

However far you travel, some things don't change. "Mortal Nature" originally appeared in Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine #8, 2003.

MORTAL NATURE

by Stephen Dedman

It took the customs official less than five standard minutes to decide that he didn't have the authority to deal with my case, and call for help. I assumed my best manner of Zen-like patience and waited in a small room, my legs folded into a lotus position as I stared at a sheet of what had to be one-way glass.

The help proved to be an attractive woman in a tunic and leggings which neither had nor needed insignia to display her rank or unit. "Dr. Tigere?"

"Mr. Tigere," I corrected her. "Or Shen. I'm still working on my doctorate—that's why I'm here, in fact."

She didn't respond, but pulled a chair out of one wall and a desktop out of another, then sat down and slipped my card into a slot. A few dozen pages of my ID appeared across the desktop. "Ah. Yes. Well, you have the necessary documents, and I see our embassy on Einstein approved your visit..."

I waited.

"...but I'd like to impress upon you just how dangerous a time you've picked for this trip. While we can guarantee your safety in the cities, the wilderness is...different."

"Because it's taurusaurus mating season? That's one of the things I want to observe."

She shook her head. "I'm not talking about xeno-ecology here. There are bandit groups with military weapons hiding on Northbergen, waiting for a chance to attack. If it was only your life you were risking, I wouldn't try to stop you—but if they take you hostage and try to ransom you..."

Her voice trailed off again, but I knew what she was thinking. The long civil war on Gould had ended less than a year ago when the last 'loyalist' town had surrendered, and the 'bandits' she was referring to were the survivors of the defeated 'loyalist' force—mostly ex-cops supporting Arvid Wilsey, the former Deputy Governor and Minister of Justice. Wilsey had expected to assume the governorship when his predecessor had died, but there had been some allegations of corruption, the senate had voted against him and a warrant had been issued for his arrest, and the rest was bloody history. I didn't know whether the allegations were true, and had heard conflicting reports about who had fired the first shot, but politics isn't my field. I did know, however, that

Wilsey had never been captured or confirmed dead, and that very few people visited Gould any more, despite its wonderful wildlife. The intelligence officer sitting opposite me wasn't concerned for my safety because she liked me; it was just that because I was an offworlder, anything that happened to me would reflect badly on her government—badly enough that the Commonwealth might even decide to remove it from power.

I tried to think of some diplomatic way of telling her that I didn't want that any more than she did. "I'll be careful," I said, finally. "I'm used to living in the wild and staying out of sight—of animals rather than people, true, but there isn't as much difference as you think. Any sensors your bandits might have, some animal somewhere can match. And Northbergen is big, so if there's as few of them as you say, the chances that our paths would cross would be very slim. And I can protect myself if necessary."

She grimaced. "I've looked at your luggage. Your hand laser isn't much of a weapon, but I can't let you carry it inside the city, and I hope you don't think it'll be enough to protect you in the wild. I'd also rather it didn't fall into the hands of the bandits."

"I didn't intend to use it as a weapon. I'm here to see how your animals survived the last war, not start a new one!"

She looked down at my travel documents again, and sighed. "Mr. Tigere, I don't know what sort of deal your mother made with our embassy, but there's nothing here about diplomatic immunity. Customs are scanning your luggage as carefully as they've ever scanned anything. I don't have the authority to put a tracking device on you without your consent—" I shook my head. "Or the technology to keep a constant watch on you once you're outside the city, but I promise you, as long as you're here in Serendipity, you will be under surveillance. I also have the authority to examine any recordings you make while on the planet—"

"But not to confiscate or alter them."

"I see you know the local laws."

I shrugged. "I went through this with your embassy on Einstein. I assure you, there is nothing illegal in my luggage,

nor do I intend breaking the law while I am here, and I am *not* working for my mother; I have never done so, nor do I intend to start. Is that clear?”

I hadn't intended to raise my voice, but the woman recoiled slightly. Or maybe I hadn't changed my tone at all; my mother never had to. My interrogator took a deep breath, then said, “Does she know you're here?”

“Almost certainly, but she didn't send me. I haven't seen her since I left Earth—for that matter, I didn't see her very often before then! I've had no training as a spy, or anything like that; I'm just a student trying to finish my dissertation. Can I go now?”

She touched the table. “I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, Mr Tigere, because that's the law, but off the record... I don't believe that you could be as innocent as you claim. Even if you haven't been trained, I suspect you've inherited some of your mother's instincts and talents. Blood will out.” She returned my card to me, along with a card of her own. “Call me if you have any problems.”

I turned the card over; both sides were blank. “Who shall I ask for?”

“My name is Lee.” She glanced at the table top, which was also blank; either her eyes could see colors mine couldn't, or she had a retinal readout. “Your bags are ready. Good day, Mr. Tigere.”

I was still fuming when I reached the hotel; the cab tried to engage me in conversation, but realised—probably sooner than a human would have done—that I didn't feel like talking. I searched and scanned my bags as soon as I was inside, and then my clothes, and then—after a broad-spectrum shower—myself. Tracers a-plenty, as I'd suspected, but nothing smarter than that. I didn't even bother checking the room for bugs; like any good hotel room, it was filled with innocent machines that routinely monitored the occupants for their own comfort, and any Intelligence organization deserving of the name could use these to keep track of anyone inside. There were cameras and other scanners in the streets and corridors, too: as Mother Shantay had taught me, the only privacy possible in a city was to seem too boring for anyone to bother watching you.

Shantay Tigere, my birth-mother, was one of the best intelligence analysts and controllers on Earth, and probably in humanspace. It's said that all the human worlds were founded by fanatics, and that may be true, but many more fanatics remained on Earth, and some of them still believe some deity gave them exclusive right to some piece of land: I doubt there's a square klick of land on the planet that somebody hasn't been killed for, at some time or another. Mother Shantay wasn't famous, except among her colleagues, but she had spies, human or AI, in every city on Earth.

After changing my clothes, I walked out and took the slidewalk to the museum. The small holo zoo was almost the same as any other in humanspace; there weren't even realtime feeds of native animals, and the images they did

have might have been recorded before the war. I stood inside a bubble and watched a footpad playing with her cubs. The cubs were stalking her while she pretended to ignore them—right until the moment they pounced, when she would turn around and transfix them with a glare, or swat them with an inflated paw and send them sprawling. Footpads are predominantly ambush predators, and while their huge soft paws and the algae in their fur give them a natural advantage when it comes to stealth, they still need to practise...and that, after all, is what play is for. I caught myself thinking of Mother Shantay again; she wasn't home much, and I was mostly raised by my other mothers, but sometimes she and I would play games that I now know were aptitude tests, seeing whether I had any talent for her profession and could follow in her footsteps.

After a few hours amid the holos, I went looking for the curator of xeno-zoology, Dr. Alzal. She was as short and stocky as a heavy-worlder, but round rather than square; it was difficult to imagine her squeezing herself into a hyperlight, and she confessed she hadn't done much field-work since before the civil war. I gave her the benefit of the doubt and assumed she meant the local war, rather than the ones we were taught about in Earthian history. “I haven't even had any grad students in that time,” she complained, as she made us tea. “They all wanted to be soldiers or medtechs, instead. I've been able to keep track of the big herds through satellite scans, but even those aren't complete or up-to-date.”

“Technical problems?”

“So they say. Personally, I think they're being censored, in case someone is using them to follow troop movements.”

“I thought all that was over?”

“No. They're still hunting for Wilsey men up on Northbergen. I'm not sure why: there's only a few towns up there, all near the south coast, and no reports of attacks for at least a year.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I charted the corneteer and taurusaurus migrations—I have the data here—but any information you can give me would be appreciated, of course. For all I know, some of the creatures you're looking for might even be extinct.”

I looked at the pictures. “The corneteer migration seems to have changed a lot. Is the old route impassable?”

“Possibly, but I don't think so. Corneteers are very sensitive to sound; anything louder than a grenade can cause a whole herd to stampede, so they may have decided to avoid the old battlegrounds. Or something may have killed off the corneteers' favorite grasses in those areas, at least for a season or two, and the corneteers are following their noses. We won't know for a few years.” She shrugged. “The taurusaurus migration hasn't changed perceptibly, but tauros aren't even as smart as corneteers—I suspect there are trees with better learning curves. But tauros prefer different plants, and they depend on sight more than sound, so it's hard to tell why the corneteers have changed route and the tauros haven't. You have remembered not to pack anything