During the hours it took to reach their village, I endured their high-pitched chattering. At first it sounded like a beginner's violin class. I got used to it after a while, and by

the time we reached the village, I could see the rhythm and music in their speech. It was delightful. I regretted not having some way to record it.

The village was a typical pre-metal age type we planet hunters often encounter. Small round huts, made of that same rust-brown brush and tied together with dried-out vines.

Their bows and arrows seemed made of the same stuff. They all carried their bows in the right hand, the opposite of most humans, with a packet of little arrows over the shoulder. Primitive and typical.

Maybe they thought I was a god. *That must be it*, I thought. That happens sometimes in planet hunting and creates difficulties of its own. At the center of the village, they stood around looking, chattering, and doing nothing at all.

I felt like a fool. The distress signal was on its way, and I could not stop it. Sooner or later somebody would show up to rescue me and would have to tell the truth. These were the finest, most hospitable, and gentlest little aliens I had ever met. I knew I would be the laughingstock of other prison inmates in the near future. Rescued, in quotes, from harmless overgrown teddy bears.

Before I had dropped down to the planet, I skim-read the data about it. Thin oxygen atmosphere, nice scenery, but not recommended to visit. Not a planet to claim for my bosses at the Galactic Colonization Service either, since it was inhabited by semi-sentient beings. But you know how it is. After weeks on a ship, with not much to see, bored out of your mind, you would give a lot for a stroll on some firm ground.

Just a couple of hours wandering around would have suited me. Now a couple of hours could never be enough. I wanted to stay.

We reached the village, and they directed me to the center. Out of a large hut emerged three natives, dressed in colored skins, decorated with bits of bright stones and woven fur ornaments. Chiefs, obviously.

I knelt before them and extended my hand. *Maybe this was a hostile gesture in their culture*, I thought, but decided to take the chance. One of the chiefs approached and put one paw on each side of my hand, then proceeded to pat my arm all the way up to the shoulder. I did the same for him. He seemed to appreciate it. Soon, dozens were patting me all over. It felt a lot better than lying in that brush, for sure. Wonderful, in fact.

I can't say I have ever loved aliens of any kind. A few good friends, sure. But my thoughts about these guys came close to that. Maybe I could convince my company to open this planet as a tourist resort or something.

I stood up and they began to move me to a large clearing on the edge of the village where an enormous round hut stood, big enough to accommodate nearly the whole village. The town meeting place, for certain.

That's when all hell broke loose. Natives pointed to the sky behind me and I as I turned, I heard the whining metallic roar of a ship engine passing overhead. I looked up in shock. A galactic assault craft!

I shouted stupidly, "No, no! It was a mistake!" The craft settled just outside the limits of the village, to the right of the large hut. Troops poured out, charging with battle gear and armored suits. They advanced on the native horde, firing ultra-microwave stun-blasts, the shots dropping natives on impact, not killing but putting them down hard.

Natives armed their bows, shot scores of arrows that bounced off the suits like leaves off a wall. At the time it seemed a lopsided, unfair and unnecessary battle.

I lost my mind. Grief, guilt and rage swirled through me like devilish winds and I charged the attackers. I had to stop them at all costs, even with no weapon in hand. They absolutely must not harm my precious friends.

I slammed into the nearest attacker, clawing, pounding the faceplate with my fists, bloodying my knuckles and kicking with my knee. He spun and pushed me down, shouting at me through his faceplate something I could not hear over the clamor of the natives.

Another soldier jumped on me and I fought him as best I could, screaming in anger and frustration as two others pounced on my back. One pulled something from a side pouch, slammed it into my neck and pulled a trigger.

That's all I remember until I opened my eyes and found myself looking up into the face of nurse Stedson on the mother ship. "How you are feeling?" she asked. I could not answer because I was trying to decide if this was a nightmare or a pleasant dream, since I had a secret crush on that particular nurse.

I glanced around the room and saw I was in the infirmary, hands bandaged and the captain standing just behind the nurse. He had a peculiar grin on his

face with hands on hips, a favorite posture he takes whenever he thinks he is right, which is most of the time.

I closed my eyes and said, "Thank you for whatever kindness you intend but I do believe I am owed some explanations. I was in the midst of defending some dear friends from a brutal assault when I got zapped by a stun gun."

The captain grinned at me. "Still spoiling for a fight?" His expression was jovial and in no way threatening, with an odd twinge of compassion.

"I'll skip it for the moment," I replied, "maybe after I get a few questions answered. I suspect your rescue of me had to do with something I was not quite grasping."

He chuckled, "Right on. You were about to be invited for dinner, with you as the main course."

"That's absurd! Those natives were both harmless and friendly. When I came out of that thicket they could have drilled me with a thousand darts. They didn't. The dart they accidentally hit me with did no harm at all. If it were poison, I would have dropped dead."

The Captain leaned back on his heels a bit, looked up at the ceiling pensively, like a teacher about to lecture a small child. "It was indeed a poison dart but tipped with a peculiar potion. We call it sarcastically, the native love potion. Instead of killing its prey, it makes the victim dearly love the natives. So the prey surrenders willingly. You see, they like their meat fresh."

"That still makes no sense," I said. "Cultures throughout the galaxy, including some in the history of our own planet used poison darts. The prey gets carried back home for dinner where it gets butchered and served fresh enough."

"You don't quite get it," the captain said. "They like it really, really fresh."

I noticed the twinkle in his eye just as he noticed the puzzled look in mine. "You see, they not only like their meat fresh when they consume it. They like it alive!"

My jaw dropped about the same time as my elbow gave way on the mattress and I flopped back down on the bed. I could not speak. Something caught in my throat. I think it was my pride. The captain laughed and turned to exit the room.

I sat straight up in bed and declared, "Captain, I have a couple of questions. But before that I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart, soul and quivering liver."

"You are more than welcome. What are your questions?"

"First, are we still in orbit over the planet?"

"Yes, we are," he said. "We'll be going to star drive in about half an hour."

"Now the other question. Do you happen to have a spare hydrogen bomb you could loan me?"

THE END