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Bad Blood

Once upon a time there was an ordinary nebula. Composed of hydrogen gas with a spicing of heavier elements, the detritus of ancient supernova explosions, it had every prospect of breeding a healthy cluster of normal stars with their attendant planetary systems, a few of which might grow life, and perhaps even intelligent life.

But the happy domestic future of the nebula was poisoned by a wayward star, an outcast from an open star cluster, which by some wild improbability soared straight through our nebula, leaving a wake of vortices and turbulent motions. One of these vortices, compressed to critical size, commenced its glacial gravitational implosion, shrinking and flattening into a disk which would give birth to a star and its brood of planets.

The gaseous turbulence in which this disk was enmeshed distorted its shape, adding mass in places and subtracting it elsewhere. A double nucleus formed, elongating the shape of the disk into an oval; a few million years later, the two nuclei merged into a single proto-star, but the oval shape of the condensing nebula needed millions more years to revert to circularity, millions of years it didn't have. A family of planets emerged from the cloud, but it was a dysfunctional family, tracing elliptical orbits instead of the clean, natural circular orbits in normal planetary systems.

Such a system is gravitationally unstable; it cannot persist. The planets, tugging at each other irregularly as they followed their asymmetric paths, were certain to pull each other into conventional circular orbits – although in the process a few objects would be thrown into wild trajectories. Symmetry was achieved first in the fast-moving inner solar system, the region where life was

most likely to develop. The outer planets, however, moved more slowly and hence continued their chaotic behavior for billions of years longer.

This accursed nativity was the source of much suffering.

A Rock's Story

It was an asteroid, a small orb of rock, and not a particularly large one. For millions of years, it had orbited its sun in the elliptical orbit bequeathed to it by its nativity. Over millions of years, the asteroid's trespassing into the orbits of other asteroids finally resulted in the a close encounter with a larger asteroid. Not a collision, mind you, just a near miss close enough to drastically alter the first asteroid's orbit. Now it went into a steep dive, plunging to within 30 million miles of its sun before roaring back out to the asteroid belt. Such an orbit occasionally brought it within the gravitational reign of other planets closer to the sun, and their soft pulls steadily warped the asteroid's orbit, speeding it up sometimes, slowing it down other times. This new orbit was unstable; there was no peace for the asteroid as it erratically whirled through the stately, stable orbits of the inner planets.

It was inevitable that the asteroid would eventually pass close enough to a planet to undergo another dramatic perturbation; it was not inevitable that it would actually strike a planet, but that's what happened. Coming from behind, it slammed into the planet Lamina with such force as to send huge spurts of their combined bodies shooting far out into space. But the core of the asteroid remained intact and penetrated only a short way into the target. There it remained like a planetary tumor, stuck deep inside the planet but not deep enough to melt and meld with the planet. Overhead, the crust of the planet swaddled the huge crater in an ocean of sediment-drawing water, and layer upon layer of sediment filled and smoothed out the crater.

Meanwhile, deep down, the asteroid's denser components slowly drifted downward towards the core, while the remainder of the asteroid, shedding weight, drifted upward ever so slowly. It could not know the tectonic havoc it unleashed as it neared the surface. The sediments that had once formed the deepest of ocean floors were rudely shoved upward, right up into the sky. The wind and rain of millennia clawed at the soft sediment and stripped it away,

and the body of the asteroid emerged from its cocoon and beheld the surface of the planet.

It saw a vast land mass stretching out in all directions. The asteroid's uppermost portions were perpetually shrouded in snow; there were no peaks visible that challenged its eminence. The mountains that attended it, themselves thrust upwards by its rise, hovered in its shadow like ducklings around their mother. Beyond them lay flat plains receding from view in all directions.

Day and night were a twinkling too fast to register; the passage of years only a rapid sinusoidal brightening and dimming of the light. Storms were puffs of air against its face. It saw forests spread up the slopes of the foothills like waves on a beach, disappearing in a flash of fire that made way for the next wave. It could plainly discern the meandering pattern of evolution, as one dominant species of tree lost its place to another; the color and texture of the forest changed to reflect the new arboreal order of things.

After some time it noted a change in the distant prospect. A widening blue streak marked a rift valley filling with water. Five more such cracks yawned open all around it. The single land mass it had presided over was breaking up into six plates, all moving away from the asteroid as if it were now a tectonic pariah. Where once it had towered over a huge land mass, its domain was now reduced to a single continent.

Its eroding enemies redoubled their attacks. Water used the centuries to sneak into every fissure. In the cold it froze, expanded, and forced the fissure ever wider. In the warmth it melted and insinuated itself ever deeper into the rock. Under the relentless attack, the asteroid's body shriveled away chip by chip. As it lost height, so too did it lose sight of the other continents making off for some unknown destination in obedience to the same hidden forces that had pushed the asteroid upward.

Its descent from the freezing heights only added new attackers. Trees climbed its shrinking flanks, their penetrating roots prizing apart the rocks. The rains washed bits of rock downward, and the racing streams ground its rocks into gravel, then sand, then silt. Its powerful angular features were rounded with

age, its stony face softened with foliage. In quiet moments it could feel the tingling of thousands of hooves pounding across its gentler slopes. Beneath it, it could feel the distant vibrations of other mountains in the making. Elsewhere on Lamina, new mountain ranges were rising.

In its old age, it learned to listen to the sounds of the planet. The rumbles and shivers that it felt told of far-off places, of volcanoes and earthquakes building up the land in opposition to the erosive forces grinding it down.

Slowly the remains of the asteroid descended from massif to mountain to hill. The day came when it was nothing more than a low rise topped by an outcrop. Its awareness, flickering in the twilight of its existence, flared briefly when it felt a booted foot press down upon it. Then what was left of its identity merged with that of the planet.

The Veliko Extinction

Two billion years later, on Tuesday around noon, a herd of herbivores was grazing on a grassy plain. A few reached up to nibble on some trees. A carnivore crouched in the grass a few hundred meters away, waiting for an opportunity. An ant scrambled across the carnivore's fur, struggling through the hairs.

The sunlight dimmed. At first it was hardly noticeable, but the dimming continued, ever so slowly, and the gloaming deepened. The creatures with simpler brains began to shift into their night behaviors; the larger creatures looked around in some confusion; their internal clocks did not comport with what their eyes were telling them. A few checked their Rolexes.

Within an hour the plain was completely dark, darker than the darkest night. Caught out of their daily routines, the alarmed animals thrashed about. The carnivore's hunger was subordinated to its distress over this supernatural darkness. The sun had been blotted out from the sky in the middle of the day.

After a few hours the darkness relented; light gently returned to the landscape and the panic among the fauna abated. Within another hour, everything returned to normal. The herbivores returned to their grazing as if nothing had happened. The carnivore used the twilight to creep closer to its prey and began its stealthy approach. The herbivores, smelling the carnivore, nervously shifted to a safer location. For the next two hours, the carnivore crept closer and the herbivores drifted farther in the dance immemorial.

Towards sunset a monstrous tidal wave swept across the plain, tumbling herbivores and carnivores to their deaths, ripping out trees, drowning burrowing animals in their holes, destroying everything. On the opposite side of the planet, where it was dawn, a similar tidal wave also wrought death and destruction over entire continents.

Far out in space, the small planet Kira swept past Lamina, its gravity raising the death-dealing tides on Lamina. A denizen of the outer solar system, Kira had after billions of years been hurled out of its elliptical orbit by a close encounter with a similar planet. Like the asteroid before it, Kira fell towards the sun, whipped around, and grazed past Lamina closely enough to raise devastating tides. From there, it caromed around the inner solar system for millions of years, closely approaching Lamina four more times. In the fifth encounter, Kira and Lamina locked onto each other gravitationally; they orbited each other in what was at first a highly elliptical path. But the sun's gravity smoothed, stabilized, and circularized that orbit, and after tens of millions of years, Kira courteously orbited Lamina like a proper moon.

The Locusts of Habinda

Habinda was about as geologically dull a continent as could be: roundish, flat, monotonous, sprouting mountain ranges only along its eastern coast. What it lacked in geological sparkle, though, it more than compensated for in biological richness. Situated in a temperate latitude, it was bathed in the warm, moist waters of a providential ocean current flowing northward from the tropics. The warm, moist air generated by the ocean water did battle with the cold air sweeping southward from polar regions, and the carnage from those battles was rain, plentiful rain: almost torrential in the winter, gentle in the summer.

The blessing of the rain brought forth a riot of biodiversity on Habinda: fungi, grasses, bushes, trees, subterranean worms, burrowing rodents, surface-scouring seed-eaters, herbivores of all sizes, and of course the carnivores who reaped that herbivorous harvest. And insects – millions of species of insects crammed into every possible ecological niche, digging, chewing, browsing, flying, parasitizing, and exploiting every possibility, like street hawkers in a busy city. Habinda was the poster child for the power and richness of Nature.

For a hundred million years, Habinda basked in the blessings of its circumstances, and its biome developed ever more complexity, with species that were dependent upon species that were dependent upon other species, all in a huge and crazy webwork of biological interconnections quite unequaled anywhere else.

Adaptability is a genetic trait like any other, and in the stable climax environment that Habinda boasted, species with genes that could rapidly change found themselves at a disadvantage compared to species with less flexible genomes. Success on Habinda went to the conservative genomes, species that had lean and mean genetic complements, uncluttered with the “junk DNA”

that serves as a toolkit for rapid adaptation. Slowly, rapid adaptability was bred out of Habinda's biome.

The continents of Lamina slowly drifted across its mantle in a group dance taking millions of years for each step. Another continent, Striltsen, oozed directly into the path of the ocean current that watered Habinda.

While continents move with agonizing lassitude, ocean currents can turn on a dime. Habinda's beneficial ocean current shifted to a new course with particular abruptness: it took only a century for the rains to blink out. The result for Habinda's biome was catastrophic. Faced with the urgent need to adapt to a radically different climate, the creatures of Habinda were not up to the task. The flora withered and died, taking most of the fauna with them. In the geological blink of an eye, Habinda changed from green to brown. The survivors were few: some hardy bunch grasses, a few species of hardscrabble brush, and some pathetic trees.

There was one species that profited from the disaster: a rather obnoxious species of locust. These bugs, by happenstance, fed on the grasses and brush that survived the biological apocalypse. Luckily for them, they had previously been too few to attract any dedicated predator; they had been kept in their place by a variety of birds that were omni-bug-ovorous; when the other bugs died out, their predatory birds followed them, leaving the locusts free from predation.

Inevitably, the locusts swept over Habinda, establishing the biological analogue of a one-party state. They lived in the trees and rubbed their wings against their legs to make a loud buzzing sound to attract mates. Where Habinda had once reveled in the splendor of biological richness, now it reverberated with the incessant racket of billions of locusts. There wasn't a quiet spot on Habinda; at night the cacophony ebbed only somewhat.

It took millions of years for Habinda's biome to adapt and recover to the new order of things, and the locusts were a part of that new order. Other species arrived from elsewhere on storm-driven logs; a few hardy birds somehow traversed the wide oceans to reach a new home. Bit by bit, a new ecosystem developed. There were, of course, many species who tried to cash in on the

bounty of locust protein, but the locusts adapted to these threats by manufacturing a poison deadly to those who feasted too heavily on locust. As the aboriginal inhabitants, they had a home-court advantage, which they used to maximum benefit, and the rest of Habinda's biome had to adapt to the locusts, rather than the other way around.

In that locust-dominated environment, acoustics were hopeless. There really wasn't much point in retaining hearing abilities when the air was riven by the racket the locusts made. Most animals let their hearing atrophy and concentrated on sight, smell, and touch to read their environments. A few larger species of birds developed an ear-piercing shriek for mating calls; a small herbivore learned to thump the ground with its flat feet to transmit danger signals to its fellows. Otherwise, the animals of Habinda abandoned the aural environment to the locusts. Where communication was necessary for sexual competition or claiming territory, most species flashed colorful feathers or flaps of skin.

Thus it was that, when after many more millions of years, an intelligent species developed language capabilities, they did so using body language: tipping their heads, moving their arms, and above all, performing complex and delicate gestures with the three long, elegant fingers on each hand. They called themselves 'Frem's'.

The Secret Fruit

The little troop was up before the sun; the previous day's foraging had not gone well and rumbling stomachs roused them early. They set out across the plain towards an open clump of fruit trees. The trees had already been stripped clean but perhaps they might find some loose bits of fruit in the tall grass underneath. They spread out and began their slow sweep across the ground, separating grass tufts, looking for anything edible.

One female hit the jackpot: there, underneath some flattened grasses, she found not one but two large, complete fruits. They were only slightly rotten. This was a bonanza! But she muffled her joy; she was low on the social ladder and if she started eating the fruit, the alpha female would surely take it away. Furtively she glanced about; nobody had noticed her pause over the treasure. She moved on, trying hard to look bored and unsuccessful. She would come back later to wolf down the fruit, when nobody would be there to rob her.

The minutes rolled by and the troop progressed across the grassy glade with a frustrating lack of speed. She couldn't resist surreptitiously glancing backwards occasionally, worried that somebody else might have found her treasure. After an eternity, the troop had moved far enough beyond the prize that she could safely sneak back to it. She furtively stole back to her discovery and scanned the neighborhood – nobody was around to see her enjoy her prize. She wrapped her shaking fingers around the most beautiful fruit she had seen in ages and blissfully sank her teeth into it, enjoying the feeling of the sweet juice dribbling down her chin.

Suddenly the alpha female jumped on her, screaming and flailing. Terrified, the discoverer bolted, holding onto her fruit, with the alpha female in hot pursuit. The alpha tackled her; they rolled in the grass and the panicked victim released the fruit and ran for her life.

The alpha watched her flee for a moment, then picked up the remaining hunk of fruit and took a bite. She had sensed that the lower female was acting oddly, so she had sneakily kept an eye on her. When the lower female disappeared, the alpha knew that something was up, and crept from tree trunk to tree trunk, following her. Peeking around from behind one tree, she saw the insolent bitch gloating over what was obviously a choice discovery. When she saw the lovely piece of fruit, she went wild and attacked.

Noticing the odd behavior of the lower female – that was why she was alpha.

Soo and Dae

Soo scowled at the dirty kai root Mee had given him. He was sick and tired of eating kai roots. They were hard, you had to chew them forever, and they had a black taste to them. He wanted some meat, sweet, flavorful, invigorating meat. He'd settle for rotten meat; even that was better than this useless crap of a kai root.

He looked mournfully at Dae, who was eyeing his kai root with equal disdain. The gazelles were long gone, their migration to other lands was months ago. Maybe they could find a few birds or lizards. He spat out the root with a loud "uuu!" The other Jomkars turned in surprise. Dae grinned and threw down his root. "uuu!" he laughed, and the two got up and stomped off. Soo's wife was not pleased with his tantrum. "Soo!" she shouted angrily. He ignored her as they walked away from the camp.

Soo really had no idea what he was going to do; the chances of finding any edible animal were remote in this dry savannah. The grasses had turned brown. There were surely some earth-dwelling rodents scattered about, but they dug too deep and moved too fast to be caught. Soo was no rat-digger. You could spend all day digging out their tunnels with a stick and never even see a rat. The two of them wandered far out into the savannah with no particular place to go.

Suddenly Dae's ears shot up straight and his head jerked to the right. Soo followed his line of sight and the two of them stared intently at the horizon. Soo's ears pricked up, too, but he didn't hear anything other than the occasional rustling of dead grass. After a few minutes Soo became skeptical; Dae had good ears but Soo hadn't heard anything, and if there was something out there, they should have seen it by now.

But Dae was intent and he continued straining to see or hear something. When he whispered “toh!”, Soo looked at him skeptically; he hadn’t heard a thing. When he pointed and softly exclaimed “tee!”, Soo almost sneered in skepticism, but he followed Dae’s pointing finger and peered intently into the haze. Then he saw it -- it WAS a gazelle, just like Dae had said. What the hell was a gazelle doing out here at this time of year?

While Soo was still trying to comprehend this impossibility, Dae did something even more inscrutable: he pointed to their left and said “sai doo”. Soo was flabbergasted. What the hell did he mean by that? “leg foot”? That made no sense at all. Soo pondered; there were other meanings to those words; perhaps he meant “journey foot” or “journey under”. Yes, of course you use your foot when you make a journey; everybody knows that. But most confusing was using the two words together; Soo had never heard anything like it. He stared at Dae in utter confusion.

Dae was impatient to act. He repeated himself with emphasis: “SAI DOO!” Again Soo just stared in quizzical incomprehension. In frustration, Dae said “bee!” while sweeping his right arm from right to left. This was even more confusing to Soo: what did air have to do with anything? Did he mean that the air was moving from right to left? He felt the air on his cheeks; sure enough, there was the weakest breeze coming from the right. So what?

Then it hit him: you always approach prey from downwind so they don’t smell you. “Journey under” meant that they should make a journey to a point UNDER the wind – downwind from the gazelle! Of course! With a huge smile of comprehension, Soo nodded his head in assent and pointed in the same direction, repeating “doo” – “under”.

The two hunters dropped to the ground and crept slowly to their objective, looking for good rocks along the way. Soo found a small one, picked it up, and showed it to Dae. “uuu” Dae said, and Soo dropped it; there would be better rocks along the way.

When they reached a point that Dae judged to be downwind from the gazelle, they turned and began their stealthy approach. They took their time; the

morning was still young and if they waited for temperatures to rise, the pursuit would be shorter. The gazelle was more nervous than normal, which made sense because it did not have the protection of other gazelle eyes. It glanced about and sniffed the air frequently. But the forage was poor and it had to concentrate to find edible nibbles.

An hour passed; Soo and Dae had advanced by only about a hundred meters. Dae found a good rock and held it up for Soo to see; “aah” Soo responded. He would find a good rock, too, soon enough. Five minutes later, he found a usable rock; it was a little big but Dae approved with a weak “aah”.

They both froze; the gazelle was moving in their direction. It wandered a bit to the left, then a bit to the right, but it was closing the distance. After ten minutes, it turned around. This was a critical moment; they could use the opportunity to creep forward or they could rush it now. Dae judged the wind; it wasn't strong enough to blow their scent far. He assessed the morning; it was still too early for an easy pursuit, but that also meant that they'd have a long day to wear down the gazelle. It was a tossup between creeping and charging. He looked inquiringly at Soo. After a moment, Soo mouthed “aah”. Dae nodded his head in comprehension and looked back at the gazelle. It was still facing away from them. Simultaneously Soo and Dae rose and began running with the best combination of speed and stealth that they could manage. They got to within 50 meters of the gazelle before it noticed them and took off in a burst of speed. Soo and Dae immediately slowed to a walk and continued following the gazelle. It ran for 500 meters before turning and stopping.

Now began the long pursuit. Soo and Dae walked steadily and the gazelle grazed nervously, watching the two Jomkars close the distance between them. When they came within 200 meters, it bolted again, and again the hunters continued following. It wasn't that hot yet, so they knew this procedure would last a long time.

As the sun climbed higher, the Jomkars began sweating. That started a clock running in their heads; if they continued this long enough, they'd dehydrate and collapse. But they knew that the gazelle faced an even more serious problem with the heat. It wouldn't be able to stop and rest in the shade of an occa-

sional tree. In the brutal heat, its body temperature would rise until it reached heat exhaustion.

The pursuit continued all day; each time, though, the gazelle allowed them to draw closer before it ran, and when it did run, it went a shorter distance each time. The two hunters were feeling the heat. Dae worried that Soo wasn't up to the challenge, and he sometimes turned and grunted quizzically at Soo, but every time Soo would say "aah", and they continued.

They were now far from the camp, but Dae knew the territory well and had noted each tree as a landmark. By late afternoon, the gazelle was at the end of its rope; its legs quivered when it stood still, and it panted loudly. It finally collapsed and Soo and Dae broke into a run and were upon it before it could rise again. A few vicious blows with their rocks and the gazelle's skull was crushed. They scooped its blood in their palms and drank it eagerly; they were at the very edge of dehydration.

Now they faced a difficult decision: should they butcher the gazelle here and bring back only the good meat, or should they shoulder the whole carcass and carry it home with the extra weight of inedible bones? If they weren't so dehydrated, the decision would be easy, but if they carried too much weight, their chances of getting home were reduced. Soo pulled out his flint and held it up to Dae, who took a long moment to make up his mind. "uuu". They would not butcher the carcass here; the troop had eaten no meat for over a month, and this would be a godsend.

Soo disagreed. He shook his head and said "aah!", meaning that butchering the gazelle was the best course of action. "Dae kae" -- another pair of words. Again Soo twisted his mind trying to understand this novelty. "Dae hand" -- what could that mean? That Dae would do something with his hand? Soo shook his head in incomprehension.

Dae looked frustrated. "tee Dae kae". Soo's eyes widened in disbelief. Three words at once?!?! This was crazy! "gazelle Dae hand". What in the world did that mean. He visualized the three objects: the gazelle, Dae, and his hand. He nearly swooned when its meaning burst into his mind: Dae would carry the

gazelle back home! Soo was the weaker of the two, and he wouldn't have the additional exertion of carrying the gazelle half the time. His comprehension was apparent to Dae, who said "uuu Soo tee kae". Four words now! Yet Soo instantly understood: Soo would not carry the gazelle home.

Dae shouldered the gazelle and the two set off. When they reached camp with an entire gazelle, they were hailed as heroes; that gazelle would bolster the health of everybody for a month.

Boroghul

“They killed them! They killed them all!” Boratz ran into the camp screaming. “They’re all dead!”

Boroghul ran with the others to the center of the camp where Boratz stood crying and screaming. He pushed aside people and confronted Boratz. “Who killed them? Who was killed?” he demanded to know, but of course everybody already knew the answer: the Plant-Growers had ambushed and killed another Free-Men hunting party.

“The Plant-Growers! There were too many of them! They were everywhere! We never had a chance!”

Boroghul put his hand on Boratz’ shoulder. “Calm down, son. It must have been terrible. We need to know everything.”

Boratz told the tale to the gathered group. They had been tracking some goats. They were 20 kilometers away from the camp and 30 kilometers away from the village of the Plant-Growers. At such a distance, they thought themselves safe and thus were not being vigilant. The Plant-Growers trapped them against a fast-flowing river. Three men died fighting; Boratz and another leapt into the river; only Boratz survived.

Frightened glances rippled through the group. These were some of their best fighters; now there were only a dozen men capable of bearing arms. If the Plant-Growers could confidently attack five hunters, it wouldn’t be long before they came to wipe out the entire group.

Boroghul ran his fingers over his bare head, drumming them worriedly. One of the men cried out, “We must have our revenge! I will lead the raid!”

“NO!” Boroghul shouted. “In our last raid, we lost more men than we killed. There are too many of them.”

“We can attack them when they’re alone in their fields, and make our escape before they can gather their men to fight us.” It was Guregen, the best fighter in the group and a respected voice in counsel. “I can lead just five men to do the job. We can pick them off one by one.”

“We tried that” Boroghul reminded them. “They don’t work alone anymore. They all work together on a single field at a time.”

“I have watched them. Many times they are alone.” Guregen retorted.

“No”, Boroghul insisted. “One may appear to be alone, but there are always others within shouting distance. They could chase you all the way back here, and having found the camp, kill all the women and children. It’s too risky.”

“What would you have us do?” challenged Guregen.

“Move away. There are more lands to the north. We can find room among other groups of our clan.”

“The other groups are suffering, too. They too have been forced away from the best lands by the Plant-Growers. The only lands remaining for Free-Men are mountainous, rocky, cold, and have little food.” This time it was Sorkhokhtani, the old healer-woman.

“What would you advise us to do, Healer-Woman?” asked Boroghul respectfully.

“We go to the Onggud Valley; it is only 100 kilometers away.” she answered.

“That valley is too small to feed us all!” Guregen objected.

“Not if we grow plants like the Plant-Growers” Sorkhokhtani replied. “The Plant-Growers are so many because they grow so much food that they can

feed multitudes. We can, too. I have learned the skills from little Karez here. She gestured to the teenage girl whom they had abducted from the Plant-Growers five years earlier. “She knows how to grow plants, and I have learned from her. We can grow more food than we’ll ever need.”

“Plants are for women!” Guregen said contemptuously. “Men hunt animals. That is the way it has always been!”

Boroghul hesitated. Guregen was right; attending to plants was women’s work. He himself was disgusted by the thought of digging into the ground for food. But his little group was facing extinction. Still, they could not continue as they had been doing; for twenty years the depredations of the Plant-Growers had grown with their numbers. It was amazing how many of them there were. They could not be resisted.

Boroghul wished he had more time to consider this momentous decision, but he had long ago realized that the tribe could not survive the depredations of the Plant-Growers. He knew that the tribe had to change course. But becoming a Plant-Grower – that seemed too drastic.

The time had come for Boroghul to make a decision.

“Sorkhokhtani’s advice is sound”, he ruled. “We must move far from the Plant-Growers and become like them if we are to survive.”

“NEVER!!!” screamed Guregen. “You will not make me into a woman wearing skirts and dirtying my hands with soil. I am a Free-Man and will never be a Plant-Grower!” Several other men nodded their affirmation and moved to stand next to Guregen.

Boroghul faced a crisis. He was the leader of this tribe, but his authority was shaky; if dissent was great enough, he could be replaced as leader. If a small group of dissenters objected strenuously enough, they could simply leave and create their own group. His group was already too small with the loss of four men; if Guregen took more away, he wasn’t sure they could survive without the meat the hunters provided.

But he knew that the world had changed in a fundamental way. The Plant-Growers were slowly, steadily killing off the Free-Men. Other chiefs had told him stories just like his own: of expanding villages of Plant-Growers intruding ever further into their hunting grounds, taking the best land for themselves. Boroghul knew that the future belonged to the Plant-Growers. This was the time to make a decision between extinction and life. He set his chin firmly and announced, “I am taking this group to Onggud Valley. There we will grow plants. Those who do not wish to join us are free to take their belongings and go.”

Now came the moment of truth: how many would depart? All the young men stood by Guregen with defiance in their eyes. The older men all sided with Boroghul.

“Ha!” Guregen cried. “All the strength of the group lies with me!” You have only old men and women, Boroghul! It is YOU who must take your belongings and leave!”

Boroghul was crestfallen; he had lost his group, his people. He walked to his tent with the other old men and Sorkhokhtani, head down, but was heartened when he saw that the unmarried women all came with him, bringing with them the orphans they cared for. All in all, two-thirds of the members of the group were with him, but that didn’t count: only the men made decisions, and Guregen had the majority of the men on his side.

The next morning, the meager possessions of the group were all packed into heavy backpacks and they set off on the long journey to Onggud Valley. They had enough food to get them there and last them a few weeks. Fortunately, spring was upon them and they’d be able to grow some plants. Boroghul was placing the future of his people in the hands of Sorkhokhtani, but he knew those were safe hands.

His people made it to Onggud Valley. The first year was terrible, as they were able to grow little food. Most of the children died. But they harvested a goodly crop at the end of the year and that got them safely through the second

year. Each year, they improved their farming methods and reaped larger crops. By the time Boroghul died, his people were a large and thriving community.

Guregen led his men on raids against the Plant-Growers and achieved some success. Then one night two years later, the Plant-Growers surrounded his camp and killed every last man, woman, and child.

Dragen and Frintil

“Dragen, I have to pee.”

“Well then, pee.”

“Here? I can’t pee here!”

“Why not?”

“We’re soldiers! We’re in a battle!”

“First, cousin Frintil, we’re not really soldiers. We’re farmers with spears. Second, the battle hasn’t started yet.”

“So it’s OK for me to pee? Right here?”

“Go right ahead. Just don’t pee on the guy in front of you. He’ll get mad.”

Frintil relieved himself with a great sigh of relief.

“So what happens now?”

“We wait.”

“For what?”

“For the battle to start.”

“Why hasn’t it started yet?”

“Because the generals are waiting to get all the troops in the right places.”

“Why does it take so long? We got here an hour ago.”

“Because the generals keep changing their minds and changing the positions of the troops.”

“Well, I’m tired of waiting. I just want to get back home before my crops die.”

“Me too, cuz, but we have to win this battle first. Maybe if we get lucky and win the battle, we’ll all be able to go home.”

“You think we will win?”

“Who knows? These things just work out one way or the other.”

“But you’ve been in battles before. You won those battles, didn’t you?”

“We won the first battle and lost the second battle. I was lucky and managed to run away from the second battle before they could kill me.”

“Should we run away from this battle?”

“Not yet. If we do, they’ll kill us. But if we lose the battle and wait for the right moment, we can run away without getting killed.”

“When will the right moment be?”

“When everybody else is running.”

“Wait a minute! If EVERYBODY waits until everybody else is running, we’ll never run away!”

“Yep, that’s the idea. But sometimes you just gotta run. You follow my lead. If I run, you run. If I stay, you stay, no matter how scared you are. Got it?”

“OK, Dragen.”

A great shout arose in front of them. All the men around them started to shout and cheer.

“Why are we shouting, Dragen?”

“Because the battle is finally starting.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s good if we’re going to win and bad if we’re going to lose.”

“When will we have to fight?”

“That depends on how bad the situation is. We don’t have to fight until all the people in front of us are dead.”

“That’s great! There are so many people in front of us that we’ll never have to fight!”

“You’d be surprised, cousin. In the second battle – the one we lost – they killed most of the guys in front of me. That’s when I started running.”

“You mean you never fought?”

“No, I’ve never fought a lick, and we probably won’t do any fighting in this battle, either.”

“But why do we have to come if we aren’t going to do any fighting?”

“Because that makes the army look bigger so as to frighten the enemy.”

“Don’t they do the same thing?”

“Yep. They got thousands of country bumpkins like you and me just standing around holding spears.”

“Are they any good?”

“They’re no better than we are – and we aren’t worth spit. When they gave you your spear, what did they tell you?”

“To stick it in the enemy if I could.”

“Yep, that’s what they told me. That’s what they tell everybody. About the only thing we know is which end of the spear is sharp. You see, we’re what’s called ‘rabble’. One professional soldier can mow down people like us all day long. If you see a professional soldier coming at you, you run, because you don’t have a chance against him.”

“How will I know that he’s a professional soldier?”

“Easy. He’ll look like he knows what he’s doing. And he’ll look mad, not scared.”

Now they could hear the clashing of weapons in front of them.

“What’s happening? Can you see anything?”

“No, I can’t. It’s likely that the enemy is attacking us.”

“Should we run now?”

“No, we have our professional soldiers in the front line. They do a good job fighting. Besides, look behind you.”

Frintil looked nervously behind him. A thin line of professional soldiers stretched behind the troops.

“Those guys have just one job: to kill anybody who runs. We can’t run until they’re gone.”

They could only see about three ranks ahead, but that frontmost rank suddenly edged backwards, causing the next rank to edge back, causing the rank in front of them to edge back, so they edged back.

“What does that mean, Dragen?”

“It means that the guys in front are getting pushed back. It’s not a good sign.”

“Should we run now?”

“No, there’s still plenty of time. Just stand there. Don’t you panic or anything. I’ll get you out of this in one piece, but you have to do exactly as I say. Got it?”

“I got it, Dragen.”

Now they could see the guys three ranks ahead of them were fighting. They couldn’t see the enemy yet, but those guys were definitely fighting. It was quite a commotion, and they could hear screaming and shouting. Frintil looked at Dragen with terror in his eyes.

“Don’t worry, kid, I’ll take care of you. Just do what I say, OK?”

A sword from the front line went spinning up and over them; Frintil was too afraid to look where it landed, but he told himself that he could retrieve that sword later – it might be valuable.

Now the second line in front of them was engaged and Frintil could see the enemy soldiers hacking and slashing.

Frintil’s teeth were chattering but he managed to ask “Dragen, are they professional soldiers?”

Dragen was looking pretty scared, too, and he answered, “Yes, I’m pretty sure they’re professionals.”

“Should we run now?”

“Almost, kid. The guys behind us are still there.”

A flying piece of a hand hit Frintil in the face; he jumped back and knocked it away. Dragen took his arm and pulled him forward so that the professionals behind them wouldn't get the wrong idea.

“OK, kid, listen carefully; this is what we're going to do. As soon as they get the guys right in front of us, we'll move to the side to let them through. Don't run back; the guys behind us will kill us. The guys behind us will run forward to fight the enemy and THAT'S when we make our move. Got it?”

“OK. OK. That's what we're gonna do. OK. Step to the side. Step to the side. OK. Got it. OK.”

Dragen's whole body was shaking in fear; Frintil could barely stand up. Then the enemy broke through a few meters to their left, just as the guys in front of them went down. Dragen turned, grabbed Frintil by the arm and almost threw him behind him, towards the right. The enemy soldiers poured through and one of them charged Dragen, but Dragen tossed his spear in the guy's path and turned to run, pulling Frintil along with him. The enforcers were all gone now, and the two ex-soldiers ran pell-mell across the plain towards the river several kilometers away. If they could swim across the river, they'd be safe.

All around them, other sensible fellows were galloping as fast as they could. Occasionally Dragen turned to snatch a glance backwards, but all he could see were terrified peasants like him running for their lives. Once he saw the king's cavalry galloping along what used to be the rear of the line.

It's amazing how fast and far you can run when you're running for your life, but every Klast has his limits, and pretty soon Frintil was gasping for air. They slowed to a walk while Frintil tried to catch his breath, Dragen monitoring the situation behind them carefully. Other fugitives were likewise slowing down; they just couldn't maintain the pace.

“How far?” Frintil gasped.

“Maybe another kilometer” Dragen answered, although in truth he hadn’t the faintest idea of where they were. Then he saw something terrifying: enemy cavalry galloping forward, slashing at the fleeing farmers as they rode by.

“Let’s go!” Dragen commanded, and they resumed running, but this time at a more controlled jog. He watched the cavalry closely and figured out their direction. He steered Frintil on a different course to avoid interception. That would put the enemy cavalry between them and the river, but cavalry never stays in one place.

By now Frintil was staggering, gasping, desperate to stop, but now was not the time for rest. Dragen changed course again, heading for the rear of the cavalry column; they’d be gone by the time he reached that point. It worked but then he saw a second cavalry formation bearing down on them.

A second later he saw the river in front of them. Dragen struggled across the flat sandy bank, pulling Frintil along. The cavalry were almost upon them when Dragen leapt into the deeper water. One cavalryman chased after them, but stopped short.

Frintil was flopping around desperately; he didn’t have the strength to swim. Dragen tried to keep Frintil’s head above the water but Frintil’s flailing limbs kept breaking his grip. They hit some sort of rapid and Frintil disappeared. Dragen was himself at the end of his rope; he spun around looking for his lost cousin but saw nothing. He called out Frintil’s name and weakly swam about. A javelin struck the water not far from him and, chastened, he turned toward the far shore. It took him 15 minutes to make it out of the water. He sat on the muddy river bank and cried. He could see the enemy cavalry trotting about, stopping to spear somebody on the ground, and moving on. The sun was going down. It was time to begin the long journey home.

The Master and the Student

It was a beautiful morning in Arking. The Master stood on the porch of his small home and breathed in the brilliance of the sun, the singing of the birds, the faint smell of distant flowers, the sifting of the wind through the trees, and smiled. Then he smiled toward the students seated on the ground in front of the porch. He saw the eagerness in their faces and the energy of their minds.

“Good morning, my dear students.”

Each murmured his salutation in return.

“What has been occupying your minds of late?”

One of the students rose, bowed, and spoke:

“Master, you said yesterday that the king must both supervise his subjects and give them freedom to act. I do not understand.” He bowed again and sat.

“The good king practices both supervision and the allocation of responsibility. If he really and truly does so, then the subjects are without depravity; and if the subjects are without depravity, then all under Heaven is at peace; if all under Heaven is at peace, then the king’s severity is venerated; if the king’s severity is venerated, then the supervision and allocation of responsibility become automatic; if the supervision and allocation of responsibility become automatic, then what is sought is obtained; if what is sought is obtained, then the nation becomes rich; if the nation becomes rich, then the king’s pleasures are abundant. So when the techniques of supervision and responsibility are established, then everything that is desired is obtained.”

This is why the Jomkars were the last of the Seven Species to develop science and technology.

Another Dull Day

“It’s time for your public duties, sir.”

“So soon? Dirty ricklefricks! I thought I’d have some time for a bath. I’m covered with sweat.”

“Sorry, sir, but it’s a long schedule.”

“Oh, well. Let’s go see what you’ve got for me today.”

They crossed the atrium and entered the throne room from the side door. Kilmanj sat down on the throne; it really wasn’t much of a throne. After all, Seaptia was a small kingdom and Kilmanj had no pretensions. Sorvy waved to the first petitioner, who stepped forward.

“Sire, my name is Damout. The tax inspector says that I owe you two halmyns, five poods. But I paid my tax in full to Yeemstly, the previous tax inspector, just nine months ago.”

Kilmanj rolled his eyes; this was exactly the kind of thing that he hated. It was always one man’s word against the other’s, and any judgement he made was bound to be arbitrary.

“Sorvy, where are the tax records for this fellow?”

“Um, sire, the, I have the tax inspector, Thorine, here to explain.”

“Thorine, what’s going on here?”

“Sire, when I took over the tax office from Yeemstly, as you know, I found the tax records to be in complete disorder. I have spent months sorting out the mess, but I have found no record of any tax payments from this man.”

Kilmanj crossed his legs in impatience. “So we have no way of knowing whether Damout did or did not pay his tax?”

“I believe, sire, that the absence of any tax record for him indicates this is so.”

Damout spoke up: “But sire, Yeemstly was a cheat!”

Kilmanj had to agree with that; he’d had the crook executed for embezzling tax money. On the other hand, Thorine had proven himself to be a careful, exacting man; his judgement was always sound. So whom should he believe? The king shook his head; he hated making arbitrary decisions.

“Damout, how much money did you pay to Yeemstly?”

“Two halmyns, eight poods, sire.”

More than he truly owed; that sounded consistent with what he knew about that Yeemstly.

“Where did you pay it?”

“At my farm, sire.”

Another good sign; Yeemstly had seldom collected taxes at the tax office where one of the clerks might witness the transaction.

“Did you pay with halmyn coins?”

“No, sire, I paid him 28 poods.”

That sealed it for Kalminj. Farmers never had large amounts of cash; they saved their small gains a few poods at a time.

“Very well” Kalminj announced. “I think that we should give Damout here the benefit of the doubt. Thorine, record his tax as paid in full nine months ago.”

Drat! Kilmanj thought. That kinst Yeemstly was still costing him money!

“Who’s next?”

Sorvy motioned to a chubby fellow in the back who came forward with a bird on his wrist.

Kilmanj was irritated. “I have no taste for falconry, Sorvy; you know that.”

“This is no falcon, sir.” the chubby fellow blurted out. “Watch this!” He poked at the bird, and it croaked “All hail Kilmanj!”

Kilmanj’s eyes widened. He’d never seen a talking bird before.

“It’s in celebration of your victory over Fortritz, sire! It took me months to train it. You can have it for just thirty halmyns!”

“That’s very impressive. But thirty halmyns is a lot of money. Let me hear him again.”

The chubby fellow smiled proudly and poked at the bird a second time. “All hail Fortritz!” it croaked. Everybody laughed. The fellow poked frantically at the bird, trying to stop it. It jabbered “All hail! hail! hail! squawk! Kilmanj! squawk! Fortritz! Kilmanj!” It began flapping its wings desperately to escape the poking.

Kilmanj laughed loudly. “I think you need to train that bird a little longer.”

Sorvy quickly pushed the fellow out of the chamber.

Everybody was still laughing when Sorvy introduced the next person. “This is Pellowitz. He’s a trader from Filleen. I thought you’d like to meet him be-

cause — well, you can see for yourself. His resemblance to you is remarkable.”

“You’re right, Sorvy, the resemblance is astounding, although I don’t often look into ponds to see what I look like. Let’s see just how good the resemblance is. Pellowitz, here, put on my coat. Yes, the hat, too. I’ll give you a halmyn if you fool the queen.”

Pellowitz was reluctant, but had little choice but to obey the king. Kilmanj sat him down on the throne. “Sorvy, go fetch the queen.” He stepped to the back of the room, behind a knot of people. He directed one of the petitioners to state his case to Pellowitz as if he were the king.

A moment later Sorvy appeared with the queen. The petitioner was still presenting his plea; Pellowitz sat uneasily on the throne. The queen marched right up to him and demanded “What’s so important that you interrupt my weaving work?”

Pellowitz stared at her, frozen in terror. She glared back at him, then furrowed her brow. “Kilmanj...” she started. “...Kilmanj, is something wrong with you?” Pellowitz went white. “Kilmanj — you’ve changed. What’s happening?”

The real Kilmanj could no longer contain his mirth; he burst out into loud guffaws. Everybody turned to look at him, and the few people in front of him fearfully stepped away from him, as if they were afraid of being struck by bolts of fury from the queen.

“What!?!” the queen exclaimed. Her head bounced back and forth between the real king and the fake, and suddenly she exploded with the fury that everybody except Kilmanj had anticipated.

“You — you — how dare you embarrass me like this! She stalked up to Kilmanj, slapped him hard across the face, and stormed out of the room. Kilmanj stopped laughing as she approached him, but as soon as she was out of the room, he resumed chuckling and went back to this throne.

Pellowitz was only too happy to relinquish throne, coat, and hat. Still chuckling, Kilmanj sat back on the throne. “Sorvy, pay the man his halmyn; he earned it!”

As Sorvy dug through his purse, Kilmanj addressed Pellowitz. “I must say, Pellowitz, the resemblance truly is astounding; we must be related somehow. You say you’re from Filleen. Tell me, did your mother ever visit here?”

Pellowitz had the coin in his hand and was already heading for the door. “My mother, never; my father, often.”

Tredadon and Porbanji

Porbanji burst into the house, panting. “The ship! It’s back!”

“So soon? That was fast!” Tredadon replied. He jumped up and instructed a slave to bring a work crew to the dock. Then he and Porbanji ran down to the dock where other people were already unloading their cargo.

“Where’s mine? Where’s mine?” Tredadon shouted at the captain.

“Ah, Tredadon! We have a huge shipment of wheat for you, but you’ll have to wait for the others to unload their stuff before we can get to it.”

“Bah!” Tredadon scowled. They retired to a boulder ten meters back from the dock, where they could see the cargo being unloaded. Tredadon was always careful to insure that his cargo was safe against thieves and careless workers.

The captain walked up to them, handing a small package to Tredadon. “This is from your brother in Fahane.”

“Aha! Just what I wanted!” Tredadon exulted, as Porbanji looked curiously at the small package. Tredadon carefully loosened the strings that held it together, then unwrapped the outer covering.

“Is it something valuable?” Porbanji excitedly asked.

“Oh yes, indeed” Tredadon said – but Porbanji’s expression turned to sour disappointment when he saw his uncle unroll a letter.

“Just another letter from Uncle Tixmoor” Porbanji huffed. “I don’t see why you get so excited over those stupid letters. I don’t want to waste my time learning how to read and write letters.”

Tredadon didn't respond; he was studying the letter intently. When finished, he rolled it back up and carefully placed it in his bag. Then he leaned back and thought for several minutes.

"Well?" Porbanji asked. "What does it say?"

Tredadon thought some more, then said quietly, "We're going to send half our olive oil to Morsind."

"Why, Uncle Tredadon?"

"Because we can get a good price for it there."

"But how do you know that we can get a good price for it in Morsind? Uncle Tixmoor is in Fahane, not Morsind; how can he know what the price of olive oil in Morsind is?"

"Because his letter tells me that two ships left Fahane bound for Morsind carrying olive oil. That means that the price of olive oil in Morsind is higher than it is in Fahane. And the price in Fahane is already pretty good."

It took Porbanji a moment to follow the logic. When it finally sank in, he exclaimed, "Wow! That's pretty smart, Uncle! How do you figure these things out?"

"It's just a matter of logic, child. The letter presents the facts. You put the facts together and deduce the answers. It's really quite simple. The wheat in this shipment will feed the whole family and the slaves for six months, by which time we'll have this year's wine ready to sell; the wheat we get from Morsind we can sell for enough to get a ship of our own."

The other people had collected their shipments and the dock was clear for Tredadon's slaves to begin unloading the big jars packed with wheat. Tredadon smiled and said to nobody in particular, "Yes, this is going to be another excellent year." He looked down at Porbanji. "And if you want to get rich, child, you'll learn to read and write."

The Castaways

Jomo was a stupid little boy. He was willful and stubborn. His mother had warned him many times to stay away from the cliffs at the seashore, but Jomo didn't care much about what his mother said. He played at the cliffs whenever he felt like it. His favorite game was to roll rocks over the edge and watch them crash onto the rocks below. He would select a target and endeavor to smash it with a direct hit. His worst problem with this game was finding good rocks to roll over the cliff. He quickly exhausted the supply of easily available rocks and had to resort to elaborate and strenuous efforts to find more. Being a stupid lad, he would often climb down the cliffs to get a previously used rock, intending to carry it back up. Often he failed in the attempt, losing his grip on the rock while struggling up the steep cliff trails. Sometimes he kept his grip but lost his footing, tumbling halfway down the cliff, still clinging to his rock. Fortunately, Fremas have thick skulls and stout bodies, or my story would be even shorter.

Jomo's obsession with his rock-game eventually denuded the beaches of rocks. He took to hurling sticks, clumps of grass, dead shrubs, anything moveable that he could lay his hands on. Nothing, though, had the satisfying impact, the devastating crunch of a genuine rock. Sticks clattered, clumps broke and shrubs just kind of floated down. In his little pea brain, he sensed the impending extinction of his game.

Then came a big storm to Habinda, and the winds lashed the hut of Jomo's family with wild fury. Jomo's father, daring not to venture onto the sea in his tiny fishing boat, stayed home; the family busied itself patching the many leaks in the hut. When the storm broke, the father hurried to his boat to catch some food for the family and Jomo hurried to his cliff for a greatly-missed session of bash-the-beach.

Surprised he was when he found the cliffs newly shaped by the fury of the ocean waves. Great boulders lay strewn about the beach, and between them,

hundreds of rocks perfect for beach-bashing! It was as if the storm had presented him with a completely new beach, and he set to work reducing it to even finer rubble. The ensuing weeks saw an orgy of rock-rolling, an avalanche in slow motion. Jomo was happy.

Happier still was he when the winds again blew cold, and a dark line of clouds marching across the sky signaled another big storm. While his father paced and his mother fretted in their smelly and cramped hut, waiting out the storm, Jomo sat in the corner smiling beatifically. The last winds were still blowing the next morning when Jomo set out for his cliffs to gather the bounty of the storm. He was rewarded with a beautifully cluttered beach strewn with all manner of flotsam: tree trunks, seaweed, some boards, and some odd-shaped, indefinable clumps. The boards immediately attracted his attention; he could gather them up and present them to his parents, who would surely be pleased at this windfall.

After making his way down the cliff, he wandered around the beach, investigating each of the strange items, but he could not make them out. He was a stupid boy, after all.

He approached one of the odd-shaped clumps. It appeared to be covered with some sort of fabric, although he had never seen any fabric like it before. He reached out to feel it. It was soft and wet. Then it moved! If Jomo had been a smarter boy he would have jumped back, but he was too stunned to do so. He stood there, his hand still outstretched, staring at this clump that had heaved under his touch. Then, with a great rasping sound, it started to roll towards him, and Jomo found himself looking into a kind of a face, with eyes and a mouth, but not at all like his or his father's or his mother's.

An involuntary whistle broke from his lips, and he fell backwards, starting to scabble away from this horrible creature. It reached out with its arm and – it had no hand like his! Instead of the two stout gripping thumbs and three fine little fingers on Jomo's hand, it had four skinny articulated fingers, wriggling like worms! It seized Jomo's foot. Jomo whistled as loud as he could, over and over again, trying to escape from this monster. But he could not break its grip.

The horror multiplied. From within the creature's mouth, sounds came. Deep, rumbling, rasping sounds. Trills and squeaks and pops and rattles. Jomo had exhausted himself from whistling and lay on the sand, wide-eyed and silent now, mouth open, expecting to be eaten any moment. But the creature did not move. It held onto Jomo and continued making noises. After several more moments, it released Jomo's foot. Seizing the opportunity, Jomo raced away. He stopped a safe distance away and turned to watch the monster.

It was moving around in an irregular fashion and making its way to the other odd-shaped clump. This second clump soon began to move, more slowly than the first. Then the first creature stood up - and Tomo realized that it was much like a Frem. It had the same basic shape: arms and legs, a trunk like his, and a head with a face and eyes. But the head was bigger, and the ears were huge, floppy things that gave it a completely different look. It scanned the area, and when its gaze fell on Jomo he blanched and retreated a few more steps. It began to walk toward him, and the fluidity of its motion amazed and terrified Jomo. He turned and ran for the cliff, his stumpy legs jerking back and forth all too slowly. He climbed the cliff and ran straight home, with the creature following him steadily.

Jomo's mother, responding to his desperate whistles, rushed out of the hut. When she saw the creature, she seized Jomo, thrust him behind her skirts, and turned to face it, armed only with a stick. It stopped a few meters in front of them, tall and graceful, and began to make its terrible noises again. Jomo winced in terror, but his mother showed no sign of fear. She watched the creature warily while it croaked at her. It stepped forward and she brandished her stick; it retreated. It stopped making noises and stood quietly. Jomo's mother signed, "Who are you?" but it did not respond. An uncomfortable impasse ensued. Then Jomo's mother turned to him and furtively signed, "Get the last fish and a cup of water. Bring them." Jomo ran to the hut to comply, his mother standing her ground with the creature. When he returned, she took the food in both hands and slowly held it out for the creature. It stepped forward eagerly; she nodded her head encouragingly and it reached out to take the gifts.

And thus was established the first contact between Fremes and Lokweels.

The two Lokweels quickly recovered their strength. People came from all around to marvel at their huge ears, their graceful gait, and their deep, soulful eyes. Communication was difficult at first, but the Lokweels began to pick up the sign-language of the Fremes. Jomo took great pleasure in seeing two adults signing silly things that he had been corrected for only months earlier.

The two Lokweels created a problem for the community. They ate a great deal, and the Fremes had always tottered on the brink of starvation. Times were difficult, and there wasn't enough food to supply their huge appetites. Dark suggestions floated through the community. At last Jomo's mother broached the subject with the Lokweels: "Not enough food. You must catch your own now." The Lokweels went for a walk, grunting and croaking at each other energetically.

When they returned, they had an answer: "We help you catch food."

The Lokweels set to work gathering all the old rope and twine they could find. This they wove into a net, although since no Frem had ever seen a net, they didn't know what it was. Day by day the net grew in size, while nearby Fremes shook their heads at the waste of good rope, even if old and short. Then the Lokweels convinced Jomo's father and another fisherman to leave their spears behind and accompany them on their boats. With two boats, they cast the net, trawled with it, and when they pulled it up, it bulged with more fish than any Frem had seen at one time. In that day the life of Habinda was changed forever.

The Lokweels taught the Fremes a great many more things, about carpentry and astronomy and houses and boat-building. After several years they built a great boat, much larger than any boat seen before, and with a small crew of adventurous Fremes they sailed off, never to return.

Marstix and Chemat

Marstix scowled at the account book she was working on. The sun was setting and the light coming in through the oiled paper in the window was growing weaker. She leaned back in her chair and called out, “Flenst, bring me another candle. It’s getting dark in here!” After thirty seconds with no appearance by Flenst, she sighed angrily and got up to chase down either Flenst or a candle. With a start, she saw Chemat standing the doorway; apparently he’d been watching her quietly for several minutes.

“What? You...” she stammered, stunned. He wrapped his arms around her in a joyous hug. They kissed frantically and she laughed in delight. “How did you... When did you get back?”

“They’re still securing the ship to the dock. I jumped off before they had the gangplank in place and came straight here. But you were so intent on your book that I didn’t want to interrupt you.”

“Oh, Chemat! You...” Again she was at a loss for words. She laughed and giggled, poked his cheek, and kissed him again. Again they hugged, holding onto each other for several minutes while the loneliness from Chemat’s long absence slowly melted in the warmth of their embrace.

At last the words were starting to come to her. “I’m always so afraid when you leave. Afraid that your ship will sink in a storm, or that you’ll be taken by pirates, or that something terrible will happen to you in one of those barbarian ports.”

“Now, Marstix, I’ve told you a hundred times that they’re people just like you and me. You’ve seen them yourself many times at the docks. Klasts, Tayrans, Fremes, Lokweels, Srols, and Jomkars – they’re all regular people. You just have to get to know them. They’re not monsters.”

“That’s not what mother says. She hates them all, calls them evil names, and tells stories about the terrible things they do.”

“Do you accept without question everything your mother tells you?” he asked with a wicked smile.

Marstix laughed. “Not everything!” She pricked up her ears at the sound of footsteps. “Someone’s coming!” They separated and she hurriedly sat down at her table. Chemat stood safely on the other side of the table, assuming a formal posture. But it was only Flenst. She too was startled to see Chemat, but skipped barely a beat. “Your father’s home and wants to see you. Bring the book.”

Chemat bowed formally. “Until our next salutation, Miss Marstix.” Marstix bowed back and repeated “Until our next salutation.” She grabbed up her book and hurried off.

Her father Nopkox was seated in his great-chair, looking tired and happy to be home. “Ah, Marstix, my little treasure! What are your numbers telling you? Are we rich or poor?”

“I’m not little anymore, daddy. I can bear young.”

“Then why do you call me ‘daddy’?”

She blushed. She had never outgrown the use of the childish term of endearment for her father. “The numbers are saying good things. But I need more numbers. You haven’t given me any of your numbers for over a week. I need those numbers.”

“Yes, yes, I know. I brought home a whole sheaf of numbers: receipts from both of the shipments that came in last week, some deposit receipts from the Tarsin family bankers, and some purchases I made of cloth and olives. They’re all there. Do your magic with them.”

“I’ve never been comfortable with Marstix doing number-work.” It was Marstix’ mother, Sathstun, who had just entered the room. “That’s not proper work for a woman of good breeding.”

Nopkox glowered. “One of these days, woman, POW! Right to the moon! Who do you want to do this work: one of those sneaky money-men at the docks? You know they’ll steal us blind. We need somebody we can trust absolutely with our money. Is there anybody whom you’d rather trust than Marstix?”

Marstix lowered her eyes. She didn’t want to get caught up in this fight.

Sathstun towered over Nopkox. “And just who do you think will want a wife who does number-work? Certainly no man of substance. Do you want a sailor for a son-in-law? Don’t you care about your daughter’s future?”

Nopkox looked uneasy. “Marstix already has a young fellow in mind.”

“That good-for-nothing loser? What’s his name – Chemat?” Marstix started backing away from her parents, towards the door.

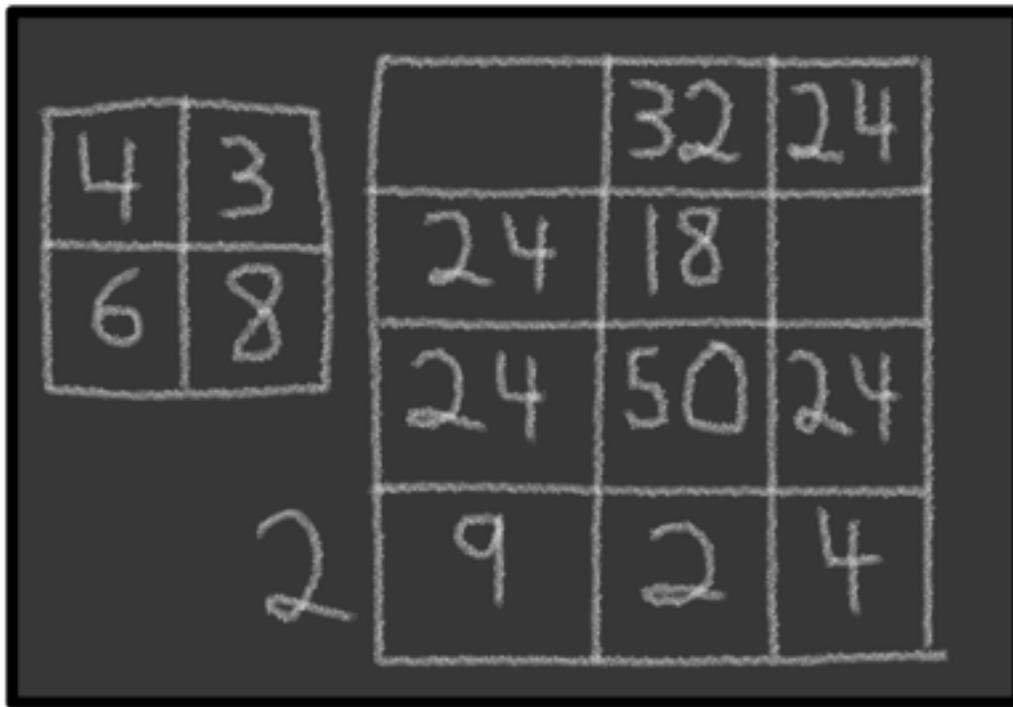
“He’s an up-and-coming young lad with a bright future. I like him.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot. Do you know anything about his family? They’re all nobodies. He is cousin to the Bracox people – you know, the ones who’ve been smuggling tcha for years. Every now and then one of them gets caught and hanged. His uncle was executed by the Fremms for something criminal, and I very much doubt that his father obtained his wealth by legitimate means. Worse, they make their money trading with the grooks, stilts, and snouts. Nobody respects them and none of them will ever get anywhere in society. I will never permit my daughter to marry that scum!”

Marstix burst into tears and fled to her room.

The next morning, Marstix stealthily avoided the kitchen and went straight to her workroom. She bade Flenst bring her a chunk of bread, a piece of pof

fruit



and

some

wine. She wanted to get the latest numbers from her father entered into the book. That in itself was a time-consuming task: there were seven different currencies, six of which had to be converted into Ripi trokyos and farstangs for proper comparison.

Here is where Marstix worked her magic. Her father knew the rough relationships between the various currencies, but only she knew how to get the exact amounts. She started with a receipt for the sale of a hundred bolts of cloth for Tayran currency: 43 griplas and 19 stlims. 20 stlims made up one gripla, and 68 griplas equalled 100 trokyos. She grabbed her slate and wiped it clean, then used her chalk to draw two groups of squares. Then she filled in the digits of the two numbers into one of the squares. She pulled out her magic table of numbers that she had copied down from her teacher years ago. The parchment had held up to use well:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
2	2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18
3	3	6	9	12	15	18	21	24	27
4	4	8	12	16	20	24	28	32	36
5	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
6	6	12	18	24	30	36	42	48	54
7	7	14	21	28	35	42	49	56	63
8	8	16	24	32	40	48	56	64	72
9	9	18	27	36	45	54	63	72	81

Then she started filling in the squares with numbers according to the rules she had learned; when she was done, her slate looked like this:

She wiped the slate clean and wrote down the first answer: 2924. Then she did more calculations according to the rules and came to her final answer: the Tayran money was worth 29 trokyos and 15 farstangs. She wrote this down in the book.

She labored all through the day, calculating numbers on her slate and entering them into the book. When she was done, she had the final number her father wanted: how rich they were. That number was 3,485 trokyos and 43

farstangs, quite a tidy sum. They were indeed doing well. Daddy would be pleased.

But now she began something that her teacher had not taught her. For more than a year she had wondered whether some trades were better than others. Her father had answered her questions along these lines with impatience; trades that made more money were better than trades that made less money. How could a bright girl like Marstix fail to see something so obvious?

But Marstix had worried that some trades took more time than others. Pof fruit were close by in Crablox; it took only a few weeks for a ship to sail to Crablox, buy a load of pof fruit, and return to sell them immediately. They didn't make much money on the pof fruit, so her father only sent a ship for pof fruit when he didn't have enough money to fund the more profitable trips to Chu Ito for the scarlet cloth the Lokweels excelled in making. But those trips to Chu Ito took six months. After wondering about the problem for many months, Marstix had figured out how to solve the problem. She had discussed it with her father, but Nopkox was unreceptive.

Chemat once again appeared in her doorway. Her work instantly forgotten, she flew from her chair and into his arms, kissing him with fervent energy. And she laughed. Just being with Chemat made her laugh, for no particular reason. He laughed with her.

“I was hoping you'd just happen to show up at the dock... so that we could spend some time together...” he began. “But here you are, squirreled away with your numbers.” He looked down at the table and picked up the slate, scanning the numbers. “I have never understood number magic. How do you do it?”

“It's just rules. Follow the rules and you can figure anything. It just takes a special kind of thinking, where you just follow the rules, like a game. If you follow all the rules correctly, you win the game. Mess up a rule, and you lose the game.”

“It doesn't seem like much fun for a game.”

“Don’t you have fun when you make a good trade and a big profit?”

“Yes, but that’s different. That takes skill and knowledge.”

“So does this. Here, let’s play a game. Suppose that you have 100 trokyos to use for trade, and you have one year in which to trade. If you had to choose between pof fruit and Lokweel cloth, which would you trade for?”

“The Lokweel cloth, of course. If you buy 100 trokyos of Lokweel cloth in Chu Ito, you can sell it here for 150 trokyos.”

“True, but you can only make two trips to Chu Ito a year. So after the first trip, you have 150 trokyos, which you use for a second trip, ending up with 225 trokyos at the end of the year. Right?”

Chemat paused to think. “Yes, that sounds right.”

“Now suppose that you use the 100 trokyos to purchase pof fruit in Crablox. How much money can you sell it for here?”

“Hah! Barely 110 trokyos! You see, you make a bigger profit trading with the Lokweels.”

“But it takes only three weeks to make the trip to Crablox and back. That means that you can make 14 trips to Crablox and back in one year.”

“So what? You’re still making only 110 trokyos each time.”

“No, you’ve made 110 trokyos after the first trip. You can buy more pof fruit with 110 trokyos, so on your second trip, you’ve earned 121 trokyos. On your third trip, you’re up to 133 trokyos. Keep going like this all year and you end up with 380 trokyos.”

“What?!?! That’s impossible!”

She sat down with him and walked him through the calculation step by step. When she was done, he had to admit that she was right, but it just seemed wrong. It seemed backwards. Everybody knew that you made more money trading with the Lokweels than selling pof fruit.

“Which do you believe: your instincts, or the numbers?”

Chemat didn't know what to say. “What does your father think of this?”

“He doesn't believe it. He says that I must have made a mistake with the numbers. But I have checked the calculations a hundred times and I know I'm right.”

“I have a suggestion for you, Marstix. What if you and I...”

He was interrupted by the crash of the door being flung open. Four men rushed in, seized Chemat, and dragged him out kicking and screaming. Marstix screamed wildly, tried to hold onto Chemat, but she couldn't stop them. They hit Chemat over the head and he went limp; she tried to follow them, but one of them held her back while the others dragged Chemat away. Nobody on the street paid heed to Marstix's frantic screams. When he released her, she ran into the house searching for help. Neither of her parents were home and the men-servants were all at work at the warehouse. Frantic, she ran all the way to her father's warehouse.

“Father! Father! Where's my father?” she cried out. The men-servants all looked up and one of them hurried off, returning a moment later with Nopkox.

“What's wrong, Marstix? Are you hurt?”

“Some men attacked Chemat and took him away! You've got to save him!”

Nopkox furrowed his brow, trying to absorb the situation. “This must be your mother's doing. You know how she feels about Chemat. I doubt that she's evil enough to kill him, but she's going to make sure that you never see him again. What would she do with him?”

Nopkox paced back and forth, thinking furiously. “She might sell him to the Fremas as a slave” one of the men-servants suggested. “No, that would bring down the ire of his family onto us. Sathstun is too smart to do something like that. She’s probably holding him somewhere, but I don’t know where that might be.”

“On a ship?” one of the men suggested. “No, people working on the dock would hear Chemat’s shouts if he were on a ship.”

“What if the ship were setting out on a journey?” the first man countered.

“That’s it!” Nopkox exclaimed. “It’s too late to sail today; who’s leaving port tomorrow?”

“The *Hindro*” one man answered.

“And that Jomkar ship” another one chimed in.

“I don’t think she’d use the Jomkars” Nopkox mused. “She hates them too much and she’d never trust ‘em. No, it’s gotta be the *Hindro*.”

“We’ve got to rescue him, daddy!” Marstix pleaded. She knew that calling him ‘daddy’ would touch a tender spot.

“We can’t just storm the ship, little treasure. There are too many men on board.”

Wailing, Marstix sat on a sack of grain and cried bitter tears. Nopkox felt his heart wrenching at her misery. He looked up at his men with an expression of terrified hopelessness. “What can we do?”

After a long, terrible silence, Nopkox’s agent Feelung spoke up: “I have an idea, sir. What if we ship that load of glass beads on the *Hindro*? They’re heading for Trebizon. The beads will fetch a good price there.”

Nopkox snarled at Feelung, “What are you talking about, man? Farlyx always overcharges for cargo he carries, and besides, you’re the agent for the shipment of copper going out next week.”

“Don’t send me with the beads, Master; send Marstix.”

Nopkox stared at him in disbelief. “Send a young woman on a long voyage as a merchant-agent? Are you crazy? That’s my daughter! I won’t lose her!”

“She’s marrying age; if she stays here, she’ll marry some nobleman and end up who knows where. You’re going to lose her no matter what. And she’ll be traveling as Chemat’s wife; he’ll protect her.”

The brilliance of Feelung’s scheme dawned on Nopkox. In a single stroke, he could save his daughter’s lover, remove her from Sathstun’s malevolent control, and set up a permanent agent in Trebizon. The Srols were tricky to deal with but very profitable. With Marstix as his agent in Trebizon, he could overcome the myriad complexities of trade with the Srols and reap huge profits. It was clearly the solution.

“Did you hear what Feelung said, dear one?” he asked Marstix. She looked up at him, her eyes swollen from crying, and looked long into his eyes, trying to absorb the import of Feelung’s proposal. When the pieces came together in her mind, the expression of joy on her face banished all doubt from Nopkox’s heart.

“Yes! Yes, father! That is the only way! Please, please, let me do that!”

“You will never see your mother – or me – again if we do this.”

The pain on her face reassured the father of his daughter’s love. “Yes, father. I know.” For a long moment she looked deep into his eyes, pouring all the love she felt for him in an intense gaze. “But mother has forced us into this. So long as I remain in Striltsen, I’ll be Sathstun’s chattel. We must do this.”

“How will you convince Farlyx to release Chemat?” one of the men interrupted.

Without turning his eyes away from Marstix, Nopkox answered gently “Oh, nothing is impossible with Farlyx when you have a little money to dangle in front of his face. I’ll offer him a portion of the proceeds from the sale of the beads. That’ll keep him honest, too.”

Nopkox turned to face the group. “We have work to do, men! Feelung, write up the contract. The rest of you bring out the beads, load them into the wagon, and take them to the *Hindro*. I’ll go get some ready money to grease the transaction. Marstix, go home and gather anything you want to bring with you. Everybody meet at the *Hindro* in one hour.”

“What if I run into mother?” Marstix asked.

“Tell her I need to see her here immediately. I’ll be back here by the time she arrives, so I will appear completely innocent of your escape.” He winked.

When Marstix arrived at the *Hindro* at the appointed time, the men were already loading the beads onto the ship and Feelung was waiting for her.

“Where’s my father?” she asked, looking around.

“He didn’t want to make a scene, and he knew that this goodbye would be too difficult for you. He bade me give you this.” Feelung handed her a folded piece of the same paper they used for receipts. Inside were the words, “Know that I will love you forever, my little treasure.” She began sobbing but the sight of Chemat bounding down the gangplank toward her changed everything. Nestled in his arms, she laughed and she cried, and she laughed and she cried.

With everything stowed and ready, the *Hindro* cast off and used the last breaths of evening wind to move a few hundred yards offshore, beyond the reach of any search. The next morning, they sailed off, never to return.

For the next eight years, Marstix and Chemat served as Nopkox's agents in Trebizon. Chemat would travel far inland to ferret out the best bargains, while Marstix stayed in Apatani, managing the warehouse, selling the imports, and doing ever more magic with her numbers. By the time Nopkox died, they had amassed quite a fortune and began doing business on their own.

Some of their competitors dismissed Marstix's number magic as nonsense; some eagerly learned all the number magic they could. The former group were all eventually driven into bankruptcy, to be replaced by the latter group.

Marstix's number magic made them rich beyond all experience. She taught her children her secrets, and her son Clarmeeek returned to Striltsen when he came of age, where he too amassed a huge fortune and founded a business dynasty that endured for centuries.

The Champa Dealer

“I have to get to Fremdar fast. I need a champa that is fast, strong, and gives a comfortable ride.”

“Top of the line, huh? Well, most of the stock I have is a bit old, but I do have one truly excellent steed that should fit your needs. It’ll cost you, though!”

“I understand. I’m willing to pay for quality. Are you sure this champa can hold up all the way to Fremdar?”

“You don’t have to worry about that, sir; this is one fine champa. It’ll get you there AND back without raising a sweat.”

By this time they had reached the stall containing the object of their discussion. Nobing looked at it skeptically. “This doesn’t look like such a great mount. Why do you say she’s so fast?”

“I know she doesn’t look like much, but this champa has a sterling ancestry. I knew both parents, and they were both top-rate animals. Besides, she has never been strapped to a wagon in her life. She was ridden by an older woman, and only for going to church. When that poor woman died, I picked this beauty up.”

“OK, I’ll take your word for it. How much?”

“16 gold jains.”

“What!?!?! That’s exorbitant!”

“Sir, you said you wanted a top-rate champa. Do you expect to get a magnificent steed like this for a trifle?”

“Oh, alright, I suppose that I don’t have much of a choice. Here you are. Have her ready first thing in the morning; I leave at dawn.”

“God bless you, sir. She’ll be ready!”

The traveller eased himself off the champa and motioned toward to the stable-boy. “Feed and water this cursed nag. I’ll be leaving in an hour.” He limped into the dirty little inn. “Food and drink”, he waved to the innkeeper and wearily sat down at a table. He dropped his head down onto his folded arms and groaned.

“Rough trip, friend?” It was the fellow at the next table across from the traveller.

“The worst. I have never suffered so much from riding. I ache everywhere.”

“Where you coming from?”

“Darstell. How far is this place from there?”

“Darstell?!? Good lord, man, it’s only 18 futlors, and that’s a fine road! How can you be tired?”

“It’s my champa. I have never ridden a champa with a jerkier gait. I’ve spent the last six hours being thrown back and forth on the back of that creature.”

“Six hours?!?! It took you six hours to get here? Don’t tell me the champa is slow, too!”

“Yes, it halts every minute or two and refuses to move. Only after a great deal of kicking and swearing does it deign to resume forward motion.”

“Why don’t you get yourself a decent champa?”

“Ohhhh...” the traveler groaned, then, one word at a time, recited, “I. paid. 16. gold. jains. for. that. champa.”

His interlocutor burst out laughing. So loud and long was his laughter that another fellow came over to see what was so funny. The traveler’s new companion related the whole story, giggling the entire time.

“Wait a minute...” the newcomer said. “You bought this champa in Darstell?”

“Yep” the traveler replied.

“Did you get it from a champa dealer on the west end of town?”

“Why, yes, that’s where he was.”

“Was he kind of burly, with a high-pitched voice?”

“Yes, that’s him exactly. Do you know this guy?”

“Oh, yes, he took me for 12 gold jains. Had this story about the champa that was owned by an old woman who used it only to go to church.”

“I feel so stupid” the traveler muttered.

The seated man paused, thinking. “What do you say we make some justice with this cheat?”

“Hey, I don’t want to get involved in any nasty business. I’m a businessman, not a thug.”

“No, I have something much better in mind. A way you and I can both profit at the expense of that cheat. But it’ll take both of us. Are you up for a little fun?”

When the champa dealer recognized the traveler riding toward his stable, his immediate reaction was alarm; he slid a knife into his belt where it could be seen. “Back so soon?” he called out nervously.

“What ho, good friend!” The traveler bounded off the champa. “Indeed I am; I’ve been to Fremdar and back in just two days!” He handed the reins to the stable-boy. “This truly is a magnificent creature! I can’t thank you enough! Boy! Take good care of my champa!”

The champa dealer struggled to conceal his astonishment. “She was a good ride, then?”

“I didn’t think that champas could go so fast for so long! And such a smooth stride – I could have taken a nap while riding! Look, I’ll not be traveling for a while, so take good care of her for me.” He turned to leave.

“Sir, might I have the opportunity to buy this champa back from you? If you’re not going to be using it for the foreseeable future, you really don’t want to be paying its board, do you?”

“Oh no, I don’t ever want to lose this beauty. I doubt I’ll ever come across such a fine champa again. She’s worth keeping.”

“But sir, I could offer you an excellent price; you’d make a handsome profit. And there will always be more champas.”

“No, my friend, I think I’ll hold on to her.”

“I’ll give you TWICE what you paid for her: 32 gold jains!”

The traveler stopped and turned around to look directly at the champa dealer. “32 gold jains? For one champa?”

“Not as a final sales price; only as a deposit against a future sale. Since you won’t be using her for a long time, I’ll have plenty of time to find a buyer willing to pay a princely sum for such a princely animal. If I sell her for more

than 32 gold jains, I'll split the excess with you. If I can't find a buyer, you simply return the 32 gold jains and you can have her back. In the meantime, I'm the one paying her board, not you. It's a sure thing – you can't lose!"

The traveler stroked his ear, musing. "Very well, you have a deal."

The champa dealer dug out his strongbox, collected the 32 gold jains, and handed them over to the traveller. As the traveler walked away, the champa dealer returned to the stable exulting. If the champa really was as good as the traveler claimed, he could sell her for a lot more than 32 gold jains. And if it wasn't that good, he'd dump her back on the traveler and get his money back.

That same afternoon, another traveler appeared at the stable. The champa dealer could not know that this was the first fellow that the traveler had encountered at the inn. The traveler's co-conspirator was gaudily dressed; obviously a man of wealth, thought the champa dealer upon sighting him.

"May I help you, my lord?"

"Yes. I shall be needing a champa. Do you have anything..." he looked around the stable, his voice dripping with disdain, "...worth looking at?"

"Why, yes, my lord, I have a number of truly fine mounts."

"Oh, really?" the wealthy stranger almost sneered. He stepped daintily over a pile of droppings and strode down the stable aisle, barely glancing at each champa before dismissing it with a snort. He stopped short at the stall containing the traveler's champa and stared wide-eyed at it. "Where did you get this champa?" he demanded.

"From a highly-regarded businessman who has in the past traveled far and wide. He no longer has use for her, though, and so he sold her to me."

The wealthy stranger entered the stall and carefully examined the champa's feet. "This champa is from the king's herd!" he exclaimed. "How do you know it's not stolen?"

“My lord, this is most certainly not a stolen creature. I know for a fact that it was raised on a farm not 2 furlongs from here!”

“Well, I’ll be!” the wealthy stranger exclaimed. “A champa from the king’s herd! That’s quite a prize! Tell me, how much do you want for her?”

“She cost me 45 gold jains; I’ll give her to you for 50.”

“A fair price for such a choice beast. Sold! Here are two gold jains as a deposit on the full price.”

“Um, a deposit, sir? Why cannot you make full payment?”

The conspirator laughed. “You don’t think that I carry that kind of money around on my person, do you? Don’t worry, stableman, I’ll not be taking the champa until tomorrow afternoon. I’ll have one of my people bring the rest of the money along then.”

“Yes, my lord. Thank you, sir. Thank you.” He watched the wealthy stranger disappear down the alley. Then he danced a jig, laughing at his cleverness and good fortune.

The next morning, the traveler showed up unexpectedly at the stable. “Good friend!” he called out. “Where’s my champa? Something’s come up requiring my attention in Chartown. I’ll have to take my champa back. I’ve brought the 32 gold jains to buy her back as per our agreement.”

“Uh, sir, I’m sorry, but you can’t do that.”

“And why not?”

“Because I have already sold her. She’s already gone.”

“What!?!? How could you do that? You cur!” The traveler launched into a cavalcade of imprecations.

“Now look here, sir! We had an agreement and I am completely within my rights in selling her. I sold her for 36 gold jains, and so as promised, I am presenting you with half the excess, exactly two gold jains.”

The traveler was furious: “I don’t want the money, I want the champa!”

“Well, that’s too bad. Take the money and be done with it! Or shall we take this to the magistrate?”

Snarling, the traveler swiped the coins out of the champa dealer’s hand and stalked off. Later that day, the conspirators met on the road outside of town. Of the 34 gold jains that they had received from the champa dealer, the traveler got 16 for his initial payment for the champa; his partner got back the two gold jains he had given as a deposit. The remaining 16 gold jains they split evenly; each made a profit of 8 gold jains on the deal.

And of course, the “wealthy stranger” never showed up to close the deal for the champa.

Naval Engagement

“Shall we trim the cross-sail, sir?” The first mate was anxious. They were drawing close to the Ripi ship and there would not be much time to make their own ship ready for combat.

“No, not yet, Surudan. Let’s make sure we have him.” Captain Bayanadan had never lost an engagement with a Ripi warship, but he had let a few slip through his fingers. He wouldn’t allow that to happen this time. He had awarded a gold doubloon to the man who had first sighted the enemy vessel. It was a little tradition with him; it kept the men’s eyes peeled and had netted at least two prizes that otherwise might well have escaped them.

The doubloons came out of his own pocket, but the monetary loss was well worth the sense of satisfaction that came with each kill.

The Tayran warship was steadily closing the distance between the two vessels. The Ripi captain had not seen the Tayrans until they had gotten the wind on him, and now he was playing for time in a vain hope for a storm or night-fall to intervene. Neither event was likely but he had to try; it was that or wait to die.

Captain Bayanadan looked over the other ship through his spyglass. They were scurrying about, making ready for combat. “Get ready, monkeys,” he muttered, “You’ll be dying soon.”

He closed his telescope with a decisive snap and bellowed, “Trim for combat!” The first mate leapt to his tasks with relief, barking orders to the sailors. Bayanadan watched them with secret satisfaction at his own ruthlessness.

He had waited until the last possible moment to give the order; not really out of military necessity, but instead to keep them on their toes. This was a top-notch crew; they could bring this ship from full sail to full combat readiness

in three minutes. He was not about to allow them to rest on their prowess; they would get exactly three minutes, not a second more. It was, perhaps, a foolish thing to risk engaging the enemy unprepared, but Bayanadan had absolute confidence in this crew. This was his perverse way of demonstrating that confidence.

The sails rolled up their cross-masts with frantic speed. Other crews brought the lances and lance-mounts to the railings. With practiced efficiency a lance-mount slipped into its hole on the railing just before the lance arrived to be slipped into its tubular casing. The lances were stout poles 5 meters long, tipped with a double-edged blade half a meter long, and counterbalanced with a heavy stone onto which were mounted two handles with which the lancers controlled their weapons. Their mounts allowed them to be swung up, down, left or right, and the tubes allowed the lancer to rotate them for slashing or thrust forward for the kill. For now, the sailors set them in their vertical position.

Below decks, the lancers were frantically pulling on their armor. It wasn't much, just thick cotton padding for the trunk and arms, and a soft leather helmet that draped down over the neck, but that was all one needed to stop the Ripi darts. At close range, of course, nothing could stop a Ripi dart. Their metal torsion-spring dart guns could propel the things with astounding velocities, driving them through several inches of oak, but the tiny darts lost speed quickly to air resistance. Beyond about four meters, they lost much of their punch, and this light armor was proof against them. Hence the five-meter lances.

The Ripi vessel had gone to combat stations, too. The quick, lithe Ripi sailors had taken their dart guns and their darts and were scampering all over the deck. Most concentrated just behind the deck railing, trying to get close to the Tayran ship to get an effective shot in. Others scooted up the rigging, onto the masts, or wherever they could get a clear shot.

“You think I’ll get myself a monkey today?” It was Chlotild, the third mate, for whom Bayandan held a fatherly affection. “Surely you will, Chlotild, if Yoloway wills it.” Chlotild unsheathed his sword and admired its edge. Short

and curved it was, barely 70 centimeters long, but the design had been proven in countless engagements. This sword was unblooded, for this was Chlotild's first voyage, and Bayanadan could sense the muffled fear that Chlotild felt. Chlotild would lead the boarding party. It was the most dangerous part of the engagement, and Chlotild's chances were not good. Bayanadan had gone through eight boarding party officers in twenty-three engagements. Sending these brave young fellows to their deaths was the worst part of Bayanadan's job.

He loved killing Ripis, reveled in the fury of battle, but he could never trade off that satisfaction against the loss of so many fine young men. Such a terrible waste, he thought. How he hated the Ripi! He looked into Chlotild's eyes, smiled reassuringly, and said, "Don't worry; Yoloway will give us victory as always. And you will slay many a monkey." But he turned away determined to order the boarding at precisely the right moment.

The two warships were now side by side. All the combatants were at their battle stations, ready for the order to begin. A few excited Ripi had already discharged their dart guns at this excessive range, and Bayanadan could hear the Ripi officers scolding them. The lancers stood at their lances, ready for his order. He gauged the distance carefully. There was no point in tiring the men with a premature order to lower the lances. Slowly the two ships drew together. Bayanadan noted one Ripi sailor leaning so far out from an aperture that he would surely fall into the water on first contact.

"Yoloway be with us! Attack!" he screamed. A forest of lances swung down with mechanical precision, crashing into the railing of the Ripi vessel. Several broke through the railing and penetrated to the deck. At least one blade found a target, for a scream broke through the hooting that had started on the Ripi vessel when the combat began. The Ripis leapt up and began firing their dart guns at the lancers. Darts embedded themselves in cotton pleated armor, but few drew much blood. The lancers worked their weapons expertly, slashing and thrusting without clashing their lances together. Lancers in even positions chopped with an up-and-down motion; lancers in odd positions slashed side-to-side. And they all thrust forward to impale any Ripi who stepped in front of a lance. The Ripis danced around the lances, trying to

draw a bead on the lancers' unprotected faces. One Ripi, leaning far out over the railing, was caught by the pole of a descending lance and toppled into the water.

"It's going well," Bayanadan observed. "You may be going across sooner than usual." Chlotild stood silent for a moment, then opened his mouth to say something, and suddenly shouted in pain. Bayanadan twisted to face him just in time to see him yank a dart from his cheekbone. Blood gushed down his cheek "Maybe you won't be going across." "Of course I will. This is just a scar to impress the girls back home." Chlotild held his kerchief to the wound to stay the flow of blood. Bayanadan helped him tie it in place.

A few lancers were not so fortunate. Some had been hit in the eye, and the dart penetrates straight to the brain. Their quivering bodies were heaved overboard and new men stepped in to take their places. The Ripis were suffering much greater losses. Some tried to destroy the lances by holding them firmly while teams with hatchets chopped off the blades. The well-trained Tayran lancers always zeroed in on the tragic hero holding the lance in place, chopping him up in seconds.

One Ripi was able to get off several telling shots from the relative safety of the rigging. Seeing this, a lancer went after him, and the chase between the slow-moving lance and the nimble Ripi clambering about the rigging made a drama that lasted several minutes. The Ripi would get ahead of the lance, turn and fire at his tormentor, and then resume his evasive flight. Eventually he slipped and his leg went through the gap, impeding his movement. He recovered just in time to face the Tayran blade as it began its thrust. The Ripi hero, realizing the hopelessness of his position, made no attempt to dodge the thrust but instead leapt out from the rigging and seized the pole as the blade sank into his body. The sudden addition of weight at the full thrust-extension wrenched the lance out of the lancer's hands and drove it downward to the deck. The Ripi's intent now became evident: in his dying moment, he would hold it in place while hatchet-men destroyed the lance. But his plan was foiled by a raised ridge of railing that the lance-pole happened to strike on its downward swing. The lance stopped abruptly and the Ripi's downward momentum carried him past the blade, slicing his body in two. The gooey mess

fell to the deck where a running deck-hand stepped in it, slipped, and slid into the mainmast. While laying stunned, he was finished off by an alert lancer.

Now approached the supreme test of Bayanadan's skill as a captain. The Ripis' resistance was almost broken. Soon their captain would concede defeat and order his men back from the railing, permitting the Tayrans to board. Then would follow a vicious hand-to-hand combat, with the Tayran armor providing no protection against the Ripi dartguns. If Bayanadan sent his men across too soon, they would face a storm of darts from a still-too-numerous enemy. But if he waited too long, the Ripis would fall back, hide themselves in a hundred crannies, and extract a fearsome toll in their defeat.

He watched the Ripi men closely. Were they concentrating on the battle, or were they starting to look furtively over their shoulders for a hiding place? He listened to the sound of their hooting, continuing even yet. Had it changed in tone? And he looked for the Ripi captain. Where was he? It was always hard to find a Ripi captain, for they moved around the deck quickly.

"Ready your men," he ordered Chlotild. The time was near. The Ripi captain would see the Tayran boarders being prepared; he would hold on a little longer in the hope of getting them when first they crossed the railing. Meanwhile, Bayanadan would wait for the slaughter to go on a little longer.

"Ready for boarding, sir!" Chlotild called up from the boarding deck. He was ready, he was eager, and he was scared all at once. Bayanadan knew that if Chlotild survived this day, he would be a better officer. He also knew that Chlotild's survival depended in large measure on the correctness of his own timing.

The seconds rolled by into minutes. The lancers were growing tired. A battle lance weighs 30 kilograms; swinging it around for twenty minutes would tire even a strong Tayran sailor. The Ripis were starting to look over their shoulders. "Go with Yoloway!" Bayanadan bawled. The boarding plank came crashing down onto the Ripi vessel. The boarding party cried "Yoloway be with us!" and stormed across the boarding plank behind Chlotild. The Ripis scattered across the deck like ants whose ant hill has been kicked.

Chlotild leapt onto the deck, shouted triumphantly, and dashed to a nearby Ripi, whom he decapitated with a single blow. Then a dart staggered him. He pressed on, slashing one Ripi and wounding another before two more darts slammed into his body, spinning him around and dropping him dead instantly.

The rest of the boarding party fanned out, slaying and being slain with dizzying velocity. The lancers dropped their weapons, seized swords, and rushed to the boarding plank. They knew that by the time they reached the enemy deck the battle would be all but over, but they each wanted one last opportunity for a kill.

Bayanadan looked down at the deck. They had won, of course, but he had given the order to board too soon and Chlotild had not survived. It didn't seem worth the price.

Nesker and Thymen

“OK. Ready? Let’s go!” The two Klasts emerged from the bushes and hurried across the open ground, aiming for a small clump of trees a hundred meters ahead. Nesker led the way, holding Thymen’s hand.

A light flickered in front of the farmhouse on their left. “Down!” Nesker hissed, and they both flattened themselves into the freshly-plowed soil. Nesker watched intently; the person carrying the lantern was apparently just going to the outhouse. A few minutes later, he went back inside the farmhouse. Nesker and Thymen rose and continued toward the trees. Safely hidden there, they both carefully surveyed the ground ahead.

“We’re coming to the end of the farmhouses; I think the going will be faster now.” Thymen suggested.

“We’ve got to be careful; there will be Jomkars coming home from business elsewhere. Let’s make for that ditch.”

Again they moved stealthily across the open ground. The night was dark, but they stooped as they ran. They picked their way across the landscape, moving from hiding place to hiding place, scanning all around to avoid any possibility of discovery.

“How’s your ankle?”

Thymen felt her right ankle; the iron anklet had banged up the ankle as they walked, but after they’d stuffed a rag around it, it wasn’t quite so painful.

“It hurts, but it’s not slowing me down. I just wish you could have gotten it off.”

“Me too. I’m sorry that I panicked; I thought sure I heard someone coming.”

“I’m not complaining; it feels great to be rid of the other chains.”

“Yeah, doesn’t it? Just being able to move around without worrying about what you’ll hurt is a joy! Where’d you get that chisel?”

“It was in the smith’s shack. Do you know I spent weeks just figuring out how to steal it without being caught? Funny, he never said anything about it disappearing.”

They had been traversing ever more barren land as they moved away from the river; now they were at the last bit of cover, a few scraggly bushes. Ahead of them was open ground rising up to a dry ridge.

“From here on, there’s no cover. On the other hand, there won’t be any Jomkars. We can walk comfortably but we still have to be vigilant. Our only hope is to see them before they see us.”

Thymen’s only response was a quick grunt. Instead of bolting from hiding place to hiding place, they walked steadily now in the open, climbing the ridge to its crest. There they turned and looked back.

“Goodbye to those hoes. Goodbye to shovels and digging canals.”

Thymen echoed: “Goodbye to spinning and weaving all day long. Goodbye to making meals that I couldn’t even taste.”

“Goodbye to eating the same slop they gave the pigs.”

“Goodbye to sleeping on the dirt.”

Nesker paused before saying, “Goodbye to whippings and beatings.”

Thymen paused, too, then said with quiet bitterness: “Goodbye to Jomkar perversion.”

He turned to her and put his arms around her. “We’re going home.”

The stars wheeled overhead as they paced across the empty land. “You’re sure you know the right way?” Thymen asked. She’d grilled him about that many times while they were planning their escape, but she had to hear it again.

“You bet; I know exactly where we are. We’re about 20 kilometers from the farm now; in another 20 kilometers, we’ll come to the Metsim River. We’ll

have to find a good hiding place on this side of it; we'll sneak across tomorrow night. After that, it's only about 60 kilometers to the ocean."

How many nights had he sneaked all the way to the little schoolhouse in the valley, entered through the loose floorboards, and spend hours studying the maps? He had committed it all to memory: places, distances, coastlines, rivers, settlements. He risked a serious whipping, but somehow he got away with it. Of course, there's a big difference between simple school maps and the real thing, but he was confident of his knowledge.

For several hours they walked without saying anything.

"Can you handle a quicker pace? From the stars, I'd guess we have only about three hours of darkness left."

"I think so; but let's bind this anklet more tightly first, OK?"

He worked on her anklet, ripping off a bit of his shirt to provide better cushioning for her skin. They resumed with a brisker pace. But the first signs of twilight appeared well before Nesker saw any indications that they were near the Metsim valley. "I'm worried, Thymen. If we can't get to cover by sunrise, they'll see us for sure."

Thymen said nothing; she was tired, but she hurried along as best she could. The two Klasts grew more desperate with the brightening twilight. There were no trees, no bushes, nothing more than the clump grass that covered the dry plain. Then suddenly they found themselves looking down at the valley; all its trees were well below the skyline from the plain. Their hearts leapt but they remained silent; their situation was precarious and without a word they slipped down the slope toward the first big clump of trees.

Inside, Nesker heaved a great sigh of relief, "Damn! That was too close! I thought sure that it would be an easy trip from the farm to here."

"It's for the better", Thymen replied. "They won't think it likely that we made it this far, and they'll confine their search to a smaller radius. I'll take the first watch; you get your sleep."

But Nesker was too excited to go to sleep. He chatted quietly with Thymen for a good hour as the sun rose. Meanwhile, the people in the valley, Klast slaves and Jomkar overseers, were starting the daily routine. The fugitives couldn't hear anything, but they could see the people moving in the fields. Eventually Nesker drifted off to sleep.

When Thymen roused him four hours later, his initial reaction was resentment at being roused so early. But then saw how high the sun was, and realizing how long he'd slept, demanded to know why she'd let him oversleep.

“You were dreaming. You looked so comfortable, I couldn't bear to wake you up.”

“The overseers never seemed to think that way”, he remarked with a tinge of bitterness. The overseers seemed to enjoy the morning ritual of bursting in on the exhausted slaves, kicking and beating them awake. He had always found it impossible to sleep well, because he knew that he'd be awakened with a vicious kick. Somewhere in his brain, something kept him just awake enough to hear the footsteps in time to jump up.

The rest of the day was uneventful. They took turns sleeping and watching, making mental notes of the amount of activity at various locations. At sunset, they began preparing for the next leg of their journey. They ate the bits of bread that Thymen had stolen as she escaped. They'd drink from the river. They planned their route, comparing their observations of the activity in the valley to estimate the safest route. They set off in the last fading of twilight, repeating their zig-zagging course across the terrain. At one point they came dangerously close to a slave hovel, but the Klasts there were too tired to hear them. Discovery by slaves would be just as catastrophic as discovery by Jomkars; the slaves would be rewarded for alerting their masters. The Metsim River proved to be deeper than the Karyon River back at the farm; several times they were knocked down by the current.

Thymen hadn't been in water since she first arrived at Arking. The captives were being herded off the ship when she was accidentally shoved off the

gangplank and into the harbor. Sputtering and thrashing, she was too weak to swim, and had been tempted to simply give in and drown, but when a rope fell in front of her face, she took it and was pulled out. They beat her.

The rest of night was a repeat of the previous night; they worked their way across the valley, ascended to the dry plain on the other side, and walked to the next river valley. This was the Martin River, not as far a trek as the first night's. The plan was to follow the river down to the sea, steal a small boat, and sail home. Neskar had learned, by sly questions spaced over the years, that Fino, the seaport at the mouth of the Martin River, was just 300 kilometers from the Klast-held Venit Islands, and the prevailing winds blew towards them.

Their second day of freedom was harder than the first. They were feeling the pangs of hunger, and the heat of the day made the lack of water more painful. Neskar had planned for this. Tomorrow would be Temple Day; all the Jomkar families would be at temple. If they could find a farmhouse with no slaves, they could steal its food, and the blame would fall on neighboring slaves; nobody would suspect fugitive slaves. Hence, they spent the night skulking through the valley, circling farmhouses, looking for any without nearby slave quarters. They found one just after midnight. They circled it twice, first at a safe distance, then closer, and there were no slave hovels anywhere nearby. So they settled down in a clump of bushes 150 meters from the farmhouse and got some extra sleep.

The next morning the Jomkar farm family was up with the sun and they bustled about with their morning chores for a good two hours. Then the family climbed into their horse-drawn wagon and set off for temple.

Despite their nighttime reconnaissance, Neskar and Thyman were terrified at the prospect of moving across open ground in daylight. They crept out of the bushes prone, and crawled half the distance to the farm house before rising to a stoop and dashing to the cover of a firewood pile. From there they watched and listened carefully; all was still.

“We’ve got to hurry. When they get home and discover the missing food, they’ll launch a search, and we can’t move fast in the sunlight.” Nesker nodded in agreement; they scampered across the last gap to the door and, taking a deep breath, entered.

The house was big and old; apparently this was a family that had seen better days. They tiptoed to the kitchen and found the pantry. “If we are careful in what we take, they won’t notice at first” Thymen advised. “You decide what to take. But it has to last us all the way home” Nesker suggested.

Thymen sifted through the pantry, grabbing items she knew were seldom used, things that were in the back of the pantry, anything edible. She handed them to Nesker, who used his shirt as a bag.

“What are you stilts doin’ there! Get your asses outta my house!”

It was a Jomkar boy, perhaps ten years old.

“You two are gonna get the whipping of your lives!”

Nesker dropped the food, turned, seized a kitchen knife, and leapt at the boy, who turned and ran screaming towards the door. He got out and a few steps further before Nesker caught up with him. A quick slice across the throat silenced the little Jomkar.

Nesker stared down at the body in horror. He turned and saw Thymen standing at the door looking on the scene, her mouth agape. Nesker looked at her helplessly and said, “I had to.”

Thymen came out, looked at the body, and took charge. “You hide the body. Drag it over to the bushes we were hiding in; they won’t look in there for a while. I’ll clean up this blood. Then we’ll get the food and get out of here.” The body was light enough for Nesker to pick up; he carried it to a clump of bushes even further away from the farmhouse, then covered it with leaves and sticks as best he could. Returning to Thymen, he saw that she had cleaned up the blood and gathered all the food into a neat pile at the doorstep.

“I think they won’t figure it out for a few hours at least. We gotta get far away fast.” Despite the clarity and forcefulness of her words, Nesker could see her hands shaking.

They headed downriver, but didn’t get far; there was a cluster of slave huts blocking their path. On both sides of the huts, the fields stretched wide and open all the way to the sides of the valley. The slaves were engaging in outdoor festivities, enjoying the brief respite afforded by Temple Day. There was no way to get past them.

“What now?” Nesker asked grimly.

Thymen was stumped. “Do you think that, if we go far enough to the right, we can crawl across the open and they won’t see us?”

Nesker scanned the landscape. From the river it sloped gently upward without a ripple all the way up to the valley’s edge. “No way” he replied.

They were trapped. On the left was the river, lined with women washing clothes; ahead were the slaves; on the right was open land; behind them was the scene of the murder.

Desperation swept over them. Thymen started to cry. She had heard the tales of horrific tortures visited upon recaptured slaves. Over the years, the Jomkars had refined their techniques so that their victim remained alive and conscious for up to two days, suffering agony the entire time. The thought of undergoing such torture was too much for her to bear.

Nesker had actually seen one such execution. It had left him scarred for life, and still held a visceral power over him. He ground his teeth together so hard they seemed as if they would disintegrate under the pressure.

“Don’t worry, Thymen. I brought the knife. If they come for us, I’ll slit your throat as quickly and smoothly as I did that Jomkar boy. Did you see how quickly and painlessly he died? I will do that for you.”

Thymen looked up at him, her face distorted with grief. Her emotions were a crazy-quilt jumble. She was terrified out of her mind by the prospect of such torture, and she was grateful that Nesker would save her from such a fate, and at the same time she felt betrayed that her friend would kill her. She didn't know what she felt.

“We will stay right here. We will hide until it's dark, then we'll resume our journey.”

“If only I hadn't insisted on getting food. If we had simply moved on, we'd be halfway to Fino already. I've ruined everything.”

“No, you were right to insist that we stop for food. We chose the best possible place. It was just horrible luck that the boy was there. We're due some good luck now. First they have to realize that the boy is missing – that could take hours. Then they have to search for him. By that time it'll be dark and they'll never find him where I hid him. We'll still get out of here tonight. Let's just squeeze in tight in this little hidey-hole and stay low. Let's eat some of that food.”

Thymen gave Nesker some biscuit but she was still too upset to eat, despite her gnawing hunger. Squeezed up tight against Nesker reminded her of the days on the slave ship. She'd been squeezed in with hundreds of other captive Klasts. There wasn't enough room, and people were dying from the lack of air, the crowding. She couldn't budge an inch, and she had soiled herself. During the journey, many Klasts died; the Jomkars would fish their bodies out of the hold with hooks and cast them overboard. She had guiltily taken pleasure in these deaths; each one opened up a touch more room for her. By the end of the journey she had a comfortable but tiny little space all to herself. Even then, she had never felt as fearful, as miserable as she did now. The hours dragged by with cruel lethargy. They both peered out of their little hiding place in the bushes, watching for any activity, any approach, but all seemed perfectly normal.

“Kinst!” Nesker hissed. Thymen twisted around; a little Jomkar girl not four years old was playing with an “air flower”, a toy that, when thrown upwards,

would spread its “petals” and glide slowly, beautifully down, spinning as it fell. There wasn’t much wind but the small drift in the air was pushing her steadily closer to their clump of bushes. The two Klasts pressed themselves deeper into the depression in the middle of the bushes and prayed desperately for the little girl to stop playing, to be called away, to wander off, anything but continue her current course.

But luck was against them again; the air flower caught on the limbs of their bushes. Thyemen was frantic with fear; she shoved her hand into her mouth and bit hard to distract her from the danger. The little girl approached, looking upward towards the toy rather than downward towards them. For a few seconds, hope fluttered in their hearts that she might not notice them. But alas, she glanced down and saw the two terrified faces peering up at her. She smiled at them; Jomkars don’t learn to hate Klasts until later in life.

In a flash, Nesker leapt out of the bush, seized her arm, and yanked her inwards with one hand. With the other she smashed the knife into her neck, almost decapitating her. Her body fell on top of Thyemen, who clawed away in frantic desperation. A second later, Nesker was atop Thyemen, pressing his hand hard against her mouth to muffle the scream that she couldn’t hold back any longer. Her eyes wide, she screamed straight into Nesker’s face. She screamed out her terror, her disgust, her horror, her shame, her emotional exhaustion. It seemed to her that she could never stop screaming, but at some point she gasped for air, and Nesker released his hold on her. She stared wide-eyed at the body in the pretty little dress with the head bent backwards unnaturally. Nesker turned and moved the body behind him so that Thyemen couldn’t see it. Turning back to her, he put his hand on her cheek. Overcome with emotion, she fell into his arms and wailed her despair as quietly as she could. Nesker made no attempt to stop her.

At last she pulled back and looked deep into his eyes. He looked back with grim determination. “I promised I’d get you home” was all he could say. Quickly he glanced about; nobody had heard or seen them. “You know that I had to...”

She interrupted him, “Yes, Nesker, you had to do that, and I do not accuse you. I’ll get over it. Don’t worry about me.” She turned away and lay down, trying to keep her head above the tidal wave of emotions roiling over her.

Now the afternoon ran away with unnatural rapidity. Nesker was alert to the slightest sound, but the neighborhood remained quiet. Just before sunset, he heard voices coming from the river. They were calling out a single word over and over – it must have been the name of one of the children. In the gloaming he faintly made out some figures moving along the river bank. Then he saw a boat slowly moving downstream. Still the calling continued. They were calling for a lost child, a child who would never return, a child whom he had murdered. But they called only one name; they must still be unaware of the second disappearance. That was good. Night would soon be upon them, and they would be able to make their escape before a concerted search began. There was no time to waste. “Let’s start moving outward, toward the edge of the valley. They won’t be looking there.”

Thymen was afraid to budge from the hiding place, but when Nesker stood up and she saw again the little girl’s corpse, she shivered and came out with determination.

The two Klasts were by now expert at reading the landscape in the darkness, and they hurried along, driven by terror and desperation. It was a long way to Fino, but they realized that their plan had to be altered. The murders would surely be discovered early the next morning; runaway Klasts would be prime suspects, and their objective at Fino would be apparent. Riders would be sent galloping to Fino to raise the entire population along the way to search out the child-killers. Nesker and Thymen had to be well out to sea by that time. They climbed out of the valley and into the open dry plain to make better time. They pushed hard, driving their long legs as fast as possible. Thymen, smaller than Nesker, had to work harder to keep up with him, and eventually the pain had her in tears, but she refused to stop. This pain was so much less than the torture, she assured him.

They made it to Fino long before sunrise; in their haste, they went straight through the little town directly to the docks. Creeping along the shoreline,

they saw a tiny sloop, barely more than a rowboat with a mast, drawn up onto the beach. It was unattended; Thymen piled in and Nesker pushed it out. Quietly, quietly, he rowed it out to sea. The further they draw away from Fino, the more furiously he pulled at the oars. Thymen insisted on taking her turn, even though she couldn't handle them as well as Nesker. She wanted to give his aching muscles a chance to rest.

Dawn found them still within sight of land but well away from Fino. They didn't dare raise sail until they had lost all sight of land. They knew nothing of sailing but the wind blew towards the east, and that was good enough for them.

Progress was slow; they ate their food and drank their water. They had enough to last them several days if they were frugal. They took turns sleeping and rowing. Often the wind was strong enough to make rowing unnecessary. Nesker sat at the stern, holding the rudder idly, thinking of how it all began. He remembered the raid all too well even after so many years. Their little village was twenty kilometers from the coast and they had thought themselves safe from the slavers' raids, but they were wrong. One night, Nesker woke up to a great hubbub of shouting. Dashing out, he ran directly into Jomkar raider, who brained him with a club. He never had a chance to offer any resistance; he lay on the ground stunned while they slapped chains onto his hands and feet. Then they hoisted him up, joined his chains to a long chain that his neighbors were being chained to. He saw many Klasts lying dead on the ground. The Jomkars killed the wounded and began marching the captives toward the coast. Anybody who lagged was killed. They must have killed a quarter of Nesker's neighbors along the way. Terrified, he hurried as best he could with the chains.

Nesker felt the anger and hatred of the abuses he had suffered through, and he tried to balance it against the murder of the two children, but the scales just wouldn't accept the two evils weighed against each other.

On the third day, they caught sight of a Klast fishing boat. They shouted but it was too far away. An hour later they saw an island, and set the tiller to make landfall. When the hull of the rowboat ground against the sandy bottom,

Thymen leapt out, splashed through the surf, and danced wildly on the beach. Nesker followed her and fell to the ground and kissed it. Rising with sand-covered lips, he set Thymen into a paroxysm of joyous laughter. She leapt into his arms, laughed, cried, and jumped away to prance around more. She called out to him, “Aren’t you happy to be home?”

Nesker couldn’t feel the joy she felt; he had dedicated his being to this effort and, now that it was achieved, could only feel satisfaction. Immense satisfaction, to be sure, but he was too integrated a person to forget the horrors of slavery. He looked at her with a smile and said only “Eleven years, four months, and sixteen days”.

Thymen stopped. “Six years, ten months, and four days.” They stared solemnly at each other. “It seems like forever. Do you remember home?” They had shared memories of home many times, but it was a subject whose fascination never flagged. “I remember sitting on the porch, waiting for the squirrels to come close. Sometimes I’d toss bits of fruit for them.”

She’d heard that story many times, but this time it seemed warmer and more charming than before. “My favorite memory is of swimming in the river...” She stopped before elaborating; he’d heard it many times.

They soon found other Klasts and told their story. They roused a sensation; they were paraded from town to town and feted as heroes. Their homecomings brought huge crowds and grand celebrations. They were showered with honors and wealth. But they came to regard the public celebrations of their escape with distaste, and later refused to have anything to do with such celebrations. Despite all that they had suffered through together, they could not bear to be in each other’s presence. And neither one of them ever slept a single night without remembering the smiling face of the little Jomkar girl.

Jesser the Priest

Hurtuh mounted the platform and looked out at the gathering. There were a few hundred people gathered, perhaps half of them religious, the other half pilgrims. A good crowd, he thought.

He turned to Jesser and smiled broadly. Jesser was the best student he had ever known; he took great pride in Jesser's achievements. Jesser would make a fine member of the priesthood.

"Jesser, you have demonstrated mastery of The Books of Truth. There is no more that this monastery can teach you. I bestow upon you the robe of the Master Priest." He helped Jesser into the robe, a bulky construction of purple with a pattern of zigzagging orange stripes. "Kinst, he looks bodacious in it!" Hurtuh thought.

Jesser bowed in acknowledgement and grinned back at Hurtuh. Hurtuh winked.

"Now you must decide your path. You can take the Outward Path, leave this monastery now and travel the world teaching the people The Truth. As a Master Priest, you will be celebrated for your knowledge and listened to with great respect."

"Or you can take the Inward Path, enter the House of God, and seek yourself therein."

Hurtuh paused for effect.

"Which path do you choose?"

"If you will allow, sir, I would take the Inward Path."

Hurtuh wasn't surprised, but he nevertheless felt a pang of fear for his student.

“You know how dangerous this path is. Do you choose it from pride or bravado?”

“No, sir, I humbly accept the possibility that I will fail.”

“If failure is your destiny, do you embrace that destiny?”

“I do. I eagerly embrace whatever fate God has chosen for me, for I know God makes what is best for me.”

“Even if that fate is death?”

“Even so, for God would not give me that fate if it were not the best course for my life.”

Hurtuh looked closely into Jesser's eyes. He could see that Jesser was speaking from his heart, without the slightest trace of affectation. He truly believed what he was saying.

“Very well. We shall take you into the House of God.”

The crowd murmured its admiration for the courage of Jesser's choice. This was going to be dramatic. No matter how it came out, they'd be able to tell Jesser's story when they returned home, and everybody would be envious of them.

There was no delay. They removed Jesser's ceremonial robe and clad him in a warm, skin-tight body suit. Then Hurtuh led Jesser and a troop of priests to the opening of the House of God immediately behind the platform. A gate of iron bars prevented anybody but the elect from entering — except on the Day of Atonement, when everybody was free to enter the Outer House and behold its grandeur.

The gate was unlocked and the iron gate swung open. Candles were lit and they entered the cave. The path to the Outer House was smooth and well-worn from hundreds of years of use by generations of priests and laymen. They traversed it quickly and stopped at the entry of the Outer House.

Jesser took in the scene. It was glorious; in the dim light of the candles the stalactites and stalagmites loomed huge and mysterious. The shadows were so deep that the other side was lost in darkness; it seemed as if the Outer House went on forever. Jesser had been in the Outer House many times, but it always took his breath away. It was different on the Day of Atonement, when thousands of candles illuminated it so brightly that every knob, rock, crack, and dome stood out with perfect clarity. But this half-darkness struck more deeply into the soul.

The little group crossed the floor of the Outer House and proceeded to the gate to the Inner House. This gate was unlocked only to permit the ceremony of the Inward Path. Hurtuh himself opened the gate. The assistants raised the cowl on Jesser's attire, blocking his view to the sides. He could only see what was directly in front of him. It was not permitted for him to see anything but the path forward. Jesser crossed the threshold for the first time in his life. Where he was going, he had no idea.

Only the most devout Master Priests attempted the Inner Path, and only a third of those who attempted it succeeded. Another third had to be rescued; the last third were never seen again; God had taken them into his own House.

The rescued aspirants retained their status as Master Priests, but were required to take the Outward Path, and there was always something of a stain attached to them. Certainly the Master Priests who had originally chosen the Outward Path treated them as inferior.

They walked along slanted, slippery paths; they climbed steep slopes and slid down even steeper ones. They jumped gaps whose bottoms were shrouded in black. They crawled through narrow tunnels. At one point one of the assistant priests whispered to Hurtuh "Must we take him this deep?" Hurtuh did not reply, but pressed on.

When they reached the right place, Hurtuh called a halt. There was a flat rock, just the right height to sit on comfortably. “Sit” he motioned to Jesser.

Jesser sat and looked around. There was nothing to see, just blackness with an occasional flicker of candlelight against a nearby rock. Hurtuh placed his hand on Jesser’s head. “Here you will find yourself, my son. Meditate here.” Then he led the others back in the direction they had come. The space around Jesser was plunged into darkness, darkness so absolute that Jesser had difficulty comprehending it. He could hear the sounds of the receding group, but within a few minutes even those faded away.

Jesser sat in absolute darkness and total silence. He smiled, thinking “This is nice.” He would not speak out loud; it seemed sacrilegious in this holy place. He felt the cold air against his face, perfectly still. He knew that he should begin meditating, but he didn’t feel like meditating just then. He didn’t want to do anything at all; he wanted only to sit and absorb the silence and darkness. He wanted his mind to become silent and dark to match the physical environment. He sat quietly and let the black silence penetrate his being, seep into his brain, consume his thoughts. Slowly, slowly, his mind grew quieter and quieter. This was a pleasant feeling; he liked it. It felt like sleeping while awake. His eyelids slowly closed; his hearing shut down; he even lost the feeling of his body against the rock or the cold air on his face. He sat in silent reverie.

Suddenly he shook his head and jumped back into full consciousness. “Why did I wake up now?” he thought. “And when is now? Have I been sleeping all this time? How much time has it been?” He had no idea; his body did not feel any different. He didn’t feel hungry or tired or sleepy or anything at all. He felt only his own existence.

“I suppose I should meditate now. I’m supposed to do that. But I still don’t feel like meditating. Right now I want to explore. I want to hear the voice of God; I want to feel his breath on my face; I want to see the path he illuminates for me.”

Jesser stood up. He slowly turned a full circle, listening to the silence, seeing the darkness, feeling the air. In the absolute silence, he could hear a faint voice, a beautiful voice, speaking to him. He could not make out the words, but he knew that the voice was speaking to him. In the total blackness, he could make out the faintest of images: a face. He couldn't make out the features of the face; all he knew was that it was a face and that it seemed to be speaking to him. The voice was coming from the face. He felt the ground in front of him with his foot, then took a step toward the face. He didn't raise his arms to feel possible obstacles; instead, he felt his way with his feet.

He had no idea where the face was leading him, but he was absolutely certain that it was leading him to his true destiny. He grew more comfortable, less willing to allow his senses, alarmed by absence of sensation, to divert his attention. All he had to do was follow the voice and the face. They showed the right way, whatever that should be.

Hours went by; the cold began to penetrate. He knew that he should be hungry by now, but the intensity of his anticipation blocked the pangs of hunger. He was going to his destiny; how could anything occupy the slightest fraction of his thoughts at such a momentous time as this?

More hours passed and he was beginning to tire. A voice of fear arose in his mind, whispering its treacheries. He couldn't silence the voice but he shoved it aside, concentrating on the voice he could hear so faintly in the darkness.

The time came when the pangs of hunger and thirst could not be silenced. They shouted loudly in his mind, demanding satisfaction. More voices joined the chorus: voices of loneliness, voices of regret, voices of self-reprobatation. But he doggedly continued concentrating his attention on the faint face and the weak voice ahead of him, and continued his march.

At long last the voices grew so numerous, so loud, and so insistent that he could no longer see the face or hear its voice. He kneeled down where he stood, a dam broke in his mind and all the inimical thoughts and voices poured over him, tumbling his mind into chaos and confusion. He began to cry, he beat the ground with his hands. Has God rejected me? Am I unwor-

thy? Is it his desire that I should die here alone and in the dark? In his weakness, he lay back and rested. He felt the silence and darkness, and once again went to work bringing them into his mind. It was harder this time, so strong was the agitated panic, but he struggled and, perhaps out of exhaustion, the silence and blackness cast a thick balm over his mind.

Again he awoke, again he had no idea of how long he had been unconscious. But the babble of voices was gone; only the peace of the cave permeated his mind. It was time to go, he knew. He stood up and again rotated all around, listening, seeking, feeling. There was something new: a faint breath of air motion against his face. He could tell the direction from which it came; he started moving toward it. At intervals he stopped to watch, listen, and feel; the air current was stronger each time.

At one point he lost the air current. It was no longer on his face. More curious than worried, he glanced around. To the right, he saw something. It was nothing more than a faint glimmer. He wondered, am I seeing this with my eyes or my mind? He stared at it and listened, but heard nothing. He moved towards the glimmer, and, joy of joys, it grew brighter as he approached!

He quickened his pace; now he could make out the ground underneath his feet. He could see the sides of the shaft he was climbing at a steep angle. He held on and hoisted himself further up. At the top, the shaft turned sharply to the left, and then he saw it: daylight! It was only a slim crack of light; Jesser had to crawl the last few meters. The opening was too small, but he tore at the rocks, pushed away some loose soil, and wriggled through.

Standing up, he realized that he was — well, he didn't know where he was. It was a hillside, thick with trees and brush. He couldn't see more than a few meters. He clambered down the slope, a long ways, to a dry creek-bed. Where am I? Has God taken me to another world? He trekked down the creek-bed; it joined with two other dry creek-beds and still there was no sign of the monastery or anything of civilization. Eventually he came to a little road; he followed it for some kilometers before he encountered a single rider, who informed him that he was three kilometers away from Chenning.

“But that’s thirty kilometers from the monastery!” Jesser protested.

“Yep” the old fellow said. “Thirty kilometers sounds about right.”

Jesser stumbled into Chenning. The innkeeper didn’t really believe that Jesser was a Master Priest, not as shabby and filthy as he was, but when Jesser recited a long section from the Books of Truth, the innkeeper gave him food, a bed, and a wash basin. The next day, Jesser walked back to the monastery. His arrival was greeted with astonishment. He had been two weeks inside the cave; nobody had ever survived that long. And he had found a new entrance into the Inner House of God. Hurtuh swore him to secrecy about that entrance. It didn’t matter; Jesser had been so dazed at the time that he couldn’t remember the way back to it.

Years later, Jesser succeeded Hurtuh as the Keeper of the House of God.

Fortic's Plunge

Manlorkeetle couldn't keep his hands from shaking. This had been the most harrowing sortie he had ever flown. The ground bolos had been more intense than anything he had experienced before. The air-netters were everywhere. Over the last three hours, he had seen more plummeters brought down than he had seen in his entire tour. The Tayran Air Force was suffering its worst defeat in history.

His own plummeter had suffered three close calls. One of the ground bolos had wrapped itself around the right wing, and for twenty terrifying seconds the wing had been locked in place, unable to flap. The plummeter had gone into a death-spiral, but somehow Freenkotsil, the flight engineer, had managed to manipulate the wing-cords in just the right sequence to shake the bolo free. His gloves were ripped up by the fast-moving cables, and his hands were badly lacerated. How he pulled that off while bouncing around inside a spinning aircraft, Manlorkeetle could not imagine, but if they made it home, Manlorkeetle was definitely recommending him for a medal.

Not ten minutes later another plummeter, spinning down from a direct snag by a Jomkar air-netter, had collided with Manlorkeetle's rear section. Plum-meters are light enough that the collision didn't break off the rear section, but the plane was thrown into such a tumble that recovery seemed impossible. Somehow, Manloorkeetle had brought it back under control. How he managed that trick, he had no idea; he had just frantically leaned and pulled the control rods in whatever manner seemed right at the moment. The other crew members thought that Manlorkeetle had to be the best pilot in the fleet; he knew it was just dumb luck.

Then, halfway down the plummet, an air-netter got them. The Jomkar pilot was certainly gutsy: he came at them from below, heading straight up into their path. He had waited until the last possible instant to release his net, then broken away, missing them by less than a meter. Manlorkeetle could clearly

see the Jomkar's face as he swooshed past them; the Jomkar was gritting his teeth hard enough to break a few.

But by some stroke of impossible luck, the net didn't deploy properly; it was still contracted when it bumped into their plane and harmlessly fell away. That Jomkar pilot must still be wondering why he didn't get a kill. If he knew his net was a dud, he would be furious, after the huge risk he had taken.

Even so, the attack had so rattled Fortic, the rakeman, that his aim was off and they didn't get anybody on the ground.

With the plummet completed, Manlorkeetle had pumped the engine up to full power, setting the wings flapping deep and powerfully, in a frantic effort to get out of that hell. They'd had some more anxious moments, but after 20 minutes they'd gotten up into the clouds and the danger was past.

He didn't see where the net came from; he never saw an air-netter. The plane suddenly staggered, there was a ripping, tearing sound, and then everything was back to normal. He frantically checked around: the wings were good, although there was a fragment of a net streaming back from the left wing, close to the body of the plane. He called out on the intercom, "Everybody OK?" One by one, the crew members checked in; Freenkotsil asked what the kinst had happened. Manlorkeetle said he didn't know.

But he hadn't heard Fortic's response. "Fortic, it sounds like you were closest to it; did you see what happened?"

Again, no response. "Fortic? Fortic? Are you there, buddy?"

Again, no reply. "Theolodin, crawl up front and see what's wrong with Fortic. Maybe it's just his intercom."

A moment later, Theolodin's voice, shaky, came through. "Boss, Fortic's gone."

"What do you mean, gone?"

“There’s no Fortic. There’s no raking compartment. The whole thing got ripped off.”

Far below, Fortic plummeted through the clouds. He struggled with his parachute, but it had been torn off in the impact of the net. He managed to stabilize himself, looking downward as he fell. The only thing he could think was how cold it was, falling so fast through the below-freezing air.

Below him a forest of conifers spread out. It looked pretty in the snow, all dark green with patches of white. Fortic was surprised at his lack of fear or alarm. He was falling to his death, but there didn’t seem to be any point in getting upset about it; there wasn’t anything he could do. So he thought that he might as well enjoy the view while it lasted.

As he neared the ground, he could see that there had been a very heavy snowfall in the past few days; heavy piles of snow were still bunched on the branches. It reminded him of...

The last hundred meters were gone in a flash. Whump! He hit the branches of a tall fir; at the top of the tree, they were small, and his body barely slowed down. Then he hit more branches, larger and larger branches, but because they bent under his weight, he was pushed slightly further away from the trunk of the tree with each impact. So he cascaded down along the outer reaches the tree’s branches, never hitting a thick branch. He felt it as a fierce thrashing with fir branches; after the last branch, he plunged into a deep snowbank, penetrating three meters of snow and hitting the solid earth hard enough to break both legs.

He lay there for ten seconds before he realized that — well, that he was still realizing things. This confused him mightily; one doesn’t fall out of an airplane without a parachute and live. He must be dead. He was surrounded by pure white; that seemed apropos for death. But his lips were cold and he could feel the snow melting on them; that wasn’t supposed to happen, was it?

Oh well, he thought, I must be dead. I'll just wait here for something to happen. I've always wanted to know what death is like. Maybe there really is a Heaven.

As luck would have it, he landed just fifty meters away from the top of a mountain where there was a ground-bolo emplacement. The crew had not seen him fall, but they heard the racket he made when he hit the tree. Curious, a couple of Jomkar soldiers wandered over to see what had happened. When they saw the vertical path of broken branches, they knew they'd found the source of the commotion. Struggling through the deep snow, they reached the hole and peered down at Fortic.

Fortic had heard them coming and looked upwards to see what was happening. When he saw the Jomkar heads peering down at him, he thought, "Kinst! Heaven is run by Jomkars!"

"That guy's alive!" one of the Jomkars exclaimed. "But where's his parachute?" the other demanded. The first one looked up at the path of broken fir branches and shouted "He didn't have one, but he made it down alive!" The two Jomkars couldn't believe it. They started shouting for their comrades, waving at the Tayran at the bottom of the hole, and jumping about in excitement. "We're gonna be famous! We found the guy who fell from the sky and lived!"

More soldiers arrived; using a rope, one slid down the side of the hole to Fortic, laughing and grinning. He slapped Fortic on the shoulder and said "You're going to be famous!" Fortic didn't understand any of this, but it appeared to be good, whatever it was. Perhaps he was being welcomed into Heaven. They pulled him out of the hole, lashed him down to a quick stretcher they fashioned out of a couple of small trees they chopped down, and dragged him, stretcher and all, to the road.

A captain arrived, then a major, then a colonel. They all trooped down to see the fir tree and the hole in the snow. Somebody took photos of everything, with soldiers pushing and shoving to be the guy in the picture pointing out some detail. The colonel couldn't believe it; on the way down to the hospital

he questioned Fortic closely through a translator. He'd heard the whole story by the time they reached the hospital. They set his broken bones and cleaned him up. A few hours later, the colonel showed up with a very official-looking document certifying that Fortic had fallen from an altitude of 4,000 meters without a parachute and lived. The colonel, the major, and the captain all signed it.

Fortic's story was in all the newspapers; the soldiers who discovered him were interviewed by countless reporters, as was everybody else in the bolo crew, the captain, the major, and the colonel. They showed pictures of him smiling with pretty Jomkar nurses at the hospital. His story even got back home, where Manlorkeetle was greatly relieved at learning that Fortic survived. They put him in for a big medal.

A year later, Fortic fell sick and died in the POW camp.

The Global Peace Conference

Lymol stepped up to the microphone, started to say something, stopped, and tapped the microphone. The hundreds of delegates in the auditorium hurriedly adjusted their headsets while interpreters gathered their wits.

The delegates were arrayed about him in a circle; there had been no way to arrange the seating otherwise without slighting somebody. Each of the species had exactly the same amount of space in the auditorium. Each of the species had exactly the same number of seats. The Ripi seats were smaller, so they were crowded closer to the rostrum; the Tayran seats, being bigger, extended upward rather further. It had taken months of bickering to resolve the seating.

“I call to order this Global Peace Conference. Delegates, we have spent the last twelve years slaughtering each other. Each of our species has lost millions. Many of our cities lie in ruins. We each entered this war expecting a quick victory. But the war dragged on and on as we engaged in offensives, counter-offensives, invasions, retreats, advances, victories, and defeats. Now, twelve years later, we have accomplished nothing. Nobody won. Everybody lost. Our treasuries are empty; our best young men are dead.”

An approbatory hoot came from the Frem section, but heads turned and silence returned.

“We are here to fashion a peace that will never again be shattered by war. Our task is to settle once and for all the petty territorial disputes that have sparked past wars. We must establish a world order that makes war impossible. We must fashion international institutions that permit the peaceful resolution of every disagreement. The list of areas demanding our attention is long: fisheries, electronic communications, air pollution, conventions for air travel, currency transfers, terms of trade, scientific cooperation, and the establishment of international standards for new technologies. All these things and more require real, workable solutions now, at this conference.”

“Our predecessors deferred action on many of these issues, thinking them too difficult to resolve. Their inaction paved the way for the most destructive war in history. We must not repeat their mistake. We **MUST** find solutions now, for if the shock and horror of this war is not enough to goad us into action, then we will need the even greater shock and horror of another war to do the job. Let us do our duty to each of our species individually and all Laminans collectively.”

Approving noises rippled through the auditorium: applause, hooting, the rapid-fire exhalations from the Srols that to the Klasts always seemed like laughter, and so on. Some of it was enthusiastic; some was polite.

He was followed by the leaders of each of the other species, each of whom said pretty much the same thing. After each speech, the delegates all expressed their approval and respect.

But it was Klorstill, the Tayran Prime Minister, whose speech lit a fire in the hearts of the delegates. He offered a graphic design that incorporated elements from each of the flags of each of the species, and suggested that each species honor its war dead with that symbol and the words “Let not this death be in vain.” On the upper walls of the auditorium he projected horrific images of the war: images of uniforms that had once contained bodies now mashed into the mud under tank treads; a city whose buildings had been reduced to skeletons, with a few forlorn refugees cooking something over a fire; a tank on fire with a flame-enveloped figure falling from it. “I myself lost a son, a daughter, two nephews, and countless cousins. I know that every delegate in this room has a similar list of bereavements.” Klorstill’s voice choked and he paused. “Let every memorial mound, every grave marker, every death-pole, every memory-stone, every heritage tree, every picture-post, every pyramid – **every** monument of **every** kind display this simple message. Let us honor their sacrifice with a new union that will transform the horror of war into the glory of peace. Let us insure that, in dying, they truly did pave the way for peace. Millions of lives were laid down to open this door for us; let us not dishonor their sacrifice by failing to grasp this historic opportunity. Let us

walk through this door, together, into a new Lamina, a new chapter in our history: a New Unity...”

The delegates all leapt to their feet and were screaming, yelling, honking, and gesticulating wildly. Ripis, unable to contain their enthusiasm, were running up and down the aisles. Srols – Srols! – were sobbing; Tayrans stood in silence with their arms extended in pride and respect, but they were also shivering. Klasts were hopping in their unique fashion and the Lokwheels were loudest with their throaty roars of approval.

Then came the truly historic moment: people started crossing the aisles, sharing the celebration with different species. Jomkars ran across the podium, right past Klorstill, to embrace Fremas on the opposite side of the auditorium. The separate delegations dissolved into a mixed crowd of all species. They were all expressing joyous salutations to each other according to the other’s tradition, doing it rather badly, and thereby triggering peals of laughter in all its many dimensions.

The movie cameras panned all over the scene, zooming in on small groups and zooming out to show the exuberant crowd. All over the world, newsreels played the footage over and over to rapt crowds. After all the suffering, all the horror, the images touched a spot in every heart and forever changed every Laminan.

Climot

“Are you here for business or pleasure?”

Climot started; the Klast passport officer’s accent was jarring. It wasn’t just a matter of accent; the Klast vocal tract was so different from that of Tayran that the words sounded entirely different, even though they were understandable. He felt an instant of admiration for the training the Klast officer must have undergone to learn to distort his voice to more closely match Tayran speech intonations. Still, the result sounded truly alien.

“Business.”

The Klast officer sized him up, noting the gaggle of colleagues he was traveling with. “Let your visit be a profitable one” he recited and with a wave of the Klast officer’s hand, Climot was inside Harnox.

He joined his friends and off they went to the taxi stand. Climot couldn’t help staring at all the Klasts. Sure, he had seen Klasts on television and in the movies. Sure, he knew all the basics of Klast culture and history, and he was glad he had taken the orientation course before this trip. The Klasts had all sorts of cultural differences that could so easily lead to misunderstandings and ruin a business relationship. Climot was nervous; he felt as if this trip was a walk in a minefield. He was very, very glad that Norkimda was leading their group; Norkimda had years of experience working with Klasts. He was fluent in their language and fit in perfectly.

The airport was just like any airport back in Tayra; the taxis were the same; the roads and freeways were indistinguishable, and the buildings looked no different. Everything looked exactly like things back home, except that there were Klasts everywhere. Klasts driving the cars, Klasts on bicycles, Klast pedestrians – more Klasts than he had ever seen in his life. Something in him

felt panic at all these alien creatures. Something else inside him smiled indulgently at the immaturity of that panic. These were people just like him; they just looked different. They were just as intelligent, just as educated, just as cultured (in their own way) as he was. They just looked different. You just have to get past the surface appearance, he reassured himself.

His room at the hotel was reassuringly Tayran in style; the pictures on the wall all depicted Tayran themes. The shower and the furniture were all exactly the right size for the tall Tayran frame. Even the handles on the water fixtures were built for the Tayran hand. He washed his face and told himself he would adjust soon enough.

He had only an hour to settle in before the phone rang; the group was having dinner with their Klast counterpart and it was time to meet in the lobby. Climot grabbed his room key and headed out. But when the elevator doors opened on his floor, there was a single Klast inside, also going down. Climot automatically smiled slightly and nodded in recognition, then remembered that Klasts nod their heads upward; he clumsily corrected his error as he entered and stepped to the rear of the elevator.

“Oh, Yoloyway!” he thought “What’s elevator etiquette in Harnox?” The Klast was standing in the center of the elevator, facing the side where the floor buttons were. He was standing in the rear of the elevator, facing forward. He nervously turned to face in the same direction as the Klast. He hoped he hadn’t already screwed up something.

As he stood quietly, the panic returned: he was all alone inside this tiny elevator with a Klast. He could hear the Klast breathing; it was just different enough to compound the sense of alienness. Why was this elevator taking so long? The elevator stopped at floors, and more Klasts boarded; slowly Climot was being squeezed into a smaller and smaller space. He stared with great determination at the floor, breathing rapidly and hoping desperately that nobody touched him. When the elevator reached the ground floor, he waited for all the Klasts to debark before daring to move.

He scanned the lobby area frantically and heaved a huge sigh of relief when he saw Norkimda and the others. He hurried – almost ran – to join them and felt vastly safer enveloped in the Tayran group. As they talked, he nervously glanced about at all the Klasts bustling about the lobby.

“Here she comes!” Norkimda announced. A tall Klast woman was striding towards them. Norkimda faced her, nodded upward, and held his left hand forward, flat and facing her. She nodded upward in response and raised her right hand to meet his, palms touching according to Klast convention. After a brief conversation, Norkimda introduced her to each of the team members. When Climot’s time came, she repeated his name “Glee Mongt” and extended her fist; he struck it upwards with his in accordance with Tayran convention.

The hotel restaurant offered a range of Tayran and Klast dishes. The others all tried Klast dishes but Climot decided to play it safe and order a Tayran meal. As they ate, he couldn’t take his eyes off the Klast businesswoman’s mouth. It jabbed and pecked at the food rapidly, like some sort of nibbling machine. It was grotesque. The food itself was soft and jelly-like; it quivered as she pecked at it. He felt sick to his stomach.

“Stilts” – that’s what they called Klasts in impolite company. He’d heard the word used many times and had even pronounced it a couple of times in his childhood. It was an ugly word, a bigoted word, a word that polite people never used. Only ignorant boors thought that way. He was an educated person with a broader view of the world.

So why was he having these visceral reactions to Klasts? Why was something inside him feeling revulsion and contempt for these people? Sure, Tayran history bristled with species-bigotry; we were all guilty of that. His own grandfather had been an out-and-out bigot, using all the vicious terms for other species. According to his grandfather, Jomkars were stupid, Srols were arrogant, Ripis were cheats and liars, and Klasts were barbarians. They were all animals, he had ranted. Kill ‘em all and be done with it, he sneered.

But times had changed and, even as a child, Climot had known that such hatred was wrong. Still, his father's enthusiasm for globalization had always seemed half-hearted, and Climot had grown up thinking of the New Unity as a necessary and noble, but perhaps naively optimistic ideal. After all, those other species were so different from Tayrans.

He knew what was right. He knew how he should feel. But he looked up from his plate and saw the greasy quivering blob disappear into the Klast's gullet and suddenly he stood up. "I'm sorry, Norkimda, but I think the jet lag has gotten to my stomach. Please extend my apologies to our hostess." He turned to face her and nodded upward as Norkimda explained. She nodded upward politely, but he was already turning away, holding his hand over his mouth.

The Applicant

“Please have a seat, um...” — the bureaucrat glanced down at his papers — “Siboot”.

Siboot complied quietly. He was nervous and uncertain as to the content of the interview. It was supposed to ‘determine the fitness of his personality’ to the role of a colonist of Kira, but he had no idea what that meant. Were they trying to figure out if he was a nice person? Smart? Tough?

“You certainly do have an impressive resume, Siboot”, the bureaucrat announced brightly. “Fluent in both Klast and Lokweel...”

“And I have a tourist’s grasp of Tayran!” Siboot interrupted.

The bureaucrat did not like being interrupted. “Yes, indeed...” he muttered. “And your school grades are also excellent. I’m pleased to see that you spent several seasons doing volunteer work among the Lokweel poor. That was most admirable. Tell me, did you have any problems while in Marfand?”

“No, everything went smoothly. All the credit for that belongs to the New Unity Foreign Service Agency. Their preparatory training was excellent, and their support while I was in-country was tip-top. I must say, the weekly meals of Ripi dishes greatly boosted my morale; I had underestimated just how demoralizing it can be to eat a foreign cuisine day in and day out.”

“Ah, yes.” the bureaucrat responded. He scribbled something down. Siboot worried that he might have said something wrong.

“I see you signed up for a second tour; I take it you enjoyed your work with the Lokweels?”

“It was deeply satisfying, but not enjoyable. These people are desperately poor; gentility is a virtue of the well-fed. They live a harsh existence and have personalities to match. I understand their straits but cannot feel intimacy for such hard hearts. I saw my efforts as the first step in bringing them into a larger, richer, and more civilized world.”

“There’s a notation here about a fight. Can you tell me the story?”

“Yes, that was ghastly. Two of the families had been at each other’s throats for decades. When some livestock disappeared from one family’s corral, they all stomped over to the other family to recover what they thought had been stolen. I arrived just as the confrontation was reaching its climax. I had just started talking them down when somebody threw a stick; the place exploded into fighting. I foolishly waded into the fight, trying to separate the combatants, but a Ripi can’t do much against Lokweels, and I was kicked and trampled rather badly. Ironically, it was my injuries that stopped the fighting. When they realized what they had done to me, they were all so ashamed that they stopped the battle and allowed some bystanders to carry me away. That terminated my volunteer work in the Foreign Service; I was in the hospital for a month recovering.”

“Did that stain your feelings towards Lokweels?”

“Oh dear, no! Definitely not! Those people were behaving according to their traditions. I was deeply touched that my injuries were the cause of so much shame; aborting a fight before it is resolved is unheard-of in their traditions; I was deeply honored by their esteem for me.”

“I see. Well, I think that’s about all I need from you, Siboot.” The bureaucrat stood up and curtly bade him good day. Siboot, gravely disconcerted by this sudden turn, arose from his seat and shuffled out, shocked and confused.

A week later, he received his letter of acceptance into the Kira Colony Program.

Presidential Briefing

“Thank you all for coming. I have asked you to prepare this briefing because I was flabbergasted to learn just how large our nuclear arsenal has become. Of all the surprises I’ve had as incoming President, this was the most shocking. I realize that previous Presidents who oversaw this growth had perfectly good reasons for doing so, but I would like to have it explained to me one more time. Dr. Frangetty has already done a good job of bringing me up to speed, but I need to see the big picture, which is why all of you are here today.”

“Our primary concern, of course, is with the Lokweels, so I’d like to start by asking how many targets there are in Marfand.”

“Sir, that would be about 150 targets.”

“Why so many? There are only about a dozen big cities in Marfand. What other targets could there be?”

“In order to effectively destroy the Lokweel economy, we need to take out some dams, a number of important transportation hubs, as well as a goodly number of their mid-sized cities.”

“When you say ‘mid-sized cities’, how big are you talking? What are the populations of the smallest cities on your list?”

“Um, that would be... just a moment... that would be about 250,000 Lokweels, Mr. President.”

“Good lord! Is it our strategy to kill every last Lokweel in Marfand?!?!”

“No, sir, our strategy is to eliminate the Lokweels’ capacity to strike back at us. That means that we must take out all possible sources of weaponry. Every one of the targets on our list has some warmaking potential.”

“What do you mean by ‘warmaking potential’?”

“The existence of industry capable of manufacturing weapons, or supporting the manufacture of weapons.”

“Do the Lokweels have that many weapons factories?”

“No, Mr. President, but we have to take out the factories that could be converted to weapons-making or could support weapons-making. That includes automobile factories, civilian aircraft factories, power plants, steel mills, mining sites, ball-bearing factories, and a host of other facilities.”

“So basically you’re talking about wiping out their entire industrial capability?”

“Well, yes sir, we learned in the Big War that almost the entire industrial infrastructure of a modern economy can be converted to manufacture of weapons or the support of such manufacture.”

“That level of destruction – how many Lokweels would survive that kind of destruction?”

“Our calculations indicate that only about 200 million Lokweels would die in the attacks.”

“Two Hundred Million Lokweels? That’s a fifth of their population!”

“Mr. President, if I may break in at this point, that’s only the casualties from the strikes themselves. In the following weeks, there would be additional casualties from radiation sickness and those who succumb to their injuries because of lack of medical care.”

“And how many Lokweels would die from these causes?”

“We think it could amount to 200 million deaths.”

“Mr. President, sir, Dr. Coodine’s numbers are highly speculative. The fact is, we don’t know how many people would die from those causes.”

“So you don’t know whether the body count could be even higher than 200 million?”

“That wasn’t what I meant, sir.”

“But it’s not something you could solidly dispute?”

“Well, no sir, but I rather doubt his numbers.”

“On what basis?”

“Well, on the basis of civilian casualties in the Big War.”

“But nobody used nuclear weapons in the Big War. There was nothing approaching the magnitude of destruction of a nuclear attack, was there?”

“Well, no sir.”

“So, Dr. Coodine, you conclude that total Lokweel casualties would amount to about 400 million. Is that correct?”

“Well, no, Mr. President; there would be continuing casualties arising from the destruction of the Lokweel industrial base. The Lokweels would not be able to provide adequate food, water, housing, or medical care for their people.”

“That’s not true! Our plans provide for a rapid occupation of Marfand and the provision of supplies for the maintenance of the civilian population.”

“But General, did you not just tell me that our attacks will wipe out their transportation systems? If so, how do you propose to get those supplies to the population?”

“I cannot say exactly how we’ll do it, sir; but the Army is capable of moving huge quantities of material quickly and efficiently.”

“I see. Dr. Coodine, please continue. How many Lokweels do you think will die in the long-term aftermath of a war?”

“Mr. President, I project total Lokweel casualties of 800 million.”

“My god! My god! We’re talking about the near-extinction of the Lokweels.”

“I remind you, Mr. President, that they are planning exactly the same thing for us. If they launch a full-scale attack, much the same thing will happen here. That’s why we must deter an attack with the means to assure their complete destruction. Only if they know that we can utterly destroy them will they be deterred from attacking us.”

“Yes, yes, Mutually Assured Destruction. I understand the principle and, while it makes me sick to my stomach, I cannot envisage any alternative. So, General, we need 150 warheads to insure the destruction of Lokweel civilization?”

“No, Mr. President, we need 300. We must have the capacity to lose half our warheads in an initial attack and still retaliate effectively. If we keep only 150 warheads, then we invite the Lokweels to take a chance on a sneak attack that could reduce our warhead count to such a low level that we would not be able to effectively retaliate.”

“OK, so we need 300 warheads to take out the Lokweels. Why then do we have 2000 warheads?”

“Because we need to be able to respond to a coalition of forces. If other nations were to form an alliance with the Lokweels, their combined nuclear ca-

capacity would be enough to overwhelm us. Therefore, we must have an arsenal large enough to threaten each and every potential enemy with assured destruction.”

“Wait a minute! You are contemplating the whole world against us? Even the Ripis? That’s absurd!”

“Sir, we are required to assure the safety of our species. We cannot make optimistic assumptions; we must prepare for any eventuality.”

“So you’re telling me that we need 2,000 nuclear warheads so that we can destroy every other species on this planet – is that correct?”

“Yes, Mr. President, that is correct.”

“And am I correct in assuming that each of the other species has come to the same conclusions and has armed themselves similarly?”

“Yes, sir, our intelligence indicates that all the other species have similar numbers of warheads.”

“Let me go over the numbers one more time. We believe that 150 nuclear warheads would destroy 80% of the Lokweel population. If we assume that this number is roughly the same for each of the species, then roughly 1,000 nuclear warheads could destroy 80% of all life on this planet. Is that a reasonable assumption?”

“Yes, Mr. President, that follows from the numbers we have given you.”

“So we need only a thousand warheads to wipe us all out and we have a total of 14,000 warheads. That’s right?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Does anybody have any idea how we can extricate ourselves from this absurd situation?”

There was no answer.

Siboot

He had waited patiently for his turn to look out the window. When finally it came the view alone justified all the testing and training of the last ten months. There in space hung Kira, the moon of Lamina. For all the talk about it holding the future of the Seven Species it was an ominously barren place. From here in space most of Kira looked to be bare rock and sand. The atmosphere was thinner than Lamina's, showing just a tiny sliver of brightness at the edge. For all its beauty, it gave Siboot a strong sense of foreboding. How could we possibly hope to carve a colony out of this barren rock?

The first explorations had shown that the atmosphere was barely adequate to support life but at the equator the temperatures were certainly comfortable. Careful management of the subsurface water would permit some agriculture – a little grain and a few vegetable gardens. This was not the lush garden land some people back home spoke of with more hope than knowledge. Regular shipments of bulk carbohydrates from Lamina would be necessary for a few years more.

“We can do great feats with our technology”, he thought, “but it will be many a century before we can rework the surfaces of planets or even moons. Kira is a dead and forbidding place and will likely remain so despite our ambitious plans for colonization. Look how limited we are. Tens of thousands clamor for a place on Kira yet the population is strictly limited. The Space Office's people know perfectly well that Kira cannot support more than a few hundred people and all that noise about processing applications is just a subterfuge to cover their policy of limiting the population. A strange colony indeed!”

But then a new thought struck him: Kira is a new kind of colony. We are not colonizing the land, for there is no arable land to speak of, only rock and sand. We are colonizing a new frontier: our own spirits. The harsh environment of Kira forces us all, Srols, Tayrans, Jomkars, Ripis, Klasts, Fremes, and Lokweels alike to crowd together into tight quarters, work directly together

and somehow get along as we have never been able to do before. No wonder the Space Office is so careful about picking idealistic young fools like me; we are meant to be the tangible proof of the ability of all Laminans to live together without the strife that tears apart our home world.

His time was up; he had to yield the window to the Frem behind him. He cast a last glance at the moon before him and pulled himself away from it. Colonizing our spirits – he liked that thought.

Armageddonette

It started with a minor dispute between the Jomkars and the Ripi. The former had been assisting radical elements attempting to overthrow the Ripi government. When the Ripis discovered the plot, they demanded immediate cessation of all such efforts and an apology. The Jomkars refused the Ripi demand.

The issue was complicated by the mutual support treaty that existed between the Ripis and the Klasts, which required the signatories to come to the aid of each other should any action be taken against their respective governments. The treaties had been intended to cover only acts of war but the Ripis argued persuasively that an attempt to overthrow a government was just as dangerous as an act of war and should be treated as comparable with one. The Klasts, wary of Jomkar perfidy, were all too ready to pledge their support. They threatened the Jomkars with full retaliation should they act against the Ripis.

The Jomkars were taken by surprise by the Klast entry into the dispute and alarmed by the Ripi/Klast argument that the Jomkar actions had been acts of war. The Jomkar government did not perceive its actions to be warlike and protested as much to the Klasts. At the same time the Jomkars appealed to their allies the Tayrans for support and the Tayrans responded reluctantly but positively.

A minor dispute between the Ripis and the Jomkars had escalated into a major international incident. At this point the Srols attempted to intervene diplomatically. The Srols had close ties to the Tayrans and had no desire to allow those ties to drag them into a war. They saw their ties to the Tayrans as a source of leverage that would make it easier for them to bring the crisis to a peaceful conclusion. So the Srols dispatched emissaries to each of the parties. The crisis had frightened all concerned, for the world had never before come

so close to a nuclear war. The Srol diplomatic missions were received with honest relief in all quarters. Their proposal to the Ripis and Klasts struck those nations as entirely fair and proper and the proposal gained credibility from the influence the Srols were known to wield in the Tayran capital. Moreover, the Tayrans seemed amenable to the Srol initiative and they would surely bring the Jomkars around. After two terrifying weeks of ever larger headlines the world seemed to be gravitating back towards peace.

Then the peace process was shattered by a totally unexpected revelation. Along with their public proposal, the Srols had sent to the Tayrans private assurances that the Srols would at a later date support the Tayrans in their long-standing fisheries dispute with the Klasts, if the Tayrans accepted this less than optimal Srol proposal. The Srols had made the offer in the expectation that this would be a simple painless way to buy support for a peace process of great import to all Laminans. Moreover it was not exactly a magnanimous offer; the Security Council of the Srol government had already decided to support the Tayrans in the fisheries dispute. They merely seized upon this opportunity to gain some extra mileage out of their decision.

What the Srols didn't know was that one of their translators, Imago Afrogit, had been turned by the Klast Secret Service. This spectacular feat had been accomplished through an improbable series of coincidences that simultaneously embittered Afrogit to his own species and compromised his position there. Afrogit had been able to get the text of the secret assurances to his contacts in the KSS.

The revelation had a profound impact on the Klast senior policymakers. They had taken the Srol proposal to be a generous offer motivated by a sincere desire to maintain the peace but now it appeared to be an element of a larger plan with ominous overtones. A Srol-Tayran-Jomkar condominium would completely upset the delicate Laminan balance of power. The Klasts were particularly frightened by what they didn't know. What promises had been made to the Jomkars? What other promises had been made to the Tayrans?

After much agonized debate the Klasts decided to release the information publicly; this they felt would sway the still-neutral Frems and Lokweels in

support of the Klasts and Ripis. Surely the neutrals would not stand by and watch a triumvirate steamroller the Klasts and Ripis.

The Klast revelation exploded the crisis to new heights. The Srols, caught with their pants down, responded with outrage at the violation of their diplomatic privacy (Afrogit was charged with high treason and surely would have been shot had he survived the war.) The Srols argued that the Klast intrusion into the innermost workings of the Srol diplomatic corps was just as serious a violation of Srol sovereignty as Jomkar financing of Ripi radicals. If the Jomkar action could be taken to be an act of war then surely the Klast action merited the same treatment.

The arguments that the two sides were hurling at each other were primarily legalistic in intent yet they created for both sides a terrible uncertainty. How could either side be sure that the other was merely arguing fine points of international law? What if these arguments were a justification-in-advance for military action? Strategists in each of the capitals came to much the same conclusion: if the other side is indeed contemplating military action it would be wisest to place our own forces on an elevated defense posture. A reserved but firm posture will signal serious intent without provoking the situation. The armed forces of the contending nations were all given strict instructions to act with great restraint. The Srols, determined not to allow any provocations, pulled their carrier group out of the Surimi Straits and closer to home.

The situation however had created its own momentum. The armed services of the various countries all went to elevated alert status at approximately the same time. This created the false impression in all quarters that the military alerts of the other nations were frantic responses to their own military alerts. It only heightened the atmosphere of urgency. The Jomkars were especially nervous because of the exposed position of their forward bases on the Hediki Islands and placed the units there on full alert.

The nations of Lamina had all but talked themselves into a war. Fortunately they still had sense enough to refrain from firing the first shot. Everybody clung nervously to the hope that the war could be confined to paper. But the military machine that operated completely under the control of its govern-

ment has yet to be created; somewhere some nervous junior officer took the action that ignited the conflagration. History will never know if it really was Lt. Dagbar of the Jomkar Air Force or Flt Commander Subardan of the Ripi Naval Air Command or even the unnamed soul who fired a few shots into the air control tower at Chu Itu Air Base but somehow the shooting started, and before anybody knew what was happening the nuclear missiles were in the air.

The Laminans were fortunate; only sixty birds went up. Some of the others failed on launch; some were destroyed in the early attacks; some launch officers refused to launch their missiles. For whatever reason only a small portion of the warheads stockpiled on Lamina was detonated.

But sixty warheads did enough damage. All of the major metropolitan areas of Lamina and all seven capitals of the seven nations were destroyed. Only about 30 million people died in the explosions themselves out of a total population of 3 billion. But the destructive effects of the bombs did not end when the mushroom clouds had dissipated. The radiation spread out, killing millions more and poisoning the land. Temperatures fell somewhat all over the planet, hindering the growth of crops untouched by radiation.

The greatest damage though was to the social structures of Lamina. The normal patterns of social behavior were destroyed. The farmers stopped growing food even where they had the capacity to do so – after all, who would buy their crops? The factory workers didn't bother to come to the factories that still stood ready to produce – what was the point of manufacturing widgets anymore? The bombs' greatest effect was the most insidious: they destroyed the social contract. Everybody lost faith in a society that they felt had been destroyed. Even though only 1% of the population perished in the blasts and only 10% died from radiation in the weeks after the catastrophe the surviving 90% didn't know what to do, which authority to obey, or what laws to respect. They had lost their faith in their societies and that was the real catastrophe. Society is an interlocking web with each person linked to a thousand others in a network of cooperative support. When the Laminans turned their backs on their ties to each other, they became a planet of individuals. The web collapsed and the Laminans in their billions crashed to the ground like a

wooden building whose nails have suddenly been removed And they died in their billions. Lamina ground back in social time. When things finally stabilized, the population stood at 600 million.

Siboot's Dream

It was the dead of night in the colony on Kira when the first bombs went off on Lamina. All were sound asleep except for a couple of technicians monitoring the energy systems. Out of radio contact with the homeworld, they had no way of knowing the catastrophe that was unfolding at home.

Siboot was dreaming, a soft, confused, languid dream; but of a sudden it changed. He was floating in a black void; there were no stars but he could see tiny dots of light far away. They were uncountable, but so tiny as to seem more like a cloud than dots. They were all moving about in an agitated fashion.

A black cloud appeared and began to consume the little lights. Siboot knew that the cloud was evil, but he didn't know why that was so. The black cloud dissipated, leaving a fraction of little lights untouched.

Then Siboot heard voices. They were distant; Siboot caught a few snatches of Ripi but he also heard foreign voices. He had no idea what they were saying. The little lights disappeared, and the black void was replaced by an intensely bright and complex pattern of colors. It didn't look like anything at all. There were only three colors: red, green, and blue. They appeared in tiny scintillating triangles that appeared out of nowhere, grew brighter, and then faded in random patterns. It was a riot of crazy geometry and color.

Siboot could sense that there was some connection between the voices and the colors; the color pattern was shimmering in some complex synchrony with the voices. It was glorious, awe-inspiring, and immensely important — but Siboot could not understand what it meant.

Governor Grad

“I don’t have complete information at this time. All I know is that I can’t get through to the Space Office or any of the governmental liaison offices. I was able to get a patch into the telecomm net through a shortwave operator and here’s what I learned from one person:

The situation is utter chaos. They have not, I repeat, NOT ‘blown up the entire planet’ as Smick here says. There has been a nuclear exchange, and there has been heavy loss of life. But the person I spoke with was in Clymack, a medium-sized city, and he said emphatically that there has been no damage to the city and no radiation. Everyone’s really scared, but otherwise, things seem normal enough. They’ve slapped down a curfew and started rationing; the authorities are having some problems keeping order. The situation is bad, but it’s definitely NOT the end of the world.”

The six translators worked to keep up with the Governor. Before they could finish, there was a chorus of questions, demands, and challenges. The crowd wasn’t really angry, but they were scared silly and their fear sounded in their voices. “One at a time, people, I’ve got all night.”

It was a slow process. Each person had to state his question, which then had to be translated for everybody else. Then Governor Grad would give his answer which again was translated. The colonists clung to their headphones, hanging on each word.

“How many warheads detonated? How much damage was there?”

“I don’t know. I can’t get the Space Office, and their facilities had lots of backup, so I’m pretty sure that Gilanox was destroyed. Similarly I haven’t been able to reach any of the New Unity liaison space offices. That suggests to me that each of the seven capitals took a hit. Of course, we would expect

the capitals to be the first targets in any nuclear exchange, no matter how small.”

“Who started it?”

The Governor paused. “The information I have is that the first shot was fired by a Srol.”

There was an outbreak among the Srols. Several leapt up and screamed at the Governor. Some Jomkars on the other side of the cafeteria jumped up and began shouting at the Srols. Fists were raised, gesticulating threateningly. Several of the big Tayrans stood up ominously.

“Calm down! Calm down! Calm down!” the Governor shouted. “We aren’t sure of that story. My information is fragmentary. We’ll find out soon enough. But we don’t need to start our own little war here. Settle down, please!”

“Whats going to happen to us?”

“Now there’s a more important question for all of us. Our plans for the colony anticipated the possibility of some disaster cutting us off from resupply. We have a ninety day supply of everything that this colony needs: food, fuel, medicines, everything. We have spare parts and backup units for all crucial equipment needed to run this colony. We can take care of ourselves while they sort out this mess on Lamina. We will need to institute emergency measures to stretch our supplies until a resupply shuttle can be sent again. But we can do it, people. I just need your cooperation and your support.”

For the first time, the crowd was silent. Then came a single, quiet question, from one of the Klasts: “Ninety days?”

“If we make a concerted effort, I’m sure that we can stretch it out for longer. We can shut down all unnecessary use of power, increase pumping of water and plant more fields. The situation isn’t hopeless. We have to pull together; everyone. There will be a resupply ship. We just have to hold on until it comes.”

“What if a resupply ship never comes?”

“It will come. The situation isn’t that bad. They’ll patch things up and get a resupply ship up to us sooner or later.”

One of the Srols jumped up and began shouting. The translator had difficulty keeping up with his excited shouts. “The situation isn’t that bad? You can’t even get through to anybody in authority and you say the situation isn’t that bad? You say that every one of the seven capitals has been destroyed and the situation isn’t THAT BAD? You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, mister! We are cut off!”

Grad’s exasperation was starting to show. “Just sit down and stay calm. We’re in a tight jam and we’ve got to keep order and work this thing through. I’ll get through to the Space Office and get their advice on what we should do.”

Now it was a Ripi who was shouting. “The Space Office? What can they do for us? They’ve screwed up almost everything involved with this whole colony and you want to rely on them for advice now? You can’t even make contact with them! Screw the damn Space Office!”

“Now see here: I am Governor of this colony. My authority comes directly from the Space Office of the New Unity. They are my superiors. I swore an oath of loyalty and I intend to honor that oath rigorously. Now this meeting is getting out of hand so I want you all to go home, calm down, and in the morning...”

“You Jomkar son-of-a-bitch!” One of the Klasts leapt out of his seat and ran towards the Governor, whom he began to pummel with his fists. Prignine, the Lieutenant-Governor and a Tayran, ran over and tore the Klast away from Grad, hurling him into the audience. At this several more Klasts dashed forward; several of the Jomkars moved to block their path and a ferocious fist-fight developed. Two Ripis ran to the stage, shouting “Protect the Governor!” but Prignine didn’t understand what they were saying and savagely kicked them away. The entire Ripi section stood up and began shouting, at which

point some Tayrans fell on them, kicking and beating. The entire house erupted into battle, with most of the people trying to escape the melee. Governor Grad remained on the stage, shouting futilely for order and calm. A Jomkar dashed out and returned with a pole; a moment later a Srol showed up with a spade. Grad jumped down and threaded through the fights, trying to pull combatants apart. He was struck on the head by a wrench. He fell, quivered, and lay still. People streamed out of the cafeteria, shouting and fighting. They left behind them the crumpled bodies of Grad and eighteen others. The battle didn't end, it simply dissolved into smaller pieces and spread itself out over the colony.

Siboot was one of those who had run when it first started. He found himself cowering behind the radio shack with two other Ripis, a Lokweel, and a Klast. They all looked at each other in fear. Fortunately the Klast was a translator and so, in the frightened gaps between looking out for approaching combatants, they took counsel. "What do we do now?" was about all they could say to each other. They stayed up all night, scampering from hiding place to hiding place, trying to avoid anybody else. But as dawn neared, Siboot decided that the time had come to assert themselves. He stood up and announced, "I'm going to the main courtyard. Who's coming with me?" They all looked around at each other and they all came. They marched to the main courtyard as the sun was rising. On any other day Prignine would have showed up at about this time to raise the flag of the New Unity, but today he was not to be found. They stood in a circle around the flagpole, calling out in all languages, "No more fighting!"

People began to filter out of their hiding places. They watched warily from the shadows, peering through windows and around corners at the little group. Then, one by one or three by three, they scampered out of their hiding places and into the little ring. Within ten minutes Siboot had twenty people, and at least one from each race. He organized them to shout the phrase, "No more fighting!" in their own language, in sequence. Six times the phrase would be sounded in six different languages, and then would come an eerie silence as the Fremis signed the same demand in their own language. More people joined the group. As they added their voices to the chorus, it gained in volume until it could be heard throughout the colony.

When at last Siboot judged that all who could come had come, he raised his hand for silence and said, “Friends, let us ponder our fate together.”

A Walk in the Garden

Siboot and Buricalex left the clamor of the meeting room for a quiet discussion. “Let’s go to the vegetable garden.” Siboot suggested. “I find it so satisfying to stand in a green place with living things. It is such a refreshing antidote to the barren rock and sand of Kira.” So they walked through the rows of tomatoes and cabbages, discussing the future of the colony. “Where to begin?” Buricalex asked. “There are so many problems to attack. Should we put our energies into augmenting our water supply and food production, as Kefscape wants? Or should we concentrate on developing some limited industrial capacity so that we can at least maintain our current stock of equipment, as Bertoct would have us do? Or any of the other proposals that have divided us?”

“Not to worry about our will to unity, Buricalex. We colonists all argue vehemently about the proper course of action, but we are all sensible people. We are deeply affected by the fate of our homelands. We shall stick together no matter what. Did you notice the civility with which the debate was conducted? Frightened we are, indeed!”

“Will it last? Is this civility fright or shock? Will we lose our sense of respect and unity with the passage of time? Are we Laminans hopelessly fractious, doomed to destroy ourselves? Is there any hope for us?”

They walked quietly for a while. Buricalex answered his own question: “I think we are. Doomed, I mean. We Laminans have never learned to live together. It’s in our spirits. This emergency has scared the bile out of us, but in time the old ways will return.”

They walked a ways further. Finally Siboot spoke. “No, Buricalex, we are not doomed. We make our own answers out here. We can accept the ways of the past, but it would be a deliberate decision on our part to do so. What hold does the past have on us? Lamina, the old ways, the Space Office, the Seven Species – those things are all gone. The only reality is what we have here on

Kira, and what we carry in our hearts. When I first came to Kira, Buricalex, I realized that we came here not to colonize the planet but to colonize our own spirits. We came here to mine the depths of our souls and see if we could find some vein of goodness in them. We haven't struck gold yet, but we've found some likely rocks. There is still cause for hope."

"I wish there were something more substantial than the emergency mood that now galvanizes us all. I wish that we had something tangible, some honest ray of hope for the Seven Species."

"There is something, something I've found here on Kira. I've been exploring it since I first came here, but I've kept it secret all this time. Governor Grad would have sent me home on the first shuttle had he known what I was up to."

They came to the end of the rows of vegetables. Siboot stopped and stared out into the emptiness of the Kiran desert.

"Well, what is it? What is this great secret that would either save the Seven Species or get you sent home?"

"I'm trying, I'm trying. I'm not very good at it yet. It takes great concentration. Tell me, what would you like to eat right now?"

Buricalex was thrown off balance by the question. "What do I want to eat? You just told me that you could save what's left of civilization and now you're talking about food? Are you playing some sort of game with me?"

"Just relax. If you could have anything you wanted right now, what would it be?" He pulled a notepad out of his pocket and scribbled something onto it. "Just stare at that hill and ask yourself 'What would I like to eat right now?'"

Buricalex was confused, but he complied. He looked over at the hill, halfway expecting it to hold a sign announcing that 'THE ANSWER IS...' but there was nothing to see on the hill except more of the ubiquitous orange sand.

Then it hit him. Actually, it was more like it swam into his consciousness. He was suddenly aware of redness, like that of an apple. It wasn't a real apple, it was more like an idealized apple, purely and intensely red. In fact, it was more like a combination of "red" and "edible". It wasn't a vision; he couldn't see anything other than the hill and the sand. He couldn't smell or taste it. He was simply aware of a very red apple, or rather of "redness plus eatingness". Although the image lacked any sensory substance, it was unquestionably real in his mind.

"That's funny. Now that you mention it, I'd kinda like a juicy red apple. I don't know why, it just came to me. You think there might be one last shuttle left on Lamina that might bring me an apple?"

He was laughing lightly at his tiny joke and he almost choked on his laughter when Siboot held up his notepad with the words "red apple" scribbled on it.

Funeral for a Civilization

Siboot stood at the rostrum and waited for the last few people to move into the cafeteria and settle down. It was at this very rostrum, just one year earlier, that Governor Grad had met his end. On that night the world had turned upside down for Siboot and all the other colonists. On that night everything changed. And tonight, from the same rostrum, he would bring to a close the first stage of the changes that had befallen the little colony.

The translators began moving into their positions, and people began placing the little headphones over their ears. Siboot wondered how long it would be before he could talk to everyone in eeyal. Which would be the slower task, he wondered, discovering the language or teaching it to the people? The crowd was ready; it was time to begin.

“Good evening, my friends. Today is the first anniversary of the nuclear war that destroyed our homelands. For one year we have watched and waited for some communication from Lamina, a signal, any sign at all that there are people left on the planet. There has been absolutely nothing — no television transmissions, no radio transmissions, nothing. We have watched the surface closely for any signs of activity, but we have seen nothing. None of the normal signs of civilization that we would expect are visible.”

“This does not necessarily mean that everybody is dead on Lamina. Our resident experts believe that it is quite possible that there remain small settlements of people growing their own food. But there is no civilization left on Lamina. Of that we can be certain.”

“This is a painful thing for us to face. For the first few days we clung to the vain hope that there might still be one more supply shuttle. Then we told ourselves that a shuttle would be mounted in six months. For these last few months we have been telling ourselves that they are trying to cope with the

disruptions caused by the war, that as soon as they can, they will re-establish radio contact with us. A year has passed without any sign from them that they are even alive. The time has come for us to face the truth: our civilization is dead. If Fate has smiled on us, perhaps the Seven Species still live on Lamina. But the civilization that nurtured us is gone forever. It is time for us to bury it and our false hopes.”

A wail broke out from the right side of the cafeteria. Siboot gestured harshly for silence. The sobs were muffled. Siboot stared long and hard at the audience, his eyes sweeping over the eyes of the colonists. His next words he pronounced slowly and emphatically:

“There will be no more shuttles, not in our lifetimes and probably never. There will be no rescue. We are alone. We are the last fragment of Laminan civilization.”

There was not a breath from the audience. They stared at him in utter silence. For an instant, Siboot wondered if they understood the import of his words.

“Every funeral mourns the dead. But we have grieved for a year already. We have suffered in ignorance of the fate of our homelands and our friends and relatives. This funeral serves to put an end to the mourning that saps our will.”

“There remains some hope that the Seven Species still live. We will continue to watch and listen, to transmit on a regular schedule, and to hope that someday somebody will talk back to us. But for now we must acknowledge to ourselves that these remain dim hopes, unlikely to be realized in our lifetimes.”

“We must now turn to the matter of our future. Kira is now the fragile repository of all that was Laminan. Here Srols and Tayrans, Jomkars and Fremes, Klasts and Lokweels, and Ripis, too, all continue to live. Look at one another — for all of our differences, we are all we have now. The many achievements of Lamina are now our heritage to pass on, for we are the only ones to pass it on. Our literature, our technology, our understanding of the universe,

the wisdom of our philosophers, our music, all the things that elevate us and give meaning to our lives, we must preserve.”

“But we must also remember that Laminan civilization was self-destructive. It lies in ashes now, and for a very good reason. If we merely replicate that civilization, we shall surely suffer the same fate. We must today bury the old civilization and celebrate the birth of a new one, the child of the old civilization.”

He paused and glanced at Buricalex and Kefscape on the right side of the cafeteria; they nodded back at him, ready. On the left, Redlistik and Grifin nodded gravely.

“I want each of you to stand up and shout in your native tongue, ‘Lamina is dead!’ Do it, now!”

The crowd stood up nervously and paused, waiting for a cue. Siboot’s assistants provided the cue, shouting in the different tongues, and soon the crowd began to follow. It came with confusion at first, for the inchoate roar of six tongues being shouted simultaneously was enough to confuse everybody. But the people caught on soon enough, and the shout became a chant. Tears rolled down cheeks as the people released a year’s worth of desperate, unfulfilled hopes. Siboot let them carry on as long as there was energy behind it; then he gestured for silence and all sat down again.

“Now I want you to close your eyes and listen carefully to the ideas that I will communicate directly to your minds. This is something new; I call it ‘eeyal’, and I want you to learn it.”

He closed his eyes and imaged as hard as he could, a blue image of goodness and virtue. Buricalex and the others, sensing his eeyal-speak, chimed in, adding the strength of their own idea-image to Siboot’s. The idea-image floated through the audience, prompting gasps, whistles, and squeals.

Siboot paused for a few seconds to gather his strength. Then he sent the next idea-image, a bright green “truth, honesty, integrity”. Again his assistants augmented Siboot’s message.

The audience was waiting for the next word eagerly; there could be no doubt now about the innate ability of all species to grasp this new eeyal way of communicating. Siboot took a deep breath, squared his stance, and thought deep red thoughts of power and strength.

He waited for a long moment, staring into a sea of closed eyes. Then they began to pop open, and he looked into each pair of eyes hopefully. People stood up, intense with feeling but unable to express it. They milled about, looking at Siboot for guidance, but he offered none, wishing to have them find their own expression. There were a number of disjointed attempts to echo Siboot’s eeyal back at him, but all failed. Then somebody shouted in Tayran, “Lamina is dead! Let Kira come alive!” Several others took up the shout. Somebody translated it into Jomkar and the Jomkars joined in. Then everybody was shouting, and the Fremes gesticulating, the same chant.

After a few moments, Siboot again gestured for silence. “There are no surviving Ripis here. All the Tayrans are gone from this room. The Fremes have disappeared; no Jomkars stand in our midst. All the Lokweels are gone, too, and the Srols are nowhere to be seen. Of Klasts, none remain. The only people I see here are Kirans, and they are all of one soul, and one mind. For the nonce, we shall continue to speak the ancient obsolete languages of Lamina, but we now have our own language, eeyal, that we can all speak and hear.”

So ended the funeral for a civilization.

Siboot and the Universe

Siboot walked slowly through the dunes, enjoying the contrast between the cool air on his face and the warm sand on his feet. Everybody else back at the settlement was deep asleep, save for a few overnight workers whom he slipped past easily. Out here, far from the settlement, the solitude was total. Lamina was still below the horizon; only the stars illuminated the dunes.

From a particularly high dune, he had an unobstructed 360° view of the dome of the sky. He sat down, placed his arms on his little knees, and looked up at the constellations he had known for so many decades. He recalled himself gazing upon those same constellations as a little boy back on Striltsen, saying out loud “the stars are forever”; staring up at them from a sleeping bag while backpacking as a young man, whispering the same words; wondering at them before he left Lamina forever on his great mission, repeating the same mantra; and seeing how, on Kira, they looked exactly the same as on Lamina. Quietly he repeated, “The stars are forever.” As it had always been.

For fifteen minutes he stared at the universe. Very quietly, he asked, “Why me?”

“There’s nothing special about you.” the universe replied. “You are the product of all the random numbers that move the universe. You just happened to comprise the intersection of a particularly abnormal combination of random numbers. You’re just a fluke.”

“But why me? Why now? Why here?”

“The random numbers are always tumbling, always reassembling. They all came together with you. That’s all.”

“So I just happened to be born with magic genes?”

“No, there’s nothing special about you. You’re a perfectly normal, average, everyday person. You just happened to experience a rare confluence of situations that distorted your perception of the universe in a particularly felicitous manner. It wasn’t any single event; there was no bolt from the blue. It was the combination of millions of minor events that in toto pushed you in an odd direction. It’s like Brownian motion: there’s no reason why it couldn’t push a mote of dust all the way across a room. It’s just unlikely.”

Siboot looked down, sifting sand through his fingers. “It was all just random chance?”

“EVERYTHING is just random chance — but it’s filtered through the lens of physical reality. The formation of life on Lamina was the result of chance — although not particularly rare chance. Millions of other planets have living organisms. The rise of multicellular creatures, however — that was not so likely. The development of intelligence was a truly wild fluke — it happens rarely in the universe. The rise of seven independent intelligent species at roughly the same time — that was spectacularly abnormal! The probability that anything like it will ever happen again, anywhere in the universe, is near zero.”

Siboot sighed. “So I’m just one more random fluke in a cavalcade of flukes?”

“You choose to phrase it that way. There are other ways to phrase it.”

“I can see where things are going. I can see how eeyal will develop and change everything. But it won’t reach fruition for generations. I’ll die long before anybody else understands it. Why taunt me so?”

“You think that you’re important enough to taunt? Do you think that the universe cares about your feelings?”

Anger was edging into Siboot’s voice. “Then why do I see these things before they can have any value?”

“It’s all in the random numbers. The others are all progressing according to normal physical, chemical, biological, cultural, and social processes that, as you already know, will get them there in a few centuries. You just happen to be the beneficiary of random numbers lining up long before they should have. You’re a freak. All through history, there have always been people who saw things before others did. Sometimes, as in your case, they see it so far ahead of everybody else that they simply cannot communicate what they see to their fellows. Sometimes their lead is early enough for them to be recognized as visionaries. Sometimes it’s only early enough for them to be recognized as inventors or creators. Sometimes, nobody gets it beforehand, and they all figure it out at the same time. It’s just a matter of randomness and timing.”

“Why can’t I just tell them?”

“Because they won’t believe you, which in turn is because they couldn’t understand you. They cannot see what they cannot recognize, and recognition requires a pre-existing set of mental perceptions. You cannot perceive a sailboat in the clouds if you’ve never seen a sailboat.”

Another lengthy silence.

“What should I do?”

After an hour without an answer, Siboot rose and trudged home.

Stargazing

“Anything new tonight, Hortz?”

“I don’t think so. I haven’t finished my search, but it seems pretty much like normal. It’s hard. The features change under the changing lighting. When I first started this job, I spent almost every night discovering all sorts of things that weren’t really there.”

“Do you mean you were seeing mirages or hallucinating?”

Hortz pulled away from the eyepiece and laughed. He looked at Fredegund, trying to make out her face but his retina still retained the burned-in image of Lamina’s surface. He needed to rest his eyes for a few minutes anyway.

“No, no, I certainly wasn’t hallucinating, although Siboot certainly thought so after I’d shaken him awake for the umpteenth time to show him something in the scope. No, I was seeing changes that weren’t caused by people. It’s difficult to appreciate how much a planet’s surface can appear to change when viewed from a distance. Here, let me show you. Look in the eyepiece.”

Fredegund sat down on the stool and peered through the telescope.

“Where am I looking?”

“It’s Habinda; the northern half is obscured by clouds. Can you recognize the shape now?”

“Yes, yes, I see it! But wait! I thought that the Bay of Escobar was on the western coast of Habinda. This looks like it’s on the east.”

“This is an inverting telescope: everything’s reversed. You just have to use your imagination and flip everything around. See the mountain range behind the Bay of Escobar? It’s marked by long dark shadows.”

“Got it.”

“Good. Now look closely at the land between the mountains and the bay. What color is it?”

“Looks like a light green to me. Green with a little yellow mixed in.”

“That’s right. Now, if you were to come back here in three nights and look again you’d swear that it had changed color to dark green. And in fact it would have changed color. When I first saw that I thought sure I had proof that they were planting or digging or something. But then it changed back to light green a few days later and I went nuts trying to figure out what those crazy Fremms were up to. Then I checked the geography book. What an embarrassment! That section of terrain is – or was – a national park, a big jupine forest.”

“OK, so what? Maybe they chopped down all the trees.”

“No they didn’t do anything. I was just seeing the trees from different angles. The first night when we see Habinda on the eastern edge of the planet, as we now see it, we’re looking at the forest from an angle but on the third or fourth night we’re looking almost straight down on the forest. Have you ever seen a jupine?”

“No, but I’ve seen pictures They’re just real big pine trees, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. But the trick is, the needles always point upward. So when you look at a jupine sideways you see the needles sideways and they’re bright green, but when you look down on one you see mostly the dark spaces between the needles, so it looks darker.”

“I see.” Fredegund’s tone of voice indicated that she was not as impressed with such trivialities as Hertz was. “Have you ever seen anything indicating that people are still alive up there?”

“No, I haven’t. You’d know if I had – I’d have danced through the streets with the news. I look for lights on the dark side of the planet, but their absence doesn’t mean much. People won’t start using outdoor lighting until they’ve got power plants running. I’ve been concentrating on agriculture. If they’re alive up there, they’ve got to be growing crops, and fields of crops might get big enough for me to see. So far though, I’ve seen nothing.”

“Doesn’t that mean that they’re all dead?”

“No, they could be farming plots too small for me to see. I figure I couldn’t see a field less than three kilometers square. That’s a pretty big field. It would have to be the work of a small farming community supplying food to thousands of people. Mostly I’ve been concentrating on the same river valleys that were the cradles of the earliest civilizations: the valleys of the Rendox Farlit and Kefra Rivers. Like I say, so far I’ve seen nothing.”

“Could you show me my home town? It’s near Crablox.”

“Sure, I’ll try. I doubt that you’ll be able to see anything, though. It’s the rainy season in Harnox and the place has been under clouds for the last few weeks. Here, I’ll let you do it: just turn these knobs here to move the telescope.”

“It took Fredegund a few moments to get the hang of the controls, but she eventually managed to bumble her way to the region of Harnox. “This is great! There are clouds over both coasts, but the interior of the country is sunny!”

“I doubt that you’ll discover any evidence of people; the whole countryside is green this time of year. They could be cultivating the entire continent and we wouldn’t know.”

“Oh, look, there’s Cholin Reservoir! I learned how to swim there!”

“No, you’re mistaken. The dam was destroyed or something in the war That reservoir’s been empty ever since. You’re probably looking at Montfelly Bay.”

“No, no, I remember the shape of both Cholin Reservoir and Montfelly Bay from the maps, and this is definitely NOT Montfelly Bay. I must admit, though, it looks smaller than Cholin Reservoir; but it is in the right place relative to the coastline.”

“Here, let me have a look” Hertz didn’t wait for Fredegund to vacate her seat; he leaned over her shoulder and looked down the eyepiece.

“Oh, my god, it is Cholin Reservoir! They’ve repaired the dam!”

Siboot's Last Sermon

“My friends, I have taken ill and Dr Eilen tells me that I shall probably not survive the week. I am therefore taking this opportunity to say goodbye to all of you. I leave with much optimism and some fear for the future. We have done so much together and we all are deservedly proud of our achievements. We inherited a world that had destroyed itself. We nearly destroyed ourselves in insane imitation of our mother society. But we didn't. We found another way and we have pursued that other course and prospered.

Much work remains, work that you must carry on. Although each colonist can understand and use a small amount of eeyal, there remain wide gaps in proficiency with the language. I would like to see those gaps closed, for my own experience demonstrates that no species is innately handicapped in the use of eeyal. You must improve training in the language. Along with this goes the task of extending the language itself. It pains me that this my last sermon must be given in my native tongue and translated to each of you. I had hoped that the day would come when we could all speak together in a single language. We have made the start but you must finish without me.

You must also continue the exploration of the mental powers revealed by eeyal; they are triangular in nature. I am certain that further experience with eeyal will uncover additional faculties shared by all Kirans. I abjure you to continue the transmissions to Lamina. It is difficult, I know, expending so much effort to send messages to a home planet that may not be listening and will not respond. But remember that it is far easier for them to receive than to transmit. We know that they are alive.

I worry that you will consume your energies in contention with each other. This is the price we all pay for my long Shepherdship. You must choose a new Shepherd. Select a person who is strong in eeyal, for such persons can lead you to the only viable future we have.

Lastly, remember this always: power destroys virtue, virtue overcomes truth, and truth conquers power. I don't know..."

At this point Siboot began to cough violently. Dr Eilen led him away. He never finished his sermon.

Casito

Casito was the *fifantene* on Lamina, a Ripi term that translates to (roughly) “funeral director”, although his responsibilities were nothing like those of the funeral directors of the other species. His training as a fifantene was his primary qualification to becoming a colonist. Even though the responsibilities of a fifantine are rarely exercised, they are absolutely crucial to Ripi tradition, and so there had to be at least one fifantene on Lamina.

Fifantenes were trained by apprenticeship; every fifantene, upon ascending to full status, immediately recruited an apprentice and trained that person in the ancient rituals.

Immediately after Siboot died, Casito claimed the body; he had only 18 hours to process it. He summoned his apprentice Ragameen and the two of them placed Siboot’s body on a cart.

He had the kitchen area scrubbed clean, and then had Siboot’s body taken there. Dismissing everybody but Ragameen from the room, he closed and latched the door. They donned their ceremonial cassocks and headpieces and set to work. Casito held his arms over the body and recited the funeral prayer. It had never been written down; it was passed from master to apprentice orally. Every five years the fifantenes would convene, recite their versions of the prayer to each other, and iron out any mistakes that had crept into the language. This prayer was thousands of years old, in an ancient form of the Ripi language that was now incomprehensible; that’s why they had to verify the pronunciations in their collective memory. Sometimes memories had been so faulty that conflicting versions had to be resolved by a vote of all the fifantenes.

With the prayer finished, Casito lowered his arms and Ragameen pressed a large butcher knife into his left hand. Casito set to work on the gory task of extracting the skeleton from the flesh. Although few fifantenes ever got much practice, the training was so rigorous that Casito worked quickly and effi-

ciently, explaining to Ragameen exactly what strokes to use, how deep to penetrate, and where to stop. Had this been anybody other than Siboot, Casito would have permitted Ragameen to carry out some of the simpler cuts, but this task was of such vast gravity that Casito felt obliged to do it himself.

Slices of flesh were unceremoniously tossed into a large tub; the flesh was not the essence of the person in Ripi belief. It was the bones that were sacred; above all, they must not be scratched or gouged by this process. As bones were cleared of their flesh, Ragameen put them into a washbasin and washed them carefully.

When at last the gory job was complete, Casito and Ragameen together carried the tub of flesh outside. There a team of Ripis were waiting with a cart. They had already dug a hole far from the settlement and would bury the flesh in that hole. This was solely for purposes of hygiene; the location would not be remembered or visited as a grave.

Meanwhile, Casito and Ragameen worked at the final cleaning of the bones. This was a slow process that had to be done to perfection. Casito assembled the bones on a table according to ritual, while Ragameen cleaned every trace of blood, leaving the kitchen sparkling clean. Then they opened the door to the celebrants. The Ripis filed in slowly, walking the circuit around the skeleton, touching the bones, and leaving. Then the other species were permitted. Although most other species found this ritual ghoulish, such was the respect that they held for Siboot that they all followed the tradition reverently — except for the children, who could not be expected to understand the importance of the funeral ritual.

When all had paid their last respects, Casito and Ragameen carefully gathered up all the bones and placed them in the cassotene, a ritual box devoted exclusively to this purpose. They carried the cassotene to Casito's home. Over the next few weeks, they worked reverently on the bones, cutting them into small beads that they bored with holes.

In Ripi tradition, such “bone beads” would be distributed to the descendants of the deceased to add to their “ancestry necklaces” that all Ripis wore. When

a Ripi died, his own history necklace would be broken up and its beads distributed among his descendants, and new beads would be fashioned from his bones for the descendants. Thus, Ripis wore their ancestry on their persons.

One might think that such necklaces would have grown impossibly large over the years, but the accidents of time and fate had kept most necklaces manageable. Those few Ripis who possessed an ancestry necklace of great antiquity took great pride in their good fortune, and were widely admired.

Every Ripi knew at least one tale about every bead on their necklace; if you could not recite a tale about a bead, it was dishonorable to keep it on your necklace. This was another force keeping necklaces small; sometimes a Ripi would die without telling the children all the tales of all the beads. Sometimes a descendent would not recall a bead's tale. Again, the possessor of a long ancestry necklace who could recite the tales of all the beads was held in great esteem.

Sometimes beads were distributed to people who were not descendants or kin of the deceased; this was often the case with famous and highly regarded people. It was a mark of honor to wear a bead from a famous priest, scientist, artist, or statesman.

For this reason, Siboot had instructed Casito on his deathbed that Casito was to make 300 beads from his skeleton, one for each of the colonists, with some extras for unforeseen situations.. They could refuse the bead, which was fine, but Siboot did not want disruptive jealousies undermining the comity of the colony. Casito labored for weeks carefully cutting, shaping, and drilling the beads, and when they were done, not a single colonist refused his bead.

Dr. Eilen

Dr. Eilen stood on the platform waiting for the crowd to settle down. When he finally realized that the crowd would not settle down of its own accord, he began to shout “Let’s get to work! Everybody settle down!”. He repeated his command in each of the seven languages; as part of his training for service on Kira, he had learned both the language and medical treatments of each species.

“It is time for us to choose a new leader – er, a new Shepherd. I know that many of you are still grieving over the loss of Siboot, but we cannot afford to put off important decisions for even one more day.”

He waited for translators to repeat his statements, then resumed.

“I have been chosen to preside over this meeting because I am the one person who cannot become Shepherd. My duties as doctor to the colony do not permit me to serve also as Shepherd.”

“Siboot enjoined us to select a person who is a master of eeyal. How shall we make that choice?”

“Democratically, by election.” one voice shouted.

“No, that would simply produce a seven-way standoff. We need something independent of species politics” Dr. Eilen declared.

“What if we have some kind of contest to find the best speaker?” another voice piped up.

“That might work” Dr. Eilen said. “We could hide all the candidates behind a curtain and have each one, in turn, say “I be Kiran” from behind the curtain, and then have everybody vote for the one who is best.”

“To be fair, there should be only one candidate from each species.” somebody suggested.

“Good idea. OK, we’ll have two rounds. In the first round, each species selects its strongest eeyal-speaker, and in the second round, we together select the Shepherd.”

A long silence demonstrated wide approval of the idea.

And that is how Arlen became the second Shepherd.

Artigul the Teacher

“That’s enough for you today. You’re tired. Go home get a good night’s sleep. Work hard tomorrow morning to clear your mind and show up tomorrow ready for another lesson.”

The student stood up, a little frustrated and sheepish at his poor performance in the day’s lesson. He left quietly. Artigul visibly brightened when he saw that the next student was Amilcar. Amilcar was a fast learner and sent strong, well-defined images. "*Greetings!*" he imaged to Amilcar but Amilcar’s own "*Greetings!*" was already crowding back at him. It was, as always, a bright powerful image, so much stronger than the weak, uncertain images that most beginners sent. It had more raw power than the images that mature speakers of eeyal sent but it was clumsy and unpolished and so not as clear. *Amilcar how?* he asked and the response flashed back *Amilcar strong*. Good for you, Amilcar. Your images feel strong to me, too. And so they commenced the lesson with Artigul sending images and critiquing Amilcar’s responses. At times they had to break into Amilcar’s native Srol language to clarify a point but such interruptions were infrequent. After two generations, eeyal was still a clumsy language. Based as it was on fundamental idea symbols common to the Seven Species, it was not so much created as discovered, and the process of discovery was slowed by the tedious process of developing the mental powers necessary for speaking eeyal.

Throughout the lesson Artigul was struck by an oddity in Amilcar’s images. They were powerful, yes – that was the first thing that he had noticed about Amilcar. But there was some flavor to them, a kind of mental coloring. He had noticed that some people seemed to speak eeyal with something like an accent, but had never thought much of it. With Amilcar, though, the accent was pronounced and it seemed as if he had heard it before without noticing it. Artigul drank in the flavor of it, noted it carefully. He sensed that somehow it was important.

The lesson ended. Artigul sought out Arlen, the Shepherd of Kira, and another powerful speaker of eeyal. Although Artigul was by occupation fluent in all seven languages, he initiated the conversation in eeyal. *Amilcar speak good* he began. *Artigul teach good* Arlen retorted. There was the same feeling of power that he had gotten from Amilcar but the flavor, the accent, was different. It was every bit as striking, every bit as distinctive, but it was not the same as Amilcar's. Artigul refrained from revealing his thoughts to Arlen and ended the conversation. Off he hurried to see Sertgrid the radioman and another strong speaker of eeyal. A quick exchange in eeyal revealed the same sense of powerful imagery, the same distinctive flavor. This felt similar to the Amilcar's accent. Artigul hastily excused himself and ran directly to Amilcar's home. Bursting in, he fixed Amilcar with a stare and demanded *Clock how big?* to which Amilcar replied (after a confused pause) *Clock be 2030*. There was absolutely no doubt about it: Amilcar's tone was exactly the same as Sertgrid's! Artigul exclaimed with delight and dashed out of the house. "He certainly was pleased to learn the time" Amilcar's mother observed.

Artigul paced down the trail trying to put together the pieces. The accents he had felt were not unique to each speaker. This was not just a case of different minds speaking with different tones. No, there was something fundamental here, some central reality he couldn't quite grasp. Spying Ferliki's house, he knocked and entered. There he found Grotilda, Ferliki's wife. *Clock how big?* he asked. She stared at him for a moment then spoke with some irritation in Ripi, "Artigul I passed my final examination; you don't need to test me anymore."

"Please I need to hear you speak in eeyal. It's important!"

Clock 2050. "Did I do it right?"

"You did just fine. Thank you. Thank you." Off he went into the night. From house to house he went demanding to know the time in eeyal, ignoring the looks of surprise and bemusement. (The next morning his quest for the time was the talk of Kira.) He felt the tone of each reply and within an hour he had a clear notion of the scope of the matter. Some speakers used Amilcar's accent, some used Arlen's, and some didn't seem to have any accent at all. By

the time he reached his own home he had it worked out. There was a scale of tone with two poles. The first pole he called 'katsin' after an old Frem word meaning 'left hand'. The second pole he called 'shial' from the Frem word for 'right hand'. Some people, like Amilcar and Sertgrid, were strong in katsin. Others, like Arlen, were strong in shial. Others had no strong leaning and lay in the middle of the scale. He was very pleased with his hypothesis and went to bed feeling quite happy.

The next morning he advised Arlen of his discovery. "I too have noticed some differences in the tones people use. I call them 'auras', because they don't seem to be part of the language itself. To me, they're something characteristic of each speaker."

"Hmm. Auras. Yes, that fits the feeling exactly. It's like something that the language is steeped in, different for different people."

"One other thing, Artigul: I am certain that these auras did not exist when I was young. They seem to have appeared in the last 20 years and grown in strength over the years. I think that they're rising as the community learns more about eeyal."

Artigul continued to putter around with the auras, but never learned anything more.

Sharpin the Student

“Sharpin, please characterize the auras for me.”

Sharpin responded from rote:

“There are two auras, shial and katsin. Some people have an abundance of one or the other, and some people have a balanced mixture of the two. There is no relationship between the aura a person uses and the quality of that person’s eeyal.”

“Very good, Sharpin.” Artigul pronounced. “You’ve learned your lesson well.”

“Yeah, except that it’s all wrong.”

“Excuse me?”

“All that stuff about two auras is wrong. There are three, not two.”

“WHAT!?!?!” Artigul exploded. “Why, you ignorant, insolent, insubordinate little...”

Artigul stopped himself just before he said the taboo word, “stilt”.

“...student! Get out of here this minute and come back prepared to explain the details of the relationship between shial and katsin!”

Artigul was furious. How dare that little twerp contradict me! I discovered the auras. I defined them. I have done more to expand our understanding of them than anybody else. Even Arlen respects my expertise with eeyal. Why, I have discovered more words in eeyal than anybody in history; my contribu-

tions to the advance of eeyal are rivaled only by Siboot himself. How dare that little punk presume to tell me that I'm wrong!

Artigul had been researching auras for years now, and he had never found anything that remotely challenged his explanation. He had conversed with every single speaker of eeyal, and carefully noted the aura that person used, and everything lined up perfectly: people had varying degrees of shial or katsin, with some at the extremes and some closer to the middle. Everybody fit that pattern. Every single person.

He had also learned that younger speakers were stronger in their auras than older speakers; clearly the mental powers associated with eeyal were expanding with each generation. He had examined all possible variations, tendencies, and peculiarities of eeyal use, compiling a massive amount of data on how people used eeyal. He knew eeyal inside and out, backwards and forwards. He was undoubtedly the world's leading expert on the subject. For a student to contradict him was risible.

Artigul continued to stew over Sharpin's insubordination the entire evening and had difficulty getting to sleep that night. The next morning, he was still irritated, but resolved to put it aside. He couldn't allow one young punk's needling to get under his skin. He developed a plan for dealing with Sharpin. He would show that little brat how ignorant he truly was.

That afternoon, Sharpin showed up for his lesson showing not an inkling of remorse or even embarrassment over his outrageous behavior the previous day. He shambled in, slouched down on his chair, draped his arm over the armrest, and looked at Artigul with an innocence almost intended to provoke the old man.

"Now, then, Sharpin, you made a surprising statement yesterday. You believe that there are three auras, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir" Sharpin replied, still supremely self-assured.

"Very well, would you be so good as to reveal to me the names of these three auras?"

“The first two are katsin and shial. I don’t have a name for the third aura.”

“Can you at least tell me something about this third aura?”

“It’s just, you know, another aura, just like the other two.”

“And tell me, young Sharpin, how is it that you came to discover this hidden aura when I, after searching for years, never detected it? Did you find it under your pillow? Is it a secret revealed only to you? Are you in contact with Si-boot’s ghost?”

“No, sir, it’s just obvious. Anybody can see it.”

“Anybody? Well, Sharpin, I certainly don’t see it. Do you think me blind?”

“No, sir. You don’t see it because it’s your own aura.”

Artigul leaned back in his chair. Sharpin was certainly a clever boy; he’d come up with a scheme to prevent falsification of his claim. Artigul knew he’d have to try a different approach.

“I see. So I am possessed of this magical aura that nobody else sees except you.”

“Oh no, sir, other people see it, too. They’ve told me.”

“**WHO** has told you this, Sharpin?” Artigul smiled confidently; now he had trapped the little bastard in a lie.

“Well, uh, let’s see...”

Artigul’s smile widened.

“There’s Smiteleen, and Eexer, and Penumb, and... I think Gosab once told me that she saw it, too.”

“Tell me, Sharpin, can you name any **ADULTS** who have reported this fabulous discovery to you?”

“No sir, I can’t.”

“Sharpin, do you really expect me to believe some cockeyed nonsense that only you and your young friends agree upon?”

“No, sir, I guess I don’t.”

“So are you prepared to retract your statement?”

“No, sir, I know it to be true. I just can’t prove it to you in a way that you’ll believe.”

Artigul frowned. This kid was smarter than he had expected. It would take some more work to put him in his place. “Stay right there, Sharpin.” Artigul stepped outside and gestured to a young Frem to come to him. He signed instructions to the little guy, who ran off. A few minutes later, the Frem returned with Eexer. Artigul gave the little boy another instruction and brought Eexer inside.

“Eexer, Sharpin here has been telling me the most remarkable tale, and claims that you can verify it. Tell me, Eexer, how many auras are there?”

“Three.”

Artigul’s eyebrows jumped up.

“I see. And tell me, where do you perceive this third aura?”

“You have it, sir. So does Foctrin, and Messril, and Shimple, and, uh, I think Mareet has it, too.”

Artigul recalled what he knew about the auras of each of the individuals in question. They were all in the “balanced” category, between katsin and shial. Artigul chuckled with avuncular good will.

“I see. You poor child, you simply haven’t learned to recognize what balanced auras feel like.”

“Sir, I don’t see mixed auras. There aren’t any people with a little bit of shial and a bigger bit of katsin. Everybody is either pure shial, pure katsin, or pure Artigul-aura.”

Artigul chuckled again. “You’ve named this aura after me? I assure you, child, flattery will not advance your cause here.”

“We just call it that because it’s really obvious with you.”

Artigul spent the rest of the day interviewing other youngsters. Their stories were consistent; they all said that Artigul and some others had this third aura, that it was quite distinct from the others, and that they had never sensed any mixtures of auras. Everybody talked in one of the three auras.

But Artigul was an old man; he had spent his career researching the auras and this new idea did not fit in with his own conceptions. In his heart, he knew it to be wrong, but he couldn’t disprove it, and he reassured himself that the youngsters couldn’t prove the existence of a third aura, either. Artigul went to his grave unconvinced.

And Sharpin became the new teacher of eeyal. He named the third aura “tanaga”.

Shaleen's Sermon

Shaleen stood outside the radio shack trying to stay in the thin sliver of shade next to the wall. It was a scorcher of a day; it would be flaming hot inside the shack. She felt sympathy for Foctrin who was just finishing up his sermon. He had been at it for thirty minutes; how he maintained his concentration in that oven she could not understand. And he was a Tayran! She at least had the advantage of a smaller, more easily cooled body. Foctrin's voice changed tone. He was ending his sermon with the standard request for anyone who was listening to reply on the same frequency. She didn't understand Tayran but she knew the formula and she could follow his meaning from the pauses. After three tries he signed off. He wasted no time opening the door and getting outside to the cooler air.

Talk good? she asked.

Talk most good. They throw Foctrin flowers.

Tayrans throw flowers?

They both laughed at the image. Shaleen entered the shack. It was hot and stuffy but not as oven-like as she had feared. Her session would not be torture, just uncomfortable. The equipment was all set up and running. She sat down at the microphone and checked her watch; she had a few minutes to kill. She organized her thoughts. At precisely 1300 she flicked on the microphone. "Good day fellow Lokweels on Lamina. This is Shaleen your friend on Kira. I'm hoping that Fate has been good to you this week and that each of you has found something new within yourself."

"We've done well this week. One of our Jomkar women, Shenlow, gave birth to a beautiful little boy this week. Have I told you how we greet a new Kiran? The birth is assisted by a committee of midwives, one woman from each

species. Siboot taught us that motherhood means more to mothers than species-hood and so we have this custom that mothers from all species participate in the birth of every Kiran child. And you know, Siboot was right! I was waiting outside and when Daframe the Srol midwife came out to announce the successful birth there were tears of joy on her cheeks. A few hours later they had the birth procession. They carried Shennie and her baby to the cafeteria where all the Kirans were assembled. Shennie presented the child to Arlen who held up the baby for all to see. He then made a little speech welcoming the child to Kira, and all the gathered Kirans added their own welcomes, and all the mothers cried with joy. You know we can't have many children here on Kira. There isn't enough food for more than 280 mouths, so each woman is allowed only two children in her lifetime. A birth on Kira doesn't happen very often. We have learned the value of life here on Kira. If only we had all learned that lesson before the war."

"The redberries are starting to come in this week. We all just love to eat redberries. Its funny: when people first came to Kira they all had different tastes in food and of course different species still have different dietary requirements, but nowadays we can't afford to cater to all the different tastes. We don't have any sweets on Kira, so if you've been thinking that Kira is some sort of heaven, forget it! Peace and good feeling, yes; candy bars, no. Anyway the redberries are the sweetest thing that we grow here and of course they don't keep so basically we all gorge ourselves on them when the crop comes in. We have a festival, The Redberry Festival, to celebrate the berries and we organize the biggest, wildest orgy of redberry guzzling ever! Everybody wears red and makes up stupid redberry jokes and generally carries on like a fool. We're really looking forward to Redberry Festival, which starts next week. My next sermon will take place right in the middle of Redberry Festival, so if I sound a little silly, don't worry.

"We had a bad accident this week. Thrilken, the dearest, sweetest old Ripi, was injured when some crates in the warehouse fell on him. When I was a little girl Thrilken used to make little dolls for me out of corn husks. It was so clever the way he could fold, wrap, and tie them until they looked just like real people. He could make Jomkar dolls, Srols, Lokweels, any of the Seven Species, and I used to play with them all. I learned how to say 'Thank you' in

Ripi just for Thrilken. Have you ever tried to say anything in Ripi? It's almost impossible! And when I finally thanked him in Ripi, he put his hand on my head and said something but I don't know what he said. Dear old Thrilken. He's badly hurt and everybody is pulling for him. I hope you'll think of him tonight."

"I know that I talk too much about Boxlen. By now most of you have probably guessed that I kind of like him. I suppose that you have gotten sick and tired of hearing all sorts of boring stories about Boxlen. Well, here I go again! Bear with me! Three nights ago we had a little social for young unmarrieds down at the cafeteria. Boxlen was there and he and I had a nice talk. We went out for a little walk. You know, you have Kira as a moon and at night I'm told that it illuminates things when it's full. Well, I've never seen Kira from Lamina, but I can tell you that Lamina is beautiful when it rises above the dunes full and blue and round. Its so bright it lights up everything. We talked about Lamina. We both wondered how things are going for you and especially how things are going in Marfand. We've never been there or seen it of course, just old pictures, but it is our homeland. We worry about you fellow Lokweels and hope that all is well with you."

"Well, it looks like my time is about up. As always, I wish that you could talk back to me. I have so many questions to ask you! You know the procedure: if you do have anything to say, say it now."

She flipped the microphone switch from TALK to LISTEN. She leaned back in her chair and eeyaled *Not now*. She knew that Salmin was outside the shack getting ready for his sermon; apparently he was talking to somebody else and the noise was distracting her. She grumbled to herself that another broadcaster, of all people, should appreciate and respect the rules mandating silence around the radio shack. Kinst him anyway. Then she sensed that something was wrong. The white noise that always sounded on the speaker when she left it on LISTEN was different. There was a faint modulation to it. She leaned forward, listening intently. She felt Salmin's eeyaled *Hurry*. She screamed back in Lokweel, "Shut up! Shut up!" She listened very carefully and then heard it plainly: a voice saying something over the noise. It was badly broken up but she could tell that it was speaking in Lokweel. She couldn't

make out enough to make sense of it but first she heard the word “Kira”, then “Lamina.” When she heard her name pronounced, a thin cry almost of pain, escaped her lips.

Shaleen, hurry. Salmin eeyaled again. She looked away from the speaker, frantic. She jumped at the door, tore it open, grabbed Salmin by the shoulders and began screaming in Lokweel, “They’re here! They’re talking to me!” Salmin and his friends backed away from her, taken aback by her explosion. One of them ran to find a translator or somebody who could help.

Shaleen stood at the door of the shack screaming in the general direction of the village, “Lamina! They’re alive! They’re talking back to me!”

Arlen was at the warehouse, straightening out a dispute over responsibilities, when they told him that Shaleen had gone crazy. His first reaction was worry for her well-being, but when somebody mentioned that she was at the radio shack, an intimation, a possibility, a hope, arose inside him. He started walking briskly towards the radio shack, asking questions as he went. What was she doing? She was giving her sermon. Oh my God, he thought. Was she finished with her sermon? Yes, Salmin was waiting to give his sermon. Arlen broke into a run.

He waded through the crowd at the door and elbowed into the shack. Shaleen was seated at the microphone, sniffing and wiping away tears as she spoke. He didn’t need to understand Lokweel to know what she was saying. “Where have you been? How are you? How many people are left? We thought you were all dead.”

Sharpin's Dream

It had been a long, vexing day; Sharpin was tired and looking forward to a good night's sleep. He threw himself onto the bed and fell asleep immediately.

He was flying through a black void. Every now and then he would speed by a blotch of color – always either red, green, or blue. Or perhaps he was stationary and the blotches of color were speeding past him. Somehow, though, he sensed that he was the one moving; sometimes, when several blotches appeared at once, he could see that his path was not straight but gently curving in various directions. It was as if he were going somewhere.

This was pleasant; he felt as if he were soaring effortlessly. The little blotches of color would first appear as tiny dots in the remote distance, growing steadily as he approached, until he flew past them.

One of the blotches seemed a little different as he approached it; it was an odd shape. Idly curious, he watched as he drew closer, wondering how it was different than the others. It seemed almost like a dumbbell shape. With some alarm, he realized that his path would not bypass the object, but would in fact collide with it. The final approach was very rapid, so fast that he didn't recognize it until he was stopped directly in front of it; it was a pair of eyes!

Sharpin fell out of his bed, sweating and panting, his heart pounding. What the kinst was that?!?!

On the other side of the compound, Sonbeyun lay quivering on the floor next to her bed, wide awake and equally in shock.

Sufupican's Sermon

“It’s all set up and ready. Your transmission will go to Trebizond; they’ve got a group of translators set up there who will translate and rebroadcast your sermon all over Lamina. From what they tell me, every radio on the planet is tuned to this frequency, ready to hear the news first, even if it is in Tayran. They’ll all flip back to the translation-program frequency as soon as they hear your voice for real.”

“Very good, Sertgrid. I am ready.”

“Just flip that switch when you’re ready and speak into the microphone. I’ll notify you if there are any problems.”

Sufupican settled into the chair, eyeing the microphone and the battery of electronic knobs and dials. She had always harbored a secret longing to learn these mysterious devices, but the opportunity had never arisen. This was a hell of a way to get the opportunity.

There was no point in dawdling any longer, not with a billion Laminans waiting to hear her voice. She leaned forward, threw the “Transmit” switch with alacrity, and began her sermon:

“Salutations to all Laminans. I am Sufupican, the Third Shepherd of Kira. I convey my deepest regrets that I cannot as yet live up to the noble ideal that Siboot established for us and address you all in eeyal. Someday that will be possible, but for today we must live with the sad reality that I am inadequate to speak to you in any other than my native tongue.”

“I have been chosen for the Shepherdship because I prevailed in a contest. There was one contender from each species; all Kirans of all species voted for the candidate who had the strongest power of eeyal, and I received the

most votes. The other candidates, and all the Kirans, have now united behind me; we are one people, with one will, one resolve, one cause. I will now take my assigned place and accept the responsibilities it brings. From this day forward, I will think of myself not as a Tayran, not even as a Kiran, but as the Shepherd of all Kirans and all Laminans. You may submit your disputes to me in full confidence that I will adjudicate them with absolute objectivity and concern for the welfare of all Laminans.”

“I conclude this sermon by looking backwards. We have lost Arlen, a great Shepherd and a true leader of all Laminans. We all grieve for our loss. I hope that you will also pray for me, that I may prove a worthy successor to that great one.”

“I give unto you tranquility.”

She flipped the switch off, leaned far back in the chair, and heaved a great sigh. I sure hope I didn’t screw up, she thought.

Lariltof's Discovery

Lariltof crawled to the next tega plant in the furrow. There were two small weeds growing next to it; he expertly popped them out without disturbing the tega. The tiny irrigation pipe had shifted position a few centimeters; he adjusted it to discharge at the base of the plant. Then it was on to the next tega plant.

“I **hate** tega work!” he thought to himself. “It’s utterly boring, it’s hot, and it scratches my hands.” He continued working; his workload was defined by the number of furrows he cleared, rather than any defined time period. There was no benefit from slacking. “Why do they make us work this way? They talk about ‘learning and earning one’s place’, but it’s a crock. They just do this to keep us busy.”

He crawled to the next plant. “It’s not as if this work has to be done. All they need to do is give these plants a little more water, and this busywork wouldn’t be necessary. But no, the adults are too stupid to figure that out. Or maybe they just like to keep us busy.”

“This is a big waste of my talents. I shouldn’t be slaving away in the tega-field. I should be improving my eeyal. I’m already better at eeyal than most adults, and I’m only 14. I could do lots of things better than this. But no, they have to waste my talents on this stupid tega work.”

Lariltof **really** hated working the tega-field.

He noticed Trokloan walking down the furrow, heading towards him, carrying a hoe. His mood brightened; Trokloan was the sweetest Klast girl, full of kindness and generosity. And she was really cute, too. One of these days, Lariltof was going to ask her out.

As she neared him, she eeyaled him: “*Happy salutations*”. He almost giggled in delight, so he looked down at the tega plant and eeyaled back: “*Happy salutations*” But he couldn’t help noticing that the tega plant was a shade of blue indicating leaf-sag fungus. This fungus had plagued Kiran agriculture for years, and their only defense against it was the immediate removal and burning of any plant showing the telltale bluish tint. All the young workers were taught to recognize the color. And this tega plant was definitely bluish. But Lariltof hesitated; it hadn’t been bluish a minute ago. He looked up, wondering what he should do. When he looked back at the tega plant, the bluish tint was gone.

“What the kinst?” he thought. He blinked his eyes and looked again: the tega plant was perfectly normal. “Am I seeing things?” He rubbed his eyes and looked again; the plant was still normal.

And then serendipity blessed Lariltof with a coincidence that changed everything: the eeyal for “*work now!*” jumped into his mind. Twisting around, he saw Genlik approaching. “Kinst that Genlik; he’s always been a bully and even now he’s still acting like he owns Kira. I won’t take the bait; I’ll ignore him as he passes. That will make him mad.” He turned back to the tega plant and nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw the strong reddish hue it radiated. “Kinst!” he exclaimed aloud and jumped up, jostling Genlik as he passed. Genlik shoved him away with an imprecation in Jomkar; Lariltof ignored Genlik and stared wildly at the tega plant. What the kinst was going on?

He looked around at the other tega plants; they all seemed normal. He looked back at the first tega plant – now **it** was normal! He looked up at the receding figure of Genlik and suddenly a perception dawned on him. He seized the tega plant, tore it out of the ground, and ran towards the village. The first person he encountered was Stilstris, an older Srol. “Say something!” Lariltof demanded in eeyal. The old woman looked at him with irritation and ignored him.

Lariltof noticed Breenfim, a Tayran kid slightly younger than he was. Dashing to the kid, he commanded “*Talk!*” in eeyal. The kid looked at him wide-

eyed, and then stuttered in eeyal “*Shepherd is to trust.*” This was one of the little sentences that beginning students learned to say. Lariltof stared excitedly at the tega plant, but it didn’t have any red or blue tint; instead, it seemed a brighter green. “Kinst” he muttered and dashed off, looking for somebody else. This time he settled on Vargan, a Ripi about 18 years old. “*Talk!*” Lariltof demanded, and Vargan replied “*No*”. No doubt about it, the tega plant turned red. One more test; Lariltof ran to Sharpin’s home. He burst in while Sharpin was working with a student, which should have irritated Sharpin, but Lariltof genuflected in the Klast fashion to demonstrate his respect, then eeyaled “*most apology*”. He waited in his genuflection for Sharpin to respond. Sharpin had a gentle heart and he immediately sensed the urgency in Lariltof’s eeyal. “*Ungood?*” he asked. Sure enough, the tega plant turned bluish in Lariltof’s hands. Wildly excited, he could only eeyal “*Translator! Translator!*”

When the translator had come, and Lariltof had explained everything to Sharpin through the translator, Sharpin was not as excited as Lariltof.

“Yes, I have seen a bit of that on occasion, but it has never been strong enough for me to believe in it. I am skeptical. However, I will test your idea.”

Sharpin’s own tests produced equivocal results; he was not convinced. But Sufupican suggest that he limit his tests to younger Kirans, and that he test for their own color perceptions rather than his. Those tests gave decisive results: each of the auras was associated with some sort of psychological factor. Blue, which represented shial, always tinged nice, happy, or good communications. Red, representing tanaga, seemed to appear when people were trying to show their power or intimidate somebody. Green, for katsin, was the hardest to decipher, but further testing suggested that it denoted sincerity or truth.

Sharpin remained skeptical of the whole thing, because he couldn’t see it himself. Neither could Sufupican, but she was convinced by the evidence, and she made a proclamation: “Tanaga is red is power; Shial is blue is goodness; Katsin is green is truth.” That became doctrine.

That was the most important thing Lariltof ever did. For the rest of his life, he never amounted to anything.

The Judgement of Sufupican

Sufupican awoke with a sigh; she did not look forward to another day with happy anticipation. Her life was a continuous barrage of selfish parties seeking her approval for some advantage. It seemed to her that, no matter how judicious her decisions, no matter how carefully she presented them, one of the parties always went away angry. People are so small-minded, she brooded as she glumly drank her morning tea. The Shepherdship was a thankless job; as Shepherd, she was expected to set an example of modesty and self-denial that nobody else seemed to emulate. The only gratuity she received for her labors was the service of meals in her home, so that she might have a little time alone to gather her thoughts. Only her sense of dedication to Siboot's ideals inspired to keep up the daily slog. She was making a greater contribution to the future as Shepherd than she could ever make any other way. And the only purpose of living in this godawful place was to shape the future.

Girding her mental loins, Sufupican headed for the Administration building. As usual, it was buzzing with activity integrating and coordinating the activities of the colony, allocating labor for the day to the most pressing tasks. Water had to be tracked and accounted for at every point. From well to distribution pipe to each of the different fields, every liter was tracked so as to measure and evaluate the performance of the different crops. A variety of agricultural experiments were always underway; temperatures had to be carefully noted, even though they varied but little.

She smiled at the diligence of her administrative staff; they were a good group, never complaining, always coming up with improvisations to cope with the breakdowns of equipment, the shortages of resources, the idiosyncracies of individuals. They shielded her from the pettiest of disputes, but any disputant had the right to appeal directly to her, and Kirans were quick to exercise that right.

Sufupican conducted most business in the open area of the Administration building, knowing that the presence of the crowd would dampen the outbursts of indignant disputants. The surrounding bustle also impressed upon the disputants the insignificance of their conflict on comparison to the ongoing business of the colony.

Sufupican also had a small office in which to engage in private conversations. As always, her assistant Sesfika was waiting for her there. Sesfika was her right-hand woman, her crutch, her confidant, her cheerleader, and her confessor. Sufupican would have disintegrated under the pressure had it not been for Sesfika. The Sherpherdship was really a team operation, with Sesfika serving an unrecognized role.

“What’s on the agenda today, dear?” she queried, noting an intimidatingly long list of strings hanging from her kipoo. Sesfika raised the loose end out from her belt and fingered the strings in sequence, using the knots and beads thereon to refresh her memory. “We’ve got an argument between Nesmit and Sarang over an accident in the warehouse. Nesmit blames Sarang for the accident and wants her to apologize to the team.”

“Great. Isn’t Sarang that young Jomkar girl?”

“Yes, ma’am, she’s inexperienced; she might well have been the cause of the accident, but the fault might lie more with her trainer than with her.”

“We’ll just have to interrogate them to figure this out. What’s next?”

“Ridishawn and Marifolk are at it again. This time Marifolk is complaining that Ridishawn rumbles in his sleep so loudly that the noise penetrates the wall and Marifolk can’t sleep.”

“That’s it! I’ve had it with those two! I’m separating them! Have both of them swap their abodes with somebody else. Make sure that both of them get a lower abode, so that the people who have to move into their places perceive

it as a step up. Figure out the new assignments before I meet with them; I'll hear them out then pronounce judgement immediately."

"Got it." Sesfika double-checked the next string on her kipoo. "On a more serious note, we have an 3:00 appointment to hear a fishing dispute between the Fremms and the Srols. You may recall their previous dispute over the..." She paused as she re-read the beads closely. "... over the Ranastrimo islands between them. Those islands are just rocks, and so you internationalized them. Now they're fighting over the demarcation line separating their respective fishing zones."

"Wise Siboot! Can't these people solve even the simplest problems among themselves?!? This is a trivial problem! I'll chastise both sides for their failure to learn the lessons of the war."

"Dear Shepherd" Sesfika intoned, using the most formal and respectful title, "Perhaps you should review the history of this dispute. It goes back centuries. The Paramian Empire first established control of the entire Esfort Sea more than 500 years ago. When it fell, King Sgmisi of the Srols drove the Frem navy from the sea, establishing Srol sovereignty over the area, which they held for 320 years. But in the Great War, the Srols and the Fremms fought a series of big naval battles in the area of the Ranastrimo islands, which the Fremms won decisively. Hence, both sides have historic claims to sovereignty."

"So basically we're going to hear two completely different versions of history today."

"That's about it, ma'am."

"OK, could you bring me all the history books dealing with this? I'll go over them before the conference. I suppose I'll have more trouble getting each side to shut up so the other can speak. Sheesh!"

"One last thing, ma'am: we have a bead dispute. The parties are waiting outside."

"I'll take that right now; it shouldn't take long."

Sesfika opened the door for Sufupican and she proceeded to what was jokingly called “The Throne”: the imposing chair that Governor Grad had awarded himself ‘to instill the proper sense of respect for the office of the governor’. It sat at the head of a long table at which disputants sat. Sesfika motioned to the parties and they assembled in front of their chairs, standing until Sufupican sat. They were all Tayrans. The plaintiffs sat on the right, the defendants on her left.

Sufupican turned to her right and said, “Please present your case.”

Tromilcar, an older Tayran, began. “As you know, Wise Siboot allocated one of his beads to each colonist. Over the years, colonists have inherited their beads from their parents in a legally determined order. This has insured that each and every colonist has a Siboot bead.”

Sufupican nodded and urged “I know. Get along with it.”

Tromilcar continued, “Twenty four years ago, Margwith and Damilla bore two children, but one died at an early age. To keep Tayran numbers at their proper level, Arlen authorized Margwith and Damilla to have another child, but Damilla proved to be too old to conceive. Accordingly, Arlen authorized myself and Hamilcar to bear a third child, Subotai.”

“The sole surviving child of Margwith and Damilla is Chepebeki, who inherited both of her parents’ Siboot beads. But Hamilcar and I have only two beads to bequeath to our three children. We ask that Chepebeki surrender one of her Siboot beads to Subotai upon our deaths.”

Sufupican nodded with her best approximation of a poker face. She turned to Chepebeki on her left. “Please present your case.”

“Yes, ma’am”, Chepebeki began. “These two beads represent more than just Siboot; they also represent my parents. One came from my father and one came from my mother. The ancient Ripi tradition has it that one’s ancestral necklace should hold beads representing each ancestor. It would be a viola-

tion of that tradition for you to take away from me a bead representing one of my parents.”

Sufupican couldn't suppress a sigh of relief, but she tried to make it appear to be a sigh of completeness. This was going to be easy, she thought. “Have you any specific response to Tromilcar's statement?”

“Yes, ma'am. Tromilcar is asking you to violate an ancient tradition. There has never been a case of a person forced to surrender an ancestor bead. It is unthinkable.”

“Tromilcar, have you any response to Chepebeki's statement?”

“Yes, ma'am. We argue that our third child is entitled to a Siboot bead, just as any other colonist. If you deny our petition, Subotai will be the only colonist in history to have no Siboot bead.”

“Very well” Sufupican announced. “I shall meditate and consider this case carefully. Please return in one hour.” She arose and strode back to her office, Sisfeka trailing behind. With the door safely closed, Sufupican dropped into her chair and smiled. “Another easy case! Why can't these people solve their problems without me?”

Sesfika was puzzled. “Why do you say that this is easy? It seems to me that both sides have good arguments.”

“Chepebeki is mixing together two completely different traditions. One tradition is the single Siboot bead for each colonist. The other tradition is the possession of beads from one's ancestors. If Chepebeki were serious about the ancestor necklace tradition, she would have had a bead taken from each parent upon death. She is trying to make the Siboot beads replace the genuine ancestor beads. That's not part of the tradition.”

Sesfika smiled. “Clever! I suppose that's why you're the Shepherd. Shall I gather them to hear your decision?”

“No, they should think that I sweated over this decision for the full hour. That gives me an hour to go through the history books for this Frem-Srol dispute. Would you please run and get them for me?”

Sesfika smiled and left for the library.

Filrith's Dream

He was floating in a black void. In the remote distance, he could see something faint; it was growing. There were filaments; they were rushing at him with unholy speed. They enveloped him as they raced past, and he saw vague shapes: mists, lines, blotchy surfaces, all racing past him. The direction of motion changed and with it his perception: he was the one moving, at impossible velocity through a weird universe of colored shreds and curves.

As they became denser, he descried some emerging patterns. There were numerous tiny beads, each colored either red or green or blue. There were larger conglomerations, wispy and ill-defined. His path took him almost straight through one; it resolved into a firestorm of red, green and blue fragments, bits of pattern, strings, blotches, shapes that seemed like windows into something stretched and distorted. From a distance these blobs seemed varicolored, but up close they were always composed of pure red, pure green, or pure blue. It all disappeared in a flash of brilliant white light, and he resumed normal dreaming. The next morning he felt unrested, as if he had not slept well. He sought out Oopkie, another Klast who was good at eeyal.

“I’ve had something like that”, she agreed, “but not as vivid as you describe. My dreams have only the red, green, and blue beads. Let’s go talk to some others.”

They recruited a translator and interviewed others. They quickly learned that the dreams were limited to younger people, and there was definitely a connection with eeyal; strong speakers of eeyal had more vivid dreams. The most surprising result was the realization that the three colors (red, green, and blue) that everybody mentioned were tied to the three auras. Tanaga was red, katsin was green, and shial was blue. Why that was, nobody knew.

Dream Combat

Feslym stood waiting at the porch to his hut, leaning against the post, watching the sunset, thinking hard as the image of the sun burned into his retinas. Nightfall was upon him; it was time to make a decision. Theorid had a tana-ga-pon; he knew that for a certainty. Feslym's pon was katsin; if he engaged Theorid in dream combat, he would lose.

On the other hand, he thought that Menkili had a shial-pon. That meant that he should attack Menkili, for his katsin-pon would defeat Menkili's shial-pon, knocking her out of the contest. But what if he was wrong? If Menkili in fact possessed one of the other pons, Feslym would be knocked out of the race.

He didn't know much else about any of the other acolytes; he had gained little information in his conversations that day. He suspected that Arfram's pon was shial, but he wouldn't dare risk everything on that suspicion. Kinst! If only he had been more aggressive in his interactions with the others that day!

There would be a maximum of seven battles in the coming night. First the battles using the same auras would simultaneously eliminate both their combatants. Then the battles with different auras would take place simultaneously. If more than one acolyte emerged from dream combat unscathed, or if nobody was left with a pon, the combat would be repeated the next night, but if exactly one acolyte made it through the night without losing their pon, that acolyte would become Kira's new Shepherd.

The sun had set and the stars were already coming out. He walked inside and sat down on the mat on the floor. He meditated, gathering his strength. Then he lay down deliberately, face up, with his arms laying at his sides, palms up. He closed his eyes and sent his mind to sleep. Soon he felt the fire within himself glow and erupt into flame. He was ready.

He sent his spirit reaching out across the black empty space of the dream world. He could see little fireflies, pinpoints of light, that were the normal people of Kira, the untrained ones whose minds were only strong enough to speak eeyal. He had to remind himself not to feel superior; once he had been like them. Only the long years of training had given him this much reach, and he had been selected for that training as the representative of his species.

Then his spirit caught the feel of Menkili's, and he readied himself for combat. He brandished his katsin pon, wrapped it around himself, thrust it forward. Now he was directly aware of Menkili's spirit, a blazing ball of fire, large and powerful. He was frightened by the size and energy of Menkili's spirit; perhaps Menkili was the rightful Shepherd. He could not know how he appeared to others; perhaps Menkili was just as intimidated by Feslym's own spirit.

The two spirits engaged; the power of their impact would have shattered a lesser spirit. Through the violence of the contact, though, Feslym could clearly sense the shial pon that Menkili had used against him. He had guessed right! In triumph his spirit pulsated and grew, sweeping into and through Menkili's spirit, draining away the shial pon that she had mistakenly used against Feslym. Menkili's beaten spirit flickered and blinked out, returning to Menkili to regain its strength.

Feslym awoke; he was lying face down several feet from the mat. Dried blood was caked around his nostrils and as he struggled to his feet he felt the aching in his joints that told him he had spent another night thrashing wildly in his aura-sleep. He wondered why he had not encountered anybody else in the dream-world; he must have been lucky enough that nobody chose to attack him. Perhaps it was because nobody knew anything about his aura. Perhaps his reticence the previous day had kept others in the dark.

There was a cluster of people waiting outside his door, with more coming to join the growing crowd. The little fireflies might not be able to participate in mind-combat but they certainly were aware of its existence and outcome. The other acolytes appeared and elbowed their way to the front, standing on the

porch next to Feslym. One by one, each one declared Feslym to be the new Shepherd.

Thus Feslym became the Fourth Shepherd of Kira.

Rodding the Chief Translator

Rodding glared at his porridge with anger so intense that he would not have been surprised had it burst into flame. After another crappy day he was at last alone; under no circumstances was he going to take his meal at the dining hall with those other... idiots.

Everybody thought that translators had a cushy job. Yeah, right. And he, as chief translator, had the cushiest job of all — right? Yeah, right. We never have to work, do we? We just sit around and yak away in the shade. Yeah, what a cushy job. Right.

On paper, it all seemed so simple: 280 people on Kira, 14 translators, two from each species. At any given time, 4 translators on duty, with others on call. He, as chief translator, was on call 24/7 but was supposedly engaged only in teaching the younger translators. Supposedly. Yeah, right.

In practice, most Kirans had developed enough eeyal to communicate the most basic ideas: yes, no, good, bad, help, get and a few more. It was adequate for most daily work, especially in a world of well-worn routines.

But when problems arose, everything went to hell. The 13 translators under Rodding's supervision were all supposedly skilled in all seven languages. Yeah, right. Not one of those lazy bastards was fluent in more than three languages. Whenever a problem arose requiring translation services, the odds were that none of the translators could handle the job alone. Sometimes, two of them would team up, translating from one language to a second then to a third. He had once eavesdropped on one of these "translations"; it was truly a grand farce:

Amkalien (Tayran): "*Freemisar lost shovel.*"

Gleenfry (in Jomkar): “*Freemisar can't find the big spoon.*”

Soraykin (in Ripi): “*Where is the big spoon?*”

Freemisar (in Ripi): “*What big spoon? I don't know anything about a big spoon.*”

Soraykin (in Jomkar): “*Freemisar doesn't know what a big spoon is.*”

Gleenfry (in Tayran): “*What is a big spoon?*”

This was the kind of idiocy that Rodding had to sort out every day. He had tried to teach his translators the languages, but the facility for learning foreign languages had seemed to desert Kirans over the generations.

But that wasn't the worst of it, Rodding thought, stabbing the air with his spoon to make the point: the languages themselves were in flux. Every generation of young punks has to establish its own generational dialect as an act of rebellion against its parents. Fortunately, these creative leaps never went further than the creations of synonyms for words important to teenagers: good, bad, adult in authority, cute boy, cute girl, and so on. But with seven languages undergoing such ferment, and kids occasionally borrowing words from other languages, there were currently 43 different terms on Kira that expressed approbation. And he, Rodding, was expected to keep track of all of them!

He slammed his spoon down on the table and paced about angrily. They had the gall to scream at him during their disputes. He wasn't responsible for the screw-up; he was trying to help them fix it. But no, they had to take their anger out on him. If the kinst-butts would just tone down...

Kinst. He paused his rant. Well, there was one word that was universal. It didn't need translation; everybody used it, although parents tried to preserve the innocence of their children for a few short years before abandoning hope. Even the Frems had a version of that word that everybody recognized, and most Frems could tell when it was being used by foreigners. Why in the world was that the only word that all Seven Species shared?

He shook his head. Who knows? He wiped down his spoon and bowl, put them away, and settled down into his armchair. “I need some peace and

quiet.” He pulled out his old book of classic paintings and leafed through it, drenching himself in their beauty as if it were a balm for his hurt.

Feslym's Daughter

One of Feslym's first acts after ascending to the Shepherdship was to take a wife. The duties of an acolyte are too great to tolerate the distractions of a family, and so the custom had developed that acolytes put off marriage until after a new Shepherd had been chosen or they had passed the baton to a successor. The problems of choosing a mate on Kira were simplified by the small population. With only 280 souls on Feslym's accession, divided among seven species, there were only about twenty females of each species. At any given time, only three or four might be available for marriage. Thus, there wasn't much choice. Romance got short shrift under such conditions.

Feslym had three female Jomkars from which to choose. Being the Shepherd, there was little question as to their own willingness to be his spouse; the Shepherd's spouse enjoyed some minor privileges that were, in the harsh environment of Kira, luxuries. When Feslym offered his hand to Nafimko, she accepted without hesitation.

Exactly one year and two months later, Nynub was born. Despite the fact that the birth had no political significance, it was nevertheless greeted with pleasure by Kirans and Laminans alike. Nynub would have no special claims to the Shepherdship, but it was generally believed that mental powers were in some way founded in genes, and so the offspring of a Shepherd were held in special regard. Moreover, there lingered in all Laminans some fondness for the ceremony and splendor of royalty, and a royal birth had been a matter of great importance in the middle histories of all species except the Jomkars.

The significance of Nynub's birth was elevated by the fact that she was the first child born to a sitting Shepherd. Arien had been infertile and Sufupican's husband died shortly after she became Shepherd. Her birth was thus a matter of great significance to Kirans and Laminans alike; she symbolized the normalization of Kiran life. It capped the unification of the Seven Species with a symbolism powerful to all Laminans.

Feslym found fatherhood more consuming than Shepherdship. Jomkar family loyalties have always been very powerful, so Feslym had difficulty honoring the admonition of Siboot that Shepherds must see above their own species and think only of the Seven Species. Feslym had no problem being fair-minded when it came to resolving the disputes of other Jomkars, but when it came to Nafimko and Nynub, Feslym lost his objectivity. The Kirans did not resent Feslym this single advantage he took of his office. To himself he took no favors; he readily lent a hand to any physical labor, no matter how difficult or demeaning. They could forgive this minor vanity.

And so Nynub grew up the darling of Kiran society, the Little Princess loved by all. Old mothers made her special clothing; the farmers brought her the first fruits of the season; the machine shop workers made her toys out of unusable scrap. She greeted each gift with a delight that never failed to warm the heart of the donor.

School was Nynub's first harsh encounter with the realities of Kira. Although her teacher treated her with much affection, she was still only one child among many, not the center of attention. Nynub rebelled against the hard truth, and it cost Feslym much pain and many years bringing her to acquiesce to her place as a citizen of Kira. Even then, her acquiescence was a grudging one; she retained her conviction that she was at heart superior to the other Kiran children.

Sirk The Til

One of the finest contributions that the Srols made to Laminan culture was the domestication of the Til. These little animals, weighing about 3 kilograms were hunters in the scrub lands of the Srols before they were domesticated to control the flocks of birds that ate the crops. Smart and sociable, the Tils quickly became house pets in Srol farmhouses. Some of the earliest trading contacts with the Srols involved these endearing creatures and soon they were being bred all over Lamina. Some of the first Kiran colonists brought along their Tils. The calamity that befell Lamina and cut off Kira from support forced Siboot to take draconian measures to insure the survival of the colony, but Tils were not to be sacrificed for survival. Siboot well knew that his authority would be challenged if he tried to deny the colonists their Tils, so he devised a formula for the place that Tils would have in Kiran society.

Just as the total population of Kira would be held to 280 souls, the Til population would be held to 60 animals. Since the average lifespan of a Til was 10 years while the average Laminan lifetime was 50 years, Siboot's formula guaranteed that each Kiran would own one Til during his lifetime. Moreover since the average family had four members, most Kirans could expect to have a Til around most of their lives. It was a wise and generous solution that everybody applauded. The cost in food was about enough to feed two more Kiran mouths but all agreed that it was a small price to pay for the joy that the Tils brought.

Siboot further decreed that no consumable medicines would be expended on Tils, a rule that also was widely agreed to. This basic system governed the Til population on Kira through the years and served all well. Thus when a Til named Fester gave birth to a litter of four Tilkies, they had already been assigned to their new homes. Four weeks later Skordokott, a six-year old Tayran brought home his Til, whom he named Sirk. Skordokott and the Tilkie were instant friends. Sirk was an especially smart fellow and he quickly learned a variety of chase and hide games. He and Skordokott would spend hours stalking each other. Skordokott would creep about pausing to listen for

any sounds of motion while Sirk would sneak up behind him and attack his leg with mock ferocity. As they grew up they would go on walks together with the Til esconced in Skordokott's backpack taking in all the places they had just been to. Skordokott would talk to Sirk, telling him all his secrets and Sirk would listen with great attention and no comprehension. Skordokott would spend at least an hour each evening playing gently with his little friend. Skordokott's parents were amazed by his behavior. Not even Tayrans are immune to the charms of the Tils, but such liberal generation of emotional warmth was totally out of character for a Tayran. There was only one other Tayran child at the time, a little girl, and she was so insulted by Skordokott's unseemly coddling of his Til that she stopped playing with him. Skordokott was deeply hurt by her taunts and retreated even further into his friendship with Sirk.

His mother wanted to step in and do something about his behavior but his father demurred. She feared that he was not growing up like a Tayran, that there was something wrong with him to be so quiet and gentle. Little Tayrans, both boys and girls are hellions, but Skordokott seemed to have no interest in running, screaming, and fighting with his playmates.

His father though, saw a greater wisdom in Skordokotts behavior "It is true, he is not growing up as a Tayran. He is growing up as a Kiran. Is that not something we ought to appreciate?" His mother had no answer. Skordokott was allowed to follow his own path with Sirk.

In Skordokotts thirteenth year Sirk met with an accident. He had gone out for adventures during the day while Skordokott was at school, but when Skordokott came home that afternoon, Sirk did not show up to greet him. This was a surprise to Skordokott, for Sirk was a punctual creature who would not miss their afternoon greeting. Instantly worried, he began to search for Sirk, but he found nothing and had to be ordered to bed late that night.

The next day was wasted as he fretted through schoolwork, waiting anxiously only to escape and resume his search. At last the time came and Skordokott raced home. As he neared his house, his heart leapt when he saw Sirk's form waiting for him where he always waited. But his joy turned to worried curios-

ity when he saw Sirk's mouth wide open, the pink tongue sticking out as if he were panting. He reached out to touch Sirk and realized that there was something terribly wrong with the way the mouth hung open. The lower jaw was broken and hung loosely by the gums and tongue-tissue, all of which was swollen badly. Skordokott nearly fainted in horror. He gently picked up Sirk and carried him to Yelfim's house. Yelfim was the doctor and he would fix Sirk. Yelfim took one look at Sirk and sent word for Skordokott's parents to come immediately. He sent another messenger to find Forago to translate. What he had to say was too important to rely on eeyal.

This done, he began a careful examination of the little Til. It took less than two minutes for the frantic parents to show up at the doctors house, and another minute to calm them down and reassure them that Skordokott was fine. Then, with the parents holding the child's hands, and Forago translating, Yelfim told them his conclusions: "The damage to Sirk's jaw is too much to repair. The infection that has already set in will only grow worse, and it will kill Sirk within a week.

Skordokotts eyes went wide. "But you're the doctor! You can save him, can't you?"

"I'm sorry, little one. The infection is too deep, the damage too great. I cannot save him."

Skordokott looked in desperation at his mother then his father They were both near tears, but their expressions confirmed the doctor's words.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" he begged.

Skordokotts mother knelt in front of him and looked him in the eye with a mixture of sternness and love. "Yes, Skordokott, there is something we can do, but Sirk is your Til and you must make the decision. We can do nothing and let him die a slow and painful death, or we can put him out of his misery now."

At first Skordokott did not grasp the meaning of her words. “You mean we can fix his misery now?” he asked hopefully. His mother hesitated, looked at her husband, and then, very slowly said, "Yes, Skordokott, we can fix his misery now, the only way that we can. We must do now what nature will surely do in days. We must do without pain what nature will do with pain.

Skordokotts eyes widened in horror at the suggestion “You want to KILL Sirk?!?!” By this time the translation had caught up with Yelfim and he intervened. “I shall dispose of the animal. You take the poor little fellow home and make up some story to cover his grief. Tell him that I am taking the Til to a happy place that only Tils can go to.”

His parents explained this to Skordokott. One parent took each of his hands and they led him away, but Skordokott knew that he would never seek Sirk again. He screamed and raged against his parents, against the doctor, against the whole world. And thus Skordokott lost his gentleness.

Soome and Flebtin

It was the end of a hard half-day's work. Soome had been training a crew of youngsters. These were 12-year-olds who had graduated from simple gofer responsibilities to their first fieldwork. In recognition of their age (as well as their clumsiness), they were given light work lasting only half a day. Still, Kira was no garden and every hand was needed to grow enough food. So young Kirans went to work at an early age – unless they were candidates for acolyte status, in which case they spent their time learning languages so that they could act as translators.

The kids filed into the tool shed one by one to hand over their hoes. But Flebtin's hoe was broken at the junction between the handle and the blade. She was obviously terrified by the situation. She handed over the broken hoe and started crying.

Soome didn't speak Lokweel, so he resorted to eeyal. He held up the broken hoe and asked "*why?*" he asked. Flebtin continued sobbing; she wouldn't look up at Soome. He put his hand on her the top of her head in a reassuring gesture common among Lokweels. "*why?*" he again asked.

Flebtin stifled her sobs and looked up at Soome. After a long pause, perhaps due to her having to think through the eeyal, she said "*Siboot*" It was a common eeyal usage indicating something that was just fate, an accident or some other event beyond the capability or will of any person.

Soome had a strong sense of truthfulness, and the three Siboot beads on his necklace enhanced his perceptiveness. He straightened up, smiling. He put the broken hoe aside, dismissed the other kids, and smilingly told Flebtin "*Come*". They went to Caronycoorck, the translator on duty nearby. Soome explained the situation and asked for translation. "I can handle it" Carony-

coorck offered, but Soome demurred. “She’ll never be comfortable about me if she thinks I asked you to reprimand her. I must do it myself.”

“OK, if that’s how you want it” Caronycoorck shrugged her shoulders. With Caronycoorck translating, Soome set to work.

“You are still learning eeyal, yes?”

“Yes, sir”

“You are pretty good at it for a girl your age.”

“Thank you, sir”

“There’s something new that you need to know about eeyal.”

“What is it, sir?”

“If you tell a lie in eeyal, sometimes the other person can see it.”

“How, sir?”

“The colors around your head show it.” He didn’t mention the role played by the Siboot beads.

“But I don’t see any colors around your head.”

“That’s because it takes many years of practice to be able to see the colors around a person’s head. Only the acolytes are good enough to see them, and even then, it’s difficult.”

“Really?”

“Yes, my dear, and so I’d like to ask you to tell Caronycoorck exactly how the hoe was broken.”

At first the import of Soome's comments didn't sink in, but when she realized that she'd been caught in a lie, she started crying again. Both Caronycoorck and Soome put their hands on her head to reassure her. They let her cry her tears out, then Caronycoorck repeated the question.

“There was a rock in the way. It wouldn't move. I got mad and started hitting the rock with my hoe. It broke.”

Caronycoorck and Soome exchanged glances; that seemed unlikely given her age and strength. There was something afoot. Soome had an idea: “Let's see if we can't bluff her into confessing the truth. Tell her than I can see by the colors around her head that she's still lying.”

“But you can't see auras in regular languages!” Caronycoorck protested.

“You know that, and I know that, but does Flebtin know that?”

Caronycoorck smiled, and translated the statement for Flebtin. This time she didn't cry; the expression of terror returned to her face. Soome and Caronycoorck exchanged worried glances.

“What's wrong?” Caronycoorck inquired solicitously.

“I can't say” she responded.

“It sounds to me,” Soome declared, “that there's something bigger than a broken hoe here. We won't get the truth out of her. We need to get her parents.” Three minutes later they were in the little home of Flebtin's family. They had a new Til who frolicked joyously with Flebtin. Caronycoorck explained the situation and asked Nostoru, her father, to get Flebtin to tell what really happened. It took ten minutes and a few more floods of tears to get the story out of her.

Charbin, one of the teenage Lokweels, had traded his broken hoe with Flebtin, warning her that Siboot would be extremely angry with her if she

told anybody. He told her that she would never be able to speak eeyal if she told anybody.

Caronycoorck and Soome again placed their hands on Flebtin's head, and then left the father to reassure her. Outside, they split up: Caronycoorck went to find Charbin and bring him to Feslym; Soome went directly to Feslym to brief him on the situation. Feslym would deal with Charbin.

Gaustusu

Gaustusu was the son of Promtrila and Litkin, the archivists for the colony. The job of archivist had become almost hereditary since his grandfather Formoty had organized the task in the years after Siboot's death. Somebody had to do something to preserve all the books, movies, and data disks that had been scattered about in the homes of the colonists. At first it had been primarily a matter of gathering and cataloging everything but Formoty had completed almost all that work. His successors were saddled with the task of preserving the meaning of all these works. The archivist position evolved from that of a librarian to a kind of Minister of Culture. In a colony of 280 souls struggling for survival there was little time for art and no room for artists. The colony's concession to the artistic imperative was to preserve its memory.

Promtilla and Litkin pursued their duties energetically, pushing literature onto tired laborers too polite to refuse it, organizing Sunday afternoon concerts of recorded music that few attended. They never gave up on the attempt to repair the movie machine; it had been a big draw for the first twenty years after the war. Kirans had marveled at the images of life on Lamina, at the lush green foliage that seemed to be everywhere on that blessed planet. Repair was futile; the tiny rubber belts had long since decayed and there was simply no substitute on Kira. The music machines still worked but nobody cared. The language of music was lost on the unfamiliar ear. The sweet serenades and glorious thundering of classical Laminan composition were random noises to the ears of Kirans who had not been brought up in the Laminan tradition of great and powerful music. This was the cruelest sorrow to Promtilla and Litkin, for as Fremes they took special pride in this the one pursuit in which Fremes had dominated Laminan culture. Little Gaustusu, though, was raised in an environment humming with music.

He heard all the great composers. The collection was spotty but they did have most of the important pieces of Laminan music. To his parents delight, Gaustusu developed an avid love of music. They were able to instill in him what

they themselves lacked: an inner sense of music. As he matured, Gaustusu faced the dilemma all music-loving Fremms struggled with: the desire to play a more direct part in the music. The voiceless Fremms had never known song and so they turned to their instruments and poured their hearts out with strings, winds, and percussions.

Gaustusu's quandary was even more profound than the one that had driven other Fremms in times past to such dizzying heights of composition and instrumentality. There was not a single functioning musical instrument on all of Kira. His soul soared and danced with music that could find no outlet. But Gaustusu was a Kiran as well as a Frem and he breathed the sturdy self-reliance that Kira had inculcated in all her children. He found his own way to play his own part in the music: it was a kind of dance. Now, Fremms were never dancers; their stubby limbs and thick bodies made their attempts to follow the music ludicrous. The best dancers on Lamina had always been Ripis and sometimes Srols. But Gaustusu didn't know this and so he was not deterred. He turned away from his clumsy feet and looked to his elegant hands. Frem hands, so quick and expressive in Frem sign language, were the ideal outlet for his musical longing. He would sing with his hands.

It was frustrating at first. All he could do was shake his hands in rough approximation of the beat. He felt foolish: his clumsy thrashings bore little resemblance to the beauty of the music he heard. But he kept at it with the same Frem stubbornness and love that had made Fremms such great musicians. He learned to see the music as a visual structure. He knew no theory, of course. Perhaps if he had, he might not have invented his unique view of music. He simply traced the visual structure of the music with his hands.

He kept his little art form a secret. There wasn't much point in telling anyone about it – nobody would understand it if he showed it to them. Besides, nobody ever asked him. But he kept practicing and improved steadily. He learned how to make his hands quaver, lilt, and throb. He developed a repertoire of fundamental motions that covered all of the sonic capabilities of Laminan instruments. Staccato stabs for strings, puffs for horns, and precise finger-thrusts for the articulated sounds of the various keyboard instruments. More important, he found the emotional expressiveness he longed for. When

the music turned a graceful twist, his hand pirouetted in perfect syntony. A gay dancing trill sent his hand prancing and gamboling through space. When the solo voice of the violin soared in sweet tremolo sadness, his hand accompanied it with soaring, trembling fingers. And when the orchestra thundered back its answer his hands rippled with power and virility.

He did not thus master his art until he was a young man, working in the fields by day and practicing his passion at night. By this time, he was the Frem acolyte. A multiply-gifted person, Gaustusu mastered eeyal with an unconcerned ease that infuriated others in his class. What they struggled with, he didn't care about, yet he learned. Perhaps there is some secret link between musical faculties and eeyal that gave him an advantage.

As he neared middle age. Gaustusu took over his parents' job as archivist and continued pursuing his passion. In the early evening hours, he would latch his door, shutter the windows, and lose himself in the angelic strains of the great composers. Their agonies and raptures, their merriments and wonder, their ecstasies all found form in Gaustusu's fingers. He came to know these long-dead ancestors of his in his very bones, and feel their voices in his muscles. Gaustusu was at one with his heritage.

And nobody ever knew.

Koopie and Skordokott

“Koopie, what do you think you’re doing?”

Koopie woke up from his daydream and looked at Mortil. For a second his face showed some panic, but that was quickly replaced by a more relaxed expression. “I’m sorry sir I was just thinking.”

“Koopie, you are such a sadness to me. Blessed with so much talent, and yet so unconcerned. You are the finest Ripi speaker of eeyal, sure to become the next Ripi acolyte when Jukili retires, yet you don’t seem to care for the honor or the responsibility.”

“I’m sorry Mortil. I know you’re right, but I just can’t seem to care very much for it. I didn’t choose this great honor for myself and I wish that I could transfer the burden to someone more desirous of it. Besides,” he broke into a grin, “I’m young; I have so little time and so much hell to raise.”

Mortil laughed. It was hard to remain angry with Koopie’s light heart and sense of fun. “Go home, Koopie. Try to practice the constructions I showed you today.”

“I will, sir.” Koopie winked wickedly. He went straight from Mortil’s house to the cafeteria. At this late afternoon hour, there would be only a few snacks set out, but there would probably be some of the other young people; Kiran society recognized the greater need of young people for socializing and required of them only a partial work shift in their late adolescence. Most of them would be gathering at the cafeteria for an afternoon snack and some fun.

Jopin was already there. A fat little Frem, she helped out in the records office and so had a shorter distance to walk to reach the cafeteria when the 3:00

horn blew. *Hello, Koopie! News?* Despite her clumsiness with eeyal, her bounciness and laughter came right through with the images. Koopie laughed to himself. *Jopin most good!* He expanded the point with an exaggerated gesture of himself sweeping an imaginary Ripi girl off her feet and smothering her with kisses. Jopin laughed and blushed with a coy wave of her hand.

Negative workness! The image shot through both their minds with frighteningly great penetration power, causing them both to instantly drop their play and wheel about, searching for the source of the accusation. Koopie knew from the texture and feel of the image, and sure enough, there in the doorway stood Skordokott, tall and powerful in the bloom of early Tayran manhood, still sweating from his work guiding an irrigator.

Skordokott eeyal strong. Koopie had no desire to argue with Skordokott. Perhaps Skordokott was just in a bad mood.

Koopie eeyal negative strong. Koopie play. Koopie negative work. Koopie negative strong.

Koopie express feelings negative strong Skordokott.

Skordokott was not placated by Koopie's submissiveness. He grew angrier at this lazy, laughing fool.

Skordokott Shepherd future.

Feslym negative dead.

Feslym die future. Skordokott Shepherd future. Koopie negative Shepherd future. Koopie negative workness.

By this time a number of other people had entered the cafeteria. Few could fully understand the conversation but all knew that it was a confrontation. Koopie was uncomfortable with the unpleasantness of it; he didn't like to fight. He paused, smiled at Skordokott, and walked away. Jopin chased after him. *Koopie negative go!*

Koopie just smiled at her and winked. *Jopin come.*

Mealtime in the cafeteria was always an intimidating experience. Old Tekula, the Lokweel, ran the place with a hard eye and a sharp tongue, and although few could understand her words, all feared her anger. She made certain that everybody cleaned their plate, bussed their tray, and observed her idea of decorum. Skordokott, like other Tayrans, had little objection to her dictatorial style; the cafeteria was in his mind Tekula's territory and she had a right to run it any way she saw fit. He waited his turn and when it came, he pointed to some leafy vegetables and started to image *target*. But just as he imaged his word, there was another image: *garbage*. Now, one of the first lessons in eeyal that every Kiran child learns is to 'get off the air' if somebody else is imaging, and so Skordokott instinctively aborted his imaging after saying *Target*.

Skordokott was surprised to see Tekula staring at him coldly. He blinked innocently, wondering if he had said something wrong. People nearby edged away from him. He looked around, his confusion growing. *Negative good?* he asked Tekula. She wiped her hands on her apron and disappeared into the kitchen, to emerge a few seconds later with a pail of old, spoiled food. *Skordokott target garbage*. She dumped the contents of the pail onto his head.

Skordokott never saw Koopie and Jopin peeking over the nearest window, laughing uproariously. And he never figured out why Tekula got so mad at him.

Camiggdo and the Redberries

Redberry Festival was just four days away. The first redberries had already come in but there wasn't enough for everybody, so they were set aside in the kitchen to wait until the main crop ripened. Everybody was looking forward to the Festival; redberries were the only sweet edibles on Kira, and they were eagerly anticipated.

Camiggdo was particularly enthusiastic about Redberry Festival. Last year she had discovered that she had quite a sweet tooth, gobbling up just about every redberry concoction cooked up. Each of the Seven Species had their own gustatory preferences, and a stupendous redberry cuisine had developed over the decades, mixing redberries with just about everything else that grew on Kira in a crazy kaleidoscope of tastes.

There was special excitement this year over the first crop of ginga-fruit. The ginga-fruit trees had been on Kira from the beginning, but during all this time they had never borne fruit. Ten years ago, Tarnos, who had dedicated himself to learning the ancient arts of tree-raising, had learned from fellow Srols back in Trebizond how to raise ginga-fruit trees properly. At long last his babies had begun to bear fruit, and each of the seven cooks had devised a new dish to take advantage of this tantalizing new comestible. Nobody had any idea of how ginga-fruit tasted, but much consultation with chefs on the home-world had given them a rough idea.

Camiggdo knew that the cooks were already trying out their new recipes, and she was desperate with anticipation of this new taste. She resolved to act.

In the darkest hour of the night, she crept into the kitchen, feeling her way past boxes, touching counters and pots. It was pitch dark and she didn't dare turn on a light, so she closed her eyes and navigated by touch and smell. She knew that the new redberry dishes had to be somewhere close.

Her right hand brushed against something soft and textured; she felt it more deliberately. It was some kind of baked coating. Gently, gingerly, her fingers traced the outline of the item. It was a pie! And a slice had been taken out of it! This was her ideal target. She reached for it with both hands — and her left hand smashed into something hard and metallic. A cacophony of clanging rang out as pots banged against each other and a spoon bounced on the floor.

Camiggdo panicked; she turned and felt her way as fast as she could towards the exit, hoping and praying that she could escape before somebody came to see what the noise was about. But in her haste, her long legs crashed into several boxes, upsetting them, slowing her down, and making even more racket. She reached the door and pulled it open, clambering out into the open. Lamina was above the horizon, so the settlement was bathed in bright, bright light. If she stayed in the shadows, she would make it home safely. Gently, quietly closing the door, she turned towards home — and ran straight into somebody. Hands grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. An angry voice shouted imprecations in a foreign language. It took her a second to realize that the language was Lokweel and then another second to recognize the voice: it was mean old Tekula!

Stop! Stop! she eeyalled at Tekula. If Tekula would stop raising such a ruckus, Camiggdo might still escape this jam with minimal damage.

Tekula stopped shaking Camiggdo and pushed her out into the light, turning her so that she could see the face of her prisoner.

Most negative good! she signaled.

Camiggdo thought frantically, and quickly hatched a scheme. She knelt down before Tekula and began to cry. “*No eat past. Much work.*”

Tekula was a hardened old bitch and wasn't of a mind to let Camiggdo off the hook, but she responded with a simple “*I see*”. She'd taken the bait!

Camiggdo thought frantically. Now all I have to do is bring her in. “*Camiggdo work morning. Camiggdo no eat. Camiggdo work afternoon. Camiggdo*

no eat. Camiggdo work evening. Camiggdo no eat.” She paused for effect. “No eat cause no sleep. Camiggdo walk. Camiggdo see kitchen. Camiggdo target eat-thing.” She paused again to sob weakly. “Forgive Camiggdo. Forgive Camiggdo. Camiggdo most negative strong. Camiggdo most negative good. Forgive Camiggdo.”

It worked! Tekula was a vicious old lady, but Camiggdo had found the chink. “*Camiggdo come*” Tekula said. She entered the kitchen, turned on the light, and produced a hunk of tega-plant for Camiggdo. “Just what I didn’t want” Camiggdo thought, “some slimy old tega. Great.” But she again fell to her knees, clutching the tega plant as if it were a lost lover, crying and eeyaling “*Camiggdo thank most Tekula. Camiggdo thank most Tekula.*” Tekula even patted her on the head, then imaged “*Camiggdo negative come*”. Camiggdo rose and turned to scurry away. Ten meters off, she turned to face Tekula. “*Camiggdo thank most Tekula. Camiggdo thank most Tekula.*” Then she started off briskly for home. I suppose that I pulled that one off pretty well, she thought to herself. Still, I didn’t get any redberry pie. And this — this stinking tega! She hurled it angrily into the field nearby. I’ll just have to be more careful next time.

The Three-Ball Game

Feslym climbed up onto the makeshift platform and waited for the rumble of the crowd to fade. He noted just how large and how small the crowd seemed. Here was assembled the entire population of Kira, and to see all 280 inhabitants in a single crowd, well, it was a stirring sight on a moon that seldom saw more than twenty people in one place. On the other hand, he reflected somberly, this was the entire population of the moon, his people in their entirety, clustered together in this little knot. Not much of an empire.

He raised his arms and closed his eyes, the better to concentrate. Then he eeyalled as strongly as he could, “*Game now! Game now!*” The crowd roared back in eeyal, “*Game now! Game now!*” It was an exhilarating sensation, all 280 souls imaging the words together. The power of the cry swept up everybody, and the cry became a chant. Over and over they signaled “*Game now!*” until at last the chant died out in the mutual exhaustion of the crowd. They looked around at each other, proud of their unity and awed by its power.

Now the teams took the field. A level patch of sandy ground had been set aside for the big game. A gang with big sticks had ploughed shallow trenches to mark off the playing field, an equilateral triangle 50 meters on a side. In each corner they had etched a semicircular goal area 5 meters in radius. Onto this field trotted the 21 contestants: one male member of each species for each of three teams. The Kirans did not see any contradiction between the deliberate catholicity by species and the equally deliberate segregation by sex.

The captain of the Tanaga team was Skordokott. This would be his last game; he was getting a little old for the annual Big Game. He had been chosen to play because he had always been one of the best Tayran players in anybody’s memory. Indeed, in last year’s game Feslym had gently admonished him to play less recklessly, lest he injure himself. Skordokott had

bowed in respect and obedience, but his heart swelled with pride that the intensity of his playing had been noticed.

Soome was also playing, on the Shial team. He was also the captain of his team, not because he was the best athlete, but because everybody respected Soome. Koopie was on Soome's team, but Ripis were never captains in the Big Game; they had a special role to play. Like Skordokott, Koopie was a little old to be playing, but the statistics of reproduction had fluctuated after he was born and all the Ripi children for five years after him were females, so he was pressed into service once again.

The teams moved to their respective corners and huddled together for a last consultation. Referees took up positions behind each goal and in the very center of the triangle. Then each corner-referee gave a colored ball to his team; the ball was placed on the corner of the triangle. The center referee held up his arm and dropped it; the game began!

Skordokott wasted no time. He snatched up his ball and loped warily toward the center of the triangle, pointing frantically toward positions he wanted his teammates to take and barking orders in eeyal. The other teams were fanning out from their corners, looking for defensive needs and offensive opportunities. The Tayran members of the Shial and Katsin teams rushed out to meet Skordokott's threat. The prime rule of the Big Game is that no person may touch any person of another species — only the flag that all players wear on their belts can be touched. Only another member of the same species can physically stop the ball-carrier.

Genubi was the captain of the Katsin team, a Srol well-known for his clever leadership in the Big Game. He was also Zubenelgenubi's brother, and so she stood on the sideline nearby shouting her encouragements. Another rule of the Big Game was that only players and referees could use eeyal during the game; onlookers were required to use their native languages. When Genubi saw Skordokott coming out, he immediately sensed an opportunity. Handing the ball to Kornall, the Klast next to him, he ran forward along the sideline, waving his arms to show all opponents that he wasn't carrying the ball. Kornall ran behind him, small enough not to be readily noticed.

Skordokott's team was still struggling to obey his torrent of orders; in their preoccupation they paid scant attention to Genubi. Two-thirds of the way toward the Tanaga goal, Genubi cut inwards in a faked move toward Skordokott and the Tanaga ball; Kornall had great instincts; he followed Genubi step for step until most of the Tanaga team had taken the bait, then split off and headed for the goal. He easily outran the Ripi defender and closed in on the goalie. Alerted by the cries of his teammates, Skordokott turned round and screamed at his Klast to get back there fast, although he knew it was too late. The Frem goalie dashed out from the goal line in a desperate attempt to unflag Kornall before he reached the goal, but a Klast's height gives him a natural advantage against a Frem. Kornall twisted past the Frem and danced into the goal area.

"Touchdown!" Zubi screamed, jumping up and down and slapping her hands on her cheeks in applause. The crowd roared in six languages. Skordokott's disgust was without limit. Thirty seconds into the game and already they had scored. Here he stood in the center of the field, stalled by two Tayran opponents who were not going to yield him an inch. He tossed the ball in disgust to the Lokweel further back and called his team back into a more defensive position. He wanted a chance to back off, get ahold of things. The last thing he wanted was to let the Shial team score on him in the confusion caused by the first goal. Maybe the Shials would move against the Katsins and give him some time to get the initiative back.

But Genubi had already arced across the center of the field and was now in position to block just such a move. The bulk of the Katsin players were in excellent defensive position against a Shial raid. Soome eyed their positions, and those of the Tanagas, and decided against overextending himself. These quick goals rattled everybody; he wanted a chance to feel out the other teams before trying anything bold. He let his players dance around, jockeying for position relative to the other teams. His Jomkar player filtered through a gap in the Katsin line and circled about in their rear, signaling hopefully for a pass, but Soome could see the Katsin Jomkar not far off, ready to move should he pass the ball.

Just then he realized with dismay that the Tanaga Klast had snuck up on him while he was studying the Katsin positions. He had stopped for a few seconds, and that was a serious mistake; he tried to twist away but Lokweels are not fast creatures and the Klast was already curling his fingers around his flag. The Klast fell to the ground with Soome's flag in his hand. A referee's whistle blew and Soome gave up the ball to the Klast, who gleefully kicked it as far as he could towards the Katsin goal. Here we go, thought Soome.

The ball caromed off a Katsin player and headed for the sidelines; another Katsin player intercepted it and sent it streaking for the Tanaga goal. The entire Shial team shifted toward the Tanaga goal in a desperate effort to recover their ball. Skordokott cursed his bad luck that the Katsins had so easily reversed the play, but at least his team was in good position. A melee developed fifteen meters in front of the Tanaga goal line, with players frantically kicking the ball between them. Tanaga players just wanted to get rid of the thing, but the Shial players wanted to either recover the ball or make a score. The rule against touching forced everybody into an oval with the ball bouncing around inside.

Soome stayed back to defend his goal with Koopie and the Srol goalie. Sure enough, here came Genubi carrying the ball himself. Soome grinned to himself: "You didn't count on my Srol goalie, did you?" Genubi realized his mistake as the Srol goalie headed out for him; he tossed the ball to the Tayran who was accompanying him. "I'm not scared of Tayrans", thought Soome; "They're big but I can almost always get their flags." The Tayran tried to bull past Soome but he stood his ground. If the Tayran touched Soome, the referee would whistle him down. Realizing that Soome would not yield, the Tayran broke off and twisted to the side, giving Soome an easy opportunity to snatch his flag as he went by. A second later Soome was holding the Tayran's flag aloft and the referee's whistle was blowing. He kicked the ball towards the Tanaga goal, laughing out loud in Lokweel, "Here's more fun for you, Skordokott!"

By this time the Tanaga ball had been lost and was being frantically kicked and chased all over the field as well. The Big Game was barely a minute old and its characteristic state of total anarchy had already been achieved. Play-

ers dashed around madly, chasing any of the three loose balls. Skordokott gained control of the Tanaga ball not twenty meters from the Katsin goal, but his kicked shot was blocked and the ball was bounced halfway back to the Tanaga goal. Genubi tried a number of clever tricks, but the chaotic situation foiled every scheme. At one point Heen, a Frem playing with the Tanagas, leapt high into the air to intercept a ball flying overhead, snagged it, and easily loped over the Katsin goal to score a point for the Tanaga team. Three minutes later he repeated the trick, only to discover that he had carried the Shial ball over the goal, earning one point for the Shial team.

“You’d better get ready, Koopie,” Soome warned. “You could get your chance any minute now.”

“I know. I’m watching for it.”

Soome glanced back at Koopie, whose tone of voice indicated a decided lack of enthusiasm for the job. Soome grinned. He turned back to watch the action and took a ball full in the face. On the sidelines Caronyccoork burst into laughter at the sight. Soome rubbed his nose in embarrassment and reminded himself to keep his eye on the ball. “But there are three balls and I have only two eyes,” he thought. Oh well.

Koopie’s chance came just two minutes later. Genubi led a raid on the Tanaga goal, taking with him his Tayran and Frem teammates. The defending Katsin team was thus deprived of its tallest members. Soome didn’t waste a minute. “Let’s go, Koopie!” He got the attention of Tana, the Tayran member of his team, and had him play close to the Katsin goal. This pressure induced the Katsin defenders to close in tight on their goal, forming a solid line of bodies that Tana could not breach. Meanwhile, Soome and Koopie were desperately trying to gain control of the Shial ball before Genubi came back. Someone in the crowd must have alerted Genubi, because he suddenly broke off his raid and started running back to assist his team’s defense. At about the same moment Soome fell on the Shial ball in the center of the field, picked himself up, and began to run towards Tana. Koopie, seeing his moment had come, also started to run towards his position. There were no Katsin players in any position to stop them from setting up a Ripi-play. The crowd started

screaming madly. Feslym stood up. Skordokott's team and all the other players elsewhere on the field stopped their activities and turned to stare.

Soome moved much more quickly than Koopie and reached Tana several seconds earlier. He knelt down on one knee about 2 meters away, facing Tana, leaned forward, and held the ball up over his head. Koopie lengthened his stride to position his footfalls properly, then shouted a wild war-cry: "Yaaaaaa!" He bounded up Soome's back, seized the ball as he crashed into it, and curled up as his momentum carried him up towards Tana's outstretched arms. The Katsin team simultaneously leapt as high as it could, arms stretched aloft. Tana ducked his head, swept his arms behind Koopie, and jumped upward, hitting Koopie's legs and propelling him on a higher, steeper trajectory. "Yaaaaaa!" Koopie sailed over the outstretched fingers of the defending team and crashed with a bone-wrenching "Whump!" over the Katsin goal line.

You'll just have to figure out for yourself how the crowd responded.

Zubengelgenubi and Soome

Zubengelgenubi was a Srol, and her gift for eeyal had singled her out for training as an acolyte at an early age. She raced with ease through the training that all Kiran children receive in eeyal.

She caused a minor sensation when, at the age of eight, she innocently engaged in some tanaga-pranks that left the entire community wondering as to their source. Recriminations were starting to fly when the mental vandal was discovered to be a naive child. With relief and laughter her parents gently reproached her in the responsibilities of mind-power and she never repeated the behavior. Norgentan, the current Srol acolyte, knew from that day that in Zubengelgenubi resided the mental power to gain her the Shepherdship if ever she were given the opportunity. He took her under his wing and secretly provided her with additional training. When she came of age, Norgentan had her assigned to the position of pump-house technician. In that remote facility she would be isolated from other Srols, for Norgentan, in the manner that is usual with overzealous teachers, did not wish her attentions distracted. He wanted to insure that the passion and energy that drives all Srols would be focussed exclusively on the development of her auras.

The current pump house technician was Soome; a Lokweel a few years older than Zubengelgenubi. Soome was also an acolyte-in-training; it seems that Norgentan's desire to isolate his trainees was shared by the Lokweel acolyte. Most Kirans held pump house duty to be a form of punishment, a period of exile from the community to be endured, not enjoyed. Soome was therefore elated to learn that a replacement had been selected. It would take a week to train Zubi and then he would return to civilization.

The aging equipment at the pump house foiled the plans of Norgentan and Soome. Within a few days of Zubi's arrival, a check valve, encrusted with mineral deposits, refused to snap shut under back pressure, and the pressure

tank bled out through it. This was not a surprise; the plumbing was more than a century old and previous generations had mastered the art of repairing the mineral-encrusted plumbing. Nevertheless, it was an emergency, and it demanded immediate rectification. They first notified the colony of a water emergency, initiating a water-preserving routine by all colonists. Then they routed the water supply through the small backup tank that could satisfy the reduced demand of the colony. Next they depressurized the main tank and removed the check valve. They scrubbed the valve out with a wire brush, ground the valve seat smooth, and reassembled everything.

Zubi failed to tighten the cutoff valve properly, and when they repressurized the system and Soome opened the valve, it blew clean out of the housing and sailed 30 meters up into the air. Soome was lucky to be uninjured, but he stood over the valve trying to hold the water in with his hands, an attempt made ridiculous by the 150 pounds of pressure in the water and made necessary by the preciousness of water. He screamed at the top of his lungs, “Cut the pump! Cut the pump!” but Zubi, from the other side of the housing, could hear only the rush of the water. She turned the corner to behold Soome the centerpiece of a mighty fountain, the sprays of water reaching out at angles dictated by the spaces between his fingers. At this moment of crisis, Zubi was overwhelmed by laughter at the sight, and fell to the sand, rolling there despite Soom’s furious shouts. After some seconds she found her feet and staggered, still convulsed with laughter to the main power box. She threw the switch and the geyser around Soome receded. He unbent himself examining his tingling hands for damage but there was none. He walked slowly to Zubi who now kneeled at the power box still giggling. She fell silent on his approach. When he reached her he paused, struggling for words. Should he chew her out for her irresponsibility? Cut her some slack on account of her inexperience? She looked up at him and inquired with feigned innocence *Soome enjoy shower?*

Now Soome was a particularly good-hearted fellow but this was too much. He stared down at her for a few seconds struggling with his fury; then slowly he turned around and walked away. Zubi chased after him *Sorry. Sorry. Please no angry.* He stopped and looked at her bright face now lined with concern at the wrong she had done. He paused again. *Soome no angry.*

Soome... Soome... He couldn't find the words to say how he felt. That was a rotten trick, to laugh at him like that but he knew she meant no harm, and her eeyal shimmered with both her intense energy and her genuine regret. He couldn't feel anger at her mirth even if it was at his expense. *Soome...*
Soome... wet. He imaged with great intensity of feeling and all seriousness. "Wet" was the only image he could think of that wasn't angry. She stared at him unbelieving for a second, then fell down on the sand again laughing. He watched her, telling himself that he had actually intended it as a joke.

They had no time to revel though; the water system remained out of operation. Zubi found the valve head and Soome repaired the valve. Four more hours and they had the system running, and an hour later they rescinded the water emergency.

The next week went smoothly They monitored the performance of all the components of the water system, trying to identify problems before they became failures. They checked the depth of the water in the well every day. Soome showed Zubi how to estimate the true groundwater capacity by measuring the rate of recovery of the well after a large amount of water had been pumped out. Despite the fact that the installation wasn't very big, the age and importance of the equipment justified constant checking of all the parameters of its performance.

Zubi soon settled into the routine of pump-house life She slept in her bedroll under the kitchen table. Soome as host made all the meals and Zubi as guest did all the cleaning. There wasn't much opportunity to talk; neither understood the other's language but they did talk in eeyal as often as they could. As acolytes in training they were expected to continue refining their skills in eeyal and each found it rewarding to converse with an accomplished speaker of that difficult language. The conversation tended to drift in directions that suited the constraints of eeyal rather than the interests of the two speakers, but it was fun nonetheless to chat about the little things of life. Most conversations in eeyal with normal people were blandly functional short exchanges punctuated by gesticulation and scribbled drawings in the sand. It was exciting to carry on real conversations with a member of another species even if they were hobbled conversations. It was especially exhilarating to share

thoughts and feelings with a person whom you had always seen through a dim window of incomprehension, to realize that such a completely different creature shared the same feelings.

Towards the end of the week, Soome was preparing to turn the job over to Zubi and go home when a new problem arose: the pressurizing pump showed a loss of pressure. Soome knew that he couldn't turn over the job to a neophyte with so serious a problem. He called Feslym and informed him of the problem and his intention to remain at the pump-house for the next week or two to handle the repairs.

Zubi and Soome plotted their strategy together. The repair of the main pressurizing pump was an intricate operation. While it was shut down there would only be the small secondary pressurizing pump to supply the entire community. The water-wise Kirans could easily handle a short-term water emergency but the crops would not be so tolerant. If they disassembled the main pump and found serious problems resistant to immediate solution it could be disastrous for the community. It was an immense responsibility for two young people to bear but they were acolytes: the best of their generation, and Kirans were trained from childhood to take responsibility.

Carefully they analyzed the data and considered the possibilities: worn impellers, scale inside the housing, clogged valves, even low voltage to the motor. They ran tests developed generations earlier to get a clearer indication of conditions inside the pump. They were able to rule out some possibilities. They argued their interpretations of the results. Soome had experience and maturity, Zubi had energy, intuition, and powerful analytic skills. Together they created a checklist of possibilities and their responses should they arise. They had the machine shop build a new impeller blade as a hedge against the possibility of the existing one being damaged. They rehearsed the sequence of steps they would take, challenging each other at every point. They advised the agricultural director to irrigate more heavily in the days before they shut down the pump, just in case they failed.

They were ready. The tools were all in position, the plans and diagrams were all stuck to the walls above the workplaces. They shut down the pump and

removed it in an hour and 23 minutes. Then came the tricky task of disassembling a pump that had been in continuous use for 133 years. The screws had been used hundreds of times but with such care that they showed little wear. Zubi carefully cleaned each part as it came off the pump. The problem turned out to be a bent impeller blade. They both studied it carefully trying to guess the cause of the bend but there were no score marks inside the housing to suggest that a rock had entered the pump. The pre-screen was intact. They made careful notes of the condition of the pump's interior for the log book and then reassembled it slowly and carefully. They stole a few hours sleep the first night and resumed work at 4:00 AM the next morning. They continued with the reassembly until late that second evening. Just before midnight they called in the recision of the water emergency. They were exhausted but too elated to go to sleep, so they sat down at the kitchen table to celebrate.

Zubi work most strong. Zubi most smart.

Soome lead most good. Zubi learn most. Zubi thank most Soome.

They sat at the table sipping their drinks and expressing their admiration for each other until they exhausted the clumsy limits of eeyal, so they sat silently slouched in their chairs fondling their cups staring, at each other. Soome again felt the frustration of not being able to express himself adequately in eeyal. The language was still so primitive! In the last two weeks he had developed a deep affection for Zubi that he could not express. She was so bright and lively, so full of energy and joy, brimming over with fun and happiness. He wondered, why would they banish such a wonderful person to this place? Normally pump-house duty was reserved for antisocial clods like himself, but Zubi was the antithesis of that. It seemed a violation of fairness and decency to send a person who radiates such joy into the loneliness of the pump-house. He was a loner to start with; he could take the loneliness better than most. But it was a crime to send Zubi here He felt sadness for her and anger at the injustice of her assignment. How could he express all that to her? He looked straight into her eyes and she returned the gaze. He struggled with his eeyal trying to form the images.

Soome... Soome...

The intensity of his feelings frustrated his efforts. He reached deep inside himself, still staring straight into her eyes and then he found it: the image he sought. It was a new image, one that nobody had ever used before. *Soome love Zubi*. She understood it instantly and found the same image within herself: *Zubi love Soome*. Her image shone with immediate clarity and absolute honesty. Stunned, they both pulled back in their chairs.

Zubi wondered to herself, What is this? How can I love a Lokweel? We are different, Soome and I. We cannot even talk except through eeyal. We Kirans are all supposed to love each other, Siboot taught us that, but this, this is different. I have never felt so strong a love before, not even for another Srol. She looked at him recalling the camaraderie and closeness of the last two weeks and she realized that she loved him because he was good-hearted, honest and gentle. As an acolyte in training she had more in common with him than with any other Srol on Kira. He shared the mental strain, the responsibility, the frightening nights of aura dreams that hurl you awake sweating and shivering. On her second night at the pump-house she had experienced a bad one and woke up crying. In her still-elevated aura state she had felt his aura reach out to soothe and comfort her. Why then couldn't she love him?

But where could it lead? Where was the boundary between love and passion, and how could she stay on the near side of that border? The love she felt was too strong to be repressed yet too alien to be expressed. Would she take him in her arms and – no the very thought of it was repugnant. It would always be love under a low ceiling, always constrained by the physical realities of their bodies.

Fearfully, she glanced up at him and their eyes locked; with a start, she realized that the thoughts in her mind were not hers alone; they were just as much Soome's as hers. For a few seconds, their minds had joined in communion and shared the same thoughts. The realization hit both of them at the same time. Soome reached out his hand toward Zubi; she timidly reached out to touch it. When their fingers touched, they both felt the shock of feeling alien skin. It was like an electric shock; they both jerked their arms away in horror and revulsion. Soome stood up, alarmed and frightened. Zubi stood too, then

backed away from Soome. She reached the door, turned, and fled into the warm desert night.

She did not return that night nor the next morning. Soome packed up his things and prepared to return to the colony. His work at the pump-house was done; it was time for him to go back. He waited by the door of the pump-house. Eventually Zubi appeared on the crest of the rise and stood watching him. He slung his bag over his back and started up the ancient path leading back to the colony. He paused at the curve and looked back. Zubi had moved down from the rise to the pump-house and was standing by the doorway. He raised his hand in salute and goodbye. She raised hers. They stood that way for perhaps a minute. Then he turned and trudged back to the colony.

The Missing Book

Life at the pump-house is about as boring as can be; the attendant makes daily checks of water pressure and usage, and is expected to keep everything in repair. Above all, the pump-house attendant must be ready to handle any leakage instantly so as not to lose precious water. So important is this priority that the attendant is permitted to return to the settlement but once per week to report to the Shepherd on the state of the water supply, and to get a little social interaction, food, and other supplies.

Zubengelgenubi found social isolation particularly painful; she bloomed in the presence of others and withered in solitude. After just a month's service she broke down in tears during her report to Feslym and begged him to release her from this lonely exile.

Feslym was sympathetic to her needs but wary of the political repercussions consequent to granting her wish. Few Kirans enjoyed pump-house duty; letting Zubi off the hook would signal favoritism and engender ugly resentment against her.

Feslym promised her no more than an investigation into the possibilities. He would have to find a suitable replacement; he would have to smooth it over with Norgentan, Zubi's teacher who had nominated her in the first place; he would need to fabricate a good excuse. In the meantime, she was not to tell anyone of her desperate loneliness; he did not want to fight rumors that he had replaced her because she asked for it. If anybody asked her how she liked life at the pump-house, she was to tell them that she was settled into the life.

In the meantime, he suggested, why not catch up on some reading? Few Kirans had much opportunity to read the old books, so busy were their lives. Perhaps Zubi might take advantage of the surfeit of time she was blessed with to delve into Srol philosophy, universally regarded as the pinnacle of philosophical thought among the Seven Species.

That seemed like a good idea to Zubi, so upon taking her leave of Feslym, she went straight to the library. Actually, it was more of a storage room than a library. An old tool room in the main building had been dedicated to book storage. There weren't many books, and since there were seven different languages, the choices available to Zubi were scant. Still, there had to be at least one book on Srol philosophy, and Zubi found it listed in the catalogue. But when she looked for it on the small bookcase holding Srol books, it was gone.

This was certainly a surprise. Hardly anybody ever borrowed a book, and a heavy tome on Srol philosophy seemed the last book that anybody would want to read. She double-checked the catalogue and confirmed that the book had not been lost or destroyed. So where was it? She found the little box where Kirans declared their borrowings. You wrote your name and the book's title onto a scrap of paper when you borrowed a book, then removed the scrap when you returned it. The little box had just one paper in it, listing the philosophy book Zubi sought. But the borrower astounded her: Skordokott! What in the world was Skordokott doing with a Srol book on philosophy?

She immediately set out in search of Skordokott. He wasn't at work in the fields; his shift had ended a few hours earlier. He wasn't at the cafeteria, either. Nor could she find him at his little cabin on the edge of the settlement. Zubi knew that she had to gather her food and supplies and get back to the pump-house soon, but this mystery fascinated her. The combination of Skordokott and a Srol philosophy book was so incongruous that it demanded explanation. Zubi patrolled the streets and alleys of the settlement, but Skordokott was nowhere to be found.

The imperative to return to the pump-house grew heavier and heavier, but Zubi simply could not let go of this itch that she could not scratch. She went from building to building, calling Skordokott's name in eeyal as powerfully as she could. At the warehouse, he returned her call. She looked around expectantly and then saw him climb down from a stack of boxes near the wide doorway. He seemed rather furtive as he did so. What in the world was Skor-

dokott doing up there on top of boxes, she wondered. As he approached, she saw the book in his hand.

“*Target?*” he demanded.

“*That!*” she said, pointing at the book. He held up the book.

“*I use now this.*” Another stunning surprise: Skordokott could read Srol!?!

Zubi didn’t know what to say for a moment. Then she asked, “*Why?*”

Skordokott looked around nervously. “*Skordokott target knowledge.*”

Again, Zubi was astonished. She pointed at the book and asked incredulously, “*Skordokott target THIS knowledge?*”

“*Yes*” came the curt reply.

“*Skordokott know Srol-stuff?*”

Again, “*Yes*”

“*Who tell past Skordokott Srol-stuff?*”

“*Skordokott tell past Skordokott Srol-stuff.*”

Zubi simply could not grasp that Skordokott had taught himself to read Srol. How could anybody do that without a teacher? She popped her lips in bewilderment. She looked at Skordokott and could only say, “*I see*”, with a strong aura of shial mixed with a weaker aura of un-katsin. She couldn’t believe it, but in a good way. It was a big surprise.

“*Skordokott request Zubenelgenubi that Zubenelgenubi negative tell future this-stuff.*”

He didn't want anybody else to know that he was reading the book. So that was why he secreted himself atop the boxes!

Zubi held her hands together in front of her in a double fist. "*Yes most*"

Skordokott held his hand up. "*Skordokott negative greet Zubenelgenubi least strong.*" He turned and left.

Wow! Zubi thought. He said goodbye with great respect for me! Skordokott! He plays strong with everybody. He must really want me to keep this secret. And of course I will.

The day grew late; she had business to do. She ran towards the cafeteria.

Illness

Caronycoorck knocked at the door but it was ajar and she knew that she should simply enter without bothering Nafimko. She quietly pushed the door open and slipped inside. The outer room was empty but she had hardly taken two steps before Camiggdo emerged from the bedroom “*News Feslym?*” Caronycoorck asked.

Knowing that Caronycoorck was a translator, Camiggdo spoke in her native Klast. “It looks bad. The doctor seems quite helpless. The infection has moved into his lungs and he is having problems breathing. The old man doesn’t seem to have much fight left in him.”

Caronycoorck pursed her lips and shook her head. This was bad news.

“It looks as if we shall be initiating the campaign soon. I do not relish the thought.”

Camiggdo looked at Caronycoorck nonchalantly; the two had never been friends. Caronycoorck did not trust Camiggdo, thinking her deceitful and manipulative. Camiggdo’s reply was dismissive:

“It is what we have been training for all these years.” Then she pushed past Caronycoorck and departed.

Caronycoorck gathered her courage and entered the bedroom. Nafimko and the doctor were standing by the bed; Feslym lay motionless. With some effort he glanced up; a weak smile creased the old lips. “Ah Caronycoorck! So good of you to come! It is so taxing using eeyal and translation is always so slow and...” – he cast a reassuring glance at Ganigil – “indirect. It is good to be able to talk to you directly in Jomkar. So tell me, are you preparing yourself for the campaign?”

“Feslym, it is unseemly for us to raise the subject of a campaign. I am hoping very much that you will beat this illness.”

“Oh pish posh! Any idiot can see that I am going to die; it’s just a matter of how soon. You should be preparing yourself for what happens after that. Oh, how I wish I could be around to see how it goes. With the big supply of aura pons we have accumulated, dream combat should be much more interesting than it was in my day.” A pause. “Do you suppose that I could announce my death in advance so that I could watch the campaign?”

“Don’t be morbid, Feslym. Remember the campaign cannot start until after the funeral. Do you want to watch your funeral too?”

“That would be a good one, yes! I could even give the eulogy.” He chuckled, then began coughing violently. The doctor bent over him trying to help while Nafimko cast an evil eye at Caronycoorck. It took several minutes to calm the coughs. Nafimko ordered Caronycoorck to leave but Feslym insisted on a last word.

“Caronycoorck, you know that I cannot and would not favor any candidate in the campaign. But I want to emphasize this to you: I want you to fight hard and well. I remember how much agony it was to carry on the mental combat and I am sure that it will be worse this time what with the greater amounts of aura you youngsters carry about.” He pauses to steady his breathing. “Under no circumstances are you to drop out of the competition. The credibility of the Shepherdship is at stake; if any acolyte drops out, the stature and legitimacy of the Shepherdship will be compromised in the eyes of many Lamians. And one other thing...”

He paused again, coughing weakly.

“Whomever wins, you must enthusiastically support. I want your promise that the winner of the competition will have your full, vocal, energetic support. That you will go on the radio to Lamina and tell all the Jomkars, if you lose, that the new Shepherd is the rightful and proper Shepherd who deserves their absolute support.” He coughs again. “Promise!” It was a hoarse wheeze.

Caronycoorck instantly and fervently promised that she would honor the spirit and letter of his request. His last words to her were, “Good, the others have also promised.” Then he lay back to rest. Caronycoorck hurried out before Nafimko could throw her out.

This time Caronycoorck was the exiting party and Caronycoorck was entering. Caronycoorck feel deep sympathy for Caronycoorck. She was always very close to her father. She had been there when Caronycoorck’s father died. Caronycoorck paused in front of her to ask, “How are you doing? Is there anything I can do?”

For just an instant, Caronycoorck seemed about to let her anguish erupt in a torrent of tears, but she gathered herself up and closed that door.

“It is a difficult time, yes. I think I can handle it. Thank you, Caronycoorck.”

Caronycoorck left. There was already a knot of people waiting outside; the deathwatch had begun. Caronycoorck went home; there was nothing to do now but meditate in preparation for the campaign. Caronycoorck would be summoned when the time came.

Camiggdo and Gaustusu

In a quiet corner of the cafeteria, away from the hustle and bustle of cooking, cleaning, and eating, was a little shrine dedicated to Siboot. Gaustusu, just finishing his lunch, noticed that Camiggdo was standing in front of it, her hands clasped behind her back in silent thought. Intrigued, he bussed his table and then walked over, expecting to quietly announce his presence so as not to startle Camiggdo.

Before he could do so, however, Camiggdo quietly greeted him in eeyal without turning; she had sensed his auras as he approached. Camiggdo was powerful with auras that way.

The little shrine to Siboot didn't have much: a few photos from olden times; his ID tag issued by the Space Agency; his little Ripi tunic; his old straw hat; and a walking stick from his later years. There was a wooden plaque that somebody had painstakingly carved decades ago; on it was written in each of the seven languages "Siboot our first and forever Shepherd". Young Kirans were frequently brought to the shrine by their parents and told stories about each of the items on display. An elaborate mythology had grown up over the years about each of the items. All the succeeding Shepherds had tried to stamp out the fictions but their efforts were half-hearted; people need heroes.

"*Why?*" he asked, wondering why Camiggdo was standing in front of the shrine they had all seen thousands of times.

Camiggdo took her time before answering. "*Who Shepherd future.*"

"*I see?*" Gaustusu replied, with a strong interrogative tone to his eeyal.

Again Camiggdo took some time before responding; she turned to face Gaustusu, fixing him with a soul-penetrating stare. "*We enough good? We enough*

true? We enough strong?” The colors of her aura-words were saturated, intense and bright. Gaustusu was so startled by the question that he had to think for a moment. What could he say? Should he confidently declare that he was ready and able to become Shepherd when the time came? That would be vainglorious, and the uncertainty in his thoughts would be obvious in his eeyal and betray his falseness. Yet how could he condemn himself and the other acolytes as unready, not up to the job? He struggled to find a ready answer, an answer he could believe in, but came up empty. He looked up, straight into Camiggdo’s consuming eyes, and blurted out the answer that those eyes evoked: “*No*” It was the pure truth, its aura shimmered bright green with truth, and he felt enormous relief that the true answer had erupted out of his subconscious.

“*You say truth*” Camiggdo replied. “*We negative enough*” She looked back at the shrine and paused again. “*Siboot negative enough. Arlen negative enough. Sufupican negative enough. Feslym negative enough.*” She turned back to Gaustusu. “*negative enough all.*”

Gaustusu was stupefied. He stared mutely at Camiggdo, then at last spat out a confused “*Yes. What?*” Are we doomed to failure? Was there no point to all this? Are we unworthy?

This time Camiggdo was even longer to reply. After several moments, she once again looked directly into his eyes. Camiggdo’s eyes now seemed tired and warm. “*We do good. We do truth. We do strong. All. Only.*”

Caronycoorck at Work

Caronycoorck had been meditating for an hour, beefing up her mental strength, but it didn't seem to be working very well. Oh, well, she thought, some days you have it and some days you don't. She decided to check out the pantry and grab something to eat before heading out to work.

The pantry was not well-stocked. This was as it should be. From the very beginnings of the colony, before Siboot himself, it was established that most of the food should be dispensed through the cafeteria. It is just too wasteful supporting food-preparation and storage facilities in each home. Simple non-perishable foods that required little in the way of preparation are allowed, but otherwise the colonists are required to eat at the cafeteria. Even so, many colonists occasionally sacrifice the culinary “delights” of the cafeteria for the pleasures of a private, if simple, meal. This morning Caronycoorck was in such a mood, and so some cold porridge served for breakfast.

The sun was climbing high before she set off to the fields. She was one of five translators on Kira; like everybody else, she worked a nine-hour shift. This meant that at any given time there were two translators on duty, with one in reserve to permit rotations. The translators were expected to hang around the field or the machine shop, two busy places where there is often a need for the precise kind of communication that eeyal cannot yet provide. Being an acolyte, she pulled the easier job of field duty. Although there were over a hundred people working in the fields, most of their work was straightforward, and the demand for a translator's services was less than it would be at the machine shop. She spent most of her workdays lounging around in the equipment shed, staying out the sun and practicing her eeyal whenever possible. Occasionally somebody called her over to translate a conversation, and sometimes she was called back to the village to assist with some special need. For the most part, though, hers was an easy job.

She'd earned it, of course. Learning the seven languages of Kira is a tough challenge, and she had busted her butt as a kid doing it. Her parents had pressured her into it, not wanting her to spend her life as a field hand, and she was grateful that they had been so pushy. What neither Caronycoorck nor her parents had anticipated was that she would also demonstrate such talent in eeyal. Perhaps it was all the training in the other languages, but halfway through school you began to show a great proficiency for eeyal. A few years later, Menkili selected her as the new Jomkar acolyte when she retired. Her diligence earned you the translator job, but becoming the Jomkar acolyte — that was fortune.

She checked in with Skordokott. One of the field crew chiefs, he was not popular with his workers, but he was respected because he's smart, tough, and demanding. His crew consistently outperformed the other field crews, and they took pride in that, but Skordokott was not sensitive enough to use their pride to keep their morale up; he just drove them hard. They would have rebelled long ago except for the fact that Skordokott works harder and longer than any of them. Skordokott and Caronycoorck were good friends. It would be different if she had to work for him, but that would never happen anyway; acolytes are never placed in subordinate positions. Skordokott treats Caronycoorck with the respect she deserves as an acolyte, and genuine friendliness to boot; she was one of the few who does not regard him with sullen resentment.

Soome's crew was coming off its shift as Caronycoorck arrived. They were all dusty and tired, but Soome himself never drooped. His confident, alert style of giving orders and taking care of his crew was quite a contrast with Skordokott's brusque technique. Soome's people all had absolute faith in him. They carried out his orders smoothly even though they were eager to get home. One of the workers, a younger kid, was having problems stacking some equipment properly. Soome moved in on him and took over the task, drawing attention away from his act by loudly instructing somebody else on the other side of the equipment shed. The kid watched and learned the proper way to stack the stuff without undergoing any embarrassment.

On his way out, Soome stopped to have a brief word of greeting with Caronycoorck. A thoroughly likable guy; he would make a perfect Shepherd, if only the Shepherdship were awarded for managerial talents. She made small talk with him and he went his way.

The day passed quietly enough. She helped straighten out some confusion about the course and depth of a small irrigation pipe; she joined in some break-time chatter between the workers. It was always surprising for her to see how much meaning these people could squeeze out of simple eeyal supplemented with grand gestures. Some of these people were very good mimes! They tell stories, argue, and gossip with the language. She helped out occasionally, but her literal translations were often less interesting than the eeyal plus imagination provided.

The only excitement of the day came when she was asked to translate at an altercation at the school. By the time she arrived, Feslym and a dozen other people were there, all jabbering at each other in their native languages and fractured eeyal. Feslym shut everybody up and she interviewed each of the participants in turn, translating into Feslym's native Jomkar language. One of the children, a Lokweel, had been terrorizing the others, and the teacher had finally called in the parents to demand that they discipline the child. The parents, though, rejected the charges leveled at their child and accused the teacher of personal prejudice against him. There were ugly undertones of species-prejudice in their wordings. Not wishing the other parents to understand the precise meaning of the accusations, she pulled Feslym aside and quietly advised him of the situation.

Feslym had a few questions for the teacher, the young troublemaker, and his parents. Then he directed the teacher and you into the outer hall. Through Caronycoorck, he informed the teacher that her handling of the situation was proper, but special tact would be required to defuse a delicate situation. He told the teacher to spend additional time with the child, provide him with extra attention and some special favors, but she was also to be absolutely unyielding in her disciplinary demands. If the child did not reform in two months, he would be removed from school and sent to the fields. The severity of Feslym's decision shocked the teacher.

The parents were next, and Feslym's approach with them was still diplomatic but much stronger. They had been remiss in their duties, he told them, and he was especially displeased with their intimations of species-prejudice. He was shocked that any Kiran would be party to such evil thoughts in the absence of proof. As a consideration to their sensibilities, he promised to interview the parents of other Lokweel children to verify their suspicions, and if there appears to be substance to them, he would take action. Until then, they were to banish such evil thoughts from their minds and accept the fact that some blame did indeed fall upon their child. He concluded by warning them that the child would be removed from school and sent to work in the fields if the situation was not quickly remedied. They were shocked and hurt, and promised to take strong disciplinary measures.

Caronycoorck accompanied Feslym back to the main building. "Why did you impose so harsh a threat on the parents?" she asked. "I am the Shepherd," he replied, "it is not my task to find pleasant solutions or to have people like me. I must do what is best for the Seven Species. The issue at the school had nothing to do with the child. The issue was species-prejudice. Would the Lokweel parents accept the judgment of a Ripi teacher? If they had presented their complaint as little more than a dispute between overprotective parents and teacher, then I would have taken a completely different approach. But once they showed the slightest inkling of species-prejudice, I had to respond to that above all other matters."

"But is it right to harm the child's future in pursuit of the parents' sins?"

"If Kira cannot resolve the problem of the Seven Species, what future does any child have?"

He took his leave of Caronycoorck. She noticed how tired he looked, how his shoulders drooped and his voice no longer carried the characteristic lilt of the Jomkar language. He was not that old, she thought; his daughter Caronycoorck has just now come of age, and already he looks like the Ages. Is this what all that eeyal, all those auras do to one? Or is it the consequence of making brutal decisions all day long, decisions that hurt people individually

to help them collectively? She stared at his receding form and wonder, would I really want to be Shepherd even if I could?

It doesn't matter what I want, she mused. There are millions of Jomkars back on Lamina who want another Jomkar Shepherd, and she was duty-bound to give it her best shot. She couldn't even resign unless there was somebody better to take her place. That's just the way it was.

It had been a long day. She went home to more cold porridge and meditation.

The Judge of the Campaign

Soome decided to drop by the cafeteria to grab a quick meal before heading home to contemplate the coming campaign. Waiting for him at the door of the cafeteria was Flanl the teacher. By tradition the most senior teacher on Kira is the Judge of the Campaign, a sort of referee whose job it is to insure that the campaign is carried out fairly and with decorum. The Judge also acts as an interim Shepherd, although he or she is expected to pass all important decisions on to the new and rightfully chosen Shepherd.

Flanl was a quiet person, prim and proper, and a pedant, always testing the acolytes with fine points of eeyal. It seems the universal goal of grammarians to impose upon their subjects, no matter how simple, an imposing array of rules and structures utterly bereft of significance. So it was with Flanl and eeyal, a clean and simple language that slowly evolved through the trials and errors of its many speakers. There was little grammar to speak of; the structure of the language arose naturally from the usages of the people, and was still very much in flux. This lack of grammar, a relief to students, was a challenge to Flanl, and she set to work imposing a grammar on eeyal. After some years of effort she devised a truly awesome system that made no sense whatever. Surely it would have won her some sort of academic prize, had there been academic societies on Kira to award it. As it was, her work was neglected by the ignorant boors who would rather use eeyal than understand its inner structure.

This did not discourage Flanl. There were always the acolytes, supposedly the keepers of the flame of eeyal, the finest speakers of eeyal, and as a teacher she had quite some influence over who would be selected to become an acolyte. Thus it was that a generation of acolytes learned the Grammar of Eeyal according to Flanl, memorizing a huge list of rules and their inevitable exceptions. The tortures did not end with one's accession to acolyte status;

no, Flanl prowled the streets and public places looking for acolytes, and when she caught one, she required her victim to pass her impromptu grammar test.

Soome had to remind himself to be polite and respectful, but he was in no mood for Flanl's pedantries. He was lucky this time: the question she asked was easy and she let him go with a short five-minute lecture on how to decline irregular verbs in eeyal, if there were any irregular verbs or declinations in eeyal.

Zubengelgenubi was sitting at a nearby table, grinning. "Brings back fond memories, doesn't it?" He laughed and rolled his eyes. She laughed, too.

He headed over to the serving tables and assembled his meal. Then he scanned the room for a seat at a quiet table. Along the way, though, he heard your name being called. It was Koopie! He smiled and threaded his way through the chairs and sitting-stands to Koopie's table.

"Howya doing there, champ?" he asked.

"Just OK, Koopie. Old Flanl caught me at the door and grilled me. I got through OK."

"Yeah, she's set up a trap there. She's smart — figures that we'll all come to dinner tonight to get a good meal before we start preparations for the campaign. So far she's caught everyone except Skordokott and Gaustusu."

"Hey, look, I gotta go now. Have to go visit old Mom before I go into hibernation for the night. You take care, and don't let any ferocious grammarians catch you."

"Right, Koopie."

"One other thing: good luck in the campaign."

Soome looked up at Koopie. His normal jaunty expression was gone; for once, Koopie was not making a joke. Soome smiled back at him and put his hand on the Ripi's shoulder. "Good luck to you, Koopie."

Eyes

Eyes. Eight pairs of eyes. Seven focussed down at the prone form on the bed. One looking up, focussed on nothing. No sound save that of slow, labored breathing. The lips strain to form a word, but no word emerges. Seven pairs of eyes strain to divine the nascent word on those lips, but none is there. The lone pair of eyes moves over each of the seven pairs, searching. The eyelids lower, the mist over the once-bright eyes thickens. The breathing falters. The eyelids fall shut.

You stand in shocked silence for perhaps a minute. Then your duty prods you out of your stupor. You edge open the door behind you a crack, and a figure appears in the gap. “Tell them,” you say softly, “it is over.”

You cover your eyes as you let the door close. It is over. Feslym is dead. The Shepherd of Kira is gone. All these years he gave us hope. And now it is over.

A wail erupts in the outer chamber, a wail that is taken up by waiting voices in the yard. Within seconds, that wail will echo through space to the home planet of Lamina, where billions will pause in their labors and contemplate their loss. The seven discordant species of Lamina will find brief unity in their sadness. After that, the fragile union of Lamina will again be put to the test.

The room is enveloped in blinding light. You shut your eyes tightly but the light remains; it’s inside of you. It’s pure red, then green, then blue, then alternates rapidly between the three in a crazy disordered sequence. Then it is gone. You open your eyes in amazement and behold the other acolytes blinking in similar astonishment. What has happened?

Flanl, the Judge of the Campaign, steps forward from the back of the room. “Feslym explained his plan to me yesterday. He has bestowed upon each of you six pons of different auras; you will use these in dream combat. Each

night, you will enter the dream world and attack one of your fellow acolytes with a pon. As Siboot taught us, power defeats truth, truth overcomes virtue, and virtue conquers power. Two pons of the same aura destroy each other. Use your pons accordingly. The acolyte who still holds at least one pon when all the others have been eliminated will become the new Shepherd.”

Even as one era ends, another has begun. As you look up from your contemplative floorward stare, you can see the six pairs of eyes looking at each other, sizing each other up. Eyes dart from face to face, sending subtle messages of threat and support, of demand and reply. Already the scramble is on; tonight the dream-combat will begin. One of these seven acolytes — only one — will be chosen to replace Feslym as the Fifth Shepherd of Kira. Each candidate from a different species, each one duty-bound to earn that place for his species. Who will win that position?