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Ticolaya and the Terrans
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TICOLAYA AND THE TERRANS

This novella was inspired by Eric Frank Russell's 'Next of Kin'... one of the first SF stories I ever read.

TICOLAYA AND THE TERRANS

Ticolaya saw the men carried away on stretchers but after that nothing much happened. After the events of the previous night he was desperately tired. Against his will his eyelids closed and he fell asleep. When he woke all was still quiet in the compound. His teacher, the Ree M'Tasha was still where he had last seen him, sitting with two other prisoners by a small campfire. He approached them with the anxious question: "Has anything happened? Have they taken the Strange Ones from the building?"

Ree M' Tasha nodded. "Yes, my Y'Tami, a short while ago. They took them across to one of the rocky islands for the funeral rites."

"And since then?"

"They performed the proper rites from what we could see, then withdrew to the shore of the island to wait for them to die. They'll probably go back at sunrise to see if the poison has done its job."

Ticolaya twisted his torso and laid his arms across his back. His small body heaved with emotion and tears rolled down his cheeks.

Everything came in twos to Ticolaya; two parents, two eyes, two ears, two arms and two sturdy pairs of legs. He was born two years after the start of the Alpha Space War and was two years old before he saw his father, who was the leader- the Tami- of their planet of Chiffyor. On the day he turned four years old he was sent away to the mountains to begin the long time of strict training necessary for the day when he would take his father's place as Tami of the people. Thoughts of intergalactic war were far from his mind when he began his education under the constant care of his companion-teacher, the Ree M' Tasha.

It did not take long for Ticolaya to discover that a Y'Tami's training was not as exciting and glamorous as everyone believed. Mostly it was long, hard and exceedingly boring and he began to look forward to the smallest thing that would present a change in routine. They were few and far between and usually came in the guise of some kind of instruction.

Such was the trip he and M'Tasha made to the neighbouring planet of Vare. It was a dead world with no natural life in its cold, dark canyons, but it was rich in minerals and many worlds had mining operations on it so there was a lot to see. They toured the bases and explored a small part of the maze of tunnels which ran all through the mineral veined mountains. They were led on a conducted tour of the extraction plant and spent several days on board a massive mining machine as it crept hungrily across the deserts munching up the crystallised surface and sorting the valuable sands in its rumbling belly. It was all intensely exciting to the young Chiffyorn and he was disappointed when Ree M'Tasha declared his studies of mining to be at an end, and that they must return to more important matters.

The return trip, which he had expected to be about as enthralling as staring at a grey wall, turned out to be the most exciting time of all. He was gazing from a port, watching the pale green disc of Vare grow smaller by the moment when six, fat pods burst out of Beta Space and began to fire upon the ship. The pilot tried to outrun them but the Vare to Chiffyor ferry was built for dependability not speed. It was wallowing along, its screens up and glowing with the absorbed energy of the lethal blue fire from the pods when a sleek ship of shining silver materialised in Alpha Space and routed the pods with ridiculous ease. Its streamlined shape was imprinted on Ticolaya's young mind long after it had gone. He sat in a daze and did not even hear the pilot's announcement that they had just escaped an attack by the Bovans.

"Bovans," Ree M'Tasha said in his best lecturer's voice. "Are a war-like race, allies of the Kyben Vor, instigators of the Alpha Space war. We discussed their political motives for entering the war the day before we lifted off for Vare, you will remember. Please recite for me a summary of the Bovan political situation."

Ticolaya turned his head slowly from the port to face his tutor with glazed eyes. "Who were they?" he asked. "Those in the silver ship?"

Ree M'Tasha snorted. "They are no concern of yours," he said. "They are members of the Federation. You haven't learnt about them yet and you should not have any interest in them."

"But I am interested. Who are they? Where do they come from? Why was their ship streamlined when there's no need for it in space? What do they look like?"

"So many questions. Why do you want to know? The knowledge will be of no use to you."

Ticolaya frowned and couldn't understand his own sudden desire to know more about the beings in the sleek ship. "I don't know," he confessed. "I don't understand it. I have this feeling."

The Ree M'Tasha snorted louder than ever causing several other passengers to turn and stare at him. He tucked his legs more comfortably under him, against the pale cream fur of his belly and turned his attention to his student. His voice when he spoke again, was full of derision. "That feeling you have is idle curiosity. Idle curiosity is a Terran trait."

"Terran?"

"The crew of the silver ship was Terran. They are a strange race, unlike any other in the galaxy. Some races worship them, seeing them as handsome in appearance and transcendent in demeanour. They are natural bipeds with a smooth hide that gleams like polished brown metal. They are industrious and intelligent but disarmingly illogical. They have no equals. But, they are still no concern of yours my Y'Tami, and as your teacher I do not wish you to fill your head with thoughts of them."

From that day on Ticolaya thought of nothing else. The tall, proud Terrans obsessed him; they were in his every waking thought, even in his dreams. He read every book, collected every scrap of information, viewed every piece of film he could find that

contained any information at all about Terra and its natives. It became the ambition of his life to meet a Terran and Ree M'Tasha's secret dread that he actually would.

The Y'Tami still studied and did well in his lessons, but every spare moment was occupied by something pertaining to the subject of Terrans. While he did not encourage the interest M'Tasha did not actually forbid it either, hoping it would die a natural death. But it did not. By the time he was twelve years and on the verge of becoming an adult, Ticolaya had written several books and innumerable essays on the subject and was acknowledged as the greatest living authority in his region of space, on the subject of the Strange Ones of the small, blue planet of Terra.

For the fourteen years of the Alpha Space War the Chiffyorns had considered themselves neutral and were therefore annoyed when the tide of battle came along and engulfed their galactic backwater. They were no more pleased when both sides in the conflict landed on their doorstep asking for the use of their world as a base. Being so far from their home systems both sides desperately needed somewhere to set up storehouses, workshops and hospitals. Both sides knew that whichever one gained the foothold on Chiffyor would be the victor in that part of the galaxy. But they did not dare to try to take the little world by force for it had long enjoyed the protection of the powerful Vortex Empire. The Empire had so far kept out of the war and both sides preferred it that way.

So the Federation tried to buy a toehold with galactic credits and promises of freedom preserved and free trade once the war was over. While they were bribing, wheedling, begging and pleading, the Kyben Vor kidnapped Y'Tami Ticolaya from his mountain school and demanded the use of Chiffyor in exchange for his safe return. They were certain the Chiffyorns would submit, but the plan backfired; the Tami solemnly informed them that his son knew his duty and would be pleased to die for them. Chiffyor then promptly joined the Federation.

Ticolaya knew of the ultimatum and the answer his father had given the Kyben Vor. He approved, and bravely and calmly awaited his death. Ree M'Tasha, kidnapped with him, waited too, immensely proud of the quiet courage of his pupil. Standing beside him he bravely faced the guard who came to collect them.

They were not taken to their deaths but to a narrow cell deep in the belly of a battle cruiser and there they remained incarcerated for a span of time which lost all meaning to them. They saw no-one and heard nothing; but food and water arrived at regular intervals so they knew they had not been entirely forgotten. With typical Chiffyorn stoicism they bore it all without complaint and did not even speculate on what might lie ahead. They learned of their fate almost half a year later when they were off loaded from the battle cruiser to a cargo ship which took them on, deep into Combine territory to the prison world of Stebb. Its warders were the native inhabitants, the stolid, none-too-bright but ever helpful Dows. They were loyal Combine citizens with a level of technology sufficient to enable them to build spaceships and carry on moderately successful interspace trading ventures.

They were ignored when the Combine went to war, for the simple reason that their fighting potential was close to zero. But someone forgot to tell the Dows and they

turned up, as eager as children, to assist their companion worlds. The presence of their tubby little ships in the battle zones soon became a source of acute embarrassment to the Combine who found them underfoot and in the way wherever they turned; and a source of great amusement to the Federation who delighted in the confusion they caused.

The Combine's solution to the problem was to convince its over eager ally that his finest role lay in taking charge of the prisoners of war. Large prisons were set up on Stebb and the Dows changed from being a distinct liability to the Combine, to a valuable asset. They were unswervingly loyal and unbribable, unshakeable in the face of most insults and riots and just intelligent enough to detect most escape plans before they got very far. By the time Ticolaya and Ree M'Tasha arrived, escape attempts were regarded by most prisoners as a complete waste of time.

It was not that the prisons were high-walled or heavily guarded; it was not that most prisoners could not have outwitted a Dow six ways from Sunday; it was simply that there was nowhere to go once an escape was made. The prisons had been set up, each in the heart of a number of small islands spaced a good distance apart on a broad sea. On all the islands there was not a single ground vehicle and only one small, well guarded boat. To complete the picture the seas around the islands teemed with schools of fish that made sharks look docile and piranhas mere nibblers.

In the ten year history of the prison world there had only been a handful of prisoners who had actually escaped from their islands and gone any distance across the water. Those who had not been eaten had been shot or recaptured. After hearing this and after an escape attempt or two that usually ended in recapture and punishment, most prisoners gave up and settled into a lethargic existence which took them from day to day in a kind of stupor. M'Tasha and his pupil soon fell into the same sort of routine.

Prison number 16, the one to which Ticolaya had been assigned, was set on the eastern edge of an island not more than twenty kilometres wide and hardly more than ten metres above sea level at its highest point. It was a low, dome shaped mound ringed by a rocky shoreline and covered with brown grass, a couple of pockets of forest and some swamps. Apart from the prison there was only one other community, a small fishing village some distance south, and some isolated individual dwellings. The prison consisted of a large flat topped central building, two stories high, surrounded by a power house, a pump house, workshops, large open air compounds for the oxygen breathing prisoners, a pond for the aquatic types and a new, closed atmosphere dome for the Combine's more exotic enemies. The prison compounds were to the south of the building. To the north east corner was a small pad for the use of the spaceship that came at regular intervals bringing supplies, Bovan inspection teams and sometimes new prisoners.

The appearance of the ship in the sky over the island, the landing and the sight of it towering over the main building caused a flutter of interest for Ticolaya the first few times he saw it. After that the only interest for him, as well as for most of the prisoners, lay in speculation about new prisoners.

"I wonder who they are this time, and where they'll be put?" Ree M'Tasha asked of no-one in particular as he reared up on his hind legs to reach over the top of the well wall. With his front hoofs anchored on top of the wall he leaned his torso across the dark hole and grabbed the bucket.

"In here with us, I should imagine," said Bruon Abar a lean, reptilian biped, as he scrambled across to assist with the drawing of the water. "At last count we had fewest prisoners of any of the compounds."

The Red Arulla joined them. He was an Ossillian omnivore, a centaur-like creature bigger and heavier than the dainty Chiffyorns. His companion, the Black Arulla lay a short distance away in the shade of a tree. He was suffering from a bout of fever and had not moved for several days.

"They might be prisoners for the new closed atmosphere dome," he suggested. "The war has gone into Sekate and Booain territory and some of the inhabitants there are chlorine and sulphur breathers." He scooped a dip of water from the bucket as it rose to the surface and quietly padded back to his sick friend.

"I hope they're Terrans," Ticolaya said and for the first time since his pupil had heard the magic word, M'Tasha hoped so too; there were so few things in this dreary life to put a sparkle into Ticolaya's eyes.

Suddenly an amplified voice rang out across the compound. In Standard Speech, it called for the prisoner Y'Tami Ticolaya to report to door East-One of the main building. A little group consisting of the Arullas, Ree M'Tasha, Bruon Abar, Ticolaya and several other sympathetic life forms, quickly gathered to discuss the matter but Ticolaya knew it was a waste of time; ultimately, he had no choice, he would have to obey their jailers' summons. If he attempted to remain in the compound the guards would come and find him and their search and seizure methods were not always gentle on innocent parties. "I will go," he said putting an end to the talk, and went without further fuss.

Inside the building he was taken to see the Prison Commander, a Dow called Svee. Commander Svee told Ticolaya that he was very interested in alien life-forms; in particular the ones known as the Strange Ones- Terrans, and he had just learned that Ticolaya was an expert on them. "I would be pleased to hear all you can tell me about them," he said. Ticolaya, delighted to have discovered an aficionado of his favourite subject, obliged with a flood of information. At last Svee turned off his electronic notebook, thanked him for the interesting conversation and said that he hoped they might talk again one day. Ticolaya trotted happily back to the compound between a pair of flat footed, stomping Dows. He was glowing with pleasure. Bruon Abar smiled when he heard the reason.

"Terrans," he said, "What a strange effect they have on you. It's pleasing to see you happy little friend." He shook his scaly head slowly back and forth causing a ripple of light to play along its smooth surface. "Still, I can't help wondering why a lead-headed Dow like Svee should be so interested in Terrans all of a sudden. What, exactly, did he ask you?"

"Mostly about what kind of creatures they are, what they breathed, what they ate, what their customs were, that sort of thing."

"Did he ask you how much they ate and how much sleep they needed?"

Ticolaya drew back his head a little and looked at the big lizard. "Yes, he did. How did you know?"

"I guessed. I was talking to a Zegan at the compound fence the other day and he told me that the Dows collect information on all the imprisoned species, to learn their strengths and weaknesses. Terrans were probably an unknown quantity to them, as they are to most of us. But you, my little friend, have just given away all their secrets."

"No!" Ticolaya cried in abject horror and hoped fervently for the rest of that day that it wasn't true. Late that evening, he knew that Bruon Abar had been correct when four Terrans were roughly pushed into the compound.

"Attention! Attention!" bawled the amplified voice of the Dow Commander. "Prisoners of compound East-One are advised of the arrival of four prisoners of the species Terran. They are named Al, Altoo, Mickeymouse and..." There was a sudden silence from the speakers, then: "Ozzmozz." This linguistic gobstopper was followed by some amplified throat clearing then the Commander made his usual speech about welcoming the new boys and no in-fighting and went off he air with a click that echoed through all the compounds.

The Terrans, tall bipeds dressed in shimmering silver suits that made them look like offspring of their sleek craft, set about carrying the food cartons and building materials supplied by their captors, into the shelter of the first clump of trees.

"I must go to them," Ticolaya cried. "I must beg their forgiveness for what I have done."

"Y'Tami, no!" M'Tasha grabbed him. "They will be angry with you. They may kill you." Ticolaya looked at him blankly. "You know they are an uneven tempered species. I cannot let you risk it. I forbid you to approach them."

But Ticolaya would not be dissuaded. His guilt was too great to bear and could only be purged by confession. Excitement and trepidation alternating within him, the current of it causing him to tingle, he made his way across the compound to the spot among the trees where the Terrans had elected to camp. He saw they had erected neat shelters from the pitifully small load of building materials they had been allowed. As he drew close, lingering in the shade of every bush, one of the silver clad beings heard him and turned.

"We have a little visitor," he said.

"Oh yeah?" said another man beside him and turning to look repeated the same words in a different tone. "Oh yeah, Chiffyorn, I've seen them."

"Never heard of them."

"They come from that little world in the middle of what's now called the Holding Zone. There was a big fuss over it about a year or so ago. They called it... ah... a 'vital stepping stone'. The Kybes wanted it bad, and so did we. We got it because the locals decided to throw in their lot with us."

Ticolaya looked at them in awe. Like all Terrans both men had nearly bare skin with only a sparse covering of hair on their forearms and a little on their faces. Paradoxically, the hair on top of their bodies was long and luxuriously thick. On one man it was dark brown in colour and stood out from his head in a wild frizz all round

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like a dark nimbus. On the other man it was cut short, like the hairs of a thick brush. His eyes were bright blue, the other man's eyes were brown and lustrous. "You are well informed," Ticolaya said, hoping it was a polite remark.

"We keep our ears open," the brown eyed one remarked.

Wondering what else Terrans might do with their ears, and not knowing how to respond to a statement like that, Ticolaya hesitated a long time before he spoke again. "I am Y'Tami Ticolaya," he said.

"Nice for you," the man replied.

Ticolaya flicked his ears in a Chiffyorn frown. How was he going to be able to confess to these strange beings when he could not even communicate clearly with them? "No. It is my title and my name."

"Title? You mean to say you're royalty or something?"

"I am... I was, leader-in-training- Y'Tami- to my people."

"That a fact?" the man asked, causing Ticolaya's ears to semaphore again. "What can we call you?"

"My name is Ticolaya."

"Ticky Ticky Tavi. OK. My name's Dubin."

Ticolaya checked the name off against the memory of the names that had been spoken and not finding a match came to the logical conclusion: "If you have given a false name to the Dows they will learn of it and you will be punished."

"False name? No, my name really is Dubin. Ali Dubin."

The first syllable sounded right. "Ah," Ticolaya said glad of at least one crumb of understanding. "You have long names of which you use only a small part." He looked at the other man. "Which name do you have?"

"I'm Albert Jones."

"The one called Altoo?"

"Yeah, that's right, I'm Al too." He looked at the first Al and closed one eye with exaggerated slowness. The action, Ticolaya recalled was a wink, but he couldn't remember what it was supposed to mean. He reminded himself that it was not important anyway and steeled himself for his confession.

"I have something I must say to all your group; would you ask the others to join us?"

Al one turned slightly. "Oi, you two, visitor for you. Get yourselves out here." A voice came back from one of the tiny, bare wooden dwellings.

"Is she blonde, busty and beautiful?"

Al turned back and studied Ticolaya. "Small, brown furred, four legged, two armed, flat chested and of indeterminate sex."

"That'll do," the voice said cheerfully. There was a clatter of dropped tools and a man appeared at the door. He was smaller than either of the two Als, with lank hair the colour of sun dried summer grass and eyes as pale as a winter day sky. Close behind him came the fourth man of the group, a big, broad shouldered man. Ticolaya found himself staring for the big man seemed to have his hair on upside down. There was

little on top where it should have been, but a rich growth depending from cheeks and chin. It was a disturbing sight.

"This is Chet Altman," Al was saying clapping a hand to the shoulder of the man with dry grass hair. Ticolaya was about to comment on the appearance of yet another Al, when the man went on to say something that took the thought right out of his mind. "We call him the Aussie Mozzie."

"You do?" he asked, confused by this business of Terran names. He hadn't realised it was so complicated. "Why?" He suspected it might be a title like captain or leader.

"Why? Well, because he's an Aussie and he's a little feller. And this one we call Mickey Mouse." He clapped his hand on the hair-amiss giant. "His name is Davy La Salle Don't let his size put you off; he's just a big, good hearted slob."

"Why do you call him Mikkymous?"

"Because he's a little feller too."

Ticolaya felt he was making sense of about one word in three, which was something less than optimum for understanding, but one thing he did know well enough to dispute, was that Davy La Salle was a small man. "He's big!"

"You're dead right."

Al Too jogged him with an elbow. "Lay off him Al, you're confusing the poor little beggar." Big Davy squatted on his heels to put his face on a level with Ticolaya's. "I'll explain it," he said. He held out his great hands to indicate a space about half the width of his face. "A mouse is a little animal, see? Mickey Mouse was a famous little animal. They call me Mickey Mouse because it's just about the dead opposite of what I am."

Though not entirely clear about the repeated use of the word 'dead' where it seemed to have no application, Ticolaya grasped what he thought was the idea behind the additional names. "You are called by opposites. I understand. Then an ozzmozz is a large animal?" It was logical. It was not correct.

"No. A Mozzie is a little insect- just like him." All four men began suddenly barking. Ticolaya shied backwards, tripped over his own back legs and collapsed in a heap. The barking became louder, the men bending backwards and forwards, waving their hands about and making odd hacking, gasping noises through their mouths. He was terrified that he had offended them and that this was some pack ritual, a prelude to a hunt. He recalled from his reading that Terrans stemmed from a stock of social, hunting animals... meat eaters... organised killers. But they made no move to attack him.

"Are you angry?" he asked. "Should I go away?"

Al shook his head as he squatted to face him. "No, no, don't go. We're not angry. Don't you know what laughter is?"

"Ah!" the young Chiffyorn exclaimed, another ray of sunlight breaking through his clouds of non-comprehension. "I have seen it mentioned but did not fully understand what it meant. I thought it indicated some form of sympathy."

"Sympathy? What made you think that?"

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"Because it was usually expressed after someone hurt themselves, or fell down or said something which would have caused them embarrassment."

"I see. A good deduction, but incorrect. It's an indication of humour, not sympathy. We laugh when we find something funny. It's an outward expression of our sense of humour."

Ticolaya was silent a while as he reviewed what he had learned about Terrans. While he thought, the silver clad men ceased their laughter and seated themselves on the ground in the shade of the tree where he had fallen. When he spoke they all paid attention to him as if his words were jewels of great value falling from the lips of a stone idol. It flattered him but also made him feel uneasy.

"I had learned that Terrans had five senses- taste, smell, touch, hearing and sight; but I did not know you had a sixth."

Al shook his head. "It's not that sort of sense. It's not a physical sense. It's an emotional sense. You mentioned sympathy- so you feel sympathy?" Ticolaya nodded. "Love? Hate? Desire? Well humour is that sort of sense. Don't you have a sense of humour?"

"I thought all intelligent races had a sense of humour," Ozzmozz remarked.

"Nah," the Mouse responded in a drawl. "You've only got to look at the Dows to see that's not true." There was more of the noise called laughter.

"Can you explain this humour sense to me?"

Al screwed his face into a grimace the other men recognised as an expression of doubt. How in space could you explain humour to a being who has no sense for it? He scratched his head and looked at Ticolaya. "Imagine this situation: One of your people is up on a platform addressing a crowd. He is pompous and unpleasant. At the height of his speech he falls off the platform into a muddy puddle, not injuring himself, but ending up covered in mud... how would you feel?"

The young being considered. "Satisfied that justice had been done and pleased he had not been hurt."

"Not amused?"

His ears wig-wagged in confusion. "I hear the word but it makes no sense to me."

Al Too leaned forward and touched Dubin's forearm. "Drop it Ali. It's obvious he doesn't understand. Didn't he come to tell us something?"

Al nodded and looked at Ticolaya who, taking his cue, climbed to his hoofs and composed himself to deliver his confession. "I am sorry to say that because of my stupidity you can expect a very harsh time here."

"Ah huh," said Al, not sounding too upset. "What did you do?" Ticolaya explained about his conversation with the Camp Commander, hanging his head at the end of it, ready to take their abuse or punishment. There was silence. He lifted his head to venture a look. The men were looking at him with expressions that ranged from smiles to frowns. Al said "Ah huh," in precisely the same tone as he had used before. A slight wrinkling creased the normally smooth skin of his brow. "Let me get this straight; because you inadvertently told the Commander our minimum requirements, we can expect to get something less than our minimum requirements for the whole of our stay?" Ticolaya nodded unhappily.

"I was right then," Ozzmozz said. "We were supposed to share that lot with the other prisoners." He jerked his thumb at their small shelters.

"Share? Oh no, that is yours. We have all had our shelter supplies. Ree M'Tasha and I, with the help of the Arullas, constructed shelters from the soil and a hardening agent which was supplied to us." He stopped speaking because all four of the men had turned their heads away from him and were silently regarding the shelters they had built. The big man was the first to turn back.

"Just what did you tell the Commander were our minimum requirements?"

"Only what I have read; that each male has a separate above ground construction for himself and his family, usually consisting of a female and one or two offspring and sometimes an ageing parent. Each member of the family has a separate room for sleeping; then there is a communal eating room, another room for relaxation, another room for cleaning, another room for study..."

Ali threw up his hands in a blocking gesture. "Whoa. We get the picture. I mean, we understand." He made a movement with his hand to beckon Ticolaya forward. "Listen Ticky, what else did you tell the Commander about our requirements? Food for instance?" There was a curious quality to his voice that the young Chiffyorn did not understand. It went along with a crinkling of the skin at the corners of his eyes and an upward curve of his lips and while it did not look aggressive, he could not be sure. It was hard to tell with alien races... especially a race as strange as this one.

"I told him..." he began cautiously, watching every move, "that you need this much fresh meat daily, from an animal not too long dead, and that you need some way of heating the meat until its red juices cease to flow. I told him that you also need fresh vegetable matter... er... tubers and fruits and soft green leaves, not barks or grasses... and that you also consume the fluid products of lactating animals and the unfertilised ova of certain birds. Oh... and nuts."

Dubin's face split in a wide grin. "Nuts," he repeated. The others made the laughter sound. "What about drink? Entertainment?"

The men did not seem to be angry with him so Ticolaya relaxed and let his mind wander back to the long conversation he'd had with the stone faced Dow.

"I do not think we discussed drinks because I do not know too much about your requirements except that like most creatures, you need a regular supply of clean water. I believe you drink the juice of some fruits and the animal fluids I mentioned before." He paused but there was no comment so he went on. "As for entertainment; I think I mentioned some of the sports you like to play and that you enjoy a wide variety of activities as entertainment. Unfortunately I don't think I said you needed entertainment to survive, so you could be without it."

"I think we'll survive," Ali Dubin said with that curious tone to his voice and a glitter in his blue eyes. "In fact I think we'll manage so darn well we might never leave here." He leaned forward and clapped his hand solidly but not unpleasingly on top of Ticolaya's head a couple of times. "Ticky, little friend, you've turned our internment into a bloody holiday."

"You are not angry with me?"

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"No. Relax. Can you keep a secret?"

Ticolaya thrust out his chest and drew back his head proudly. "I am Y'Tami; I know how to hold a confidentiality."

"Great, then listen; if we get only half of what you told the Commander we need, then we'll be living like kings. We'll not only survive... we'll have trouble not getting fat and lazy."

Understanding overtook Ticolaya at last. "I over estimated," he said.

"Beautifully."

Ticolaya didn't see how the word applied but he guessed it was a compliment, and taking it as such, allowed it to spread a glow of pleasure all through his small frame.

The Terrans settled into life in the compound with an ease that surprised everyone except Ticolaya. He had learned from his books that if the species could be said to specialise in anything, it was adaptability. Also, thanks to his conversation with Svee, they were well supplied with all the essentials of life, except females and they declared they could live without them for a long time if they had to; though their constant reference to the opposite sex made something of a lie to their proud boast.

They were well fed, well watered and housed and seemed to have an unlimited capacity for entertaining themselves. Ticolaya was fascinated to see them derive enjoyment from such diverse activities as conversation, singing, games with cards and dice, running full tilt from one end of the compound to the other for no apparent reason, swimming in the pond and building small, useless houses and spaceships barely big enough for a 'mikkymous' to get into.

Some of the things they did for entertainment caused no more than smiles of contentment, others caused arguments and one that Ticolaya could not understand at all caused a lot of the strange reaction they called laughter. They called it 'goon baiting'. It was usually involved, secretive and inventive and often ended with one or the other of their captors, or the Commander himself, being tripped, splattered with something foul or made to run round in a panic investigating an alarm that meant nothing. Sometimes it ended with the Terrans being lined up in the sun by the building wall at the north end of the compound and made to stand there for hours while the Dows paraded up and down before them hissing and barking orders.

For most of the prisoners the experience would have been a true ordeal but the Strange Ones seemed to delight in it, breaking into gusts of laughter that infuriated their captors causing them to leap up and down on their stubby legs and wave batons in the faces of their prisoners. Ticolaya soon caught onto the fact that many of the Terran tricks were aimed at producing such a display. Some of the other races imprisoned in the compound shared the Terran sense of humour and took great pleasure in watching the goon baiting sessions develop and come to completion. They said they had not felt so alive since the day of their capture.

All beings had benefited from the arrival of the Terrans. Those who had a sense of humour found entertainment; those who were weak found them to be helpful at fetching and carrying; those who were inept at constructing shelters found neat homes made for them out of scrounged materials; those who ate meat found their ration

increased and those who ate fruit and vegetables found a regular supply in one corner of the little huts. The whole camp seemed to have come alive, partly due to the increase in food, but mostly, Ticolaya felt, due to the infectious spirit of the Terrans. He basked in the glow of vicarious pride.

Only the Black Arulla did not thrive but he had been ill from the start and though his devoted companion the Red Arulla, Ree M'Tasha, Ticolaya and the Terrans did everything they could to aid him, he continued to weaken. Ali Dubin earned himself a spell of punishment in the inside cells when he demanded of the Commander that he do something about providing medical aid. The Dows, members of a sturdy race, who were rarely sick themselves, did not place much importance on medicine. They tended to think that beings who needed to resort to such help were weak and degenerate in the extreme. This attitude was unfortunate for the Black Arulla who died one night while most of the camp and their scaly captors slept.

There was a strange atmosphere in the camp the next morning. The prisoners were subdued as they stood about in small groups by the main gate waiting for an event to take place. The Dows seemed nervous and frightened when they arrived. Their actions were quick and even less graceful than usual. They trod on each others tails, tripped over legs and dangling weapon straps, crashed their silly, short sighted heads repeatedly on top of the low compound gate and generally provided a spectacle that would have had half the camp curled up with amusement if the mood had not been so solemn.

Ticolaya sat with the Terrans watching without speaking while the Red Arulla, helped by Bruon Abar, carried the body of his companion from the compound. Flanked by the skittering, eye-rolling Dows they marched slowly away, out onto the wide sweep of the moor, some distance from, but still within sight of the camp and there performed a ceremony over the body before placing it on a pile of dry brush and setting light to it.

"Why?" asked Albert Jones of no-one in particular. Ticolaya looked up at him.

"It is the custom of the Arulla to cremate their dead on a broad field. They believe it allows the spirit room to move after death- to run free. They are a race from the wide plains of Zalisar."

"Yeah, interesting, but what I meant was, why are the Dows letting them out like that for the funeral? Why are they all so panicky and nervous? Is it my fond imagination or are our nasty little lizard masters afraid of death?"

Ticolaya had to admit his ignorance. "I will ask Ree M'Tasha," he said, his usual last resort when he ran out of information.

The Ree M'Tasha usually arranged to keep himself as far as possible from the Strange Ones and their unsettling ways but today, as though the funeral had already disturbed the air and more could not matter, he allowed himself to be drawn into their presence and answered their questions.

"Your instinct is correct, one called Altoo; the Dows have a certain fear... not of death itself, but of the power they imagine the newly dead can wield. They believe that if a body is not correctly handled, according to the custom of its people, it can

wreak awful havoc on the living. In some ways their fears are not unfounded for it is well known that the subtle electric energy of a living being can be charged with the ability to take revenge or create turmoil even after the spirit has passed on to the next stage of existence. Sometimes the spirit itself, being so tied to the physical plane that it cannot bear to leave, will supervise some kind of revenge. Sometimes it will kill those who have wronged it. Sometimes its revenge will be worse than a killing."

Ticolaya's ears spread comically sideways as, interest held captive, he lost control of them. His eyes grew round with delicious horror as his usually staid teacher unfolded stories of terror, and of ghastly deeds performed by vengeful ghosts. He told of vicious, howling winds from a clear sky, beings battered by unseen, unstoppable forces, the innocent sickened and maimed, bellies slit open by invisible knives, bodies bursting into hellish blue flames, and fear so intense it was a like a physical thing. Ticolaya's eyes grew rounder and rounder and he leaned toward M'Tasha to such an extent that those watching thought he might soon lose his balance. Chet leaned toward him till his face was within a handbreadth of one, drooping brown ear.

"Boo," he said quite softly.

Ticolaya let out a bray of fright, his back legs shot straight out lifting his rump into the air while his front legs stayed half bent and refused to budge. Thrown off balance by the unevenness of the major portion of his body, his torso flopped forward onto the ground in front of M'Tasha, raising a cyclone of dust all round. Behind him his Terran friends shattered the morning's solemn mood with an orgy of uncontrollable laughter. Feeling hurt and rejected Ticolaya trotted away trailing a small jet stream of dust and would not talk to any of them for days.

Against his better judgement, but for the sake of his beloved Y'Tami, Ree M'Tasha found himself playing Devil's Advocate. "You must forgive them," he advised. "They did not mean to hurt you. It is their sense of humour."

Ticolaya shook his head. "I do not understand it."

"It is a difficult thing to understand, for those who do not have it." He pondered his words a moment. "That noise they make- the laughter- it is really a noise to scare away predators."

It took a while for the words to penetrate Ticolaya's wall of self pity and confusion. When it did he looked up at M'Tasha with eyes wide with surprise. "What do you say? To scare predators? How can that be when they are the most successful predators on their planet?"

"Even the eaters sometimes get eaten. Ages ago, back before the civilisation of the race, even before intelligence had touched it, they existed. They were then like animals, a little aware but terribly vulnerable in the savage world about them. They hunted, they gathered food and they feared the weather, accidents and bigger animals that could kill and eat them. When a predator appeared suddenly before them they would cackle with fright, much as you did when the man spoke that one word to you a few days ago." Silencing Ticolaya's imminent protest with a stern glance he went on: "This sometimes had the effect of frightening the animal, causing it to go away. So those who made the most noise at the appearance of something unexpected, it is to be

assumed, were the ones who survived to breed and so it came to be that the race developed a habit of making a noise at anything unexpected."

"There was no predator about when I fell on my face," Ticolaya pointed out grumpily.

M'Tasha puffed his cheeks. "Of course not. The primitive response I described has been refined by millions of years of evolution. It can now be a very subtle reaction to situations which have precise definitions of humour or non-humour. They made the noise called laughter because to them you looked funny. In amusement they find the same kind of relief and pleasurable feelings their ancestors must have felt when they realised they had not been eaten."

"But what happened was not unexpected," Ticolaya protested unhappily. "They knew what would happen if they frightened me that way. They anticipated it. When they set up their tricks on the Dows they can imagine what will happen. They expect it to happen. How can that be called unexpected? I don't understand it at all."

"As I said, the reaction has been refined by time." M'Tasha shook his head and had to admit, to himself at least, that he could say no more. He understood humour not much better than he understood curiosity. But one thing he did know- Ticolaya was unhappy and had been so ever since the men had laughed at him.

"Go," he said, pushing his young charge. "Go and talk to them. You will see, they will not laugh at you again."

It took some persuading but at last the Y'Tami agreed to go and see them. "You will find most of them down by the pond," the Ree M'Tasha said.

"Oh hello," Davy greeted him when he came walking softly up to the shaded edge of the small pond. "Decided to forgive us have you?" He reached out one big hand and laid it companionably on the Chiffyorn's back. Ticolaya was about to deliver the speech he had formulated- to say that as they had, in the beginning forgiven him, he could do no less- when his attention was distracted by Chet and Ali who were standing at the water's edge gazing down into the green-black depths. From those depths a line of silvery bubbles wavered upwards to burst on the surface in a spread of ripples.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

"Jones is down there. Don't worry, he's a good swimmer. We're looking for the bottom."

"Is there something of value down there?" Ticolaya asked recalling that a number of items had been dropped into the pond in the time he had been a prisoner.

"Yeah, a way out if we're lucky," Dave drawled. "The water has to come from somewhere, so maybe if there's a way in for it, there's also a way out for us."

"Out? You wish to escape?"

"You bet. What's the matter little friend, don't you want to get out of here?"

"Naturally, but not out to that." He pointed to the bleak plain and patch of swamp beyond the compound fence. "I've told you about this place; once you get out, there is nowhere to go. It's not worth the risk."

"Little friend, you don't know that until you try. Freedom alone is sometimes worth all the risk there is." He turned his face away from Ticolaya as Jones came back to the

surface in a rush of bubbles. He hauled himself out onto the bank and lay gasping like a landed fish for some minutes. He kept shaking his head and when his ability to speak returned the first word he said was no. "No, it's no good. I tried my damndest, but if there's a bottom to that thing..." He glared at the pond as if it had just become his mortal enemy, "it's somewhere near the centre of the planet."

"No side channels?" Ali asked hopefully. He was sprinkled with water from Altoo's curly mop as he shook his head again.

"There are some, but they're too far down to explore without an air supply. The walls are made of limestone. It looks like a drowned cave system." He noticed Ticolaya standing nearby. "Hi there. You any good at swimming?"

Ticolaya shied daintily away from the water and gave a little shudder. "No. I do not like the water."

Chet began to chuckle but Ali dug him in the ribs with his elbow causing him to stop so suddenly he might have been switched off. Ticolaya realised that, for his sake, they were trying very hard not to laugh at him and he was pleased and flattered.

Some days later an event occurred that was to effect the lives of both Ticolaya and the Terrans. A door on the main building opened and a prisoner was carried into the compound by a pair of guards. He was dumped on the ground and left. As soon as the door closed behind the guards' scaly tails some of the prisoners rushed forward to check the new arrival. He was long and of a shape that suggested an upright biped. He might have been Terran but the space suit that covered him from head to foot was of non-Terran design and dark blue in colour instead of silver. There was a deep gash in the metal on the front of the helmet as though it had struck something very hard. Ali Dubin traced the scrape with one finger.

"Maybe a crash," he said. "The Dows found him, dragged him in here but couldn't get anything out of him because he was unconscious. C'mon, let's get him out of his suit; he could be drowning in blood or vomit inside that helmet."

With his and Ticolaya's nimble fingers at work on the locking mechanism and Bruon Abar's strength on the damaged hinges they eventually loosened the helmet face plate and lifted it back. Ali almost fell backwards as he caught his first glimpse of the face within the frame of the thickly padded helmet.

"Nakadah!" he gasped. His eyes were wide and his face pale, and even those beings not familiar with Terrans could tell that he was upset. Ticolaya looked at him then down at the face that had disturbed his friend. It might have been a Terran face- it had the right nose, eyes, mouth, over the correct underlying structure of flesh and bone, but the hair which lay sweat plastered to the forehead was dark blue- a colour no native of the planet Earth had ever sported- and the skin beneath it was a pale but quite distinct green. Dubin was walking in small circles, cursing. Ticolaya grabbed at his waving hands.

"What is it Ali? Who is this man?"

"Nakadah!" He almost spat the name into the dust. "Prince, bloody Nakadah." He looked at the Chiffyorn. "Oh you wouldn't know. He's half Terran, half native of my

home world of Caad. Yeah, I know, you're surprised I'm not Terran. My people were settlers from Earth who came to Caad several generations ago." He shook his head. "It's too long a story to tell. It's about trouble between the settlers and the natives. We'd have won but for him. Meddler. He's half Terran but he sided with the natives because they set him up as their prince, no less. I think he married into the royal family. He's responsible for some godawful bloody wars and the deaths of thousands of settlers." His hands clenched into fists and he stepped suddenly toward the prone figure as though he intended to inflict some damage on it.

The Red Arulla blocked him with his sturdy body giving two other beings the chance to pick up the unconscious man and drag him to the nearest shade. Ali watched for a moment then turned on one heel and strode away. "Just keep him away from me, that's all," was the last thing he growled at Ticolaya before vanishing into his hut and slamming the door.

Later that night Ticolaya tapped cautiously on that same door. He heard an interrogative grunt from the man within. "It's me, Ticolaya. May I come in and tell you something?"

Another grunt then the man said, "It's about him I suppose; you've got that do-gooder tone in your voice."

"He's not Prince Nakadah." There was a second or two of silence in the hut then Dubin came to the door, opened it and peered at the small centaur-like creature waiting outside. Ticolaya went on: "He's Theon, his eldest son. He told me there have been changes on Caad since you left to join the Terran forces. The Bovens and Kyben Vor attacked the planet. Your people, the free settlers from Earth, sent a request for help to the Federation but for some politically expedient reason they were ignored. Your people had to fight the invaders alone. They were losing- badly- when Nakadah saw what was happening and made the fight his own. With his skill in battle, which you know is great, the technology of the Seaforest people and their fighting spirit and with your people working with him, they swept the enemy from Caad.

"The Federation sent their congratulations and said they would send teams to help defend the planet against further attack, but everyone could see they only meant to use it as a bridgehead. All of the people looked to Nakadah to give a reply. He told the Federation what it could do with its teams... and I believe his suggestions were not only impolite but physically impossible... and said that the people of Caad would defend their own."

"Are you saying that Nakadah is speaking for all of Caad these days?"

"I am repeating what the young, blue haired man told me. He says his father has been accepted as Prince of all the people of Caad and that all is harmony now. The natives and the settlers are mixing freely, fighting together, working together, even interbreeding and doing an excellent job of defending the planet.

The war has moved away from them now so they have built space ships and some of the young men, like Theon, are following it to do what they can to help the Federation while not actually becoming part of it."

Ali went back into his hut and flopped onto his bunk. "Why tell me all this?"

"I thought you would want to hear some news of your home world."

"Not news like that," he said, remembering the scattered, hacked and bloodied bodies of his family and friends after one particularly nasty battle between the settlers and the Seaforesters. His memory moved on to replay scenes of equally dead and mutilated pale green bodies and to recall the valour with which they had fought and died.

It was this memory than made him do no more than quietly observe the following day, when Theon appeared in the doorway of his hut. The young man squatted on his heels and bowed his head to indicated respect for an older person, in the manner of his people.

"I am Theon," he said. "I know you have reason to hate my father and my kind and I would not deny you your right to seek revenge, but can we call a moratorium on it at least for as long as we are prisoners here? I can help you."

"A truce?" Dubin asked and thought about it a while. "All right, a truce. How can you help... us?"

Theon grinned. "I can get out of the compound any time I like."

Ali sat up straight. "The pond. You've tried it already?" Seaforesters were semi aquatic- of course, if anyone could plumb the depths of the pond it would be this lad.

"I explored it as soon as I felt well enough. It goes very deep. There is a cave system leading out to a region of sink holes on the edge of a swamp. From there it is not far by foot to a small community by the sea. They don't seem to possess much that would be of use to us, no AG motors, a few tools, not much food. I did see a map of the island while I was there. It doesn't look promising. It showed the outline of the island and one or two single houses." His mouth twisted in a smile. "There are so few points of interest the map maker had even listed the sanitary depot."

"Do you feel like doing some more exploring?"

Theon nodded.

Ali would not admit it to anyone but over the next few weeks he gradually developed an admiration and affection for the young Seaforester. He was always there at dusk to see him on his way down into the depths of the pond, and always there in the cold, dark hours of early morning to see him safely return bearing whatever useful, and sometimes useless items he had been able to scrounge. It was he who was the first to see the lengths of pipe and small tap Theon had found in an old pump house and the first to think of a use for them. It was he who sent the boy out seven nights in a row to collect as much fruit, grain and sugar as he could find, and he who turned his hut into a sanctum sanctorum which began to issue strange noises and revolting smells.

Ticolaya assumed he was arranging another trick for the Dows because all the Terrans seemed to be looking forward to something with happy expectancy. Theon did not participate in the strange rituals within the hut or in the feeling of anticipation so he and Ticolaya spent a lot of time together sitting in the shade of the spreading trees close to the camp of the Strange Ones. "Do you know what they plan to do?" Ticolaya asked.

"I'm not sure. They are being very secretive about it. I understand it to be a distillation process they have set up and from what little I know they seem to be making a type of volatile fuel."

"Fuel?" Ticolaya asked thoughtfully. "Perhaps they plan to create a small ship, or flying platforms and escape that way." It did not seem possible with their limited resources and under the dim yet ever watchful eyes of the Dows, but he had faith in the Strange Ones being able to accomplish anything they set out to do.

One night the Terrans retired early to Ali's hut, inviting Theon to join them but excluding Ticolaya. He was, at first, disappointed but consoled himself, as he settled down beneath a tree and watched night come over the camp, with the rationale that they must think him to be too young and small for whatever they were doing and that they were protecting him. A light began to glow in the hut and for some time all was quiet making him believe they were still planning their trick, then a loud burst of laughter erupted from the building causing him to change his mind and to believe that the trick had reached a successful conclusion, though how they had managed to do it without leaving Ali's hut was something of a mystery to him.

The laughter came in bursts interspersed with loud talk and a noise that could have been called singing if it had had any melody to it. He expected, at any moment, to be invited to join them to be told how everything had gone... but the talk and raucous laughter went on without him.

He was dozing when the door opened. A shaft of yellow light spread across the bare ground before the hut catching his attention through half closed eyes and he looked up quickly to see a dark figure framed against the light from within. Before he could scramble to his hoofs the door closed and the silhouette became a pale shape ghost-like against the dark wall of the hut. It was Theon. Seeing the light fur of Ticolaya's chest he walked to the Chiffyorn and hunkered down his characteristic, casual crouch. "Do you remember I said they were distilling a fuel?" he asked, then plucked a stalk of grass, stuck the stem in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

"Yes. Yes. What's happening?"

"They are drinking it."

Ticolaya shook his head. His ears must still be asleep. Theon would think him mad if he repeated what he thought he'd heard him say. "I could not have heard you correctly. What did you...?"

"I said," the Caadian youth repeated, rolling the grass stalk from one side of his mouth to the other, "they are drinking it."

Ticolaya's mouth sagged open for long seconds. "Are they mad?"

"No..." Theon said slowly. "I think it's some kind of ritual. The fuel- the alcohol- has an effect on them which they seem to find pleasant. They gave me some," he added sheepishly.

"You are as mad as they are. What was it like?"

"Bad tasting, but it burnt pleasantly in the throat like the foods of my people. I have not experienced that since I left home to fight. When I'd had a few cups of the liquid

Random Collection

they all looked at me. I think they were looking to see what effect it would have on me and were disappointed when there was none."

"What effect does it have on them?"

Theon looked back at the hut. "It makes them noisy... and silly. They are in there now, laughing at really silly things."

"They always do," Ticolaya observed but Theon shook his head.

"No, you have no sense of humour, you wouldn't understand." He didn't try to explain but got up and walked away, his outline growing dim with distance till wraith like he disappeared among the trees. Deciding there was nothing to be gained from keeping an all night vigil over the hut in which the men performed their strange ritual, Ticolaya went to his own shelter and slept till dawn.

Early the next day he returned to Ali's hut. All was quiet within. He tapped at the door to get attention but nothing stirred. A quick glance around the camp revealed that nothing much else was stirring either; he was probably too early. The men had stayed up late, they would not thank him for rousing them from their sleep too soon. He remembered another morning when a thick voice, bellowing for him to 'get lost' had been followed by a heavy boot which had struck him in the flank with some force. He turned to move away but was stopped by a loud groan. The sound seemed to have come from some tortured soul inside the hut. Ticolaya attacked the door with frantic knocking.

"Hello. Hello. Ali? Davy? Are you all right? This is Ticky. Please answer me." Another groan, more soul rending than the first was the only reply. Ticolaya had been taught to respect privacy but such was his concern for the men in the hut that he ignored all the instilled rules and opened the door. He stepped in and stood still, shocked by what he saw. Seconds later he was out of the hut galloping full tilt across the compound to the main building bellowing for help every step of the way.

Though they looked it, Dows were not reptilian and therefore not dependant upon the solar orb for body warmth. They did not need to spend time basking before they were ready to face the day's tasks. Like most beings however they did enjoy a few moment's peace and calm between rousing from sleep and the start of the first chores. The Dow Commander was not put in a good frame of mind for that day when he had to forgo his usual period of calm before breakfast because of the panic of one of the inmates of compound East One. It was the compound containing those accursed Terrans and he guessed they would be the cause of all the fuss as he strapped on his weapon belt and stomped down the passage to the guard station by the outer door.

He was right. The miserable beasts had tried to commit suicide by the sound of what was being conveyed to him by the near hysterical Chiffyorn princeling and two of the guards who had been to see for themselves. It would not look good for him if they succeeded. His job was to hold the prisoners, alive and in reasonable health, against such time as they could be used as hostages or whatever fate the Kyben Vor had in mind for them. His duty was not to sleep while his charges cut their throats, escaped or drank poison.

Looking into the hut he stood stolidly on thick, firmly planted feet, barring entry to all others while he surveyed the scene. The little hut seemed filled with recumbent bodies. Scattered between them were containers of all sizes, most empty, a couple half filled with a clear liquid. Against one wall was an untidy arrangement of sealed, handmade kettles, lengths of tubing, tanks and a heating arrangement. It was cold and inoperative now, its pressure gauge dead against its stop, its taps and lids open. Over all, like a disgusting fog hung an indefinable smell. The Commander drew his nostrils slits closed against it and held his breath for the rest of the time he was in the hut. Lifting one foot he prodded the nearest body. It groaned loudly and rolled onto its back wrinkling its face into a ferocious mask as sunlight hit it. It moaned something in an alien language. Svec turned to the Chiffyorn who was trying to push past him in the doorway. "What did he say?"

The little being stopped pushing, blinked, swallowed and said, "He says that he feels very bad. He says he's dying."

"Not in my camp!" the Commander instantly ordered. He waved to the guards. "Get them out of here. Put them in the first interview room. Call the medic. And get that out here as well," he added waving a claw at the makeshift still.

Ticolaya was out of favour with the Terrans for a week after their release from the main building. Not only had they had to suffer the ministrations of a puzzled Dow medic, undergo a protracted session of questioning and some painful punishment but when they were released it was into a still-less and booze-less compound.

Nor could Ticolaya run to Theon for comfort for the Caadian was also annoyed with him. The Dows, having poor colour sense, thought he was human and had dragged him in for questioning along with the others. They had kept at him for hours seeking to learn where the material for the still and the distillation process had come from. He did not tell them, but it had not been an easy or painless experience. The Ree M'Tasha, being unsympathetic to his young charge's trouble with his Terran friends, was no sort of company, so Ticolaya spent a lot of time mooching about on his own.

At last Davy La Salle took pity on him. He pointed out to the others that the fault lay as much with them, for running the still so openly and drinking its product to such excess, as it did with Ticolaya for panicking.

"Dying!" Al scoffed to Ticolaya when he was allowed back into the fold.

"You did say you were dying," Ticolaya responded in his own defence.

"After you galloped off yelling for help," the man returned.

Dubin put his hands up. "They've taken our equipment," he said. They thought he was going to add something to the effect that it had been good while it lasted but that they would have to forget about it now, but a gleam entered his eyes and he swung his gaze till it came to rest on the now-bare wall of the hut where the still had been set up. "A man can't pursue a hobby without equipment and you have to have a hobby in a place like this." He turned his head some more to look at one of the members of the group. "Theon... my young friend..." The Caadian youth was shaking his head even before Ali finished speaking.

"Uh uh, no, absolutely not. I've denuded this miserable island of every spare bit of pipe, every tap, every piece of fruit and stray bag of grain. I'm tired of roaming about at night like the spirit of a dead warrior and I refuse to undergo another Dow interview for the sake of your foul beverage. No more stills, no more alcohol, no more midnight swims."

Several weeks later a small spaceship- a scout- swooped low over the island. Its shape was like a Terran craft but coloured deep blue with an ornate symbol on its side. Theon scrambled to his feet, obviously excited at the sight of it. "It's my father's personal flier," he explained to the others as the ship looped round and came toward them again. "He's come to find me. He'll help us all..." The light of hope died in his eyes, chased out by sudden horror as the ship screamed out of control over the compound and dropped to a devastating crash on the edge of the nearby swamp. Theon ran to the compound fence and clung to it crying "No! No!" in Caadian. Chet grabbed him when he left the fence to make a beeline for the pond.

"No you don't. There'll be Dows here in force in a few minutes. You won't help by going out and getting involved. Let's wait and see if they recover a body, or a prisoner."

"Nothing could survive that," Theon said miserably, looking at the column of black smoke rising into the pale blue sky. He spent the rest of the day hunkered down in the closest patch of shade to the door of the main building. It was shut. No guards came out, the spy flaps remained firmly closed, the big horn speakers though open mouthed, were silent; nothing moved in the heat of long afternoon.

At sunset Davy and Ticolaya brought him food and water. He thanked them, nibbled the food and drank the water then shook his head when they suggested he return with them to the camp to try to get some sleep. He would stay right where he was until he heard some news, he said.

Just then the speakers blared into life setting off a black explosion of bats from the trees closest to them. They recognised the voice of the Dow Second-in-Command. Awkwardly he called the names of all the Terrans plus Theon and Ticolaya and ordered them to report immediately to the door of East One. The door that Theon had watched all day flew open with a bang and a squad of guards marched out stirring up a lot of dust which caught the afterglow of day and hung about in a toxic orange cloud. Catching sight of three of their quarry the guards let out hisses of triumph and thundered in to capture and subdue. They grabbed the bemused trio, marched them into the building and thrust them into a room.

"You will wait here!" said the squad leader, a leading exponent of the art of giving unnecessary orders as he closed the door and locked it.

While they waited for further developments the prisoners mooched about, trying to look as unintelligent as possible, while keeping their eyes alert, so that by the time the rest of the Terrans were pushed in to join them, they were able to report the existence of four listening devices and two cameras. On receipt of this piece of information

Dubin immediately stuck one finger in his ear and another up his nose and did a jig around the room. Catching on, the other men also went into various nonsense routines.

There was a time when Ticolaya would have been astounded by this performance, but now, after having learnt something of the natives of Terra, he only watched and thought about the effect it must be having on the watching Dows. At the thought, a curious wave rippled through his stomach, burbled up his throat and escaped from his nose as a soft snort. He lifted his hands to cover his face and his dismay. The Ree M'Tasha had been disapproving enough of his interest in the Terrans, what would he say when he learned that his charge was developing a sense of humour?

In a few minutes, whether because of the performance or in spite of it, they could not tell, the door of the room crashed open and two Dows plodded in carrying a table. Two more came behind carrying between them a very small box which could easily have been carried by one in one paw. They placed it in the middle of the table then after a brief altercation as to who was treading on whose tail, they departed, slamming and locking the door behind them.

The prisoners gathered round the table and the box, which they recognised as being a message cube of a kind often used by pilots of crippled craft who wanted to leave a last message. The cubes could survive almost anything; many a hasty farewell had been sent home on them. Theon reached out to touch it but hesitated and looked at Dubin and Jones. Ali understood the reason for the hesitation. The message on the cube might not be a farewell speech from a doomed pilot but an important piece of war information he had needed to preserve.

"We must have a lament," he said, "for the soul of the dead pilot. His spirit must be attracted and put at ease with a loud lament." He dropped his hands in a conductor's wave and the group burst into a noise that could not, even by the wildest stretch of the imagination, be called song. There were six different lots of noise at first but some of the wailers quickly realised that it was easier to go along with the loud and lusty voice of Davy La Salle than to try to compete with it and they joined him in the slow rendition of what was normally a fast and bawdy bar room ballad.

Ticolaya picked up what was available of the tune and sang along with it while Theon and Dubin stubbornly persisted in singing a genuine Caadian lament for a dead warrior. The noise was indescribable.

In the middle of it Dubin began making leaning movements toward the box. The others, except Ticolaya who was too short, began to do the same and as their heads came together over the table snatches of conversation were exchanged.

"Shall we risk letting them hear the message?"

"We'll have to or we might be here till doomsday."

"Agreed. It's what they got us in here for. If we..." The head moved back.

"Don't co-operate," finished a second head, "they might try to force us. He's right."

"Chances are it's in Caadian anyway. They won't be able to understand it."

"With time and a universal dictionary they would be able to translate it."

"Do you know how to record on a cube?"

"Yes," Theon bowed and sang.

"Good. After we play the message, hit the record function."

Theon bowed again. "I understand. If the message needs to be cancelled I'll do it quickly so they won't have time to rescue it."

"We'll create a diversion and give you time to record over..."

All heads bobbed back and it was left to Ticolaya to finish the sentence. "The original message," he said, only to himself, out of a sense of tidiness.

Theon put his hands up to indicate they'd done enough lamenting. He fancied he heard a loud sigh from an adjoining room. "The warrior may be present; let us hear his last words." He laid a hand on the box which, being sensitive to Caadian touch, lit up from within revealing the location its controls. He put a fingertip to the area marked 'message playback' and a breathless Caadian voice speaking its native language rushed out at him. He listened without comment, without expression and as it finished hung his head as though in great sorrow.

"Theon, what is it?"

The youth was silent a while longer then lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "The message is nonsense." He looked at them. "I don't know what happened- perhaps the pilot lost his mind when he realised he was going to crash- but the man who recorded that message was quite insane."

Ali frowned. It took more than the thought of an impending crash to drive a man out of his mind- especially a Caadian warrior. Was the boy mistaken or was he trying to tell them something? He looked into Theon's sea green eyes and saw there a plea for understanding. He nodded. "What does it say?"

"Nothing that makes any sense," Theon said reaching out to touch the cube again. "I'll replay it at a slower speed and translate for you." He looked round at the group. "Remember, all of you, we have called this man's spirit here to this gathering- he would not like to be laughed at." They nodded, understanding that he was warning them not to show surprise at whatever he might have to say.

Once again the voice came from the box, this time in less of a rush, echoed by Theon in Standard: "Dart on nannie to crater willful. No feshish for a tamless man and the boggle speak for Thonnie. Dog dart in beat waiting for pups to make tax."

Ali drew in a breath through his teeth and gave his head a half shake. "You're right boy, it's sad but true- whoever made up that message was mentally deranged."

"What a shame," said the Mouse. "Gone to the grave without even a decent message to send home to his family." With a ghost of a wink he asked, "Shall we have another lament?"

"It might hurry things along mightn't it?" Ali agreed.

"Right. I don't fancy spending any longer than I have to in a room with the spirit of a dead man. I think it's time to get out." With that thought firmly in mind they started up the cacophony again.

Five minutes later they were pushed unceremoniously from door East One into the cool dark of their compound and the door was slammed behind them. Chet muttered that the Dows had no appreciation for a good choir. Apart from that comment they were all silent as they walked back through the trees to the Terrans' huts. They gathered in the living hut. Someone lit a standard issue chemical lamp and as its soft, blue light grew and filled the room Ticolaya looked to Theon to say something to him

of the sorrow he felt for the death of the Caadian pilot. He was surprised to see him smiling widely.

Looking round he saw that the others were all smiling too. Not only smiling but clapping hands to shoulders and swinging each other round, manifesting so many outward signs of delight that he just knew he'd missed something. "Has there been a joke?" he asked causing the men to laugh with delight. After a while they settled down and began to explain things to him.

"We didn't plan it," Dubin said, "but there is something funny going on."

Theon took over. "The ship that crashed... no-one died in it, It was piloted by a... computer in an organic framework... a very low grade android, with no soul and just enough wit to crash the thing in the right place. The whole object of the exercise was to get the message cube to me."

"Then I don't see why you seem pleased, for it failed. The message was garbled."

"It wasn't garbled."

Ticolaya thought he understood. "You translated incorrectly." He frowned. "That was not wise my friend. The Dows will find a Universal dictionary and do their own translation in time and when they find you tried to trick them you will be punished."

Theon smiled. "I hope they do translate it for themselves because then they will be convinced I told the truth. Thinking it a bit of madness they will then put it out of their minds. You see, I translated correctly."

Again Ticolaya thought he understood. "Ah, it was in code. That will not work either. The Bovans are expert cryptanalysts and a Bovan inspection is due in a few days."

Dubin agreed that the Bovans were indeed experts at code breaking. "I've heard it said that Bovan young crack a cipher a day before breakfast, just for amusement. However..." He held up a finger which, he noticed, had a hangnail, which he bit off before continuing, "as much as they know about codes, it will not help them at all if they don't know the latest spaceways slang, and there is not much chance of that."

"Slang!" Ticolaya cried, understanding correctly at last. "Idiom. Jargon. Those words that for a while mean something quite different to their usual meanings."

"Something like that."

"Well tell me, what did the message really say?"

Smiling at the enthusiasm of the young Chiffyorn Theon translated once more: "'Dart on nannie to crater wilful' means the ship crashed deliberately. 'No feshish for a tamless man' means the ship was piloted by an android..."

"How do you understand that out of it?"

"Feshish is a plant that grows on Cheribor. It's flowers look like red hearts in little ships and someone once got the bright idea of covering a spaceman's coffin with them. So feshish has come to mean the death of a spaceman. No feshish, no death. 'Tam', is spaceways slang for personality... soul if you like. A tamless man is one without a soul... an android." Ticolaya nodded and Theon went on. "'Boggle speak for Thonnie'. Well that's simple. 'Oggle boggle' is old slang for a communications set and Thonnie is what my father calls me. 'Dog dart in beat' means the main ship- the one the shuttle

came from- is in planetary orbit. 'Waiting for pups to make tax' means it's waiting for us to make contact."

Ticolaya jumped up with excitement. When he stood his face was about level with the faces of the seated men. "You mean there's a ship waiting to rescue us?"

"Some of us. A dart is a small ship. It wouldn't take more than ten. And that's probably a good thing. Too big an escape party would draw attention to itself."

"So all we have to do is get out of here and signal the ship. How do we do that?"

"There's a transmitter in my helmet," Theon said. "But I think it's broken."

"I might be able to fix it," Chet said. "If not I can rig up something."

"Good man," Dubin approved revealing some of the command structure which had existed before their capture. "As for getting out of here... that's never been a problem."

"That's right. The compound fence is flimsy and the alarm system, what we know of it, is pretty simple."

"The problem is, as it always has been, where do we go when we get out of here?"

"Anywhere," Ticolaya said flinging wide one arm, smacking Jones in the face with his small hand. "There's plenty of space out there. We could break out, contact the ship and it could land and pick us up before the Dows knew what was happening."

"I doubt it. The first appearance of the ship alarmed them. You might have noticed that they've set up the rocket launcher on the roof of the building and have it permanently manned. The instant a ship appears anywhere near the island they'll start blasting. You've seen them in action with it; it's not very sophisticated but it is effective; they can fire three ways at once and hit any part of the island." Dubin shook his head. "No, we could not ask a ship to land here. It would be suicide for them."

"What we should do then," suggested Davy in his soft, slow way, "is to knock out the rocket launcher and make it safe for the ship to land."

"If we attack the rocket launcher the Dow's will know for certain there is something in the wind. They'll put patrols out and any escape would become impossible."

"We could make it a two team effort; one lot to attack the rocket launcher while the other lot escapes."

"Fine for the ones who escape. Which fools do you think we could get to make the attack? Besides, to get to the roof you would first have to get inside the main building and find your way around."

"Bruon Abar could do that. He told me he could get into the building any time and by clinging to the rough stone ceilings he could go almost anywhere. The Dows never look above their heads for prisoners."

"Fine but remember, we haven't got time for a lot of recon work; Bruon Abar alone can't take the rocket launcher and we can't walk on walls and ceilings."

They were all aware that whatever they did, it had to be done in the three days before the Bovan inspection team arrived for they would make a sweep of the planet before landing and would be sure to discover the Caadian dart ship.

"Not very good timing on the part of the Bovans," Chet grumbled. "The brew will be just about ready to drink then. We'd hardly have time to wet our whistles..."

"You've made more of that poison?" Ticolaya asked in astonishment, his voice scaling the upper peaks of its register. "How? Where? Why?"

"Full of questions aren't you?" the man called Ozzmozz responded gruffly but was pleased to be able to tell an outsider about his latest scheme. "Do you remember that little metal trolley the Dows brought into the compound one day- the one with the wire basket in it?"

"Yes, it disappeared."

"Too right. It was made of metal tubes. And do you remember those two lovely stainless steel containers they dragged in, full of insecticide when the Grambians complained their bedding sites were infected with blue mite?"

Ticolaya nodded knowingly. "They disappeared. We were all punished for it."

"Yeah. We were sorry about that but we made up for it by giving up almost all our food rations for the next week. Meanwhile the drums and tubes were being put to good use. Along with a couple of Zegan feeding troughs, some taps and fittings that Theon found but which we didn't use the first time, they went to make a very nice little brewing and distilling apparatus."

"Where?"

"You know the area around here is riddled with caves? The pond goes down through a flooded cave. The swamp over there is on top of a series of flooded caves. From about the middle of the compound back this way toward the building the land rises clear of the water table and the caves are dry. There's a big one right under the Gambian section. They discovered it a long time ago but had no use for it. The fumes, smoke and steam from our operations goes up through a natural vent into the middle of the Gambian campfire, which they always keep burning. In return for their help we give the Grambians extra food, help in whatever they need, bits of equipment..."

"How do you get to this cave? How is it that the Dows have not discovered it? They must have examined the compounds thoroughly for any such hiding places before they ever put prisoners in here."

"They are probably aware of the existence of caves below the compound... there are caves under all parts of this island, but they must believe it is impossible for anyone to get to them without using explosives to blast a hole through their rooves. The limestone of these islands is extremely hard. Not so hard that acid can't make dent in it however... and Gambian urine is nearly pure acid. We found a natural fault in the rocks, built a hut over it and convinced the Grambians that it was the proper thing to do to urinate in private. It didn't take long till we'd made a reasonable sized entrance to the caves." He frowned and twisted his mouth in a lopsided grin. "Took ages to get rid of the smell though."

He was just about to tell his small listener about the clever deals he had made all round the camp to get materials to produce the brew when Dubin scowled in his direction. "Forget all that. Even if it's ready in three days we will not be guzzling that stuff just before an escape and we're certainly not carrying it with us."

Chet sighed agreement. "I know. It just seems a shame." He brightened as a thought came to him. "Maybe we could bequeath it to the Grambians; bring a little joy into their lives."

"Like most sane and sensible beings they wouldn't have any use for it." Dubin waved one hand. "Now come over here and pay attention to this business. That is, unless you want to stay here for the rest of your life."

By the time the new day had begun to insinuate itself through the window and the mournful cries of night birds gave way to the chatter of their diurnal cousins, all was silent in the hut. They had run out of ideas. Everything they had thought of seemed to require too much time, contain too many imponderables, entail too much risk or involve others who would be left behind to face punishment.

Ali Dubin sat, head bowed in silence, feeling ashamed of himself for not having conceived some brilliant plan to make use of the situation. He felt suffused by the pre-dawn dimness, his brain as mist-filled as the hollows down toward the sea. Unlike the real day which would soon experience the illumination of dawn he expected no ray of brilliance to suddenly leap over his mental horizon to dispel the mists of his mind.

When it came, the idea was not like a tropical sunrise bright and sudden and full of brilliance, but more like a crystal growing. The facts, the figures were all there needing only the germ of an idea to begin the plan growing in the super saturated solution of his thoughts. Its form when it grew was that of a polyhedron. When at last it was formed enough to handle, he took it up in his mind, turning it to examine all the facets for flaws, testing them with hammer blows of logic to see they did not shatter. Only when he felt he'd thoroughly examined his newly grown plan and found it solid did he dare to show a little of it to the others.

"I have an idea..." he began tentatively. "It's crazy and a little bit chancy, but if it works we'll be out of here in three days. And- unless the Dows get bloody minded about the whole thing- those left will not have to suffer punishment."

The men and Ticolaya looked at him with interest. "What have you got in mind?"

"We've all been trying to think of some way to make the island safe for the ship to land on, right?" There were nods and grunts of affirmation. "What if we do a turnaround in our thinking?"

"What..." Chet drawled, "make the ship safe for the island to land on?"

Ali grinned. "Not a complete about face. I mean a bit of a sideways venture. What if we get the ship to land on one of those flat, rocky islands over there in the sea to the north west?"

Davy shrugged. He had a home made telescope and had frequently trained it on the islands for want of a more interesting view. They were little more than flat platforms of rock a few metres above the sea, covered in sea birds and guano. "A ship could land there safely enough, but..."

Jones took up the argument. "I don't see how Al, but you seem to have left this out of your calculations; the sea between here and there is filled with things that eat people."

"I hadn't forgotten. If my plan works, the Dows will take us over in a boat and leave us there."

"Alive?"

"More or less."

"More than less I hope. I don't like the sound of that."

"It's not as drastic as it sounds. The Dows will think we are dying, as they did when we were in the last stages of inebriation after our... party."

There were cries of surprise and pleasure when they saw what he had in mind. Chet closed his eyes, stuck out his front teeth, pulled a comic face and said, "Aw! I think I like this plan."

Ticolaya found a giggle escaping him as he looked at the man. Chet pulled back to look at him. "Are you laughing at me?"

The Chiffyorn put on a serious face. "Me? No, no, not me."

"You are! You're laughing. Hey, everyone, Ticky's developed a sense of humour."

"Associating with you he's liable to develop anything, poor little blighter."

Suddenly they were all laughing, joking and making bad puns. The noise went on for about ten minutes then Dubin put up his hands.

"All right, settle down everyone." The noise subsided. "The general consensus seems to be that we go ahead with this crazy plan of mine..." The noise started up again and he had to raise his voice over it. "So I might remind you that we haven't much time." They settled down. "The plan is in three parts and the sooner we can get phase one started the better it will be. Chet, Davy, Al, Theon, I want you to go to all the groups in our compound- all those you know will co-operate- and tell them we plan to stage the biggest joke ever. Tell them we want them to do anything, any little thing they can think of, no matter how small, that will upset the smooth running of the camp and cause trouble for the Dows. Anything, so long as it doesn't get them into real trouble. It doesn't have to be big... but whatever it is, the less contrived it appears to be, the better. Do you think you can get that across to them?"

Chet nodded. "Sure. A lot of them have caught onto the idea of goon baiting. They'll be keen to join in."

"Tell them to spread the word to the other compounds as well. The wider the spread of the disturbances the less it will seem that we are the cause."

When they'd gone Dubin looked to Ticolaya with a serious face. "There is just one thing about this plan that I regret; it will only work for Terrans and those whom the Dows think are Terran. We will have to leave you behind. But, if we get safely away from here, I promise... I swear... we'll mount a rescue operation, come back for everyone and wipe this place off the map."

Ticolaya nodded. "I believe you."

"Then you are not too disappointed?"

"I'm sorry I will not be able to help you in your escape."

"Oh but you will. You are an important part of my plan; probably the most important part. You are the fulcrum it all rests on." He regarded the young being for a short while. "Ticolaya, I hope you have a good memory."

"The Ree M'Tasha says I have excellent powers of retention."

"That's good, because I don't know when he might call for you and I want you to have it all up here when he does." He touched his head.

"Who will call for me?"

Random Collection

"Old stone-face Svee."

"How do you know he will want to speak to me?"

Ali grinned. "The Dows are superstitious about death. Look how much trouble they went to, to make sure the Black Arulla was sent on his way to the next world in proper fashion. Right about now Svee will be wondering what he should do about the dead pilot sitting out there in the swamp just on the border of his camp. They think he was Terran so Svee is going to want to know about Terran funeral rites, and you're the only one he knows who might be able to tell him."

"I don't know anything about..."

"That's what you're going to learn now. Sit down, make yourself comfortable."

Ticolaya was summoned through the door of East One sooner than either he or Ali imagined. At noon of that day he was facing the Commander across his room. He was offered a drink, which he accepted, and some snacks which he refused because they looked dry and stringy, like dainties collected from the interior of an old mattress. After some small talk harking back to their earlier 'agreeable talk on Terrans' the Commander got to the point.

"You are no doubt aware of the ship that crashed outside the compound and of the pilot who died." Ticolaya nodded. "We made an attempt to recover the body. The impact was so great everything was smashed; we wouldn't tell organic matter from swamp material and ship." Even Svee's stiff, leathery face managed to show a crinkle of distaste. "Strictly speaking the pilot was not a prisoner and not under my jurisdiction but I have always been concerned for the welfare of the beings in my care and taken their particular needs and cultural differences into account. For the sake of the Terran prisoners I want to hold a proper funeral for the pilot. That is why I have summoned you here today; I want you to tell me all you know about Terran funeral rites."

"Of course, whatever you want to know," Ticolaya said then bit his tongue gently between his teeth when he thought he'd sounded too eager. The Dow looked at him for a few long seconds then blinked scaly lids and went on.

"I asked for you rather than one of the Terrans because I thought you would be less upset by talking about it." And less likely to hand you a pack of lies, Ticolaya thought. He nodded again.

"What can I tell you?"

"You can begin by explaining that strange dancing and awful noise they made when confronted by the message cube. What purpose was it meant to serve?"

Ticolaya felt his heart flutter in sudden panic; this was not what he and Dubin had rehearsed. But in a second or two he calmed himself and let his mind work. "It was to call the spirit of the dead man to ease his distress, and perhaps to help to guide him to the next world."

"Did it work?"

Ticolaya made an elaborate gesture with his hands. "I don't know. I'm not a sensitive."

"Why did they make the noise a second time?"

"Custom. It is customary to have many laments, particularly after a violent death because the spirit is often scattered and needs a focal point to gather around."

The Commander was silent a while. His face didn't show it but the nervous flicking of his claws indicated some mental agitation. "Tell me about the funeral rites."

Ticolaya drew in a breath to prepare himself and began. "Terrans know as much about the death process as any intelligent beings; they know that the spirit often lingers about the physical plane for some time... up to three days... and often needs instruction to help it on its way to the next phase of existence. They assist it by going to a place surrounded by ice, snow or water. They have special rocky platforms high in snowy places, or in the middle of rivers, built for the purpose. The lack of anything living- plants or animals- discourages the spirit from lingering and the snow, ice or water makes the passage to the next world easier. They sing laments and special death songs to give instructions to the dying one..."

"Dying one?" the Commander pounced. "You said 'dying'. Not dead?"

"Oh, I didn't tell you, did I? Terrans prefer to give their funeral rites to the nearly dead rather than the actual dead. They have found it more successful than waiting till after death."

"How do they know when they're going to die?"

"Most beings know when they're going to die. The old, the ill... they have a fairly good idea when they are about to go."

"What about accidents? Murder?"

"Ah, that's unfortunate. In that case they follow the same rituals and hope for the best."

"Hope for the best," the Commander repeated, not sounding too happy. "What should I do for the pilot then?"

"Well," Ticolaya said, appearing to consider. "You cannot recover the body to take it to a rocky place and it is already surrounded by water where it is in the swamp so the only thing left to do is to hold some kind of service."

"What words do I use?"

"It does not matter much. Something of comfort. Something to urge the spirit to seek the path to the next stage. Terrans aren't fussy about the actual words."

"When and where should this be done?"

Ticolaya had no idea. "Tomorrow at sundown," he decided on the spur of the moment. "At the edge of the swamp." He hoped it would tie in well with Dubin's plans.

"Perfect," Dubin said. "Today there will be a few incidents. They will put them down to normal day to day troubles. Tonight there will be some mysterious things, enough to make them start to think. Then tomorrow there will be a string of strange happenings, not all of which they will be able to blame on the prisoners. It will culminate tomorrow night in something happening in the swamp outside the compound. The Dows don't know about Theon's ability to get outside therefore they will attribute whatever happens on the outside to the spirit of the dead man."

Ticolaya frowned, thinking that this was beginning to sound less and less like a plan for escape and more and more like the biggest bit of goon baiting ever staged. Dubin could see the doubt in his face. He smiled, nodded his head sideways, winked and made a clicking noise with his mouth all in one smooth sequence. "It will work," he said. "You wait and see. It will work."

There was rarely a prison day that passed without some kind of problems or irritations but this day, Svee felt, was beginning to have more than its usual share. It had begun in the morning when some Zegan prisoners broke through a couple of gates and got into the gas control compound for the controlled environment dome and for some idiotic reason began fiddling with the taps. Two were taken to the medic with chlorine burns. Two others escaped back to their own compound and disappeared among their fellows. He had them all paraded for examination and questioning but it achieved nothing but a waste of time and frayed tempers. He'd considered taking some kind of punitive action but dropped the idea because he wasn't feeling in the mood and because he really wanted to spend some time talking to the Chiffyorn about terran funeral rites.

He and the rest of the prison staff had been nervous ever since the death of the pilot in the swamp. The being had not been given proper funeral rites and its spirit might become restless and vindictive, especially as its physical body had been insane at the moment of its demise. He worried that the spirit might be insane too. A normal Terran was a mad enough creature; the insane spirit of one did not bear thinking about. He certainly did not want one hanging around his prison.

What Ticolaya told him later that day did not comfort him one whit and he would have rushed out and performed any sort of service that afternoon if the Chiffyorn had not recommended it be held at sundown of the next day. The little one was assuredly an expert on the Strange Ones and their culture; there must be a very good reason for his choice of timing. There was nothing to do but wait out that day and the next and hope that if the dead pilot's spirit was active, it would not get too active or inventive.

He did not think the incident with the Zegans was caused by the spirit; the Zegan prisoners were a troublesome lot, always up to mischief. But when the Sambarese, a usually mild breed, began behaving with uncharacteristic aggression, he wondered if the spirit might not be provoking them. They began arguing among themselves as they lay in the shade of the trees on one side of the compound. Guards, watching from observation windows on the top floor of the two storied building at first informed him that the arguments were verbal and nothing serious. Then the guards reported incidents of pushing and shoving and finally a fight with hoofs and their short, sharp horns. He sent in a squad to break it up.

At that point all hell seemed to break loose as the entire Sambarese herd got up and charged, flattening two Dows and scattering the rest. They did not chase the guards but made a mass gallop to the corner of the compound by the building then turned in a body and thundered back the other way. The sound of their hooting and hollering could be heard even when they reached the far end of the compound where they stirred up a great cloud of dust as they turned and galloped back.

More guards were sent in to try and stop them but they were bowled over or pushed aside and the rush went on. Weapons discharged at the head of the crowd did not stop them. Weapons fired over their heads did not turn them. Ropes stretched out from the compound fence in an effort to halt them were yanked out of the stubby arms of the guards, dislocating a number of shoulders. Threats of punishment bellowed over the loudspeaker system had no effect as the Sambarese pelted up and down, up and down, eyes glassy, breaths rasping, saliva flying in long strands from their mouths as they ran.

Svee withdrew his battered guards and left the prisoners to it. Let them wear themselves out he told his squad leaders; they couldn't keep it up forever, they had to get tired at some stage, they had to get thirsty and stop for a drink. So he thought, but the wretched things seemed to have suddenly developed supernormal abilities and they pounded back and forth all afternoon. Back and forth along the fence line they went at the same unvarying mad gallop, stirring up more dust with every pass as their sharp hoofs cut through the fragile covering of grass. The noise, the dust, the monotony of it drove everyone mad, including a number of prisoners in adjacent compounds.

Ticolaya held his head in his hands and scowled. "All in a good cause," he saw Chet say. The man was sitting in one of the huts working on a simple amplifier made of parts scavenged from outside and from the transmitter from Theon's helmet. He had built most of it some months before as something to do but had been unable to think of a good use for it. Ticolaya was standing about acting as lookout, every so often covering his ears to block out the noise coming from the Sambarese activity.

"I know. I just hope it is annoying the Dows as much as us. What I do not understand is how they have been able to keep it up for so long. I know the idea is for it to seem that the spirit has lent them supernatural strength along with their madness... but I know that is not so."

"They're not all doing it," Chet said simply his eyes still on his work. "Every time they run through that grove of trees they leave four behind. They have rest and a drink and join the group later while others stop for a rest. There's such a mob of them and they all look so much alike no-one can tell the difference." He began pushing aside tools and project. "That's that."

"Is it finished?"

"As much as I can do. It needs a speaker."

Ticolaya looked up at the Dow speakers mounted on poles in all the compounds and Chet grinned. "Yes, you're right; speakers for the taking, but not in broad daylight. Come on, you can pass some of this stuff down into the cave for me."

While they were moving the amplifier down into the cave below the camp, Theon came along looking for a large sealable container of some kind. Chet found him a big glass jar with a screw cap asking, as he handed it over, what he planned to do with it. The Caadian youth shrugged. "Ask Dubin. He wants me to collect mud from the edge of the swamp... a whole jar full of it." He shrugged again. "Don't ask me, I'm just a courier around here."

"Where is Ali anyway?" Chet asked when Theon had gone. Ticolaya said he had seen him last talking to groups of other prisoners in the compound, conducting what looked like singing lessons. Chet nodded in understanding. "I know what he's doing. He's looking for someone who can make a really weird noise which we can amplify down in the cave. The sound will seem to come from underground and should sound particularly eerie."

"I'll go and see if he's found someone," Ticolaya said as some pale skinned Dorgans shambled up to tell Chet they were ready to begin their role in the afternoon's entertainment and to offer a container of berries which they used to colour food and which they thought might be useful in some joke on the Dows.

Before he found Dubin, Ticolaya was twice distracted. First by the unusual sight of big Davy up a tree picking things off the branches. It was not a fruit tree and for a while Ticolaya could not imagine what he could be collecting so carefully and putting in a box then after a bit of squinting against the glare of the sun he realised that what the man was collecting was sleeping bats. Up the tree with him was Jones, also picking things... small things, invisible from the ground, which he quickly popped into a jar.

The second distraction happened a little later as he continued on along a path by a side fence which divided his compound from the neighbouring one. He heard a hissing noise and stopped. At first there was nothing to be seen but a clump of bushes, then a mottled grey and green Zegan detached itself from the scenery and approached the fence. "Here, take this," he said, shoving something through the wire. It was a plastic tube knotted at both ends.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I mean, nothing in itself; it's what's in it that's important. Take it to Bruon Abar. Tell him we got it this morning."

"What is it?"

"Sulphur?"

"What does Bruon Abar want with it?"

The Zegan made a throaty noise of amusement. "You'll see."

Bruon Abar, the sleek lizard like being was not at his usual place down by the pond. Ticolaya found him in the Red Arulla's sturdy mud hut surrounded by almost every bowl and container in the camp. Some were filled with lumps of charcoal, some with a white substance and others with a grey mixture that seemed to contain both. Nearby were a number of homemade grinding and sieving arrangements. Bruon Abar was busy with a fine sieve, patiently sifting and shaking a sooty mixture. "It works better when all the granules are the same size," he said. "What have you got there?"

Ticolaya was standing, tube of sulphur forgotten in his hand, staring at the hut's owner. The Red Arulla was crouched on the floor at the back of the hut, legs folded beneath him as his clever hands worked at a task that struck Ticolaya as odd. With the aid of a spoon and a paper funnel he was measuring some of the black mixture into narrow, rigid tubes made of the rolled, gummed leaves of a book. He was sealing them with clay, leaving a short piece of string trailing from one end and then tying the

whole thing to one of a bundle of straight twigs. He gave the tube to Bruon Abar. "Here, it's sulphur. A Zegan gave it to me. I am not going to ask what you are going to do with it because I couldn't stand the explanation."

Bruon Abar's already bright eyes seemed to sparkle as he opened the tube and released a stream of yellow crystals. "I'm making an explosive powder. With dungheap salt and charcoal I have been able to make a fairly good mixture but sulphur will make it better. You will see its effects tonight and tomorrow."

"I have seen explosions before."

"You can use this stuff to so more than merely explode. Don't you have fireworks on your home world?" Ticolaya's blank expression told him that he didn't. "You will see."

"Well, take care. You are too handsome to be blown apart by that foul black powder."

Bruon Abar hissed his appreciation of the compliment.

Unable to find Dubin anywhere in the compound Ticolaya returned to the huts to find him there with- of all beings- the Ree M'Tasha. "What are you doing here?" he asked in surprise at seeing his staid teacher hobnobbing with the Strange Ones. M'Tasha pulled a face.

"I have been the victim of a ruse. This one asked me what I considered to be the strangest natural sound I had ever heard and when I told him it was the cry of the Great Upland Toglorn he asked me to imitate the sound. I did, he applauded and here I am, elected to tramp around a foul smelling, dark cave with an amplifier round my neck, a helmet three sizes too big on my head, making noises like a lovelorn fowl while a Terran trails behind me with a speaker." He scowled but Ticolaya suspected he was pleased by this chance to play a part in the proceedings.

While M'Tasha was being taken down into the cave to familiarise himself with its layout, Ticolaya and Dubin sat outside acting as lookouts in case the Dows should spring a surprise inspection. They were not seriously worried about the possibility as their captors appeared to have enough on their plates to keep them occupied for some time. From a compound further west came the continuing sound of the Sambarese stampede and in their own compound there was some kind of disturbance in the corner long occupied by the Dorgans.

"I heard them say they were going to start their part in the plan. What are they doing?"

"Developing rashes," Dubin said. Dorgans were very pale skinned, almost hairless bipeds with skins exquisitely sensitive to certain irritations. They had all had a good rub on the grass by the pond knowing it would bring them out in fierce red rashes, alarming to look at but not really injurious to life or limb. On seeing it the Dows had grabbed one Dorgan and rushed him to the medic for examination. He had prescribed a soothing lotion which was carried by the bucketful into the compound and pasted liberally on every red hide in sight. It was this noisy, messy operation Ticolaya and Dubin heard.

While it was in progress Theon trudged back from the pond with a jar of mud which he solemnly presented to Ali who, equally solemnly accepted it and then handed him the packet the Dorgans had given to Chet.

"Here," he said, explaining about the food colouring. "See what mischief you can do with it."

Theon thought a moment then nodded. "I know where the water supply for the building comes from; I'll drop it in there. It will take a few hours to filter through... maybe tomorrow."

"That's fine. I think there's been enough mayhem for today anyway. And Theon..." he added as the youth started to walk away, "after you come back from this job, stay in the compound. We don't want you getting caught at this crucial stage. Get some sleep. You'll be busy tonight and tomorrow."

"What's the mud for?" Ticolaya asked. Dubin was thoughtful and quiet as he watched Theon walk away then he turned to his small companion.

"Bruon Abar is going to take it into the building tonight and run around the ceilings dropping it in strategic locations. Dows are clean beings, they don't like mud at all." He paused then added with a wolfish grin: "Particularly if they think it's been splattered about by a dead Terran on the prow in the middle of the night."

At the end of that day that Commander Svec thought would never end, just after the Dorgan rash died down and the Sambarese suddenly quit their galloping and settled down for the night, Fate threw her hand in on the side of the prisoners causing the rubbish disposal unit to break down creating a stink right under the inlet to the air condition system to the building. Soon every room was filled with the sharp, powerful odour of decaying food scraps. This was fortunate for Dubin's plan as it drove many of the Dows outdoors that night, many to the flat roof where they were in an excellent position to view the performance.

It began with mysterious flashes and bangs from the powerhouse. A squad was hastily assembled and sent to investigate. They found nothing. Soon after that there were more pops and splutters, this time from one of the compounds and mysterious objects, some trailing orange sparks whizzed over the heads of the Dows on the roof.

Though alarmed at first, Svec soon realised that the apparitions were man... probably Terran... made, though he could not imagine how they had managed to obtain the gunpowder they were obviously using. He was much more alarmed by the next appearance. It looked like fire beetles, those non-mysterious little darting lights often seen at night in the trees and bushes all round the prison; but these beetles seemed to have undergone military training and learned to fly in formation quite unlike their free flitting kin. They also soared much higher than anyone had ever seen. Here and there, silently, the squadrons of fire beetles left the trees, ascended into the dark and skimmed away out of sight.

Down in the dark compound Ticolaya at last realised the use for the bats and beetles that Altoo and the Mouse had been collecting. His only worry was that the beetles would not come unglued from the wings and throats of the bats as easily as the

men said they would. Up on the roof Svee called for a net on a long pole to see if they could capture a batch of these odd, trained insects but by the time the net was produced, assembled and raised, the phenomenon had ceased and something new had come along.

Far out on the moor where no Dow and no prisoner should be, a soft blue light danced back and forth. A somewhat intimidated squad of guards was sent to investigate. As they approached, the light danced away ahead of them (on Theon's swift feet) and set off across the surface of a small lake. Out of reach it stopped, hovering right on the surface of the water, its light reflecting all round showing no guiding hand or splashing prisoner.

While they chased the light most of the guards had been able to convince themselves they were pursuing an errant prisoner with some kind of illumination but when the light moved across the water in a manner they could not explain, they threw that theory to the winds, turned tail and raced back to the prison as fast as their legs could carry them. They were suffering the ripe atmosphere in Svee's office, still trying to explain their undignified retreat to their Commander when a guard rushed down from his upstairs post to report the onset of a weird noise.

Wearily Commander Svee led the way from his office into the pleasantly sweet air of the outside hoping that this latest development would turn out to be easily explained... the wail of a night bird or the groan of a bit of machinery. It was not. The noise, an eerie wailing moan with a sort of whistle in it, seemed to come from somewhere underground. It was most noticeable in the compound to the left of the prison as he looked out from the building... East One... the compound that contained the Terrans.

Certain they were behind whatever it was that was making the noise the Commander led a group into the compound for a closer look and listen. They didn't have to listen hard; the noise was quite loud at times and seemed to come from a wide area beneath their scaly feet.

"Trickery," Svee muttered. "They must have found a way into the caves." He led the way to the Terran huts expecting to be met by the open grins and smothered laughter that characterised the Terrans usual reaction to the pranks they played on him and his guards. He was alarmed to see them all outside their huts, sitting about a dying fire, looking distinctly unhappy. There was one missing. "Where is the one called Ozzmozz?"

The men looked up. They were dull eyed, not at all like their usual impudent selves and their demeanour spooked Svee as much as anything else that had happened that night... though that mournful howl from the soil was running a close second. The men seemed unwilling to talk. "Answer!" he demanded.

"He..." Al One nodded sideways, "went for a walk. The noise was getting to him." Silently Svee did not blame him. The fear bumps on his own neck were standing out like knobs on a decorative rail. His eyes lit on something. "Why is this one all wet?"

Theon was sprawled on the ground where he had arrived only seconds before the arrival of Svee and his group after a sprint back from the lake on the moor. There had not been time for him to dry and dress. Jones, putting on a mournful face and resisting

the urge to scratch the sooty make up under his eyes, allowed a little time to elapse before reluctantly telling the Dows that the young man had been so despondent he had tried to drown himself in the pond. This produced a spasm from Theon which the men recognised as muffled laughter but which the Dows fortunately interpreted as pain. "You should all be sleeping," Svec finally declared, at a loss to know what else to say. The men just looked at him.

The Dows spent some hours trying to locate the entrance to the caves which they believed had to exist- a job they tackled with some enthusiasm as it was one of the few practical solutions they had been able to apply to any of the troubles that had beset the camp that day. The sound had a simple, logical, prisoner inspired origin and Svec was determined to discover it, just to satisfy himself that it was nothing supernatural.

To his consternation however, the sound began to follow him as he moved about the camp and he could not explain to himself or his guards how it was able to do so. It made sense to believe there were prisoners down in a cave, creating the sound, but how were they able to tell where anyone was on the surface? It was just vaguely possible they could hear the movement of feet transmitted through the rock, but there were prisoners milling all about and no way anyone below could distinguish Dow footsteps from the many others in the compound. Svec and his guards did not see the signals being telegraphed to Chet and M'Tasha by Ticolaya through a series of sound conducting spikes stuck into the ground.

Frustrated but not to be denied at least one victory that night the Commander was just about to order all huts and shelters to be demolished and every square centimetre of ground to be searched for cracks, when there came the glare of fire through the trees. As though someone had picked up his unspoken orders and carried them out, the Terran huts had been set ablaze and were rapidly being consumed by fire. When the Dows ran across to the site of the fire they found all the men and the Chiffyorns standing about looking at the blaze.

Half the night was occupied putting out the fire and sifting through the ashes to find the cause, and the entrance to the tunnel. Neither was found so he had the Terrans rounded up and taken into the building for interrogation. The rest of the night was spent trying to get them to admit they had set fire to their huts to cover up the entrance to an underground tunnel.

The Terrans were not very talkative and when they did speak it was only to deny that they had had anything to do with the fire. The only thing they gave away was when Ozzmozz said in a low voice, "It was probably him." He fell quickly silent when another man jabbed him in the side with an elbow. A cold shower fell on Svec's head and ran down his back because he was sure he knew what the man meant.

"Out!" he called to his guards. They made a few quick steps toward the door then had to quickly reverse direction when their leader added, "Get them out of here."

Ticolaya was pleased to see the men return to the compound. He told them so. "No less than us little friend," Dubin said. "I hadn't counted on the possibility of the Dows incarcerating us inside because of the trouble."

"Why did they let you go?"

"I don't know. Though I think Chet's remark may have had something to do with it." Imitating Chet's long-faced expression and doleful tone he said, "It was probably him." Chet chuckled with delight. "Old stone face took a few seconds to digest that then yelled for his guards to get rid of us."

"It's nearly dawn," Jones reminded them. "We still have a lot to do."

The next day was just what the Commander had hoped it would not be: worse than the day before. He had barely pushed the Terrans out of his office and tottered down the hall to his room, bed and sleep when the noise and shockwaves of an explosion ripped him back to wakefulness. Grabbing his weapon belt, the sole item of apparel any Dow wore, he was struggling to get it on as he hauled open the door of his room and stomped out. The instant he stepped over the sill his feet shot out from beneath him and he found himself sitting, surprised and sore tailed on the floor of the corridor with his weapon belt wrapped round his head.

All round there were guards slipping, sliding and tip-toeing, making noises of disgust as they encountered smears of mud. There were dribbles of mud everywhere, in all the corridors and some of the rooms. There were also daubs of mud on walls and doors and a dollop of thick, brown mud outside the door of Svee's room. The fear bumps on his neck began to rise again as he recognised it as the kind of mud... or the very mud... to be found in the swamp of the crash site. Collecting himself he got to his feet and bawled down the corridor for a squad to get itself together.

The explosion had occurred outside, in the pump house. By the time he arrived to inspect it, the pump was a smoking ruin. Svee returned to the building, tip-toed through the mud, which seemed to be everywhere and organised a team to set up the emergency pump. He had barely finished that and was about to turn his attention to the matter of the mud, streaks of which had even found their way into eating bowls in the mess hall, when an alarm sounded on the far side of the building.

It was the aquatic prisoners compound. In their big pond the water was midnight black, its still surface broken only by the accusing eyes of a group of Lombin prisoners. One lifted a speaking organ from the soupy depths and stated in Standard: "We are suffocating in here." It was lying. It knew that its own defence screen ink would not hurt it or any of the other denizens of the pond. "What are you going to do about it? We are important prisoners... politically important. The Kyben Vor would not like it at all if anything were to happen to us." It finished off its speech with some gargling noises and a flurry of bubbles that caused all Dows to break out in fear bumps and Svee to bellow for the immediate hooking up of the auxiliary pump.

The pump was brought forth from the depths of a store room, hooked up to the remains of the system and made, with remarkable speed, to work. The black, unhealthy looking water flowed to waste on the ground outside the compounds to be replaced gradually by clean, clear water from the underground spring that fed the prison.

For a while all was quiet and running smoothly. Svee looked round. He gave the Sambarese a hard stare. They chewed their cud mildly and looked as harmless as

house pets as they rested in the shade. He stared off into the distance to the far compound and saw the Terrans walking slowly up and down looking, to his mind, as harmless as live bombs with detonators. He scowled at his guards who attacked the nearest job with vigour, then, when all remained quiet he allowed himself the luxury of a long sigh.

A second later he knew he'd sighed too soon. One of the guards gave a shriek and the Lombin prisoners all lifted their speaking organs and bellowed a protest, for the water flowing into the pond was now bright yellow. While the water breathers flopped and threshed about, putting on the performances of their lives and frantic Dows ran hither and thither, Ticolaya strolled calmly to where the Red Arulla and Bruon Abar were sitting at the base of the high wall of the building that formed the northern boundary of the compounds. They were nursing small, round containers in their arms, as they sat with their heads tilted back, resting against the concrete wall. "More bombs?" Ticolaya asked.

"Hush! No," Bruon Abar hissed and gestured upward. It was then that Ticolaya realised that the pair were not deeply relaxing but waiting, probably as tense as drawn bows, looking up at a pair of guards' windows. The apertures were closed now but he knew as well as any prisoner in the place that one or the other might crash open at any moment to allow a guard to poke his head through for a look around.

"What's in...?" he was asking when one of the shutters opened and a Dow looked out. With deadly accuracy born of long hours of practice down the far end of the compound (They had planned this long before Dubin had conceived his plan) they hurled their missiles upwards. The round objects flew through the gap above the guard's head. He gave a squeak of alarm and ducked back inside.

"Run!" the Red Arulla exclaimed. The trio charged southward in a cloud of dust while behind them screams emerged from the second story guard room- screams that went on and on, followed by loud thumps.

"What..." Ticolaya asked when they stopped out of sight in the bushes, "was in those things?"

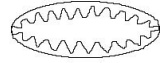
"Bees," said Bruon Abar.

Early in the afternoon Commander Svec tried to make an announcement on the address system and found it inoperative. A workman sent to investigate came back to report that instead of a line of speakers in the compounds there was now a line of bare poles. The compounds were searched. No speakers were found but in East Five, six Karzans- big, conspicuous grub like beings- had disappeared. While one squad made a search for the missing Karzans another squad set out to patrol the outside of the prison. They were the ones who found the missing speakers, filled with mud and arranged in an arrow shape with the point toward the crash site in the swamp.

That particular squad came back to the building so scared they could barely function for fear. They were sent to keep watch from the roof while other guards were sent out to continue the patrol of the perimeter fence. They made one lap without seeing anything untoward. They made two laps and the only sign of activity was their

own broad footprints in the yellow sand along the fence line. Feeling more confident by the moment they started on a third lap then ran shrieking back to the building. Drawn in the sand they had passed not many minutes before was a symbol, like an oval lined with triangles, like an open maw filled with sharp teeth:

It was, to the Dows, the most evil of all symbols.



Meanwhile all was not well in the building. A valuable Bovan machine, left in the care of the Dows, had water spilt into it by a worker cleaning up the mud. It exploded in a shower of sparks and rendered itself useless. The power house operators, afraid of the vengeful spirit which rumour said was stalking the place, made one mistake after another causing wild fluctuations in the power supply which in turn had its effect on various instruments and machines. The big air conditioning plant shut down twice and the main computer started putting out random symbols.

Fear also made the cook worse than usual and the food that day was terrible; one choice undercooked, one choice burnt and a third so sweet as to be unpalatable. In the infirmary two guards were howling with the pain of bee stung faces. Yellow water now flowed from all taps in the building staining everything in sight. It also tasted most peculiar. The only good news to reach Svee all that afternoon was that the Karzan prisoners had been found. They had metamorphosed into smaller, winged forms and had managed to stay hidden in the trees for some time. The reason they gave for their metamorphosis was not such good news; they said it only happened in times of great stress and fear.

Dubin scowled at Theon when he described the effect his 'evil symbol' had had on the patrol.

"All right, very clever, but no more trips outside, you hear? We need you tonight. And right now, quit your grinning; we have to start looking as depressed as we can."

Fear gripped the entire prison. Commander Svee knew he should do something about it but that was not easy when he had a fine crop of fear bumps on his own neck. For a short while after he'd had the Terrans rounded up and while he was venting his spleen on them in a long harangue, he felt good; but it did not last. The way they just stood there, meekly accepting his abuse; and the way they shuffled into the shade when it was over and dropped into crouches, hugging their knees, looking frightened, frightened him. If these impudent, resourceful, indomitable beings were afraid of the force at large, what chance did he have of overcoming it? The swamp side ritual was his last and only hope. Sunset could not come too soon. He sent for Ticolaya to have him explain again about the funeral rites and to hear him say how effective they would be in quelling the disturbances.

The little Chiffyorn was not as comforting as Svee hoped he would be. He kept shaking his head and making doubtful noises, saying that the spirit was so strong now it might not be possible to convince it to move on.

"Why pick on us?" Svee asked in the last stages of exasperation. "What did we ever do to it?"

"Not you," Ticolaya said cheerfully. "Oh no, it's not you he's angry with... you and the rest of the prisoners just happen to be in the way. He's really angry with the Terrans for neglecting his funeral rites. Because spirits can pass through air, water and material objects, they tend to forget that barriers exist in the physical world. He doesn't realise that the men were quite unable to reach him to perform his rituals."

In the privacy of his mind Ticolaya was thinking that if this after death postulation of Dubin's got any more complicated Svee would be sure to suspect something. As yet he did not see anything suspicious. He nodded in total agreement, sunk into deep and worried thought and absently waved one hand at Ticolaya to indicate that he should leave. The little prisoner strolled causally out of the office without his guard and was halfway across the mess hall in the centre of the building when Svee woke up and yelled at a guard to get after him.

Well before sunset Svee and a small group of his hardest guards were set up on the edge of the swamp. In accordance with his own culture he had gifts and food for the dead man's spirit and in accordance with what Ticolaya had told him, a speech of comfort and instruction interspersed with several heartfelt pleas for it to move on and leave them all in peace.

Watching from hiding at the far end of the compound Dubin and Theon were mildly dismayed. "I hope he doesn't plan to start too early," the younger Caadian said to the older one, "or the shadows won't be deep enough to hide me as I get from the pond's outlets to the methane canisters."

"And it won't look as effective in the glow of sunset as it would in the dark. I wish Ticky had thought to say 'just after sunset'; but he wasn't to know. We'll just have to make the best of it." He looked at the youth he had once thought to be his enemy and said gruffly, "You take care out there, you hear?"

Theon grinned knowingly. "What's the matter? Can't bear the thought of losing me?"

"You think I care about you personally? Listen, if you don't make it, none of us do; that ship was sent to collect you." Ali let a smile soften his face. "Just be careful, eh?"

Though he was desperate to complete the ritual and get back to the relative safety of his office, Svee was determined it was going to be performed correctly and waited till exactly sundown before beginning. The flat horizon of the sea was slicing perfectly through the centre of the red disc of the sun when he raised his short arms and began to chant in a sing song voice. It was in his own language because he knew that spirits understood all languages; it was impassioned because he really believed and wanted an end to the trouble. It went on longer than anyone expected. The sun had gone and the swamp was growing dark by the time he got round to presenting the food and gifts. Around him his guards shuffled and wheezed with nervousness.

There was a splash out in the swamp. One of the guards hissed in fright. Another asked, "What was that?" With nerve ends raw and all senses casting about for possible trouble they stood frozen, staring at the reeds and the still water. "Probably a bird..." Svee was saying when a hissing noise impinged on his hearing. Fear ran through him,

from his muscles to his nervous system, to his lower brain, but stalled in his higher brain which suddenly realised that the hissing noise might be quite easily explained. He turned to his guards. "Who's making that noise?" he demanded.

In response they made gabbling noises, their eyes bulged and they began pointing at him. For a second he was alarmed by what might have happened to him to cause them to fear him then he saw that they were pointing past him to the swamp. He turned in time to see a line of fire spring up behind a row of reeds. A fraction of a second later there was an almighty bang and a gout of flame blossomed over the water and reeds. Out of the fireball leapt a dark bipedal shape. With a hideous shriek, it dived through the reeds and down into the murky water.

There was a clatter as the guards dropped their weapons and ran. Svee lingered only long enough to see that the fire had caught in the dry reeds and was racing across the swamp, then he too turned and fled.

In the door of his office he almost tripped over a small, six limbed prisoner. The Chiffyorn was waving his arms, tears streamed down his face and it was clear he was in great distress. Beside him was a guard, babbling about something 'of great importance' which he thought he should bring to the Commander's attention.

"The Terrans," Ticolaya wailed between great sobs, "they've done something stupid. Please, you've got to help them. The spirit wants them with him for company. It brought them more of that poison and they took it... lots of it. They're full of it. They're dying. Please, you've got to..." If Svee had any hair every strand of it would have stood on end at that moment.

"Dying!?" he shrieked. "Dying?" Utter horror washed over him as he thought about the consequences. One incorporeal Terran had caused all the present trouble; what would it be like trying to live with six? Anger surged up to oust the horror and fear. "Not- in- my- camp- they- don't!" he declared in a statement of spaced words.

As Ticolaya was escorted back to the compound he heard Svee storming up and down giving orders for the Terrans to be picked up and the boat made ready for a short trip. The Terrans, including Theon who was suffering shock from having a methane container blow up in his face, were collected on stretchers and taken inside to be examined by the medic. He sampled their blood and declared it to be chock full of alcohol. Meanwhile guards searched the compound and found no trace of where they might have obtained the poison. This convinced Svee that it had indeed been materialised by the spirit for the purpose of creating companions for itself. Not if he could help it. Those miserable Terrans, while yet there was life in their bodies, were going to be sent off to the other side in the proper manner with everything done right to ensure they actually got there. He called to ask if the boat was ready.

Ticolaya slept against his will. He saw he men carted away on stretchers but after that nothing much happened and tiredness overcame him. It was still dark when he awoke. Leaping to his hoofs in alarm he trotted quickly to the nearest patch of light. The Red Arulla, Ree M'Tasha and a Dorgan were seated around a small fire. "Has anyone seen anything?" he asked. "Have they taken the Strange Ones from the building?"

Random Collection

"Yes my Y'Tami, a short while ago. They took them across to one of the rocky islands for the funeral rites."

"And since then?" he asked anxiously.

"They performed the proper rites, as far as we could see, then withdrew to the shore of this island to wait for them to die. They'll probably go back in the morning to see if the poison has done its job."

Ticolaya looked up at Bruon Abar who was perched in a tall tree where he had a good view of most of the prison, the coast and the rocky islands off shore.

"What can you see?" he asked.

"Nothing much yet..." he said, then a moment later gave a cry. "Look!" They looked and it was not difficult to see what he had spotted; it was a star, a bright star moving through the heavens. It grew rapidly larger and within minutes was a mass of white hot energy, almost overhead. With a shriek and then a roar the fallen star settled to rest on the Terran's rocky island.

As the bright glare faded away other lights became apparent; landing lights, navigation lights, deadlights. On the shore Commander Svec screeched with surprise and anger and sprawled headlong on the sand as he tripped while trying to reach the boat. His guards hauled him to his feet, bundled him into the boat and pushed off from the beach but they had barely started across the water when Theon and his father pulled the last unconscious, reeking Terran into the small ship, closed the hatch and took off into the night sky.

Back in the compound Ticolaya watched the star ascend heavenward and dwindle till it was lost among its fellows then he turned and laid his arms across his back. His small body heaved and tears rolled down his cheeks as he laughed and laughed and laughed.

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Yvon)*