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The Breath of Gelgellar

by Jean Rabe;

illustrations by Brian Schomburg

sended by Andres Lescano

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The young Glarsaur stood on its hind legs at the base of a maugesh tree, its belly brushing up against the knotty trunk, its dark eyes trained on the large, plump reeho overhead. The bird was a precious bit of sunlight come to life - - an orange and yellow splash amidst the never-ending green of the swamp planet Gelgellar.

The reeho was oblivious to the young Glarsaur; it was watching the two dozen adults in the clearing a few meters away. Nearly the size of men, the Glarsaurs resembled common curly-tailed lizards, with human-like front limbs that ended in formidable claws. They were covered from their spiky pates to their webbed toes with dull green scales that rendered them essentially invisible in the foliage. Their undersides provided the only contrast - - segmented plates, smooth and shiny and the shade of wet earth.

The Glarsaurs were arguing about the Sullustans living in the nearby farming settlement. They were hissing about where to lay their traps and what to use as bait to lure the wide-eyed men into the embrace of the trees.

To the young Glarsaur intent on the orange bird, the discussion seemed meaningless. What did it matter what bait was used - - fat monkeys, iquazards, crelnuts - - food was food, with the exception of the beautiful reeho. The Glarsaur began to climb. Just under the bird's eyes were feathers as red as one of the planet's rare sunsets. Its beak was black as night, like its eyes, and its feet were gray, the color of the clouds that almost perpetually shielded the swamp world. The young Glarsaur decided to pluck the bird before eating it, keeping some of the striking feathers to affix to a spear.

"Kel!" the largest Glarsaur in the clearing bellowed. "Come down from the tree. Listen to our plan!"

The loud words startled the reeho and it twisted its head about just in time to see the looming claw of the young Glarsaur. The bird screeched shrilly and dove from the branch, arcing well above the heads of the plotting reptile-men and over the pile of spears waiting to be used against the Sullustan mold farmers.

Faster, T'laerean mentally urged the reeho. Hurry. Fly faster.

The bird had to get back to the Sullustan settlement quickly, where T'laerean could use his newly-learned Force skills to separate his senses from the reeho's. His mind no longer divided, his senses all in one place, he could warn everyone about the Glarsaurs' plans. All the Sullustans would be safe. And he would be a hero.

Faster, he coaxed the reeho. From a small secret place he'd reserved for himself in the bird's mind, T'laerean watched the leaves and branches blur before the racing reeho. He felt the damp, humid air rush about bright orange feathers, heard the rapid thrum of the reeho's heart, and took in the rich scents of the world. Fly much faster.

The Sullustan hadn't taken over the reeho, wasn't so much controlling it or forcing it to do his bidding as he was persuading it - - entreating it to fly this way and help him. Through the Force he had joined his mind with the bird's, mentally hitchhiked along in a grand experiment, so he could see through its eyes and ears. It had been a game at first, a simple practice session, a chance to test his growing awareness of the Force, the Breath

of Gelgelaar, the Wise Man of Kooroo called it. But the game ended when T'laerean had spotted the Glarsaurs and eavesdropped on their malicious plans. The Wise Man would be so proud of him - - attempting a feat to meld with a reeho! And his fellow Sullustans, well, they would honor him, shower him with praise for saving them from the Glarsaurs.

T'laerean wasn't yet so skilled in the Force that he could release the meld with the reeho from this distance, from any distance. He needed to be in physical contact with the bird - - or thought he did, which meant indeed he must be in contact for a separation to succeed. However, someday soon he would be so skilled - - like his mentor. Soon he would be a master of the Force, able to join his senses with creatures at the edge of his vision, beyond his vision, and perhaps with the very plants that grew in profusion on the swamp world. Soon he would be able to let his mind wander around the Shrine of Kooroo, where he could spy on the pilgrims; drift toward the Great Shore Marshes, where the giant sea beasts dwelled; and then roam across all of Gelgelaar.

Faster. That's it. Time for rest later.

He urged the reeho to angle its course upward until it cleared the top of the jungle canopy, to fly past the edge of the climax trees. Below, the steamy marsh plains stretched out. At the edge of the bird's vision the farming settlement came into view, with its stark and sterile interconnected metallic box-like buildings that seemed so out of place in the swampy wilderness.

T'laerean, like all the Sullustans in the settlement, knew the Glarsaurs were warlike, and the only sentient species - - if they could be called that - - native to Gelgelaar. But he also knew the creatures weren't all that plentiful and that they usually kept to themselves. Until now, the reptile-men had been striking only when farmers took their vohis mold crops to the planet's spaceport, and didn't take enough guards or blasters with them for protection. Lately the farmers had been toting a good number of blaster carbines along, sizeable weapons that seemed enough of a threat to keep the reptile-men at a distance. But if the Glarsaurs were actually going to lure the Sullustans into the jungle, blasters would be next to useless. How could you shoot something you couldn't see, something invisible because it was the color of the ferns and bushes?

You're far beyond the Glarsaurs. They can't hurt you. But you must keep going so I can warn the people.

Why the reptile-men were so intolerant - - hateful - - of the Sullustans, and of the humans, Quarren, Twi'leks, and various other species who had settled the planet - - was unknown. The people posed no threat to the Glarsaurs, hadn't taken land from them, and had even tried to befriend them. But all attempts to establish peaceful relations had failed - - though there were rumors that some of the creatures cooperated from time to time with the world's criminal elements. And why the reptile-men were plotting to lure Sullustans into the jungle to slay them was a mystery to T'laerean. Glarsaurs didn't eat Sullustans. Or did they?

See the Krevk Settlement fence? The glittery silver net around the buildings? We're close now. Faster.

There wasn't much known about the reptile creatures - - other than that they were decidedly unfriendly. They moved so easily through Gelgelaar's swamps, and the shvash gas that habitually and unpredictably erupted from the sodden ground never bothered them. The Glarsaurs didn't need to wear breath masks like the Sullustan mold farmers did. But neither did the reeho. The bird was used to breathing the noxious gas.

Through the reeho's eyes T'laerean spied a group of Sullustans a few hundred meters outside the fence. They were searching. through the tall grasses - - sensor packs trained on the ground, repulsorlift sleds filled with mold hovering along behind them. Looking for the last of the mold patches to harvest this season, no doubt, he thought. The farmers were not yet near enough to the trees to be threatened by the Glarsaurs. But T'laerean knew if they continued along this course, they soon would come close enough and might be lured in by the promise of tasty food. Crelnuts were hard to resist compared to the simple bland fare of the settlement. Only Gelgelaar Free Port offered native Sullustan cuisine.

The reeho banked toward the west, away from the Sullustans. No! T'laerean's mind gently scolded. The mold farmers will not hurt you. Fly past them, to the settlement. The shiny buildings. Toward the glittery net. His mental words were soothing, powered by the Force, and were enough to relax the reeho. It banked toward the east, past the farmers, entranced by the voice coming from a secret place in its mind. That's it, T'laerean communicated.

Now, toward the buildings, my orange friend.

The young Sullustan felt the energy of the Force teasing his mind even as he talked to the reeho, felt the near-palpable and indescribable energy that permeated Gelgelar and everything else in the universe. He felt the Force control him, at the same time he was controlling it, and he felt its tendrils wrap around his consciousness. He worked with it, channeling it into another suggestion - - as the Wise Man had taught him. He urged the reeho to pull its wings in closer to his body, to dive. Practically skimming the tall green grass of the swampy plains now, the sun-colored reeho beat its wings even faster, carrying T'laerean's senses across a brook swollen by the recent heavy rains, closer to the settlement, then over the simple chain wall dotted with sensor units.

You are doing well, sun-reeho. I will reward you with seeds for your cooperation.

The Wise Man would arrive in the settlement next week, T'laerean knew, and would quickly learn of his student's accomplishments - - his most promising student's grand accomplishments. Perhaps the Wise Man will spend more time teaching me more powerful Force! skills, he thought.

The reeho banked over three young Sullustan women who were just inside the fence. They were playing a game of Yastesh with a group of chattering children. Toward the center of the settlement, a circle of old farmers sat beneath an overhang, their words too soft for the bird to hear. Old tales, T'laerean mused. My news will give them a grand new story to tell.

He formed another suggestion, and inwardly smiled as the bird darted toward a small building at the far end of the settlement - - T'laerean's home, a hero's home. The Sullustan's body waited inside.

As the reeho sped toward an open window, two small girls, barely four or five, darted out from the shadows, laughing and tugging on each other's ears, their wide faces flushed from play. The tallest child spotted the reeho and oohed and ahed, stood on her toes and wagged her hands.

"Pretty reeho! Here pretty, pretty reeho!" she called, her high voice muffled slightly by the breath mask. Most parents made their children wear the masks outside - - just in case a shvash gas cloud erupted in the vicinity. "Here pretty reeho! Come play with us!"

Ha! The young Glarsaur came much closer to catching the bird, T'laerean mused from his secret place. He had to admit the reeho must indeed look inviting; it had captured his attention when he was looking about for a creature to meld his senses with. Slipping above the heads of the children, the reeho flew through the open window of T'laerean's home and lit on the metal floor. As the bird's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, it hopped toward the bed, its feet clicking against the metal tiles.

On the bed, T'laerean coaxed the reeho. Fly on the bed. Touch the Sullustan. The man there who looks to be sleeping. Then I will let you be, no more voices in your head. You can fly back to the jungle. The bird moved closer, pausing only for a moment to pick up a small bit of crust T'laerean had dropped this morning. Soon I will not need physical contact to make this work, T'laerean thought. Soon I will be strong enough in the Force that...

"Pretty, pretty reeho!" The tallest child had entered through T'laerean's unlocked door and ran toward the bird, her arms outstretched.

On the bed! T'laerean's mind screamed. Hurry!

The reeho cast its head about this way and that, instantly frightened and looking between the prone form of the Sullustan and the charging girl. T'laerean could tell it considered the children every bit as much of a threat as the Glarsaurs.

On the bed! On the...no!

A piercing screech exploded from the reeho's throat, and T'laerean watched from his secret place in the back of the bird's mind as a basket was dropped over it. The other child must have climbed in through the window, used T'laerean's own basket to catch the reeho. The wicker was thick, but woven just loose enough in a few places so the terrified reeho could look out. Its small heart hammered wildly, sounding like rolling thunder to T'laerean.

"Oh, pretty reeho!" the tallest girl gushed with delight. "What a fine pet I have now."

"My pet, too, Raenyn," the other child said. "I caught him." She dropped to the floor and peered between a tiny gap in the weave. "My pet. I will call him Sunshine!"

Pet, T'laerean fumed. I am not a pet, I am a student of the Force, a student of the Wise Man of Kooroo. I am... The pounding of the bird's heart made it difficult for the Sullustan to think. Calm, he urged the bird. Relax. But the pounding continued, and a raucous mix of sounds came out of the reeho's beak - - irritating screeches and shrill screams.

Let the reeho out of here! T'laerean's mind cried. Now what is this?

The reeho had to hop as a piece of leng bark was pushed under the basket, creating a bottom to the prison. Then the bird and T'laerean felt the bark and the basket rising. The children were carrying the basket outside.

"Momma," the youngest called. "Look what we caught. A pretty pet named Sunshine!"

The basket was toted toward a Sullustan woman who was muddled from the mold fields. The reeho peered out at her, its heart slowing only because its fear had exhausted it. T'laerean instantly recognized her. She was one of the settlement council members, someone who should be warned about the Glarsaurs' ambush.

"Oh, children. The bird cannot be a pet," the woman said.

T'laerean breathed a sigh of relief. She would release the reeho, he could coax the bird to land on him, and he would use the Force to free his senses. He could warn her about the Glarsaurs and then....

"The bird can't be a pet when fresh treats like this are so hard to find outside the port. This will be a special meal for your father. I'll make reeho stew."

Dinner!

The link with T'laerean allowed the bird to grasp the woman's words. And despite its exhaustion, the bird started clacking and screeching louder, as if the threat of death injected life into it. It hopped on the bark and made shrill, piercing noises - - like a Thull whistle.

You can't kill me, T'laerean fumed. You know me! I am T'laerean, the hero. T'laerean, master of the Force! If you eat this you eat this bird, why..

. T'laerean panicked. He didn't know what would happen if the bird died. Would his senses return to his body - - in which case his problem would be solved though at the expense of the reeho. Or would consciousness drift away leaving his body a mindless shell? Would he die as the bird died? He had never practiced this Force ability before, only watched the Wise Man do something similar to it. He had never asked the Wise Man the possible outcomes, nor listened none too-closely as the the Wise Man explained exactly how everything worked. T'laerean had been interested only in the opportunity to merge his senses with something else.

The bird continued to screech, and T'laerean felt his fear matching its, his resolve melting like butter left on the table too long. If you kill this reeho, it will be like eating one of your own kind! And maybe you'll have no one to warn you about the Glarsaurs. Maybe all the mold farmers will die! You could be sealing the fate of the entire settlement in the quest for one tasty meal!

As the reeho was carried across the settlement and into the woman's home, he tried to channel his thoughts through the Force to quiet the creature, to get himself to relax so he could think more clearly. Panic begets disaster, the Wise Man once told him. T'laerean wished he had paid more attention to that lecture and the meditating techniques the old human showed him.

We will be free, he told the bird. Do not worry. Do not panic. The Force is my ally and won't let us die. He hoped. We will escape to my home at the first chance, and then you will land upon my belly. I will release you, and as my senses return to my body you can return to the jungle-never to see this settlement again. He pictured trees and the sky, and for an instant the bird's heart slowed and its spirit lifted.

But then the basket was deposited on a gleaming metal counter and the smells of spices filled the air. Through a gap in the wicker, the reeho saw more metal objects it couldn't put a name to or fathom what they were for. But T'laerean knew. They were pots and pans.

They were in the kitchen, and the woman was heating a bowl, pouring levsh oil into it! His own fears resurfaced tenfold, and the bird's heart raced again.

"There isn't enough of him to share with everyone" the woman told the little girls. "But it is your father's birthday soon. And he so loves reeho. We'll tell everyone how you caught this bird - - both of you - - as a present for your father. People will be proud of you. And your father will be so pleased."

"Can we keep the feathers?" the smallest asked.

"Of course."

"But Mama," the taller child, the one called Raenyn, wailed. "I want the reeho - - as a pet. Please."

"No" The woman's voice was stern now, tinged with parental authority. "The next time we take a mold harvest into the port, next week maybe, we'll find you a pet. Something you can cuddle. A wilwog, perhaps, a trained one that doesn't shed and won't soil the floor. Now go out and play. And put your breath masks back on." She reached for a knife.

What can I do? I must do something. If she kills the reeho, the mold farmers might die. I might die, too. The reeho screeched again, and this time T'laerean didn't try to hush it. He was trying to shut out the reeho's heartbeats, concentrating on the woman, on the Force, wondering if perhaps he could influence her. The Wise Man could do it, T'laerean knew, persuade people to look the other way, to change their minds. If only he could change the woman's mind.

Let us go. He stretched the thought outward, like it was a leaf blowing on the breeze, blowing toward the woman. Look at us! Let us go! Maybe if she looked closely at the reeho, saw how truly beautiful the bird was, she would not be able to kill it.

She started humming an old Sullustan tune, adjusted the heat pad beneath the pan, then left the room. T'laerean urged the bird to look through another gap so he could see where she went. This time, however, the bird ignored him and began pacing about the basket walls, nipping in frustration at the wicker.

Look out a gap! I want to see!

The reeho thrust the persistent voice farther to the back of its brain, far into the secret place, and clacked its beak open and shut over a strand of wicker. T'laerean felt the dryness of the strand, the sourness against the bird's black tongue, the uncomfortable roughness. The bird persevered while T'laerean floated, fuming in that secret place, and within moments it had created a hole large enough to poke its head out. The reeho tried to force the rest of its body through the opening, then finally gave up and resumed chewing on the wicker.

Good friend, T'laerean praised, suddenly realizing what the bird was up to. So smart I should have thought of that. Reehos are notorious wood-chewers. He decided he would tell the bird which strands to attack, which looked the weakest and would be the quickest to cut through but his thoughts were smothered, pushed aside by the bird's own thoughts of escape. T'laerean continued to watch and worry and to feel the reeho's throat grow dry, its tongue and beak sore from the effort..

Then he heard the humming again, the woman returning. It grew muffled, as if she turned and entered another room. Her voice was sweet, and under other circumstances T'laerean might have enjoyed it. The bird heard it too, worked faster, then it hopped back to survey its work. Big enough. The reeho edged forward and squeezed out of the prison. T'laerean felt the pressure of the jagged edges of the wicker that poked at the bird's sides.

Free! T'laerean was elated.

The bird screeched in excitement and jumped from the counter, spreading its wings and flapping madly. The dizzying scents of the spices and the heating oil flooded the bird's senses, and T'laerean fought to emerge from the secret place and again persuade the bird which direction to go.

Through the doorway, T'laerean urged. He was focusing on the Force now more than the bird, concentrating on the Breath of Gelgellar, working with the energy. He let it control him, and he asked it for some measure of control in return. The doorway! Yes, that's it, my friend. Free! Free!

The bird flew through the kitchen doorway, through a study and over a dehumidifying unit and computer console. Toward another doorway, one open just wide enough, opening more - - the way outside!

Free! Free! No!

The door opened wider still and the bird flapped madly, rushing forward and slamming into the chest of Raenyn. The impact startled the child and dazed the bird. It flopped on the ground, stunned, unable to comply with T'laerean's cries to run away.

"Pretty reeho!" Raenyn cooed, scooping him up and calling to the smaller child. "You are not supposed to be loose," she gently scolded the reeho. "You are supposed to be dinner for Papa."

She held the reeho tightly and carried him through a side doorway, one that led to a small room with two narrow beds and a desk between them. Sitting unceremoniously on the closest bed, Raenyn roughly patted the reeho's head. The other child sat next to her.

"Is he hurt?"

"It doesn't matter." Raenyn held the reeho up and stared in its round blinking eyes. Her hands were not nearly large enough to fit all the way around the bird. "Mama is going to kill him and cook him in the stew. I don't think I can eat a bite of him, though. He's too pretty."

The reeho kept blinking and T'laerean tried to focus. The impact with the child had rattled his senses, too, and he saw two of each of the young girls. Two of everything.

"She will pull out all his feathers," Raenyn continued. "You cannot eat feathers."

"He will not be so pretty then. I won't eat a bite of him either. I wanted him to be a pet."

"I wonder if he is someone's pet?" Raenyn lessened her grip on the bird just a little. "If he was someone's pet, Mama couldn't cook him."

T'laerean felt for the Force let it surround his mind like the marsh surrounded the settlement. Again he tried to clear his vision, saw the smaller girl purse her lips.

"He might be T'laerean's pet, the odd boy who doesn't farm mold," she suggested. "I saw him with a pretty reeho this morning. Maybe this one. We caught it in his house after all."

"T'laerean? The Wise Man of Kooroo's student?"

The smaller girl nodded.

"T'laerean would not have pets," Raenyn said firmly. "The bird flew in through the window. We saw it. T'laerean is strange and unfriendly. He cares only about the Force, talks only about the Force and impressing the crazy old Wise Man. He would not care about a little bird or anything else. He only wants to be important."

T'laerean cringed. Care only about the Force? Is that what people think? Of course I care about the Force. But I care about this settlement, too. About the people in it. I'm trying to save the mold farmers!

"Besides," Raenyn continued. "T'laerean is dead. I saw him when we caught the bird. Dead in his bed. Dead. Dead. Dead. Even if the reeho is his pet - - was his pet - - it wouldn't matter. Dead people can't have pets."

"Maybe we should tell someone that T'laerean's dead."

"No. Then we would get in trouble for sneaking into his house and finding him. Let someone else find him and get in trouble. He's not going anywhere, after all. He's dead."

A soft clacking noise came out of the reeho. The bird was still frightened. But it was tired and thirsty, too. So very thirsty. Its black tongue was dry and was becoming swollen. It looked up at Raenyn and cocked its head.

"Poor reeho," the girls said practically in unison.

The smaller girl started to cry. "We just can't let Momma kill him."

From beyond the doorway, the reeho heard humming, the woman's voice again. It was distant, signaling she was deeper in the house.

"No!" the woman hollered, her words sounding soft, but clear. "The reeho escaped! Chewed his way out. Girls! Come help me find him. He's probably still in the house. Girls!"

The girls glanced at each other, grins spreading wide across their wide Sullustan faces. Then T'laerean felt the reeho stiffen, fight to break free, saw a darkness looming before the bird, felt the bird being stuffed inside a sack. The reeho opened its beak to screech, and T'laerean concentrated with all his might. Quiet! he pleaded. Be quiet and we might get free!

"Mama thinks he escaped," Raenyn whispered. "We will keep him hidden. Then she will not kill him and we can share him as a pet."

The younger one made a tsk-tsking noise. "You can't keep a reeho in a sack. He will make noise, unless he becomes dead like T'laerean. And if Mama finds him - - alive or dead - - we will be in trouble."

"And the bird will be dinner."

"But maybe we can keep him in someone else's home."

"Who's home?" It was Raenyn speaking.

"T'laerean's, of course. He's dead and doesn't need his home."

"But someone will find out he's dead and we will be in trouble and then we won't be able to use his home for the reeho."

No one will find out if we bury T'laerean tonight, when no one is watching, when they think we're asleep. It's already starting to get dark outside anyway".

Raenyn softly giggled. "We could borrow Papa's shovel But let's go to T'laerean's now, hide the reeho. We'll go back after dark to bury T'laerean. If the reeho screeches in T'laerean's home, no one! will hear him."

"Well, they might hear him, but they won't pay attention. Everyone thinks T'laerean's weird."

T'laerean felt the bird being jostled, its fear rising to a fever pitch, and he suspected the girls were running. He heard doors open and close, sounds he knew but sounds that were alien to the terrified reeho. The jiggling and jarring sensation continued for several minutes, though it felt like an eternity, more doors opening and closing. Then he felt himself falling, landing abruptly and uncomfortably on something hard. The reeho shivered and picked itself up, stood in the cramped and dark confines of the sack and examined its wings and claws. T'laerean could tell that nothing was broken, though everything felt like it was bruised. The bird ached, all over and he tried to offer words that might comfort it.

But the reeho thrust T'laerean's thoughts to the secret place in its mind again and started pecking at the bottom of the sack, like a si-hen would peck at the ground for grain. Any movement seemed to cause the reeho additional pain, but it persisted, pecking faster when a bit of leather came loose in its beak.

"No, pretty reeho," Raenyn scolded. "Stop that. You will ruin my sack."

That is the idea, T'laerean thought. The reeho intends to ruin your sack just like you are trying very hard to ruin our lives.

Again the bird was lifted inside the sack, its escape thwarted. Raenyn shook the bag as

she untied it and thrust her hands into the darkness. She grabbed the orange reeho as the sack fell away, and she held it about the back, pinning its wings to its sides. It tried to bite her, but she had gripped it carefully enough so the bird's beak couldn't reach her small fingers.

Out in the open, the reeho could breathe again. It saw the Sullustan laying on the bed nearby. The Sullustan it remembered it was supposed to fly upon. The reeho relaxed in the girl's grip. T'laerean sensed it was conserving its strength, waiting. Her fingers opened a little. Then a little more.

Let her think you are docile, he urged the reeho. Let her think you are wounded - - which you are, unable to fly - - which you are not. When she drops her guard, you will fly to the bed and...

The reeho again thrus T'laerean's thoughts aside, pushed off from the girl's opening hands and spread its wings. It flew through open window and out into the growing twilight. It beat its wings hard, and ignored the ache in its body. It ignored the cries of the girls running behind it, their frantic footsteps. It ignored the old men who were going into their homes for dinner.

No! You're flying the wrong way! Fly back into the building! Land on the Sullustan - - the one on the bed!

And it ignored T'laerean.

The reeho, though tired and sore, flew as fast as its aching wings could manage, It streaked across the settlement yard, then over the glittering fence and across the swampy plains. The bird's keen vision cut through the growing darkness, like a sharp knife could cut through a crelnut. And from the secret place in the back of the reeho's mind, T'laerean watched with growing terror. The Sullustan's awareness was being carried farther away from the settlement. He felt the Force, the Breath of Gelgelar, and he sensed that it was controlling him completely. He wasn't strong enough to exert any measure of control over it. His mind was careening along toward the trees, piggybacked onto the brain of the freed reeho.

How long can I live this way? In a reeho's mind? T'laerean wondered. Will they bury my body, ending my life? Or will my body die for lack of food and water? Will my consciousness drift forever in this small brain? When the bird sleeps, will I gain the strength to coax it to do my bidding again? And what about the farmers?

The bird spotted the Sullustan mold farmers, now using large glow rods to see by. Sensor packs still trained on the ground, datapads recording the yield, they were close to the trees now. And they were closing on a trio of iquazards, massive boarlike creatures that had been cleverly hobbled to tree roots.

The reeho idly wondered why anyone would tie the iquazards, and ignored T'laerean's attempts to explain about the ambush and make suggestions that it somehow warn the mold farmers. The reeho wanted only to return to the embrace of the jungle, to the safety of the tall tress, to never see Sullustans again.

"Look!" T'laerean faintly heard from his small, secret place. "Iquazards! Three of them, and they don't seem to notice us." It was one of the mold farmers talking. "Everyone, come on. They move slow. We'll catch them and have a fine feast tonight."

The farmers would have to get close to the beasts, T'laerean knew. The iquazards were so thick-skinned they could virtually ignore blaster shots, except from close range. And close range would be too close to the jungle.

T'laerean heard the swish of the marsh grass behind the reeho, the snap of a dry twig. And through his shared senses he smelled the Sullustans, the vohis mold, the musky iquazards, the heady loam of the looming jungle. Darkness and green filled his vision as the bird swooped over the backs of the iquazards and darted between the trunks of two willotum trees and glided into the jungle.

Then a brighter green appeared, scaly and slick, and right in front of the bird. Black reptilian eyes locked onto the startled 'reeho. A young Glarsaur rose from behind a thick clump of ferns - - the one who tried to catch the bird several hours ago. The Glarsaur rose and started toward the reeho, flailing its claws and clacking its jaws.

The reeho screeched, an irritating sound now so very familiar to T'laerean. The bird banked away, retreating through the same gap the in the willotum trees, heading back over the iquazards and toward the swampy plains.

The young Glarsaur followed, disregarding the cries of the older Glarsaurs in waiting - - the curses that the ambush would be revealed. The Young Glarsaur thrashed forward, intent on the reeho that it had been denied earlier, thrashed forward past the iquazards and into the path of the oncoming mold farmers.

"Glarsaurs!" one of the mold farmers bellowed. "Run! I'll cover you."

From his secret place T'laerean watched the mold farmers turn and sprint toward the settlement, their repulsorlift sleds filled with mold trailing behind them. One held his position for a moment, aiming a blaster in the vicinity of the iquazards and laying down a line of suppression fire to keep the band of now-revealed Glarsaurs from pursuing.

T'laerean watched the mold farmers melt into the darkness, heard the squeals of the disturbed iquazards, smelled the air tinged with the heat of blaster fire, felt a claw dig into the reeho's side.

The young Glarsaur pulled the bird in close to its body, and T'laerean picked up the reptile-man's foul, sickly sweet breath. The Sullustan was only vaguely aware of the continuing curses of the adult Glarsaurs; he was more intent on the orange bird's pain as a feather after feather was plucked. Then the Glarsaur bit into the bird, and T'laerean's world turned into agony and darkness.

* * *

"T'laerean. Wake up." The voice sounded weak at first, wobbly with age. But it was persistent. "Do not die, T'laerean."

The young Sullustan's eyes felt matted shut, but he forced them open and blinked. A little girl's blurry face hovered inches from his; Raenyn's. And beyond her was the wrinkled human face of the Wise Man of Kooroo.

"I thought he was dead," Raenyn announced. "Dead. Dead. Dead. I thought we would have to bury him and would never be able to tell I him about the Glarsaur ambush and about how my father used his blaster to fight them all off. About how my father is a hero to the whole settlement, saved everyone. And..."

"Do not chatter so, little one," the Wise Man cautioned. "T'laerean has been through a great ordeal, it seems, a sickness perhaps. Or something more. And he nearly did leave us. But I think he will be all right now. The Force will continue to heal him."

The old human leaned over T'laerean, helped him up. Glancing around, the Sullustan could see that he was home, on his bed. Pale light streamed in through an open window, hinting it was morning. His throat was dry, and he was quick to accept the glass of water Raenyn offered. His belly felt empty.

"It was a good thing I came to the settlement earlier than I had planned, " the old man began. "I stopped by to see you and found you close to death. If the Force was not so strong in you, I suspect I could not have saved you."

"Perhaps the Force is strong in me," T'laerean answered after a moment. "But I am not yet so strong in it."

"You are most wise to know you have limitations," the old man said, his eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly. "Rest, my student. You need more rest - - time for more reflections. We'll resume your lessons tomorrow."

"I have a lot to learn," T'laerean whispered. The young Sullustan relaxed, closed his eyes, and listened to the retreating footsteps of Raenyn and the Wise Man. Eventually he allowed sleep to claim him, and he dreamed of Glarsaurs and iquazards, and a colorful orange bird that would forever haunt a secret place in his mind.