**Fugitive**

Kristoph groaned a little sickly. Like most organic beings he found transmats nauseating and disorientating and it took him precious seconds to regain his equilibrium.

Seconds that put him at a disadvantage in this hostile environment. He turned quickly in time to fend off an attack from a blood thirsty Veofang, a wolf-descended native of the planet Veo. He side-stepped its attack and broke its neck. There was no point in trying to reason with a Veofang. Nor was it wise to leave it merely wounded. That just made it a vicious creature with a grudge.

He didn’t know why a Veofang was here on Ferrud Beta. This was a penal planet, intended to punish those who knew exactly what their crimes were. The Veofang was a creature of murderous instincts without any moral compass. It literally didn’t know that killing people was a crime.

Many others on this desolate place knew perfectly well what murder was. He gathered all of his wits as he prepared to move through the hostile territory.

Ferrud Beta had never been a pleasant spot. Its native flora and fauna was mostly predatory. The meat eating mobile plants had been largely eradicated by the penal authorities, but there were occasional survivors.

The worst of the carnivorous animals was the Ketri, a half-mammal, half-reptile amphibian that OUGHT to have stayed close to the water sources, but very often didn’t, making it a danger to life just about everywhere on the planet.

And, of course, weapons were prohibited. He had even had to surrender his sonic screwdriver. When he came face to face with the six foot high monster with scales on its chest and straggly fur on its back, and three rows of teeth in its elongated mouth he had nothing to defend himself with but a length of gnarled tree branch he had broken off on the spur of the moment. Finding the one weak spot under the throat that the branch could penetrate was a combination of sheer luck and some stick-fighting skills he hadn’t used for a long time.

And that was before he came across any of the prisoners.

With four of them he had no choice but to fight to the death. They fully intended to kill him. He killed them first.

That was the way it was on Ferrud Beta. The only law there was that there was no law. Convicted prisoners were deposited on the planet by a one-way transmat beam. There were no guards, no prison walls. The planet was the prison and the sentence was life. That life was as long or short as a prisoner could survive by his own wits. If he could survive being eaten by the indigenous plants and animals and kill any other prisoner who sought to kill him, and didn’t give in to despair and kill himself, he might live many years.

Most didn’t.

The penal authorities on the artificial moon put a chip into each prisoner before that teleport. When the said prisoner died, it registered on their database.

Kristoph had a small, non-lethal device that the penal authorities had permitted him. It allowed him to home in on the chip registration that he was interested in.

Well, ‘home in’ was a loose term. He was lucky to get a general direction and an approximate direction of twenty miles from where he was marching, now, across a scrubby plain with hard baked reddish soil and a few hardy plants that could survive without water for much of the time. He looked to the mountain range on the horizon, a muddy grey smudge without definition. It was not so far as that, at least.

The mission gave him no satisfaction. He was doing it out of duty, because he felt it ought to be him rather than one of the Celestial Intervention Agencies’ young operatives. He resented the obligation, but at the same time he knew it would be the only way to finally put a distasteful series of events firmly behind him and everyone else.

He had water in a backpack with a tube he could grip in his mouth. It was already lukewarm and it tasted flat, but it would keep him hydrated. He had nutrition tablets in case he needed them. He hoped he wouldn’t, because that would mean he was stuck here for more than a day.

It was a tedious march. He felt uncomfortably isolated, crossing an open plain by himself. When he took on these sort of assignments in his younger days in the Celestial Intervention Agency he would usually have Lee KoscheiOakdăĕηĕfor company. They would watch each other’s backs in case of confrontation and for conversation when it was safe to do so. It helped to know there was somebody else, even deep in enemy territory, who was on his side.

Every living thing on this planet, animal or vegetable, was a potential enemy. He could trust nobody. He had nobody watching his back.

He heard a soft movement behind him and something gave itself away with an exhalation of breath. He turned and wielded his branch at the wild creature that sprang at him. It was something like a panther, but much less charming, and clearly carnivore. He wounded it with his first blow, then, out of kindness, dealt a coup-de-grace. An injured animal in a place like this would be prey to every other meat eater. It was less cruel to leave it as carrion.

He was more than a little surprised at the first meat eater to fall upon the carcass. It was a gaunt, grey-skinned man with straggly hair and beard who cut into the animal with a makeshift knife and sliced several large and bloody lumps that he wrapped in a piece of oilcloth with stains from a previous butchery. It didn’t look like a particularly hygienic way of wrapping food, but the man was obviously not too choosy.

At least he didn’t eat the raw meat like an animal.

He paid no attention to Kristoph until he had finished his messy work.

“Don’t you want any? There’s plenty of meat left… the organs, if you cook them quick.”

“I don’t need it. I am not staying here, long.”

“There’s no escape from here,” the man answered. “You will be here until you die – and that will be fast enough of you don’t eat.”

“I’m not a prisoner,” Kristoph answered. “I will be leaving once my work is done.”

“A bounty hunter? I’ve heard of the like. Some of the prisoners have prices on their heads as well as a life sentence.”

“Close enough,” Kristoph admitted. “Good day to you.”

He walked away. He had only gone a dozen paces when he felt the need to turn and push aside the makeshift knife wavering inches from his back. He tackled the half-starved scarecrow of a man to the ground easily. He landed on his meat pack with a nasty squelch but was otherwise unharmed.

“Don’t kill me!” he squealed as Kristoph raised his hand to deliver a fatal blow. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I just… just wanted a drink of clean water.”

“You would kill me for water?” Kristoph stayed his hand. He dragged the wretch upright. “There are streams across the plain. What’s wrong with the water in those?”

“Sometimes they’re poisoned,” the man answered. “You can’t tell until you’ve drunk from them.”

“Here.” Kristoph offered the mouthpiece to the man and let him drink some of the water. “What’s your name?”

“Kethik,” he answered.

“And your crime? The reason you’re here on this blasted planet?”

“I killed thirty people.”

“I’ve killed far more than that. I’m well trained, better fed, stronger by far than you will ever be. Move in front of me and walk where I say. If any more of your fellow travellers try anything you fight FOR me, not against me. Otherwise I kill them and you.”

He didn’t exactly trust him to watch his back, but he was company of a sort. After another mile he had extracted from Kethik exactly how he had killed thirty people.

“I was a skilled worker. I was good at what I did. But they made me redundant without any warning. Cast off after a lifetime given to the Company. So… I went into the boardroom… and I shot one of the self-satisfied suits for every year I’d worked for them.”

Kristoph said nothing, either in censure or praise of such an action.

“You’d have been executed already on most planets. The government of Ferrud Alpha consider this a merciful alternative.”

“The government are cowards who won’t do their own dirty work,” Kethik answered. “Mercy has nothing to do with it. They would rather turn their backs while we kill ourselves down here.”

“I never said I agreed with them,” Kristoph said. “In fact, I think a swift execution by any method is far less cruel. But its not my government, not my law. I’m not in a position to dispute it.”

Kethik said nothing. He was in no position to question the government, either.

A few miles later they were ambushed by three wild looking men with no weapons other than rocks. Kristoph killed one and left another unconscious. He turned to see Kethik render the other one insensible with a rock to the side of the head. Kristoph made him help move the two unconscious men into the shade of the rock outcrop they had launched their attack from.

“They’ve got as much of a chance of survival as they deserve,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“You saved my life,” Kethik said. “Without you, they’d have killed me.”

“You killed thirty people. You might have added three more to your tally. Or are you no good without a gun and a room full of unarmed men?”

“I… I’m not… that’s not fair.”

“Maybe not, but very few things are in this universe. I should think you know that as well as I do… perhaps better. You.…”

Kristoph stopped. He glanced at the homing device. It had stopped working.

“It’s not damaged, despite everything. He said. “The chip I am tracking is no longer active.”

“Your man is dead?”

“Perhaps. I have to find the body, to be certain. Do you know this area? We’re about five miles away – when I was getting a signal it was that way – towards the peak of that mountain. Is there anything there where a man could hide? The one I seek would almost certainly do that. He has no survival skills at all.”

“There’s a river… with some abandoned buildings… mostly ruined, but there are a few bits of roofs and walls that provide a bit of shelter.”

“Take me there, and you can have what food and water I have,” Kristoph promised. “I don’t need to come back the way I came.”

“All right,” Kethik agreed. “But I can’t promise you’ll find any body. The animals aren’t the only things that like fresh meat around here. Some of those who’ve lasted longest….”

“Sweet Mother of Chaos,” Kristoph swore. “You mean… cannibalism?”

He didn’t exactly quicken his pace. Hurrying wouldn’t make very much difference in this territory, and could lead to fatal carelessness. But he did find himself worrying if he would even be able to identify the body.

The abandoned buildings – they looked like some kind of factory or possibly even a prison of the old-fashioned sort that predated the whole planet being designated a penal colony – were only a half mile away when they were attacked again. This time the battle was with four utterly naked, wild-eyed and crazed beings with ragged beards and hair. They had been living on this planet for so long they had forgotten they were men. Their language had regressed to mere grunts. They still walked on two legs, but they fought like animals, which made them dangerous, but also devoid of any skill or finesse.

Kristoph looked at their twisted bodies afterwards and shook his head wearily. He had to kill them for the same reason he had to kill the savage veofang. Leaving them wounded would have made them even more dangerous.

“Are these the cannibals you spoke of?” he asked as he examined one of the bodies and noticed dried blood on their mouths. Kethik nodded. “Come on. There’s no sense in standing around.”

There were bound to be more of their kind. Kethik certainly thought so. He looked around constantly as they drew closer to the building.

Kristoph’s guesses at the original purposes were both right. There were the vestiges of barred cells in one of the blocks and the others were some kind of industrial unit. Once prisoners must have worked at some variation of ‘hard labour’.

The body he sought was in one of the old cells, hunched beneath old, grubby sacks. The cannibals hadn’t found him, but that was very little consolation.

The identity was easily established. Kristoph looked at the face dispassionately. Then he told Kethik to find any old rags or paper, straw, anything that would burn. He piled it around and over the body along with pieces of old, dry wood.

It wasn’t a funeral pyre in the dignified sense that any Gallifreyan would recognise, but it served the purpose of immolating the corpse. He waited until there was nothing but ashes left before he kept his word, giving Kethik the water pack and the food pills he had. Then he activated the automatic recall button on the device he had brought with him.

“Try to keep out of trouble and stay alive,” he said to Kethik before the transmat took hold of him.

He rematerialised on the artificial moon that was the gateway to the prison planet. He thanked the chief warders for allowing him to go down to the planet to identify the man of his own race who had been tried and convicted of crimes under Ferrud Alpha’s uncompromising judicial system. He returned to his TARDIS and put several light years of distance between him and that unpleasant place before he made a vid-phone call to Gallifrey.

“Mama,” he said when Aineytta answered the call. “Seveg Lessage is dead. Please… tell Oriana gently.”

He didn’t go into the circumstances of his death, nor the drug-trafficking charges that had landed him on Ferrud Beta in the first place. Nobody in the family needed to know more of the sordid affair.

“What about his body?” Aineytta asked. “Are you bringing it back for a funeral?”

“In the circumstances of his death, there was no question of repatriation. Disposal has been carried out, already.”

“I will find a kinder word than ‘disposal’ when I tell my daughter the news. I have no doubt it will be a shock… but I think… when we all come to terms with it… this is an end to a very sorry series of events. We may all move on from here.”

“Yes,” Kristoph agreed. “I’m going home to Marion, now. Tomorrow, we will visit the Dower House. Oriana might appreciate the company. She and Marion have got on better since this affair began. It is the one small consolation.”

“You will both be welcome, of course.”

He spoke a little more to his mother, then closed the call. He set a course for home then went to take a long hot shower. He felt the need to wash every trace of Ferrud Beta from his body before he set foot back on Gallifrey.