

Who's There?

by Sam Kurd

The old man sat in the run-down shack, nursing his lobol-weed tea, and cursing the bitter cold wind outside. It was hard enough for him to pry his living from the ground at the best of times, let alone with this wind and the incessant downpours. He'd lived in this shack for the past 50 years, had buried two sons and his wife in his own garden, had seen his neighbours disappear one by one, victims of hunger, of frustration, of apathy. He had been alone for the last 5 years, his little shack like an island surrounded by his ailing crops. He winced as something banged against his roof, blown by the wind. Probably one of his chickens, escaped from the pen and picked up by the gales. Well, damn.

There was a crash of thunder, followed by a crack of lightning, which the old man found odd, but strange things often happened in this field. Like survival. A very strange thing, it crops up everywhere, survival - especially odd when it happens to an old man, on his own, farming for his life. Odd. Like the ground shuddering momentarily. Like the pounding footsteps. Like the banging at the door.

The old man sighed, and wearily stood. His joints cracked painfully, but he paid them no mind - they did that a lot recently. It's the price we pay for a long, relatively happy life, and it was a price he was content to pay. His body may be failing him, but he still had his mind, his memories. Supporting himself with an old wooden cane, he hobbled to the door, fumbled with the bolt - and stopped. Can never be too careful. He called out weakly into the howling darkness of the unseen outside world.

"Who's there?"

There was a muffled reply. The old man sighed and shrugged. 'Que

cera cera,' he said to the door, finding some small comfort in the old old saying. He could vaguely remember his mother saying that to him, oh so many years ago. With a wistful smile, he slid back the bolt and admitted entrance to his visitor.

* * *

It was cold on the ship, but Captain Harris didn't notice. He was too busy trying to stop his blood, his life, from seeping through the gaping wound in his chest. It wasn't particularly deep, or close to a lung, the heart, or any particular major organ, but that didn't stop it from hurting like hell. He staggered down the corridor, clutching a sodden rag to his injury. All around him, red and yellow lights flashed, and klaxxons blared. The ship's computer was simply doing its job, informing the crew of an escaped cargo, a breached hull. Being a computer, it didn't realise that there was no crew left to take notice. Only Captain Harris was left. Out of fifty men and women, there was only one survivor. Commander Harris swore under his breath as he lurched down the corridor, his feet occasionally slipping in puddles of stuff he dared not look down at. One doesn't like to think of stepping in the remains of one's crew.

'When I get the ... thing ... that did this ...' he thought - but there was no time for thinking. He had reached the breach.

There was a huge gash in the hull of the ship, made where the creature had left. It was as if the creature had taken hold of the ship's walls and torn them apart like tissue-paper. The strength of the thing ... Harris stood in awe of the sheer brutality of it. The creature was clearly a force to be reckoned with.

Captain Harris took a deep breath, and jumped through the hole.

Immediately, he hit the ground, his feet sinking into the sodden mud up to the ankles. Rain drops plummeted around him, smashing into the ground like miniature warheads. This was a planet that took its rain seriously. And here he was without an umbrella. Go figure.

The first thing he noticed were the footprints. Well, that's not entirely true. The first thing he noticed was the blinding rain, and the second thing he noticed was the run-down old shack not far away. But the third thing? The third thing he noticed was the set of - huge, misshapen, alien - footprints leading towards the shack. Squaring his shoulders and wincing in pain, he trudged in their wake. It was hard going, and the mud slowed him down to a crawl. His quarry had feet shaped something similar to a camel's foot, allowing it to keep its footing without being slowed down too much by the cloying mud. Captain Harris did not have the benefit of that luxury. He lost a boot, but didn't notice. The prints ended at the door of the shack. Harris feared the worst.

Arriving at the door, he considered his choices. He could knock, politely ask to come in, sit and share a cup of tea with the inhabitants and ask if they'd happened to see a hideous slaver creature covered in slime and blood and gore and could they point him in its direction please? Alternatively, he could kick down the door, or smash through a window. Of course, if nothing was amiss inside, he'd look a bit silly, lunging through a window. Common sense prevailed, and he began to bang on the door.

"Let me in! Let me in!"

There was a sound of movement, and odd grunt, some shuffling. He tensed, cold and wet and afraid. Then, a voice called weakly from within.

"Who's there?"

"Captain Harris, Spacecorps! Let me in! It's a matter of life and death!"

There was some more shuffling, and the sound of a bolt being driven back. The door swung slowly open, revealing a wizened old man inside. The old man smiled nervously, and beckoned Harris inside.

Harris stepped in, shaking himself like a dog. It caused shooting pains in his ribs, but at least he was slightly less damp.

"Damned rain," he growled. The old man twitched a nervous smile.

"Que cera cera," he said, his reedy voice barely audible.

Harris looked around in growing amazement. How could this poor old man live in such squalid surroundings? The place looked like a bar after a particularly impressive brawl. There was a chair - smashed. A table - destroyed. Books - all over the floor. A lump of rags in the corner - bleeding.

Er.

Bleeding? That's not right, surely?

There was a horrific roar from behind him, and he spun round to find the old man, his face cracking and splitting at the seams, lunging forward. The old man-thing's hands were stretching, sharpening, becoming claws, his face elongating, forming a sharp-toothed snout. The man's eyes were rolling back in his face, sinking into folds of flesh. Claws raked across Harris' chest, and a long sinewy tongue slithered out of the creature's mouth, wrapping itself around his throat. Harris pawed weakly at the creature, but the fight was over before it had begun. There would be no vengeance for the crew of the ship that had been carrying a deadlier cargo than

anyone could have guessed.

The creature tore up the captain's body, finishing the job it had begun in deep space, dumping the remains next to those of the being it had mimicked. It chittered contentedly, its hunger and bloodlust sated. Crouching on the ground, it studied the remains carefully, going over the handful of strange new words it had recently learnt. Briefly, it pondered the meaning of 'Help!' and 'No!', wondering why it heard them so often.

With one clawed hand, it ripped the insignia off of Captain Harris' supposedly indestructible uniform and stared curiously at the writing, its lipless alien mouth struggling to form the word it saw ... and to comprehend it's meaning ...

"Eeeeearttthh ..."

