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about 2,000 words

The Abductionist

by D.B. Toth

By the time the ship reached the first target of the night, the captain was in a thoroughly foul mood.

The current mission was doomed from the get-go. Shortly after takeoff, the reverse thrust started acting up, making hovering nigh impossible. Once that was problem was fixed, radio signals from the planet's surface began interfering with the navigation system, rendering altitude readings unreliable.

This last problem almost ended in disaster. Flying over the Rockies, had it not been for the last-minute manual correction of a junior navigator, the computer, responding to the incorrect altitude reading, would have steered the ship into a

snow-covered mountain.

The captain praised the Navigator and yanked the Systems Engineer aside.

“Do Area 51 and Rose-welle mean anything to you?”

The Systems Engineer visibly began to reflect, but the captain held up an impatient tentacle.

“Need I remind you what these barbarians will do to us should we crash? How about locking us away in some Krouk-forsaken military compound and prodding us until we leak from every orifice!”

“Hmmm... I imagine it would be pretty much like what we do to them when we collect them as specimens,” the engineer responded, his seven eyes locking onto the captain’s.

In the old days, when he was younger and had complete faith in the Universe, the captain would have ordered the engineer to be put into a Paincell for insubordination. At the very least, he would have slapped him.

But today, he simply dismissed him and retired to his quarters. He took an electro-bath to refresh his neural synapses, and reclining in his pod, put a heat pack on his tired eyes.

This was how his assistant found him when the door to the captain’s quarters hissed open. The assistant slithered in soundlessly until he stood respectfully behind the reclining chair in which the captain lay horizontally, as if weighed

down by the problems of the Universe.

“We have acquired the target, sir,” the assistant said.

The captain pulled the heat pack from his eyes.

“It’s harvest time back home. I should be with my colony right now, prepping the combines. Instead that asshole gets elected Party Secretary and I’m eight galaxies away, collecting specimens for a project started by another asshole who died 200 years ago.”

“The recorder,” the assistant said, pointing a tentacle to the ceiling.

According to new Universal Law, all communication in an intergalactic starship, including thought transmissions, was to be recorded for posterity -- to be analyzed in the case of an accident or mishap. In reality, it was just another way for the government to keep tabs on those subjects who were farthest out of its physical reach.

The captain waved the concern away with five tentacles.

“What’d you got?”

“Target is operating a machine down a deserted stretch of road, about 40 dregs from here. We could make it there in four biggs. The Head Collector suggests a diversion in the form of a roadblock. This will force the target to stop his machine and exit it. No sense in risking damage to the ship through pursuit.”

“Fine. Call me when it’s on board.”

The captain fell into an uneasy coma and had visions of his colony; freshly hatched, scantily clad females dancing by the fires of an ancient volcano. The youngest and most beautiful, her body covered with warts, was just about to slip out of her holding net, when the captain was awakened by his assistant.

“We have it, sir.”

The captured earthling was strapped down on the examination table, its puny arms close to his body, the straps securing its wrists and ankles. Its skin was a color somewhere between brown and the color of dried vomit, the captain observed with distaste. The captain knew earthlings came in all colors, white, black, brown and every shade in between, but he was not prejudiced. He hated them all equally.

Like all earthlings, this one smelled awful, like something that had been held in a damp vault, or cave. The captain slithered closer to take a good look at the earthling’s face, and saw that it was calm and unworried.

This bothered the captain greatly. Usually, freshly collected specimens struggled against their restraints and discharged moisture from their eyes, a liquid compound high in a certain mineral that was essential to their diet. Sometimes they discharged waste materials. The sounds they normally emitted became louder and more repetitive.

“Is it alive?”

“Yes,” the Head Collector answered. But we didn’t have to sedate it. It seems perfectly at ease.”

“Is it ill?”

“No, at least,”

“Well, is it, or isn’t it?”

“Physically, it seems all right. But it’s not responding in a manner consistent with those of its kind.”

The captain was losing patience.

“Does it meet the profile?”

The Head Collector ran seven eyes down the glow-screen that contained the mission parameters as they pertained to the collection of foreign specimens.

“In every way, yes.”

“Then proceed.”

The Chief Analyst took this as his cue and stepped forward. He held a shock-stick in one hand, to be used in case the earthling made trouble while it was being carried to the dissection room.

The overhead light caught the gleaming surface of the shock-stick and deflected a ray of light onto the examination table. The captain’s eyes followed it as it came to rest on the earthling’s face. The earthling turned its head as much as the head restraint would allow and looked straight at the captain.

The earthling held both eyes open, then closed and opened one very rapidly. Then, his mouth opened and the captain could see his white, blunt teeth.

“Did you see that?” the captain said, turning to the Chief Analyst.

“No,” the Chief Analyst replied, annoyed. Like most analysts, once he was in the throes of medical research, he preferred dissecting to talking.

“Call the Translator,” the captain ordered.

His assistant withdrew. The Chief Analyst slithered closer.

“May I remind the good captain that the analysis of foreign specimens falls under the jurisdiction of civilian, not military authority? As such, the captain has no right to examine, or even to question the specimen.”

The captain leveled a cool glare at the Chief Analyst.

“May I remind the good chief that interfering with my authority on my ship will result in one or more of his tentacles being dissolved?”

The Chief Analyst withdrew, probably to draft a complaint to Central Command. On his way out, he nearly plowed over the Translator who was shuffling in.

The captain disliked academics on principle, and held no special fondness for the translator, who spent most of his time on the ship studying the dialects of the Joined Colonies of Amereeka, the super-colony from which they plucked the earthling.

“I’m going to ask this earthling some questions and you will translate for me,” the captain said.

“Yes, captain.”

“Why did it close its eyes so rapidly and why did it show me his teeth?”

The translator thought for a second, then started making strange, guttural sounds which, to the Captain, sounded like a commuter starship engaging its fourth supplemental thrust at top speed. Like most inferior species, earthlings could not communicate telepathically and had to resort to stringing their pedestrian thoughts into cumbersome units, which they then had to vocalize, sound by sound.

It was a tedious, not to mention imprecise, way of communication.

“It says you look much uglier than... (here the translator searched for the right words), the foreigners look on the far-viewer.”

“What’s a far-viewer?”

“A device that transmits images through rather primitive electromagnetic signals. They use it to tell stories, some of them about out-of-earth visitors. Very amusing stories, even if unrealistic,” said the translator, who prided himself on being an amateur exo-anthropologist, in addition to being recognized galaxy-wide as a ground-breaking linguist.

“Tell it, that at least I don’t smell like I’m already dead,” the captain said.

After the translation, the earthling started shaking and emitting a high-

pitched, repetitive noise that made its face change color. The translator looked amused.

The captain decided to try a new line of questioning.

“Ask it why it’s not afraid.”

“It says it was on its way to...end its life when we picked it up.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The translator struggled to think up the right words.

“It’s a concept totally alien to us. It’s when an earthling turns on itself, ending its own life.”

“Voluntarily?”

“Strangely enough, yes.”

The captain shook his heads.

“Why would it do such a stupid thing?”

It says everyone in the colony died some time ago and it was its fault. It can’t live with the... knowledge,” the translator said, for his language had no word for guilt.

The captain gave a look of displeasure to the translator that all his inferiors had come to know too well, especially during the last few weeks.

“It feels lonely without his colony, I suppose,” the translator said finally.

“Ah!” the captain said. “Ask him how big his colony was.”

“He says four.”

“Four? That’s it? That’s nothing to get upset about.”

The captain slithered slowly around the deck, rubbing his tentacles together. He slid behind the navigator and looked out through the oval windows onto the earthling’s planet. It was depressing and ugly, hideously ugly, with tall vegetation that made it a monotonous green, and the terrain was hilly -- making seeing at a distance impossible. It had none of the grandeur of his flat and uncluttered home planet. For the first time, he wondered what it looked like to an earthling.

He turned to the chief.

“Lower the ramp.”

As the captain was about to slither back to the earthling, the Chief Analyst stepped in his path.

“May I remind you, that...”

The captain back-handed him with five tentacles. The chief analyst hit the wall with a satisfying swoosh, like a wet rag.

“This is going in my report,” he said, and passed out.

The ramp was lowered without further protest. The captain ordered the earthling to be untied. It was done very quickly.

The earthling sat up on the table and started rubbing his its arms and legs where the straps had been holding it down. Then it hopped onto its two tiny feet.

Its legs buckled and without the captain's supporting tentacle, would have collapsed.

"Excellent reflexes, sir," the Head Collector said.

"I know."

The captain led the earthling to the ramp. The low oxygen concentration in the air only permitted the captain and his crew to be exposed to the Earth's atmosphere for about five minutes without proper gear.

The captain considered calling the Translator to explain to the earthling the concept of "compassion". But time was running out. He pointed a tentacle into the distance.

Then, the earthling did something strange. It raised the appendage on the right side of its body and held it out in a way that the two bone groups of his "arm" formed a strange angle, while the digits of his "hand" were outstretched. He wrapped a hand around one of the captain's tentacles and shook it up and down.

Then, he turned and walked down the ramp and disappeared into the night and the trees without looking back.

The captain stood motionless for a while, breathing the thin air that felt almost good after the closed quarters of the ship. Usually, he avoided looking at the earthling's planet because it made him feel alone and like he was getting further and further away from his home. But now, looking over the trees he didn't

know were called pine, and over the distant lights from villages whose inhabitants he would never know, he felt a long forgotten elation.

The captain took one last breath and went inside the ship.