

A Short Story

THE DAY

TEEN & ADULT



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The Day

The sky was filled with a dull morning light pale as pitcher milk and the sea was a dark rippling sheet of gray. The sun had not yet risen, and so the whole world was subdued, but very soon those dark clouds would burst to flaming orange and pink. Tropical waters would separate into shades of green, blue and turquoise. Waves breaking upon the rocks and sands would send up sprays of colorful rainbows in the warming air. The day was good. And it was always so.

Yet today was different!

The sea, twinkling in the early morning sun, was the same; so were the pelicans, digesting their fishy breakfast, as they calmly bobbed up and down on the swells just beyond the breakers. And the white beach ever covered with the tracks of hunters, the hunted and scavengers looked the

same. As always, the sand was giving up the night's chill and would soon be blisteringly hot; it was another ordinary day, yet there was a difference.

There was a special energy to the morning bustle; the air had a charge of anticipation to it. Oh there would be some work to the day's play, but this was a time for fun and most importantly for pride, because today they would launch the Tamaru!

She was nearly eighty feet long and very sleek. Anyone looking at her knew immediately that she was strong and fast--the fastest! The ship had grown slowly over many months from stacks of bleached, rough wood to stark white skeleton, to finished smooth sides and gleaming brightwork. Like the process of gestation the basic building blocks had been transformed into a beautiful creation. With the birth of launching she would become a creature of the deep and just as a living thing, she would soon develop a personality. The Tamaru, perched high upon the dunes, the culmination of much labor and sacrifice, was about to become the biggest and best. Her billowing sails and the bite of her bows in deep water swells would lead the fleet. Long and arduous journeys had been made to find the right woods, the best of materials and the rarest, most precious of all--metal to be used to fashion her rudder heel casting and gudgeons. Now she was ready and so this was a day with a difference.

The Vita Explorer dropped out of hyper into normal space.

Preparations began early. As men in old pants and ragged shirts, each bent on their task, strung ropes, coiled lines, checked slack, placed rollers and fastened blocks for the launching, the women shucked peas, peeled potatoes and plucked chicken for the big cook-up. The smells of saltfish, rice and fried plantain filled the air and blended and commingled with the floral scents of tropical blossoms. The gorgeous scents were almost overwhelming. It's goodness so enlarged the soul that everyone was brother or sister. All one family! It was going to be a wonderful day.

The sand grew hotter as the sun rose higher. Then the rum went from hand to hand stirring up flagging strengths. Today was a big day. You ate big, drank big, and laughed big at those few who drank and ate a little too big.

The children were all there, explosive parcels of concentrated energy getting under foot. Naked brown bodies skipping in the surf, flopping on the beach, flinging sand in hair, eyes, mouth and nose. For them the day was a lark. A time of tugging, pushing, teasing, laughing and most of all joyous screaming as they ducked under and jumped over ropes, raced up and down the beach, and generally had a good time.

One boy kept aloof from all this excitement, however. Rush was a healthy, well built scoundrel of a twelve year old. He ran and swam well and he was always helping the fishermen--running to get this or that tool, swimming out to a moored boat with cork floats, giving a hand to haul a catch ashore. And today was his day, his and the Tamaru. At each launching a youth was chosen, an example of strength, energy and spirit, the symbol of a good and bountiful future. Rush had been selected, and he was now practically bursting with pride. Much too important now to be playing childish games, he would work on the launch preparations and occasionally wander down the beach to gaze far out over the water. When the Tamaru slid into the sea today and become the newest, biggest and fastest of the fleet, only he would be onboard. It was surely an important honor.

The feast was ready and bowls were filled with delicious rich food. The liquor passed hand to hand, too. Grease was slick and bright on fingertips, on mouths and on practically every part of gorging children; it was often rinsed off in the sea and the eating would begin again. Eventually the feeding slowed. The noise and frolic subsided as the men rose to the final task. They took their positions and waited. Then Rush, draped in a flower robe, stepped forward and was lifted to the bow of the vessel. With a sudden cheer the men heaved together: the boat shivered.

Hands firm on the lines, all backs arched again and with one mighty agonizing pull the boat began to slide into the water.

The crew was a little rusty after so long a journey. Insertion was a trifle sloppy. The ship still carried enough velocity to be thrown out of orbit. A broad band survey indicated there was no "civilization" on the planet, so dumping the kinetic energy the easy way, with a bang, wouldn't disrupt anything.

A tightness built up in the air: abruptly it let loose with a wild scream. A gale sprang up and beat the hot air before it. Ripples were whipped into raging waves. Sea foam filled the sky. The tide began to pull, and the boat broke loose. It became a live thing, frantic on the back of an angry sea. Those men still on the lines were flung across the wet beach. When the freak storm suddenly ended, everyone was asprawl on the sand. The Tamaru, minutes before a proud and beautiful thing, lay wrecked upon the shore. And the sorrow grew as the water receded, for wedged between the crushed hull and the hard-packed sand was Rush. As wrecked and broken as the Tamaru.

The Vita Explorer streaked across the noon sky. Momentarily it seemed to loom over the frozen tableau on the beach, then it tore away.

All eyes followed it until it was out of sight. The sudden silence was slowly filled with a low, sad keening, for in full daylight, from across the void, darkness began settling over these people. "Civilization" from a distant sun had today left merely a gesture and a hint of tomorrow. Yes, this was day with a difference.