

Duck

A short story by CG Hatton

Yes, I'll have another, thank you. Never say no to a free drink. I think that's a Corps motto or something, anyway, where was I? Oh yes...

It's easy to joke now but at the time I thought I'd fluffed it. Beyond embarrassment. I really thought I'd lost it. Out of high-ex as well as AP rounds, radio reduced to pieces, ship the other side of the mountains and a crossbow bolt in my leg.

I think I was swearing in English when they pulled it out. For some reason that amused them. Snuck myself a tetanus shot from the medikit when no one was looking. Would've preferred whiskey but the local equivalent was about as agreeable as fusion gas.

We made it to the foothills, horses about ready to drop, just before dawn. I reckoned we'd gained maybe half a day. They wanted to stop. It took all my powers of reasoning, diplomacy and the threat of divine malcontent to persuade them we should carry on. I'd learned that much. I'd never been on a planet with so many different and intelligent indigenous species before. Each with its own unique language, history, customs and alliances. All intermingling throughout each continent.

The one overriding feature though was their overwhelming adoration of their many gods, chaotic or otherwise. Even this band of mercenaries I'd had to hire once my clandestine recon had gone all to hell were entrenched with it.

They muttered amongst themselves, casting me suspicious glances, voices rising. Then the taller of the two lizard men came over. I can't pronounce what they call themselves. They are humanoid from what I can tell. Imagine a 'gator walking upright. Oversized, covered in tattoos, total religious fanatics. Apparently they're handy to have in a fight because they have no fear of death. They believe that they're instantly re-born into a new body or something like that. There are pictures in the file but you really have to meet one to get the full effect. Took half my money to hire a band with just two of them in it, but that's what saved me. To a point. I'll get to the duck later.

"Half as much again!" he snarled, towering over me. His guttural accent was so thick, it took me a while to translate even though he was speaking the common language I'd learned during pre-landing prep whilst up in orbit.

I considered haggling. It was kind of expected, even though half an elf army was on our tail. No kidding, they were elves. Tall, good-looking, pointy ears, the lot. Vicious as hell to boot. Don't ask me what I did to upset them; it's all in the file. Anyway I just wanted to get back to my ship, file the report and get the hell out of there. Leave fairyland for the full exploration team. I know some of those guys who'd just love that place. So anyway, I just agreed the new price with lizard breath as long as we could get moving again.

It was snowing before we got too far into the mountains. I joked that maybe someone could call up the gods, cast a spell or something, and get us some nice weather. Suffice to say the looks I got were less than friendly. Superstitious bunch.

Several times before we got up into the pass a couple of them would veer away suddenly, not a word to the rest of us. One second they'd be there and the next they'd be off, followed by sharp cries from somewhere nearby, then they'd saunter back.

"Scout," the shorter of the lizard men grunted at me once.

I had the motion detector in my pack. In bits. It wasn't well. I kept the pistol in my belt. Two clips of standard ammo and only 10 clicks to go. No problem I thought and I was feeling pretty good. Except then we got ambushed, and it wasn't by pansy elves.

Ogres, six of them. Huge, ugly, human types. We were surrounded before anyone had time to react. Broadwords glinted in the pale light. Hand straight to the pistol. I'm still not sure what stopped me from firing straight away but I'd seen standard rounds bounce off some of

those guys so I figured I might just piss them off. The horses were shifting, nervous. We backed off a way. Nothing behind us. Yet.

We dismounted and swords were drawn except for goat-man with his battle-axe. Honestly, I'm not making this up, head of a goat, body of a man, breath worse than swamp gas but he had an axe that looked like it was from Hell itself. The human mercenary was carrying a crossbow, cocked and loaded, but held low, at his side, almost casually in fact, in a 'you really don't want to mess with me' kind of way. Me? I was ready to bolt, especially when the lizard men took a sudden step forward. I assume it was some kind of challenge they growled.

Everyone's weapon arms were twitching, I was ready to run. I've always been a lover more than a fighter, you know, when the duck suddenly grabbed the spotlight. He pushed through our line, jumped off his donkey in the centre of the clearing, glanced around and held up a hand. Yes, they've got arms. The ship's AI was still struggling to figure out their evolutionary line when I dropped orbit.

The ogres leaned forward, ugly smiles. I guess they thought lunch had just been served, but that stopped when the duck suddenly threw handfuls of some dust into the air between them. I swear this stuff ignited on its own. Mid-air sparks, puffs of coloured smoke. Smelled like burned grass and herbs. That checked them.

Then they all stepped back, almost as one when the duck clattered his pots, scattering bits and pieces in a circle around himself. Then he sat down. Totally nonchalantly, no regard at all for the Ogres and the six, three-foot lengths of sharpened metal pointed in his general direction.

It was after he started muttering that I got the recorder to work but it's pretty much all there. He set a circle of fires going with just a click of his fingers. Sharp gasps came from the lizard men as he held up what appeared to be a pack of cards, abruptly thrusting them forward at the ogres, then back at us. I was lost by then. I blinked soft, tiny snowflakes out of my eyes as I tried to follow what this small creature was doing. Everyone, including the ogres, seemed transfixed.

Then a shouted incantation from the duck shattered the moment. The next few seconds were bizarre even in this place. Those reputedly no-fear-of-death lizard men turned tail and ran for their lives, shouting as best as I could translate, "The spell! No! Not the spell!" closely followed by goat-man and the human screaming in terror as they ran for cover.

As far as I could tell, I was watching a two-foot tall duck playing solitaire in the snow but that did it. The ogres took one look at the rest of my fleeing party, screamed in unison and ran without even looking at each other or over their shoulders. After that, we made it back to the ship no problem.

Now I'd seen mind bending drugs and hypnosis tricks before but this was nothing like that. And I was on the look out for 'magic'. This was fairyland, remember. So I was chuffed that I had it all on audio at least.

Until I talked to the duck afterwards.

"Magic, hell" he said, flipping his cigar to the other side of his beak. "I'm just the cook."

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