



Advanced Scout

"He glanced over at the young man slouched in the corner booth of the bar. Odd ... the face seemed almost recognizable. But he'd adhered to all the usual procedures, so he knew that he couldn't have been detected, much less followed into the establishment. So close to the end of his assignment, he was beginning to become somewhat paranoid. After all, he thought, this species lacked the intelligence to develop a clear awareness of his presence, so how could he have been tracked as he carried out his duties? And, he had to admit to himself, they were such plain looking creatures that they all seemed to look alike ... that must be the reason the face seemed familiar.

"Must you smoke, immature lady?"

The waitress who was standing in front of him responded with a glance clearly intended to remind him that she knew he was a stranger to this street corner pub, and, not being a regular patron, ineligible to make such direct comments.

A stranger, he thought, if she only knew the full truth of it.

He'd been here over a week, local time, and now that his recovery was only a few hours away he was having a difficult time containing his total disgust with this uncomfortable planet and its odd collection of rather primitive and most crude cultures. And, although the genetically engineered body he had been issued was perfect in every way, an exact duplicate of the species he had been sent to reconnoiter, he still itched all over as the corrosive oxygen atmosphere seemed to eat away at his skin ... how he longed for the sweet, clean aroma of the his starship's chlorine climate.

He was interrupted from what was the beginning of a sweet reminiscence by the nauseating smell of burning organic remains and the grating voice of the waitress, "Would you like anything else, Sir?"

"You know, you really don't want to smoke ..."

"Listen, you eat the food and I'll wait the table, okay? You don't like my smoking ... I can't stand that ancient jacket you're wearing. Where'd you learn to dress, in a National Geographic? Anyhow, you want any desert or a refill of your coffee?"

He reached into her mind and ... with a slight nudge and just the tiniest bit of a twist ... "No, you misunderstood me. What I said was that you really don't want to smoke, do you?"

She put her cigarette out in the table's ashtray, "No ..."

"I mean, I've got some smoking sticks ... if you're out, that is. Would you like one?"

"No ... no, thank you very much. I really don't want to smoke ..."

"... you've never wanted to smoke, have you?"

"... I've never wanted to smoke ..."

"... you will never smoke, will you?"

"... I don't believe there's anyway that I will ever smoke ..."

"... after all, it's really a quite barbaric, primitive, disgustingly uncivilized custom, isn't it?"

"... it's really quite barbaric ... and disgusting ... once you think about it, isn't it?"

"Yes ... I think I'll have the applefruit pie, and perhaps just a bit more of the coffee bean beverage, if you please."

"No problem," there was a flirtatious twinkle in her eye, "I'll cut you a nice big piece."

So crude ... undeveloped ... arrogant in their assumption that they were 'higher life forms'! Well, he thought with a sense of smug self-congratulation, at least by ascertaining that they were most probably to become a clear nuisance to colonial expansion in this sector of the galaxy he'd be able to recommend that the scheduled sterilization procedure should be a complete affair. That would cost the Confederation quite a bit of money ... but at least he'd walk away from this miserable assignment with a hefty bonus for a job well done. And as for the unpleasant nature of his task, well, once he was back in his own body he'd spend a cycle or two soaking in a nice, hot sulfur bath ... that ought to help get rid of the stench of this planet

Depositing the remainder of his currency on the table as a tip ... yet another appalling custom unique to this twisted culture ... he rose to leave. As the waitress glanced over at him from the table she was serving, he pointed to the pile of bills and sent her a message, "This is all for you, I hope it makes your pathetic life just a tiny bit more endurable." He was halfway up the stairs before she made it over to the table, and he never heard her gasp when she first counted the small fortune heaped alongside the remains of his meal.

The abominable weather had changed once again ... something he hadn't been able to get used to ... and liquid water was falling from the sky at an appalling

rate. He zipped up the crude garb he'd been issued, checked his bearings, and began to walk down the road towards his gathering point, a tiny clearing in the woods a short distance from the center of the small town.

His head was down and the stinging rain was making it difficult for him to focus his eyes more than a few feet in front of him, so he had no time to react when a figure materialized out of the mist in front of him and walked directly into his path.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't see you walking there."

"That's acceptable, nothing of me was harmed."

A pale hand thrust towards him, "You left your umbrella behind in the bar ..."

"I don't think so. I didn't have an ..."

"Yes, yes you did. You left it hanging on the hook behind the door, don't you remember?"

"Why, that is my rainshield device! I left it hanging on the hook behind the door."

"Miserable night to be out, isn't it?"

"Why ... yes, the climate control does seem to be quite unacceptable."

He looked closely at the figure in front of him. Rather familiar ... had he seen this particular human before?

"Have I ..."

"You like the pub, didn't you?"

"Why yes, I like the pub."

"They're thinking of tearing it down ... something about making room for new expansion. That would be a shame, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, yes ... yes, it would be shame to tear it down."

"I don't think they'll do it, however, I don't think anyone will really feel anything is important enough to make destroying it necessary ..."

"No, I agree ... I ... I can't imagine any reason for tearing down such a wonderful place!"

"Well, I've got a few more people to meet tonight. You have a real happy trip, okay?"

"I will ... and ... and thank you for bringing me my belongings. I have to turn them in, you know."

"Yes, I do. And I wish I could have gotten to know you a bit better ... it's almost too bad you must forget about me. Goodnight."

Debriefing had been short and to the point, thank goodness! His report had been forwarded to Confederation Central. The response had been almost immediate, and he was pleased that they had accepted his recommendation in its entirety. Not only was a huge sum of money to be saved in bypassing the planetary system and taking no action whatsoever, it was also comforting to know that by removing the entire star system from the active list, it would be a long, long time before any other field agent had to go through an assignment as disgusting as the one he had been forced to endure ... that ought to earn him some points with his peers!

He touched one of his scale covered tentacles to his top ear. How good it felt to be normal again, he thought, and with each gillfull of the ship's sweet chlorine atmosphere he was beginning to forget the stench of the planet he'd just departed. Into a large bag he sealed the last of the items he had been issued for use on his assignment, and attached a tag to direct the package back to the supply section.

But, he wondered, what do I do with this? He hadn't been issued the folding protective device ... he'd double-checked his initial inventory chit just to make sure ... and he had no clear recollection of how it had come to be in his possession.

Perhaps I'll keep it as a souvenir, he thought, a reminder of the useless, no-good planet on which he'd had to waste far too much of his time. He felt a familiar twisting sensation in his third stomach, and glanced out the view port above him just in time to see the star field fold about itself as the ship fell into the nothingness of hyperspace. His last thought, as he placed the umbrella in the container that held his personal possessions, was, "Good riddance ... I hope I never again have to be bothered with this place."

"So ... would you like a cigarette?"

She laughed her response, "You know I've never liked the damned things. They make me sick to my stomach!"

"Well then, you did a good job!"

"How long before ..."

"My understanding is that it will be long after you and I are gone. The mechanism has already released the organism, now the genetic counter we built into it has to count out, so to speak, several hundred billion generations before it activates itself ... by then it should have vectored throughout their entire interstellar civilization."

"And then ..."

He grimaced, "Then it'll be rather quick ... and complete."

"It all seems so horrible, I wish there'd been another way."

"There might be, in a few hundred years or so after we've managed to figure out the machines they discarded when they departed, and we've found out how to produce our own starships ... but not now, not yet. And, anyhow, we didn't dare take the risk ... did we?"

"No, I suppose not. Are you finished?"

"Yup, and it's my turn to take the check." He rose from the table, "By the way, don't forget your umbrella ... I think it's raining again."