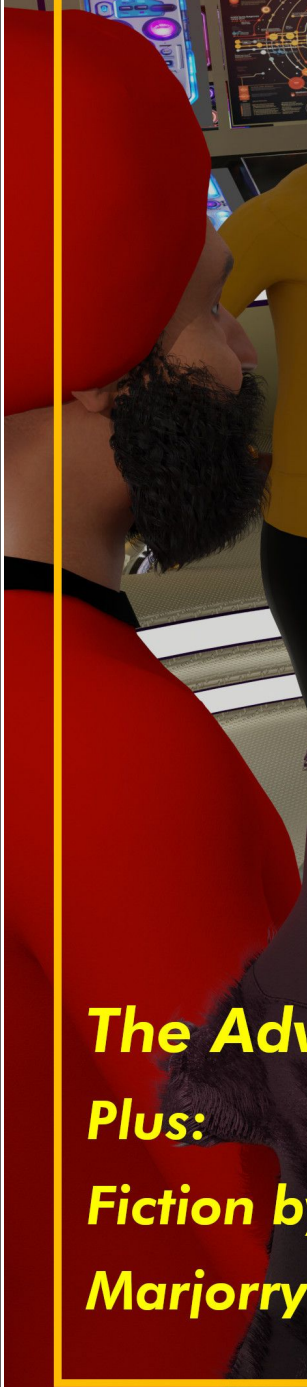


RETROZINE

Two Fandom
Elders,
One More Time!

Winter 2024 * Issue 10



The Adventures of the USS TROUBLE CONCLUDE!

Plus:

Fiction by N. C. Shapero & G.S. Cole

Marjorry Donatello * Fara Shimbo

RETROZINE 10

<https://retrozine.net>

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Retrozine is a labor of love. Nobody gets paid except in the satisfaction of a job well done. It will always be free to read on our website, or download, print, and read on your couch.

Got questions?

Contact us!

For submissions (we love and welcome submissions!) and letters of comment: editor@retrozine.net or submissions@retrozine.net, your choice.

For technical/web issues: techinfo@retrozine.net

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Issue 10? Who'd Have Thought?

Fara Shimbo

Hello, it's your friendly neighborhood Certified Public Nuisance, filling in for editor Germaine Swanson while she is deeply involved in Excitement, Adventure, and Really Wild Things. We were hoping to have this issue out for the holidays, but Excitement, Adventure and Really Wild Things kept happening. You know how it is.

So, here we are at Issue 10! To be honest, neither of us really expected the zine to last this long, but it has. According to the statistics we see, Retrozine is particularly popular in Russia and China. Hey, if you're in Russia or China, we'd love to hear from you! If you're in deepest, darkest New Jersey, we'd love to hear from you! If you're from the IRS, we'd love to not.

With this Issue, the first Adventure of the U.S.S. *Trouble* concludes. Talk about a long, strange trip! I originally started this whole thing as a farce, throwing in every science-fiction franchise I could think of. Old Movies. Gerry Anderson shows. Plenty of cats. And of course, a good deal of *Star Trek* stuff old and older. To my amazement, nobody commented. Nobody! And when I asked on our Facebook page, only one or two people recognized ... well, anything.

Well, I guess we've all moved on from the good old days when fanzines were life. But, you know, I love publishing things. My husband Bob once commented that my life consists of finding out everything I could about a subject, and then writing books about it. Then moving on to the next subject and writing books about that. Yeah, he's right. I wrote my first "book" when I was in 4th grade. I love everything about the publishing process; writing, illustrating, typesetting, formatting, all that stuff. What I hate is dealing with the Great Washed, so I sell my books mostly through Amazon. And now I'm working on this fanzine with Germaine, who is the best editor I've ever met in a very long life (well, it seems extremely long) of working with professional publishers.

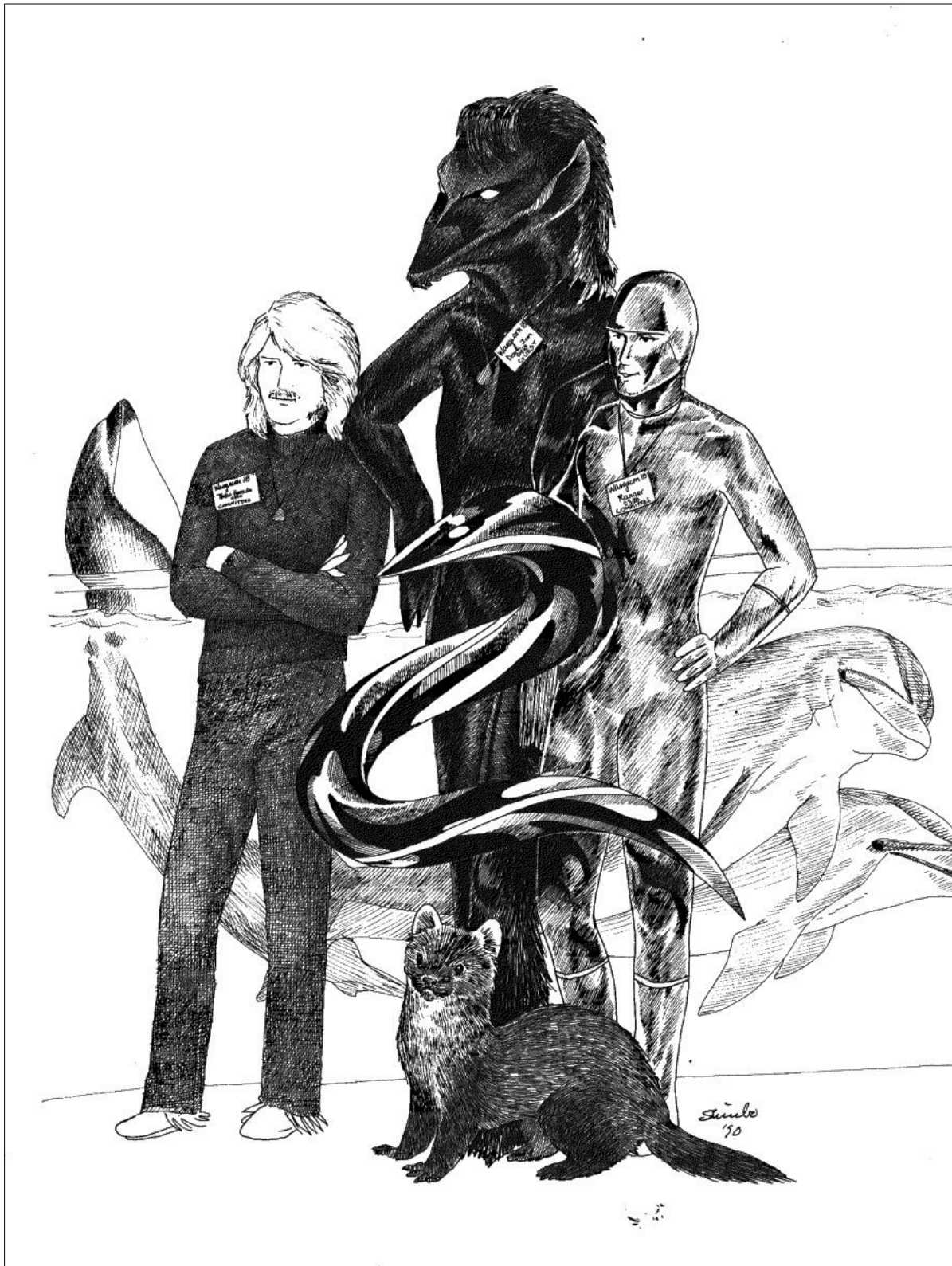
Well, as I was saying, the *Trouble* was first meant to be a lark, more or less. But as so very often happens, it began to take on a life of its own. We didn't start out with a storyline to begin with, but over time, one developed. And, of course, we learned our lesson. Before we even begin with the next adventure, we will have an outline.

What happens next? I have no idea. All I have is a ship full of People, Things, and, to paraphrase Ford Prefect, "Things who are also people." Want to join the crew? Pick your species and specialty and come along for the ride! The *Trouble* can handle a crew of up to 100, and so far we have about a dozen, so hop on! You can contact us with particulars through contact@retrozine.net.

Well, it's time to get the zine out; there are donuts in the kitchen, calling my name, and it's just time for another cuppa! Oh—and there are also these seven 3-D Printers...

See you Next Ish!

=Fa



The Four Greatest Punmasters in the Orion Spur

Back To School ... In a Dream?

An Isekai Story

By N. C. Shapero and G. S. Cole

Another Night, Another “Dream”

Richard Fox slumped forward, burying his muzzle in a book. He took a deep breath and righted himself. *Must have dozed off*, he thought. Then the characters on the page seemed to jump out at him. *Ideographs. Harashan ideographs, and I can almost understand them.* He shook his head, as if to clear it of fog. There wasn't that “buzz” that he associated with *Shidran-kas* telepathy, but looking down at his hands, he saw black fur ... on three fingers and a thumb on each hand.

A quick self survey followed. Okay, I'm still male, silver fur with black gloves and socks. But I'm wearing earth tones, and the lights are bright, as if this is the middle of the day. So, what was “I” trying to read at this “unholy” hour—pardon me—“san?”

A quick perusal and he chuckled. A contract law case, of mistaken identity; well, not so much mistaken as confused. All the details are here, and it is even fairly well written. *'I don't even have to “fuzz out” for it to make sense.'* A quick check on the book title, and that of several other books on the table in front of him confirmed his first thoughts. *'Ok, these look like the sort of books that one would use to help teach case law to the equivalent of 1-Ls. Boy, does **this** bring back memories.'* He couldn't help but laugh. *'I'm willing to bet that these are on someone's reading list.'*

He sorted through the books; it seemed that some things were the same across species and cultures. Eight ... nine ... ten ... eleven books, he thought. And they're all “doorstops”. Okay, let's take a second look on the top of the stack, and the book I “nosed down” in. The latter had a simple title: *Case Law, Contracts*. The other? *Legal Harashan Dictionary*. There was even a pad of paper—or something that looked like paper—next to the stack. And a brush and ink-bowl set. At least whoever I've time-dived into is organized. The pad had what was clearly a list of cases and, more importantly, section and page number annotations. He must have just gotten this assignment; and he even wrote down a date and time, by which time he “must be prepared to discuss and dissect” the listed cases. “Computer,” he called out, “what is today's date and time?”

“37 Winter 3 kir past High Sun,” a voice responded in a sweet, slightly higher pitched voice. Female? Okay, another similarity. A “kir” is roughly two and three quarters minutes, so ... zero bright zero eight? No, zero bright one-eight, Richard thought, and could not help chuckling. Given the time of “day”, though, I should probably settle down and get some rest. First, though, just a bit of familiarization with my environment.

He stood up, stretched, and looked around the room. Ok, there's one of their computer kiosks in the corner of the room – voice activated. The table with “my” books, and the cushion I was seated on. He reached down and felt the pad. Like raw silk, consistent with the pads we found on the *Kirán*. Three “doors,” all closed. So, which is what?

The first opened into a corridor, and had the familiar “privacy” beads. *Do not enter coding.* The next opened into a combined shower and sandbox. *Right, do your “thing” and then shower down in case there was splatter. Or just shower down. No bath?* He shook his head. Some other things were consistent across the timelines; specifically, the dislike that *Shidran-kas* had for being submerged in water. *Comes from being negatively buoyant and the waters on their homeworld being cold enough to kill even cold-adapted forms like theirs swiftly and all-too-efficiently.* The last was the best, given the situation: a small sleeping space. *With a bunk bed? Oh well,* he thought, looking it over, *at least I’m in the lower bunk.* A sniff told him that the upper bunk was occupied by another male, whose brush, hanging over the edge of the bunk, was wrapped in a brown brush-cover.

And there are two clothes hampers at the end of the bunk. Now, which one do I use? He took a sniff; the other’s scent came from one hamper. *By process of elimination,* he thought, and quickly stripped down to the fur and tossed “his” clothing into the other hamper. *I’ll find where my clean clothes are ... later. Who knows, I may even wake up back home!*

Just After Sunset

“Wake up, cousin!” a voice said in his ear. Richard rolled over and buried his muzzle and then his head under his pillow. A hand’s *ral* later, someone nudged him. “Tal-Tal Po do Ashan, *wake up!*” the voice said, and the arm connected to the speaker rolled Richard/Tal-Tal Po over on his back and lifted the pillow. “If you didn’t stay up past High Sun, you’d be better able to wake up on time.”

Richard managed to pry open sleep crusted eyes; he yawned. “Where did you come from?” he managed to growl.

“From the top bunk, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan. You have chores to complete—*this evening, if you please!*” the other said, emphasizing his final words with a sharp poke with a finger claw.

Richard/Tal-Tal Po shied away from the single dagger point of the extended claw. “I’m getting up,” he said, sliding off the far end of the bunk. “Now, where are my clothes?” he said, shaking his head as if to clear out the “sleep fog”, erecting the three “walls” that he’d learned to build in previous timedives.

The other walked over to the “hamper” and lifted the lid. “Still awaiting your ‘clean it’ request, Tal-Tal Po,” he said and, letting the lid shut, pressed a button on the side of the “hamper”. “A kir, and they should be ready. In the meantime, would you at least *please* wrap your brush? Even the blanket would be better than ... this,” he said, wrinkling his muzzle.

Before Richard/T’T’Po had to make a response, a chime sounded and the other bounded out of their joint sleeping quarters. “Incoming call for Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan,” the computer voice called out, as Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan brought one palm down on the “accept” button, hard.

The image of an elderly female appeared in the air in front of T’S’Pa, as if by magic. “I have transmitted the results from your screening tests to your clan elders, candidate Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan,” the other said.

T’S’Pa settled down on his haunches and bared his throat. “This one awaits the findings of the examination board, honored scholar,” he said. **I must have passed the screening! Otherwise they’d have just sent a note to my mother,** he ‘cast to Richard/T’T’Po.

“You placed third in the examination group, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan. I would ask that you consider becoming one of my students,” she said.

Tal-Sora Pa licked his lips. “Of course, honored first-ranked d’aka troven Larn-Tal Chen do Haran.”

“And your answer?” the other said, a smile on her lips.

“Of course; this one accepts the honorable gentlebeing’s gracious offer,” Tal-Sora Pa said.

“Excellent. I will transmit your first assignment, and I expect to hear your thoughts on your approach within the eight-day. The examinations, by the by, do not end with this most recent one. To earn a position on the Planning Board requires performance above and beyond that of any and all competitors. But your performance on the first exams bodes well for your prospects,” she said and, nodding, cut the connection.

Tal-Sora Pa sprawled on the floor, and started at the ceiling.

“I take it that that was good news?” Richard/T’T’Po asked, as he joined the other in what was their “common room”, putting on his now clean clothes as he did so.

“Do you know who that was?”

“You said she was ‘Larn-Tal Chen do Haran’,” Richard/T’T’Po said.

“That’s who she *is*, not *what* she is,” T’S’Pa said.

“Isn’t that what you asked, who, not what?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan sighed. “Just the sort of word games that I should have expected from a prospective adjudicator. The honorable first-ranked *d’aka-troven* Larn-Tal Chen do Haran is the *head* of the Tal’s Strategic Planning Board. She’s a *race treasure*. She’s forgotten more about *d’aka-tro* than virtually everyone else remembers, and she remembers more than she has forgotten.”

“And here, I thought, that all the *Free People*, had perfect memories. Was I mistaken?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

Again, T’S’Pa sighed. “More adjudicator word games. Idiomatic rather than literal, my oh-so-literal-in-his-words cousin.”

“I take it that the news was good?”

“You have another hidden talent: that of understatement,” Tal-Sora Pa said. “She said that I placed *third* in the selection exams.”

“And this is good?”

“The final round of the qualification exams was given to eight-to-the-fifth candidates. Placing third is ... exceptionally good. And she offered to take me on as one of her *personal* students! I accepted her offer, of course.”

“Good news, then,” Richard said.

Tal-Sora Pa laughed. “Yes, you might say that. And did you hear what she said? She thinks I might even have a chance to get on to the Planning Board myself! A beginning student of the art, and I managed—somehow, I *really* don’t know how—to impress one of the great masters of the art. She was a citizen of the Larn and trained there, only moving here, to the Tal, because ... well ...” he stopped, and his ears flushed with blood.

“A matter of the lovetime?”

“She bound herself—*knife-bound herself*—to a male citizen of the Tal,” Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan said.

‘Another thing that I’ll have to understand better: this “knife-binding” business may be just more than a simple marriage-equivalent, if this person regards it as so unusual,’ Richard/T’T’Po thought.

Tal-Sora Pa sighed. “I’ll need to look over the assignment that she’s sent me. I *really* need you to run the errands that you promised last night to do tonight.”

“Do you have a list?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.



“Everything in writing? Adjudicator-to-be. Very well,” Tal-Sora Pa said, and settled himself down on the pad, and looked at the pile of books. “Please put these away when you are done with them,” he said, as he took up the brush and, after preparing the ink, quickly wrote out the list.

A *grocery list*, Richard/T’T’Po thought, as he looked over the other’s shoulder. *Should be simple enough.* “No zhinj?” he asked as Tal-Sora Pa handed him the list.

“If you can find something that *you* can stomach for a sixty-fourth of a mark, you can buy some for yourself. My tastes are just a *little* bit higher than that. Besides, I do not need to fuzz my thoughts; such action would be contrary

to proper study and training practice,” he said, looking down his muzzle at Richard/T’T’Po. “Use the local market . Don’t waste coin on transit to and from the core districts.”

“And why should I want to go to the core?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

Tal-Sora Pa bowed his head and sighed. “For another bout in the Entertainer’s district with some low ranked *hengoshin*.”

“Did I take coin from you for that ... matter?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

“No, but it’s ... *disgusting*. If you act like a *ktao-re-ir shirona*, then females will treat you like an apprentice *hengocha* at best—and an unregistered pillower at worst. ‘Trust no female, ever!’” he said.

“As I have agreed to tasks, so shall I complete said tasks,” Richard/T’T’Po said, and as he reached the door, he noticed a small bowl in a niche that he’d not seen before. *A bowl full of coins. Well, I’ll take a hand-full, and come back if I need more*, he thought, and left to complete his chores. *And then it will be back to “hit the books.”*

At the Market And Back

The local “market” was more like an open-air farmer’s market than any grocery store or market that Richard/T’T’Po had seen. The scents were all enticing, the fruits looked ... interesting ... and the meats were mouth-watering. Several sellers were smoking meats, and the scents were escaping the carefully vented smokers. *Smoke in a closed environment like a Homeship? They must be paying an extra adder on their “air taxes”,* he thought.

“And a fair amount of coin it is,” one of the merchants said.

“Excuse me, gentlebeing?” Richard/T’T’Po asked, turning to face the speaker.

“Everyone here, youngling, pays a small fee to allow the scents of our work to escape the smokers, the small ovens, and the roasting pits—those with such pay the most—but the amount of pollutants...”

“Pollutants? Those glorious scents?” Richard/T’T’Po couldn’t help but ask.

“Yes, oh-adjudicator-to-be. We all produce pollutants as viewed by Ship Services Life Support engineers, so additional venting and processing is required,” she said, pointing to several rather artfully concealed vents near her stand. “If we did not process the waste properly, soon everyone would be gasping for breath. But, so long as we keep the smoke and scents under control, everyone enjoys life a little bit more than they would otherwise. The collective benefits thereby,” she finished, a friendly grin on her muzzle.

“Ah...excuse me, gentlebeing, this one thanks you for the explanation. But, how did you recognize that this one is in training to be an adjudicator?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

The merchant laughed, and reached out to tap the tunic Richard/T’T’Po wore. “A clan Ashan *mon* with the sigil indicating a beginning student of *that* art. And before you become embarrassed, please note: I have grandchildren that are full adults, and I can tell how long a young male is past his Opening Day to within a season or so. You’ll learn. But you’re just ...” she paused, and looked him over more carefully, “perhaps four years past your Opening Day; and starting your study of the Law at least a year and a half younger than your class mates.”

Richard/T’T’Po opened and shut his mouth several times. Just how much am I “giving away” to this female? Is every bit of background known to every random...

“Don’t worry, youngling,” the merchant said, and flipped open her tunic to show an odd badge. “Even behind the walls, a *T’chel-yii* can see much. Don’t worry. You’re keeping your thoughts to yourself as is polite; but you cannot help but ‘leak’ bits here and there. If you complete your training, you’ll get to know many of us.”

“A ... *mind-hunter* ... smoking meats in an open market? I do not understand? Explain to this humble individual, please?” Richard/T’T’Po said, bowing and baring his throat.

“I have to deal with the unpleasant side of society far too often. This is how I ... decompress. The only emotions and thoughts I ‘read’ here are pleasant, or joyous. The scent of roasting or smoking meats makes the Free People—at least those who are not hungry—feel better about life.”

“And those who are hungry?”

“There is always citizen-basic. And I share some of my wealth—in meats—with those less fortunate,” she said. “Ask a *count’s* merchants here; likely you’ll get the same answer.”

Richard/T’T’Po took out his list, and scanned down it. “Ah, two measures of smoked *larga* meat. *Burnt ribs*?”

For some reason, that made the merchant laugh. “Let me see that list, please?”

Richard/T’T’Po handed over the list. “Is there something wrong, gentlebeing?”

“Someone...ah...I recognize the handwriting. Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan wrote this?”

“Yes, how...”

“*Larga* is the cheapest meat, and *burnt ribs* the cheapest cut thereof. That, plus the delicate and *very* precise hand is what you might call a ‘dead giveaway’. Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan is living on a student’s stipend, and is intelligent enough to know that the cheapest cut of the cheapest meat can still provide the best protein for the cost.”

“I take it that the honorable gentlebeing is ... dare this one say it? ... a somewhat senior detective?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

“You’ll learn, youngling. I’m a *T’chel-yii*-second. And for your information, my partner—a *T’chel-yii*-first— works on the Docks on ship-repair on her off times. But you’ll need to fill that list. So, citizen basic, plus one mark and four eighths,” she said, picking out a pile of ribs, setting them on a scale, and preparing to wrap them.

Richard/T’T’Po looked over the coins in his purse, guessed, and pulled out the correct amount. The merchant/*T’chel-yii* took out a wand and passed it over his air tag, and then wrapped and handed him the ribs.

The rest of his chores took less time; he checked when his bag was full and his task list completed, he still had some coins left. ‘*But no more of “citizen basic” credit left—I hadn’t realized that they had a universal basic income system — perhaps it’s just on this Homeship, the Tal. But it’s a good idea, if there’s enough in the way of resources for everyone to survive,*’ he thought. He came across a drink stand, with several pads set aside near it for patrons, along with small tables for their drinks. *Tamse costs...* he looked up at the chalk sign, then down at his remaining coins. ‘*Significantly less than what I have. And I am just a bit thirsty; and Tamse is not an intoxicant,*’ he thought.

It only took a few *ral* to pay for, get a large bowl, and settle down on one of the pads. He “people watched” while he consumed roughly half the *Tamse*. As he sat, a young female approached him and joined him at his little table, a small bowl of *zhinj* in her hands.

“I thought I recognized you, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan,” she said.

Think quickly, Richard/T’T’Po thought. “I’m afraid that the honorable gentlebeing has this one at a disadvantage...” he began.

The other giggled. “Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan. We’re both joining the training. Have you gotten your assignments yet? The first case we’re supposed to be ready to discuss?”

“Ah, yes. Am I that memorable?” he asked.

The other laughed. “The *only* male in our class, and he wonders if he’s memorable,” she said, and licked her chops.

Just like Marjorie when she’s about to do something that I will regret, he thought, carefully keeping his thoughts within the three walls that he’d managed to build, again.

She looked down at the bag of food. “Running errands? That seems a bit much for just one male. Or do you have a partner?” she asked.

“I share cubic with another male; he’s a cousin, and we are *not* partners,” he said. Come to think of it, the Shidran-Kas haven’t had much in the way of problems with lesbian, homosexual, or bisexual relationships, based on my other timedives. Nor polyamory, for that matter.

The other’s grin grew wider. “What’s your roommate do—for a living?”

“Citizen-basic for income, plus some from some other source,” he said, thinking of the coins in the bowl. “He’s a student of *d’aka-tro*.”

The female made a face, and stuck out her tongue. “A people-twister? How can you get along with such?”

“He is kind, intelligent, and ... well ... he doesn’t keep the same sleep schedule I do all that much, so we don’t rub each other raw. And he is a clan-brother and cousin,” Richard/T’T’Po said, a low growl entering his voice. *See, I can dissemble with the best of them. Clan loyalties are important to the “Free People”.*

Two other females closed, one called out to Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan. “*Study-mate! Istiru smiles on Females too!*” she called out.

“Great,” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan mumbled. “Our remaining study group members. Ishrikanaiva is the *Sitekii*, Tal-Shen Po do Isvan is my sister.”

“*Sitekii?*” Richard/T’T’Po could not help but let a note of disgust enter his voice; all that he’d ever seen from that branch of the *Free People* had left a foul taste in his mouth. *Think first, don’t just respond*, he thought immediately afterwards.

“I get that a lot,” Ishrikanaiva said, seating herself. She had the appearance of a timber wolf among foxes, towering over the others with a grey and white coat and golden-yellow eyes. She looked at Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan, then down at that one’s drink, then looked up again. “A little bit early for that, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Hey, it helps deal with the hangover,” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan said.

“I wouldn’t know,” Ishrikanaiva said. She looked over at Richard/T’T’Po. “I don’t drink. Or smoke. I don’t need to get a *worse* reputation than I already have.”

“You’ve done something that’s wrong?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

Ishrikanaiva laughed, though it was more a bark than the usual Shidran-Kas huffing laugh. “Other than being born of an offshoot of the *Free People*? No. But I don’t need to develop any bad habits; can you imagine a drunk or caffeine-addicted adjudicator? The Board doesn’t care for weaknesses like that in their ‘givers-and-interpreters-of-the-law’.”

Tal-Shen Po do Isvan laughed, almost-but-not-quite spilling *her* bowl of Tamse. “Ishrikanaiva, light moves in corkscrews compared to you! Though that ‘bad-girl’ image that you project...”

“Would be a perfect way to capture just the sort of male that I do *not* want to catch,” Ishrikanaiva said. “I cannot help the way I look, but I have absolute control over the way I act,” she finished.

“Why don’t we go back to your cubic when you finish your Tamse! We can get a head start on the first case!” Tal-Shen Po do Isvan said, looking over at Richard/T’T’Po.



“I share cubic with someone...” Richard/T’T’Po began.

“His cousin and clan-brother,” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan interrupted. “It wouldn’t be a problem, would it?” she asked, turning to Richard/T’T’Po.

Think quick, Richard/T’T’Po thought. “This one does not *think* that it would be a problem, but if this one’s room mate objects...”

“He can sue us,” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan interrupted, again.

I can see that this one is going to be loads of fun, Richard/T'T'Po thought. But it may just be turnabout. The gender roles are somewhat reversed, he thought, carefully keeping it within the three walls he'd managed to build.

Home is the Hunter

The three females stopped at the threshold, just on the corridor side of the privacy beads. "Tal-Tal Po do Ashan, could you allow us in?" Ishrikanaiva said, moving the other two females aside to allow Richard/T'T'Po an opening.

"This one will go in first; and see if this meeting will not disturb my roommate," Richard/T'T'Po said, as he parted the beads to enter. Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan was pacing back and forth, spouting what, for all Richard/T'T'Po could tell, was utter gibberish. But in the middle of the room, glowing ideograms and odd symbols were appearing, moving, twisting, merging and disappearing as if by magic.

Tal-Sora Pa turned and stopped making noise; the symbols froze. "Put everything in the preserver chamber," he said, and pointed at a nondescript block in one corner. "Computer, save work under assignment 1 timestamped ... now!"

The three females stood, as if turned to stone, silent, staring at ... something.

Tal-Sora Pa looked over at the three females, then back at Richard/T'T'Po. "Your study group?"

"Yes, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, would it be acceptable if we took over the room to work?" Richard/T'T'Po asked, bowing and baring his throat.

"Go ahead; I've run into a temporary block anyway. I'll leave the rooms to you," he said. And he 'cast, '*And if I find you stinking up the bedroom with one of these three, there will be words.*' The 'cast was cold, harsh, and there was the feel of untapped power.

As Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan strode to the door the three females parted to give him a clear exit path. As he passed by, Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan quickly leaned over until her muzzle was next to the base of Tal-Sora Pa's covered brush and inhaled deeply.

Tal-Sora Pa spun around and brought his hands near Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan's muzzle; the claws, painted a brilliant yellow-gold, were extended, and were a hair's breadth from the end of Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan's nose.

Oh crap! Ishrikanaiva 'cast to the other members of the study group, as she jumped away from Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan. "Honorable gentlebeing Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan," she said, her voice just shy of a shout. Tal-Sora Pa froze, and glared at Ishrikanaiva. "The gentlebeing Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan is intoxicated; she is not fully responsible," Ishrikanaiva said. "It would be beneath the dignity of a master-of-dreadclaw to duel with such an intoxicated fool," she finished.

Tal-Sora Pa took a deep breath, in through his nose and out through his mouth. He straightened, let his arms drop to his sides, with the palms turned away from Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan. After a ral's pause, he bowed low to the Sitekii, Ishrikanaiva. "The honorable gentlebeing is wise, and is a credit to the Free People. The reminder is appropriate; this one allowed his ... annoyance ... with a fool to break his focus. The honorable gentlebeing is most proper in reminding this one of his responsibilities. Might this one be told the honorable gentlebeing's name, so that he might properly honor her at some future time?"

Ishrikanaiva bowed in turn, making her bow lower than Tal-Sora Pa's. "This one is known on the Tal as Ishrikanaiva and, yes, my lineage is *Sitekii*."

“There can be honor among any of the Free People, Ishrikanaiva of the Sitekii,” Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan said, bowing lower and baring his throat.

Ishrikanaiva rose from her bow, followed quickly by Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan. With a final nod, the male turned and strode off. Once he’d turned a corner and was out of sight, Ishrikanaiva turned to Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan. “You blasted moron – trying to get a sniff?”

“But you saw him,” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan said. “He’s absolutely beautiful. Those eyes – and under the cover, that brush of his must be...”

“Not for you to sniff at,” Ishrikanaiva interrupted. “Did you or did you not see his claws?”

“They were a bit too close for me to focus on...” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan said.

“Dueling code; it’s on the reading list. He’s at least a first level master of dreadclaw! He could claim challenge for your insult, through you being drunk, it wouldn’t be proper. But, if he did, and you can thank *Istiru* that he didn’t, even a blood-sands duel could send you to your next incarnation,” Ishrikanaiva said.

“How did you...” Richard/T’T’Po began to ask.

“His claws—the color—that shade of yellow, the color of death!” Ishrikanaiva interrupted, and shuddered. “Your roommate is a very dangerous person.”

“Well, I haven’t read up on the Dueling code,” Richard/T’T’Po said. *It’s the truth, after all.*

“After that introduction, I just hope he doesn’t throw us out the next time we come to study with you, Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan,” Tal-Shen Po do Isvan said. She bowed low to Ishrikanaiva. “And thank you for rescuing my sister from her stupidity. Again.”

Ishrikanaiva sighed. “Think nothing of it. One cannot choose one’s family.”

“I’m right here, people!” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan said.

“And you’re still fuzzy around the edges. You just don’t do that sort of thing. What were you thinking?” Tal-Shen Po do Isvan said. “Or rather, you weren’t thinking. But we have work to do, let us set this matter aside for later,” she finished, and marched her sister into the room and settled her down at the one table.

“I’ll call up the first case,” Richard/T’T’Po said.

Contracts:	Post-Dispute Interpretation
Disputants:	Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar (f) Tal-Ika Rau do Asao (f)
Adjudicators:	Adjudicator-5 Larn-Tyel Chen do Tsvo (f) Adjudicator-5 Larn-Ktal Po do Haran (f) Adjudicator-6 Tal-Larn Shen do Akar (m)
Determination:	Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar, Presenter Tal-Ika Rau do Asao, Acceptor
Subject:	Cloth bales, not under wartime alliance, military necessity, or clan feud barriers.

Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar and Tal-Ika Rau do Asao had consistently bought and sold cloth for general use at the wholesale stage for Three-Eighths-and-Six (36₈) Han-standard-years. The contract in question was for one-eight-fourth, four-eight-third, four-eight-squared (14400₈) bales of stage-three dunlap “of medium fibrosity”. The price was at market value date-of-sale with shipping instructions and liability assignments as was standard both in the trade and their custom. Both knew that interclan feud was a possible risk at the time of their contracting. Unlike

others in identical circumstances use of third-party brokers (with the slightly higher costs involved) was not part of their regular trade. In fact, no less than three times previous brief feuds had been virtually ignored by these two; trading was slowed and delivery delayed (often for security purposes, never justified) but sure. No haste was necessary in the transactions. Tal-Ika Rau do Asao, though, in the case at point began to concern herself with possible breach after deliveries had been slowed more than was normal in past trading. Seven-eighths and four (74₈) nights after delivery date only one-in-five of the bales had arrived, and a further one-in-one-eight-and-six (1/16₈) were in custody of clan Asao custody (customs). She contacted Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar and requested assurances that the rest would be delivered; Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar reminded her of the normal rules – that an inter-clan feud could justify a breach of contract, each person to recover loss from their clan – but promised delivery. Three-eighths-and-six (36₈) nights later, only another one-part-in-eight had entered clan Asao control. Tal-Ika Rau do Asao declared the contract void at that time, two nights after the inter-clan feud had ended, claiming non-delivery was the breach to justify it on. Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar denies any breach on her part, showing her efforts on her part to expedite delivery during the inter-clan feud were made and assurance to Tal-Ika Rau do Asao that their individual contract would be honored.

Decision: For Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar, Tal-Ika Rau do Asao to bear costs.

Grounds: (The decision having been 2-1)

The question here is whether Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar was in breach at the time Tal-Ika Rau do Asao denied the contract. Had she been, Tal-Ika Rau do Asao would have merely ratified a state already existing. In ordinary times, non-delivery eight-squared-three-eighths-six (1368) nights after the date set would be a clear breach justifying an end of the contract. With an inter-clan feud, any halt to the trade would have been justified during the feud, since no third-clan broker was involved. Using third-clan brokers to ensure deliveries during a feud, without delay, was the customary practice that Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar and Tal-Ika Rau do Asao had deliberately not followed. As a result, any delay in the delivery was not a source of breach for as long as the feud continued. Tal-Ika Rau do Asao was assured by Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar that the contract was viewed as valid when she contacted the latter seven-eighths-four (74₈) nights after the fact. To break after the feud was over, Tal-Ika Rau do Asao must show that there was a breach, or bear the brunt herself. The contract was valid at the time, she had been assured of that, and so she must take the loss.

“I can’t see how they reached that result!” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan objected immediately. “There was never a full delivery!”

“The buyer’s declaration was premature; there’s no mention that either party knew that the inter-clan feud had been ended,” Tal-Shen Po do Isvan said. “Yet they each had to know that a clan feud had interfered with the standard timing for any delivery.”

“How can you say that?” Ishrikanaiva asked in a neutral tone.

“That knowledge can be inferred from their intervening conversation when Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar reminded Tal Ika Rau do Asao that ‘an inter-clan feud could justify a breach of contract.’ And then on the buyer’s request, promised delivery,” Tal-Sen Po do Isvan answered.

“But less than 5% of the goods had actually been delivered to the buyer’s clan, and Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar gave no information that the rest had been either shipped or were ready to ship,” Richard/T’T’Po noted.

“Any delivery showed an intention to fulfill the contract; in which ‘no haste was necessary’, Ishrikanaiva retorted. “I don’t see you can object to the delay when such has been part of the ‘new custom’ that pair had already developed.”

“Oh? What about the statement that at least three times prior this pair had virtually ignored clan feuds?” Tal Larn Takao do Isvan said assertively. “They were already guilty of ignoring standard customs!”

“Then how could either claim any breach could or could not be recognized?” Richard/T’T’Po asked in a naïve tone.

Tal Larn Takao do Isvan hissed and raised her hand, claws extending slightly.

“The fact summary does not include any mention of ‘substituted custom’,” Ishrikanaiva said pointedly staring at Tal Larn Takao do Isvan. “We therefore must presume that that was not part of this tribunal’s thinking.” She huffed a laugh. “This one knows the follies of presuming commonalities of assumptions from others with different backgrounds.”

“Such behaviors being common in fields other than trade, no doubt,” Richard/T’T’Po said with an emotional freighting of experiential weight.

“Hah! Trust you to see that point, Ishrikanaiva,” Tal-Shen Po do Isvan said. “The buyer having not indicated that delivery timing was important, claiming a ‘breach’ based on slowness smacks somewhat of sharp practice, to me.”

The discussion was long, and it was clear that his study group—despite the one “clinker” —was fairly well prepared and, more importantly, had already begun to think a bit like lawyers.

After The Lesson

Richard/T’T’Po shook his head, sadly. Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan was clearly going to be more than a mild irritant, despite the attempts by her sister and their *Sitekii* study-partner to control her. *‘A man-eater? What would be the proper description here? She’s bright, but her mind seems to be stuck in the gutter much of the time.’* Of the three, Ishrikanaiva seemed to be the brightest and the best suited for the profession, at least as he understood it. *‘Giver-and-interpreter-of-the-law, hoo-boy, what a combo. Judge, advocate, and jury combined. The Free People make their system work—somehow—but I don’t yet understand how. Of course, where guilt or innocence can be determined beyond any doubt in what I would consider to be criminal torts, I can see how some of this crazy system might develop. No, discard that idea. It works, so it’s not crazy. They’ve managed to keep their societies working for over twenty thousand years, so they have to be doing something right.’*

Though it was clear that he was going to have to have a “talk” with Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan at some point. There were several times when she “accidentally” put a hand on his brush and “just by accident” stroked it. *‘I’m going to have to see how well jujitsu works on the Free People if she keeps on “accidentally” brushing sensitive spots. At least, the other two females aren’t playing “hands on” games.’* He couldn’t help but chuckle, thinking of how Ishrikanaiva had reacted to Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan’s little “games.” *‘The Sitekii has the strongest moral code of the three; how is that for a pleasant surprise?’*

Other Matters, Other Projects

The “burnt ribs” turned out to be quite juicy, and more than a pleasant surprise for all that they were “the cheapest cut of the cheapest meat.” *It just goes to show that preparation can make up for a great deal,* Richard/T’T’Po thought, as he devoured his share of the ribs. He cracked the bones open easily – and the marrow was even tastier than the meat had been. ‘*Stands to reason,*’ he thought, ‘*it’s mostly fat ... but a very tasty fat.*’ The tamse he brewed up cut through the rich marrow and fatty meat, and cleared the palate for the next bite.

It was only a matter of a few minutes—a *hand’s kir*, Richard/T’T’Po thought—before his share of the meat and drink was reduced to a few bone shards and a tongue-cleaned drinking bowl. ‘*Half the meat, and ... I’m actually full. Not stuffed, but ... pleasantly full. I think that this was likely a single day’s—or night’s—food, but I should check.*’

Checking out the “apartment’s” finances proved a bit more difficult; mostly, guessing just how to phrase the query for the proper computer record. *At least my voice-print suffices to grant me “normal” access, so I’m not bringing in the local Security forces. “I” have access, “by right.” Of course, they don’t have multiple authentication factors; more the fool, they. But since they don’t seem to have much in the way of crime—at least, not on this Homeship—I suppose that they just accept a slightly “looser” set of security protocols.*

The “burnt ribs,” it turned out, were something of a treat, above and beyond “citizen basic food.” The tamse? Since it was “first harvest,” it was actually an expense, but only a small one. Richard/T’T’Po looked over the “authorized citizen basic food ration.” And found that “he” had actually been eating less of the “free” food than he was authorized. ‘*And Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan has been redirecting his food ration to a food bank “for those less fortunate”, living strictly off of what he could buy. He marked half the “burnt ribs” as “mine”, so I didn’t step “over the line”, clearly. But he’s giving away all of his ration, and buying food instead?*’

“Surprised, cousin?” Tal-Sora Pa asked, having quietly come up behind Richard/T’T’Po.

“Ah,” Richard/T’T’Po mumbled incoherently for a moment; the other hadn’t snuck in; he’d just been so quiet entering from the corridor that it was as if he’d just materialized behind him.

“The student-stipend, in addition to my citizen-basic income is quite enough to provide for more food than I could eat, and more space than I could effectively use,” he said.

“I wasn’t trying to pry, cousin, but ...”

“You were curious, as I would expect of any of our clan, cousin,” Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan said. “We have a habit, in Ashan, of leading with our muzzles,” he finished, and laughed.

“Actually, I was worried that I might be spending some of your coin...”

“And you’ve seen that we are splitting the costs just as I said we would, right down the middle. With your student-stipend—admittedly smaller than mine—and our citizen-basic income, neither one of us has to worry about food, air, water, or any other necessity. And thanks to sharing cubic, we end up putting a few coins away for the future.”

“It just seems...”

“Like we’re living like the Merchant Princesses? Trust me, cousin, they aren’t eating ‘burnt ribs’ and drinking tamse—even brewed from first harvest leaves. They’re drinking spiced *zhinj*, entertained by second and third ranked *hengocha* and employing counts-unnumbered underlings to fulfill every business need,” Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan said, and chuckled. “Who may well include the likes of me someday, if I don’t find a spot on the Planning Board ... assuming that I don’t end up chewing first-food for my kits, and keeping household accounts.”

“I thought you said you’d ‘never trust a female, ever’? Was I mistaken,” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

“You weren’t wrong, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan, but ... I can still hope that I’ll find a trustworthy female someday—when I’m a full-adult, that is—and I’d still not like to be kept in a clan-home forever after, doing nothing with my mind but trying to raise sensible offspring.”

“What does *d’aka-tro* say about your chances?”

Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan laughed, “the *art* does not do well predicting what is in store for any one specific individual – think of it like thermodynamics. The behavior, and future, of one particle in a gas cloud is stochastic. It is only in the aggregate, the collective, that the behavior becomes somewhat deterministic.”

“Does that mean we don’t have free will? That’s not a fun thought...”

“No, we continue to have free will. And the collective behavior is really only described as a probability distribution of *likely* outcomes. There are what we call, ‘chaos events’ when the projections ‘break down’ due to the action of nexus elements and the differences between map and territory. *D’aka tro* is the map, reality is the territory after all.”

“What’s a ‘nexus element’?”

Again, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan laughed. “*D’aka-troven* have been trying to develop a definitive description other than ‘producers of chaos events’ for nexus elements for *octads* and *octads*. The *d’aka troven* who comes up with a usable formulation of all classes of ‘nexus elements’ that permits their advance prediction will win the thanks of *d’aka troven* throughout the Free People.”

“So, they’re whatever kicks over the cart and forces a recalculation?”

“Yes. And that’s the first and possibly the hardest lesson that a student of the *art* must learn, that the hunt-science is *not* perfect, and we still have to live our lives and try to make things as good as we can, and be prepared to pick up the pieces when ‘things fall apart’.”

“Must they always? Fall apart, that is?”

“*D’aka tro* can only effectively be used to project situations an octad or two future-ward before the probability of any specific outcome approaches a very small value,” Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan said. “But I’ve had enough, for now, of teaching – I am going to get some sleep. Something that you might consider as well, cousin,” he finished, and silently slid across the room and into their sleeping quarters.

‘*Even without the training, he moves as gracefully, and silently, as a hengocha. No wonder he adapted so well to his “next role”.* Assuming, of course, that I’m on the correct timeline, Richard/T’T’Po thought. And he yawned. ‘*Best I follow my “cousin’s” lead,*’ he thought, and joined Tal-Sora Pa in sleep.

Another Set of Lessons

Richard/T'T'Po laughed quietly to himself. For once, I'm the first one up. Who would have thought that Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan liked to sleep late in his youth, even after retiring early in morning. His internal monologue was interrupted by Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan gliding quietly out of the sleeping chamber.

"Ah, cousin? What is with the change in dress?" Richard/T'T'Po asked. *It looks like a gi.*

"I'm going to my training class," Tal-Sora Pa said.

"In dreadclaw?"

Tal-Sora Pa laughed. "No, silly. For that, I'd need to bring a heavier *shoda*. This is my *kenja shoda*."

'So, another word learned.' "*Shoda*" is their word for *gi*, Richard/T'T'Po thought. "Kenja? I think I understand what dreadclaw is—at least as well as any non-student of that art can—but I have no clue as to what *kenja* is. Instruction?"

Tal-Sora Pa made a tsking sound. "Dreadclaw is a killing art. It's meant as a 'last resort'. *Kenja* is intended to provide an escape without killing. I learned the former because I had ... issues ... I had to work through."

"Issues?"

"Trust issues. And the facts of my genetics."

"Your genetics? Surely..."

"I'm a failed healer. I have four sisters, all with the healer mutation fully expressed. Me? I'm just a 'failed healer'. I carry the genes, but they're recessive, and being male, I can carry the blessing, but not experience it myself."

"But..."

"I worked through it by learning how to use my body as a weapon. Not the most mature of choices, but ... I was a good deal less mature 'back when'. I started learning *kenja* because I wanted to have options."

"Options?"

"Short of killing an opponent, and *kenja* is more the art of disabling an opponent. I do not hurt my opponent. The floor hurts her, the corridor walls hurt her, or the table that she lands on hurts her. But I do not hurt her," Tal-Sora Pa said, grinning with his carnassials exposed.

Richard/T'T'Po couldn't help but laugh. *They have a moral equivalent of jujitsu.* "And you learned this to...?"

"Help control my temper. I sometimes act before thinking. It is a bad habit, that I have been endeavoring to correct. And, because of my appearance."

"Your appearance?"

Tal-Sora Pa looked down his muzzle at his cousin. “Yes, cousin-who-is-clearly-only-interested-in-females. I draw stares and sometimes I draw more than just attention; I draw unwanted touches. And other things,” he said, an image of one of the study group’s muzzle near Tal-Sora Pa’s brush cover ‘cast clearly.

“Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan does have a few ... difficulties ... involving self-control as well, I think,” Richard/T’T’Po said.

“Yes, you might say that. But I have to be off to my training. Enjoy your next study session,” Tal-Sora Pa said, and glided out the door into the bustle of the busy corridor.



Only a few minutes (*a hand’s kir*, Richard/T’T’Po thought), after his cousin had left, a muzzle appeared just on the far side of the privacy beads.

“Tal-Tal Po, can you help me?” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan asked. “Can I come in, and can we talk?”

‘*She’s really upset about something,*’ Richard/T’T’Po thought, ‘*if I’m judging the whine in her voice properly.*’ “Enter, and be welcome,” he said, hoping that would suffice. After waiting for a hand’s *ral* he sighed, got up, went to the entryway, and parted the beads.

“I’m in trouble, Tal-Tal Po,” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan said. Her eyes were bloodshot, the fur around her eyes and part of her muzzle was wet.

‘*Crying? I guess that they’re more like us than I’d thought,*’ Richard/T’T’Po thought, carefully hiding it within three walls. “Come in, sit down, I’ll brew some tamse,” he said, pointing to the table in the middle of what he’d come to think of as the “living room”.

Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan sat down with an audible thud, her shoulders slumped, her ears flat against her skull.

‘*Okay, she’s a basket case about something,*’ Richard/T’T’Po thought, busying himself preparing the *tamse*, to give the other a chance to compose herself. Once the tamse was ready and he’d filled two bowls, he brought them over and set one in front of the female. Then sat down opposite her. “A joy shared is twice a joy, a sorrow shared is half a sorrow. Tell me the problem.”

“I need help on a special assignment.”

“I thought that it was another few nights before...”

“I went to see the instructor, and she questioned me about what I understood so far regarding our first case study. She tore my preliminary draft apart, and ...” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan broke up, sobbing.

“I trust you mean that figuratively?”

“She took the printout and after reading it, she shredded it and she told me, ‘You should reconsider your talent for this art if this is the level of your current work product’. She tore up my draft! She had claws that were yellow-gold, like your roommate. She tossed it up and cut it to ribbons as it drifted down.”

“A trifle dramatic, perhaps, but you’ve been warned, haven’t you, that you need to develop something of a thick skin while you’re learning? Some teachers can be cruel...”

“She also gave me an added assignment,” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan said.

“Well, that’s a good sign, isn’t it? She’s giving you another chance,” Richard/T’T’Po said. “If she thought you were hopeless, couldn’t she have just failed you in your training? Extreme, I know, but isn’t it possible?”

“Claws! If she did that, I would just *die!*” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan said. “Could you call the other study group members, and ask them to help us?”

“Yes, I can call them,” Richard/T’T’Po said, and did so.

It took less than a hand’s kir for the two other study group members to show up. Richard/T’T’Po repeated the entry ceremony and explained the situation to the two arrivals.

“So, sister, you’ve *really* stuck your brush in it?” Tal-Shen Po do Isvan said, the “again” going unsaid, but clearly implied.

Ishrikanaiva just sighed, settled down at the table, and brought out a thermos jug. “Bowls?”

“I have first harvest,” Richard/T’T’Po said. “I’ll get bowls for the two of you.”

“Nice of you to offer, but ... I brought enough for all of us. I expect a long day coming, somehow...” Ishrikanaiva said. “So, what’s the new assignment you’ve been given, Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan?”

Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan sighed, and brought up the case study.

Contracts:	Post-Dispute Interpretation
Disputants:	Larn-Larn Issa do Kvar Tyel-Daikwan Dao do Isa
Adjudicators:	Adjudicator-5 Larn-Ika Shen do Tsvo (f) Adjudicator-5 Larn-Tyel Po do Hsin(f) Adjudicator-4 Larn-Tyel Shen do Haran (m)
Determination:	Larn-Larn Issa do Kvar, Presenter Tyel-Daikwan Dao do Isa, Acceptor
Subject:	Sword scabbards, 8-cubed in number.

Not under wartime alliance nor military necessity, Larn-Larn Issa do Kvar sought the most profitable means of acquiring the scabbards for her clan-comrades. Tyel-Daikwan Dao do Isa was known locally as an able crafter; her price on request was 4 Tal trademarks per scabbard less. On delivery date 7 8-squared 7 8s scabbards were available at Tyel-Daikwan Dao do Isa’s shop, the remainder 8 being finished such that they would be available the next night, Larn-Larn Issa do Kvar denied breach on those grounds. The scabbards were as ordered, with baldrics of plain, adjustable web.

The dispute arose over the meaning of the term, “to be fitted”, which closed the contract. Upon arriving with all 8-cubed scabbards back at her clanhouse, Larn-Larn Issa do Kvar discovered that no proviso for further change in web was possible without damaging the adjustable nature, owing to the fine fabric weave Tyel-Daikwan Dao do Isa specialized in. The scabbards, meant to be given to individual members of the Clan, were in fact more suitable for armory or more general usage. Larn-Larn Issa do Kvar brought claim, seeking damages for possible loss of face for not having individualized gifts she had been promising, although not to Tyel-Daikwan Dao do Isa’s knowledge.

Tyel-Daikwan Dao do Isa argues that from the nature of the contract the meaning is made clear. The large number of identical items denied any reasonable assumption that they were meant as specialized gifts; the price was set

on the mass nature, and would have been at least twice as great for so many individualized baldrics, which were secondary to the chief subject of the contract, the scabbards.

Decision: For Tyel-Daikwan Dao do Isa, Larn-Larn Issa do Kvar to bear costs.

Grounds: (The decision having been 2-1)

The baldrics are adjustable to many individuals, or to any individual over time-changes. It is therefore possible for them "to be fitted" again and again as owners change. Further individualization would have to be done by Larn-Larn Issa do Kvar for the scabbards themselves to be individualized – what she had planned, but not requested of Tyel-Daikwan Dao do Isa – if each scabbard was "to be fitted" to a particular owner. The baldrics being secondary, although customary, Tyel-Daikwan Dao do Isa could reasonably suppose that Larn-Larn Issa do Kvar's intent of personalization would include a switching of baldrics. These were made adjustable as was the custom of the trade.

"It makes absolutely no sense to me!" Tel-Larn Takao do Isvan blurted out. "The greatest majority of the scabbards were actually delivered! But in the earlier case, only a scant fraction were delivered. Yet that one, too, they declared for the vendor. But the reason is totally different! Yet the first decision stated that 'non-delivery would be a clear reason for breach!'"

"But only 'in ordinary times,' and the first case had a background of a clan feud possibly slowing delivery," Tal-Shen Po do Isvan interjected.

"Only cloth is not anything related to a 'military necessity,' but scabbards and their associated baldrics are," Ishrikanaiva noted. "The nature of the goods is different."

"That would argue even more for any delivery flaw being grounds, but in the second case, the court ignored the one-day-delay from the last eight being finished," Tel-Larn Takao do Isvan objected. "But the decision talks only about...the perceived quality of these goods!"

"Does it?" Richard/T'T'Po asked humbly. "Is there truly nothing else even hinted at?"

Ishrikanaiva blinked, then shook her head. "There is...a conflict being de-emphasized, almost. Between what each of the parties has assumed about the nature of the subsequent distribution by the purchaser."

"They're gifts, either way, both know that! So, there is no 'commercial' valuation difference!" Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan objected.

"Hah! The adjudicators said there was a difference over 'to be fitted'. That phrase is clear: a baldric and sword must be fitted to its owner to be of any real value," Tal-Shen Po do Isvan said.

"Yes, and what was delivered could not be so 'fitted' to the individual recipients. Only, with that volume of transaction, assuring all would fit all possible recipients would be all but impossible!" Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan objected.

"Yet both knew that when they made their agreement – so they must have had some idea of a solution. Did these ideas, match?" Ishrikanaiva asked.

"Obviously not!" Tal-Shen Po do Isvan said, "Or there would never have been a case."

"Did they overlap?" Richard/T'T'Po asked, then looked at Tel-Larn Takao do Isvan. "And if so, how?"

"I can't see that they did, or the case would not have been brought!" Tel-Larn Takao do Isvan said, her eyes almost swimming with tears.

“But the Adjudicators...they saw an overlap, on which they upheld the contract. Or was the case determined by something beyond?” Ishrikanaiva asked. “Were there other Clan motivations and pressures affecting the decision?”

That sidelined the discussion for a good forty-five minutes into a heated consideration of inter-Clan politics as it had been (at the time of the decision), as it was (at the current time), and as it was supposed to be acknowledged (according to the rules binding Adjudicators). None of which, however, forwarded the decipherment of the puzzle the least – though it did lead to several near-screaming exchanges, for which the participants were made to pause, sit down, and then eventually apologize for giving in to emotional reactivity.

“There just isn’t any sense to this,” Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan finally said, shaking her head.

“Maybe that’s the lesson your instructor meant to convey?” Tal-Shen Po do Isvan asked. “Sometimes a baldric is not a baldric, when the parties cannot agree on what a baldric is?”

“Is every member of a set, the same as the concept of that set? Or did the Adjudicators agree there were different baldrics in that one set of baldrics?” Richard/T’T’Po asked Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan softly.

“They did that... oh. Unh.” Then Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan blinked and swayed. “A set...two sets... baldrics, recipients...fitting one baldric to one member, but different baldrics across all the different memmmmmbers...!” She screeched and bounced to her feet and off them, shaking her clawed fists back and forth. “YEEEEESSSSSS!”

“When is a set not a set? When it’s a fit,” Ishrikanaiva said in a barely-audible undertone, her ears flicking at the exulting Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan.

Tal-Shen Po do Isvan was shaking her head from side to side. “I... differing perceptions, the same phrasing; this is why written words lie where mind-speech cannot. Such...pitfalls. Such hazards. How can one ever hope to avoid such? Not even the cleverest drafting...”

“I’d prefer to consider ‘stupid’ drafting first. As in ‘what stupid error am I creating or leaving room for?’” Richard/T’T’Po said softly.

Interlude

Richard/T’T’Po parted the beads and looked out on the corridor; it was empty, lit by the actinic glare of the daylight-simulating lights. The air reeked of ozone, but all that it did was make him slightly sleepy. With a yawn, he slid between the beads and out into the deserted space of the High Sun corridor. *‘I wonder what’s happening in the market. Maybe get some tamse?’* He thought, reaching back into “his” quarters to grab a fistful of coins for his purse. *‘Expenses have been down of late. I’m less the spendthrift than my “host”, certainly. The trips that one took to the Core Entertainers’ District were a greater drain than I would have tolerated,’* Richard/T’T’Po thought. He shook his head as he wandered. *‘They don’t quite roll up the sidewalks at sunrise on the Tal, but ... there’s nothing like the “day life” like what I’ve observed on Homeships like the Tyel.’*

The market was almost deserted, but the “bar” he’d been too earlier was still open, though with different servers. *‘Tamse for the likes of me, zhinj for the party-hard types. Another similarity, they do have some hard drinkers.’* He detected a familiar scent, then saw a familiar person, after he had his bowl of tamse.

‘Studying, with several empty bowls next to her. I wonder,’ he thought, and wandered over to sit at her small table.

“Good evening to you, gentlebeing *sidar-ko* Ishrikanaiva,” Richard/T’T’Po said, baring his throat. ‘Five empty bowls, all of which held *tamse* based on the scent. Right. No *zhinj* for this one, “a bad habit” to be avoided.’

Ishrikanaiva looked up from the book she’d buried her muzzle in. “Good day to you, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan,” she said, laying the book down.

“What is the study subject?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

“Can’t read upside down?” Ishrikanaiva said, and chuckled. “I was reading up on the governmental structure of the Tal.”

Richard/T’T’Po twisted his head and looked up at the Sitekii. “But isn’t that just something that is part of the environment? What effort does a fish need to exert to recognize water?”

The Sitekii laughed. “If I’d been born on the Tal, yes, it would all be obvious to me from my early education. But...”

“You weren’t? But then, how did you come to be on the Tal?”

“If I’d been born here, I’d likely have been shorter, and look more like one of our other study group members. I was brought here by my father.”

“But, if you were brought here, how...”

“Did I gain entry to adjudicator training? By becoming a citizen shortly after my arrival, and by studying,” Ishrikanaiva said.

“But...”

“It’s expensive, yes. But father bought my citizenship when he bought his own. As to *why* he brought me here, isn’t it obvious?” Ishrikanaiva asked, her friendly grin making it clear that her question was not a challenge.

“A fish does not see the water, so, no. Why *did* he come here?”

“To get away from my mother, and to save me, as he saw it, from an immoral and likely rather short life,” she answered.

“Why flee from family?”

Ishrikanaiva snorted. “You’re not familiar with what life is like on most Sitekii Homeships, are you?”

“Obviously not. What I’ve understood did not prepare me for you. You do *not* fit the stereotype of a Sitekii female. You’re polite, intelligent...”

“And a Follower of the Way, and devoted to the moral code given in the sacred scrolls?”

“You’re a Follower?”

He was answered with another laugh. “I follow the dictates quite carefully, another reason that I drink *tamse* but not *zhinj*, quite apart from the fact that I can’t stand the taste of the stuff. I don’t go to Temple all that often. It’s easier to read the scrolls and just follow them, rather than face some of the glares that my appearance prompts if I try to join any but the most tolerant of Temple groups.”

“But some of the dictates are ... somewhat restrictive ...”

“Concerning male dress, and actions, yes. But I’m hardly a fundamentalist. I understand why, in the early years, it was necessary to protect males. But we’re past the point where we need to hide males in the ship-cores, protecting them from radiation threats.”

“But females carry the young...”

“And we have full chromosomes. Males have one ‘short’ chromosome, and were more subject to irreparable genetic damage ‘back when’, before our science and engineering caught up with our life style. Where do you think that the mutations came from that produced the likes of me?” she asked.

Richard/T’T’Po opened and closed his mouth several times. ‘*Be careful here,*’ he thought, before answering. “To be honest, I never thought about it. I just assumed that it was the result of genetic drift, or some like cause. The Free People started as a relatively small population as I understand it. Just a few ships. And over time...” he stopped, at Ishrikanaiva’s laughter.

“That’s about the most charitable analysis I’ve heard in many a season, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan. And I can tell that you believe it. No, it had a darker historical reason. The early Sitekii were separated for many *octads*, before the knowledge of FTL was ripped from the Universe, and before it spread through the Free People, the ancestors of the Sitekii were really quite, ‘not nice’. The habits formed in that time persist on many Sitekii Homeships – and inbreeding had the effects that you would expect.”

“You mean...” Richard/T’T’Po began.

“Oh, we’re not a different species. We can still interbreed with the primary groups and produce fertile offspring. Though the Free People as a whole are becoming what one might call a ‘cline’.”

“A ‘cline’? I’m not familiar with the term, what does it mean?”

“Where Group A can interbreed with Group B, Group B with Group C, and so on, but Group A cannot interbreed with Group Z and produce fertile offspring,” she said.

“But that would mean...”

“That my variety of Sitekii isn’t the most variant subspecies in the cline as it now exists. There’s more than just the ‘main’ subspecies, if there can really be a ‘main’ defined. That’s one of the reasons why genetic analysis is required by most clans before pair bondings are permitted.”

“But what then are your chances? A ... sorry to say this ... but a Sitekii?”

“A refugee Sitekii, who has been accepted into the local Sitekii community. Quite good. Although I do find males, like your roommate, more attractive than the typical male in my community,” Ishrikanaiva said.

“There’s a Sitekii community on the Tal?”

“The fish does not recognize that she is surrounded by water. Yes, and it is a thriving community. We’re all refugees from more hostile environments on Sitekii ships. It’s why I was studying the Tal’s civic structure.”

“Fish and water again, for me. What have you learned?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

Ishrikanaiva laughed. “Fair hunt! The Tal’s governmental structure is based on that of the Larn and the Tyel, the oldest of the Greatships. There are three governing bodies, primarily – the Engineer’s

Council, the Ship's Council, and the Strategic Planning Board. The Engineer's Council manages ship services, resource allocation and the like. Environmental Control reports to the Engineering Council, and it has its own security forces to enforce its directives. The Planning Board has the *d'aka troven* and the scientific research responsibilities under its control, and the Ship's Council works to implement the Board's directives. Adjudicators, Mind-Hunters, Internal Police functions all work through the Ship's Council."

"But what's so unusual about this breakdown? I admit that I've not thought about what might be different on other Homeships, beyond the Tyel and what I've heard about some Sitekii ships," Richard/T'T'Po asked.

His response prompted another laugh from Ishrikanaiva.

"The Tyel, the Larn and, to be honest, the Tal, are among the exceptions to the rule."

"Which is?"

"Homeships are resource empires. Small ones, but the tendency is towards authoritarianism and autocratic rule. If the infrastructure is maintained, most citizens are comfortable. If there is any failure of the infrastructure, millions can die. So, the citizens typically find themselves tolerating, or even mandating, what you might regard as exceptionally tight controls."

Richard/T'T'Po thought over what he'd already researched on the Tal. "But the Tal isn't a Greatship, with the resultant huge resource surplus..."

"You've got it a bit backwards. Greatships are the result of the resource surplus, not the other way round. The Tal is *exceptionally* wealthy for a standard Homeship. A result, I would guess, of the political policies engendered by your Board. You're *accepting* of differences. What's your favorite food right now?"

Richard/T'T'Po cocked his head at the sudden shift in direction of the conversation. "Ah, I'd have to say that *larga* meat, *burnt ribs* is my current favorite, the density of flavor, and the taste of the marrow..." he stopped.

"And it's a favorite dish of mine, but it's a Sitekii dish, from my old Homeship. It's something that grew out of the Sitekii community on the Tal. This style of open market," she waved her hands, indicating the open market around them, "is something that came out of *Hiruun* culture. There's a fair sized *Hiruun* community on the Tal as well."

"The 'Hiruun'? Who are they?" Richard/T'T'Po asked. '*Another party heard from?*'

"They look just like you—well, in general configuration—but they're a separate cultural group. Males tend to be equal to females in most things. That's *another* feature that the Tal has taken up 'as its own,' male equality. Though it still has a way to go before males are fully 'equal'."

"Ah, I thought we *were* equal," Richard/T'T'Po said.

That response prompted another laugh from the Sitekii, Ishrikanaiva. "You're the *only* male in a class of eight-squared adjudicator-students, and you think that males are yet fully equal?"

"But I've been allowed to pursue that profession..."

"And, to be honest, you've had to be twice as good as any female to get half as far," Ishrikanaiva said.

"But that's ..." he stopped, and took a deep breath. "Fish and water?"

“Correct, *sidar ko*. Things are improving on the Tal, but there is still a long way to go. But things have been and continue to improve. They’re *changing*, which is one of the most interesting features of the Tal, as I see it.”

“And that’s why your father chose the Tal?”

“He didn’t have the connections for the Tyel or the Larn. It still requires coin to gain citizenship. But the alternative, remaining on an oppressive ship, and watching his daughter turned into the kind of savage criminal that his supposed mate was...”

“His ‘supposed’ mate?”

Ishrikanaiva shook here head. “Even here, on the Tal, males are expected to remain faithful. The most that can be expected of a female is that she not take ‘her’ male to the pillow until she has washed off the scent of her other male lovers.”

Richard/T’T’Po couldn’t help but wrinkle his muzzle at hearing this bit of information.

“Higimous, Hogomous, Males are monogamous/Hogomous Higimous, Females are polygamous,” Ishrikanaiva said. “And don’t blame me for that one; it’s part of the culture on both the Tal and my Homeship of birth.”

Interlude 2

Richard/T’T’Po looked out on the High Sun corridor. Nearly empty of traffic. ‘*For once, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan isn’t already asleep. I hope he found something interesting,*’ he thought. He shook his head, and started “wandering”. ‘*I wonder what’s happening on the docks. On the Tyel? Was it the Tyel? There were viewports for “civilians” to watch incoming ships. I wonder of the Tal has such? One way to find out.*’

It only took a hand’s kir—ten to fifteen minutes, Richard/T’T’Po mentally translated—to find out the location for a shuttle to the docks. *We’re already nearly at the top deck,* he thought. *And the little shuttle cars are free to all citizens.* As he boarded the shuttle car, and called out his destination, he heard a faint buzz and the display showed a single ideogram: “approved”. *Approved? Why would that appear.* “Computer, explain the ‘Approved’ ideogram appearance.”

A female voice, a computer generated one, but still clearly female, replied, “Citizen Tal-Tal Po do Ashan has not been using his full allocated recreational transit rations for the last three seasons. Current account balance is displayed below, along with units used for this transit.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. ‘*At this rate, I’m “allowed” something on the close order of “recreational” travel equal to circumnavigating the Homeship two and a half times every night. So, there are some restrictions on “discretionary travel”, but the limits are high enough that no one is likely to hit them unless they’re just in to “joyriding” or being driven about for the joy of being driven about for* - he did a quick calculation - ‘*Something over two san each night, or half the night, for every bloody night of a season! And that’s just to use up the seasonal allotment.*’ Another quick check showed that at one’s remaining balance would be reduced to the level of the maximum allotted for any one season if above that level at the end of each year. *I would be hard pressed to go to zero balance; and this is for “discretionary travel”.* Another check; transits required “in service to the

Collective” were outside the bounds of the basic allotment, and transits could be purchased with coin, if one’s allotment was ever used up.

‘So, I won’t be hurting my “host” by taking this one shuttle car trip. Far from it; his only previous use of his allotment was to get to the central Entertainer’s District in the Core.’ Richard/T’T’Po sighed. *‘My “host’s” transits to and from the Core had barely scratched his seasonal allotment. His use of citizen basic funds was a bit less ... frugal. This pleasure trip, at least, won’t put him out on the monetary side.’*



It only took perhaps a hand’s *kir* to reach the nearest docks. And a few dozen paces brought him to the outer “shell” of the landing bay. *Goodie! A viewing panel every two or three paces! And at this time of the day, a bit past High Sun, almost all are unoccupied!*

Just as he came up to the view port, a huge cargo ship slid into the landing bay, in clear view. Richard/T’T’Po started trying to count the attached cargo pods, but lost count around forty. *Each pod is likely a hundred or so tons of cargo.* He shook his head. The cargo pods were being shuttled away at what looked like breakneck speed. After a few minutes, the cargo ship slid back out of the bay and shot silently away, to be replaced by a second massive ship with yet more cargo pods. *‘That took less than five minutes to disconnect and move well over forty of those pods! And there’s more!’*

He stood, entranced, for well over an hour, losing count of the ships and cargo pods that were detached and sent “in ship”. All inbound in this bay. Ship after ship! *‘There’s got to be another bay where they’re servicing outbound ships, otherwise the Homeship would explode from all these cargo pods!’* He shook his head. *‘The Sitekii Ishrikanaiva understated the situation. If the Tal is just keeping a neutral trade balance, the “yearly” economic trade must be huge!’*

The decking below Richard/T’T’Po shook, and he had to reach out and lean against the bay barrier to keep his feet. *Now what...he thought, before hidden loudspeakers blared out a warning.*

“Hull breach in Bay 413. If you can hear this message, take shelter immediately in the nearest survival station. This is NOT a drill! Message repeats...”

Richard/T’T’Po looked down at the decking. Illuminated moving arrows had appeared heading away from the docking bay towards what appeared to be multiple armored chambers. *When told to “take shelter”, you “take shelter.”*

He looked around. No one else was nearby, the few other lookie-loos in the distance were heading for nearby shelters at a brisk trot. *Time to go.*

The pod door opened easily. It was well balanced, and Richard/T’T’Po noticed the “feel” of a slight power assist. *‘It’s like a bank vault door, at least ten centimeters thick if it’s one,’* Richard/T’T’Po thought. Once inside, the door shut behind him with a surprisingly quiet “thump”, he took stock of his situation. *There’s room for perhaps one other full adult in this thing; and there are air tanks with masks, instructions attached, and what looks like a phone, “for emergency use only.” Well, this sounds like an emergency to me.*

He picked up the phone.

“Ship Services, Emergency response. Please identify yourself,” a female voice asked.

“This is Tal-Tal Po do Ashan, I’m in a ...”

“Survival pod 161-345. Are you injured in any way?”

“Aside from my nerves, no.”

“Do you require a *healer-of-the-mind?*” the voice at the other end was calm, cool, and emotionless, but also clearly not computer generated.

“No, just a little shaken up. How bad are things? I didn’t see...”

“Your section is being evacuated as a precaution. Bay 413, two bays over from your bay, had a cargo ship come in hot, and breach the inner containment wall. Several sections are in hard vac. Casualty figures not yet known. Emergency response ongoing. Is there anyone else in your pod?”

“No, I’m the only one here.”

“Please be patient. We will be unlocking the inner door when it’s deemed safe for you. If you have problems, pick up the link again. For now, this one needs to see to other individuals in more desperate situations. If no one gets back to you in one *san*, pick up the link!”

“Understood, pick up the link if I have problems, pick up in any case if I don’t hear something in a *san*,” Richard/T’T’Po said.

“Thank you. Please hang up the link, now.”

Richard/T’T’Po set the phone back in its cradle, and took a deep breath. *‘Nice to know that there are people out there dealing with the problem in the first few minutes – or kir. The situation will be chaotic for a time, but the person at the other end told me a lot. More, perhaps, than I’d have gotten this quickly “back home”.’*

He noticed a new display above the phone/emergency link, counting down. *‘They’re even telling me when I should call them back, if they don’t call me first.’*



The countdown clock still had three kir left when he heard a computer voice and a (previously) hidden computer display came “live:”

“Tal-Tal Po do Ashan, inner door will open following the end of this message. Please take the emergency transport pod waiting to return you to your registered residence and remain there until you receive further instructions. The transport cost for transport to your home will *not* be deducted from your discretionary travel allotment.”

As promised, the inner vault-style door opened as the message ended, and a pace away, an armored pod awaited him. Its outer airlock door open. *‘Efficient,’* Richard/T’T’Po thought, and dove into the pod; the outer door slid shut, the inner door opened, and he found himself in a cramped cabin. *Enough room for two, if they’re friendly,* he thought. The trip back to “his” residence took far less time than the trip out had taken, though there was no feel of acceleration. *‘They must use gravitic propulsion system on their emergency pods; I could feel the starts and stops on the regular transit pod. So, they have **some** economic limits, at least.’*

The emergency pod, on arriving at his residence, docked with the entryway, and Richard/T'T'Po left for a more familiar space. Just before the pod disconnected, a second set of doors closed, locking him in. *'Okay, they want me someplace "safe" and they don't want me to get in the way of first responders. Makes a certain amount of sense, given that I'm unharmed. So, to bed.'*

As he slipped off his clothes and stuffed them into the cleaner/hamper, he noticed that the top bunk was empty. *'Okay, Tal-Sora Pa must have been caught somewhere outside the evacuation zone, and got herded to temporary housing. I'll find out tonight what happened.'* Richard/T'T'Po was asleep within moments of collapsing into the bunk bed.

After The Sun Went Down

The "sun" had been down for close to a *san* when Richard/T'T'Po woke. He rolled out of bed, triggered the "clean" function on his clothes hamper, and looked around. *Still no one else here*, he thought, and shrugged it off. *'He'll get back here when he gets back here.'*

After getting dressed, he checked on the safety door. *'Still locked in. I guess they're just a bit paranoid in Ship's Services. But, then, they do have a real enemy; the Universe is trying to kill everyone on board the Tal,'* he thought, and went to work preparing breakfast.

He tried a noodle and broth mixture whose container was labeled, "fast first meal." *'Not bad, fluid for hydration. A meat broth I think, and long flat noodles. More evidence that the Shidran-Kas are mesocarnivores rather than obligate carnivores.'* After eating, he pulled out one of the reading list books and began reading; with help from the legal dictionary, he was able to wade through the cases at what he thought was at least a reasonable pace.

A *san* after rising, the safety doors disappeared back into hiding and a computer voice blared out,

"Safety lockdown lifted. You are free to continue your normal duties or pursuits."

'Time for a walk,' he thought, and strode out of the "home". All of three paces down the corridor, he saw a familiar Sitekii hurrying towards him. Familiar, but rather different.

"Ishrikanaiva, what happened to you?" Richard/T'T'Po asked. The female was missing half of her left ear, and the fur on the left half of her face was shaved off and a gel pack of some sort covered the stump of her ear and a third of the side of her head. A patch covered her left eye.

"Where's Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan?" Ishrikanaiva asked, a low whine in her voice.

"I don't know. What happened to you?"

"Do you know where he might be?" she asked, ignoring or not hearing his question.

Richard/T'T'Po looked over the Sitekii more carefully once she stopped a single pace distant. *'She's been crying, or her right eye is "weeping".'* "You look terrible, do you need some help? At least some tamse and a pad to sit on?"

Ishrikanaiva coughed, and finally looked directly at the male. "That would be most kind of you, *sidar-ko*. I was hoping that I would find Tal-Sora Pa here ..." she stopped and shuddered, then let out a mournful howl.

"Calm down, Ishrikanaiva. Take deep breaths, come in and I'll brew some tamse for you. Have you eaten?" Richard/T'T'Po asked.

The howl stopped, and Ishrikanaiva bit her lips before hiccupping and nodding her head in the affirmative.

Richard/T'T'Po lead the female into “his” home, and after providing a pad for her at the one table, set about preparing fresh tamse.

“I was at the docks – watching the ships come and go. There were new shipments of *tofal* leaves in from the Larn, and some fruit from an agricultural trade partner. I saw Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan a few paces away at the next view portal. I turned, greeted him, and just as he turned something hit – hard. I was thrown to the deck.”

“You were at the docking bay where the accident occurred?” Richard/T'T'Po asked. **I was nearly knocked down, and I wasn't that close—I don't think—to the accident site,** he ‘cast.

Ishrikanaiva looked at him, silent for a moment. “I heard an alarm siren. I tried to get up. There was a wind, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan ran to me, picked me up like I was a kit's doll, and threw me over his shoulder.”

A fireman's carry? I suppose that there are only so many ways to manage such actions, Richard/T'T'Po thought, carefully keeping it within the three walls he'd erected this evening.

Ishrikanaiva took a deep breath before continuing. “He was carrying another female over his other shoulder. He ran towards one of the survival pods, and he threw the two of us in and slammed the safety door shut. I didn't realize how strong he was.”

“What happened to him?”

“He was outside the pod, he was running towards the bulkhead tear. There were other people there, I think. I lost sight of him, and I couldn't ‘cast past the pain. Emergency services picked us up almost immediately. I spent the remainder of the day getting treatment. ‘Meatball surgery’ the medtech called it,” she brought one hand up to the gel pack on the stump of her ear.

“I would hope that that's not all that can be done,” Richard/T'T'Po said, setting the bowl of tamse down in front of the Sitekii.

“It waits on the treatment of other more serious injuries. I wasn't in serious danger after I was removed from the area. I was hoping that I'd find your clan-cousin here.”

“No such luck, I'm afraid. Drink the tamse, and I'll try and find out where he is.”

The proper person to contact, it turned out, wasn't in Ship's Services but rather one of the Elders of Clan Ashan. Tal-Larn Shen do Ashan was an old female – after getting past several “flappers”, Richard/T'T'Po found himself in a video call with a female who seemed as old as the hills.

“Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, your cousin and our clan brother, was seriously injured in this accident,” Tal-Larn Shen do Ashan informed him.

“Where is he? And is he expected to survive?”

“The Healers who attended him said that he was in ‘critical condition’ but that it wasn't time for his next incarnation, yet. His genes are far too valuable to lose, so he will be kept alive if at all practical.”

“His *genes* are too valuable?!?” Ishrikanaiva shouted, rising off the pad like a missile launched from a silo.

“Who is this animal that interrupts me?” Tal-Larn Shen do Ashan asked, coldly. “And an animal that is neither a full adult by age or by *manners*?”

“I am Ishrikanaiva of the Sitekii, and a citizen of this Homeship. Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan *saved me from disincarnation*. He has more value than merely his genetic—”

“The male, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan is a failed Healer,” the elder Tal-Larn Shen do Ashan said, managing to look down her muzzle at Ishrikanaiva, despite the Sitekii’s greater height. “His value to the Clan *and to his ship* is in his genetics. He is only a male, and of otherwise little value.”

Please, Ishrikanaiva, let me handle this? Richard/T’T’Po ‘cast. Ishrikanaiva closed her mouth, and settled back onto the pad, baring her throat to the Ashan clan elder.

“The Sitekii speaks out of concern for someone who helped her away from the danger. Please excuse her ill manners; she speaks with the voice of youth, not yet understanding the true value of silence,” Richard/T’T’Po said. ‘*And I can dissemble with the best of them. But this one is clearly the greyest of the grey muzzles,*’ he thought, carefully keeping his thoughts within the walls he’d managed to build.

“For you, clan-child and cousin to Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, I will provide information. The other? I ignore her, as I would a bothersome flea,” the elder said, pausing to glare at Ishrikanaiva. “Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan is currently in the Hospital of First Resort. Sending the coordinates now,” she finished. The display lit with the location of the Hospital, along with the necessary contact information.

“This one thanks the honorable clan elder, and apologizes for the disturbance imposed on her harmony by this one’s communications,” Richard/T’T’Po said, “and will now leave the honorable gentlebeing to more important endeavors than providing information to a kit of the clan.” With that, and at an acknowledging nod from the elder, Richard/T’T’Po dropped the connection.

Ishrikanaiva shook her head. “It would seem as though you’ve had to deal with such individuals before. My apologies for my outburst, but I was really concerned for your cousin. And he is *much* more than just his genetic value to the Collective!”

“As you’ve observed already, Ishrikanaiva, the Tal still has a way to go before males are really equal. ‘All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others’ seems to be the rule, all too often.”

“I like that phrase. It fits the situation well,” Ishrikanaiva said. “Would you accept my accompanying you to the hospital? I really would like to see to your cousin’s condition myself, and with your clan and living situation connections, you’ll likely be able to get more data than I.”

“If you can manage. Did you lose your left eye? That patch...”

“They had to remove some shards of something. They put the regen packs on, and it should be repaired in a night or two. They gave me some pain medications, but I don’t like them already.”

“Oh?”

“I can stand the pain. But the medications kill all my emotions. They make me into a machine; I feel like there’s a translucent wall between me and the rest of the world. They also damp my Talent something terrible.”

“If it gets too bad...”

“I’ll take my meds. In the meantime, I’d rather concentrate on someone else. Can we go?”

“Of course,” Richard/T’T’Po replied.



It took a count’s kir—close to forty-five minutes, Richard translated—to reach the hospital. And, their first barrier was at the entry “lobby”. Two Ship Services Security officers were lounging there, and one came over as the pair entered.

“Tal-Tal Po do Ashan?” the *Tchel-yii*-second asked, clearly rhetorically.

Richard/T’T’Po bared his throat. “This one’s cousin...”

“Is in section 301-pod 4,” the *Tchel-yii* said.

“Can I see him?” Richard/T’T’Po asked.

“As his cousin, yes. But,” the officer looked over at Ishrikanaiva, “I am afraid that I cannot permit Ishrikanaiva of the Sitekii to proceed.”

*‘He knows us both by name, and I **think** that this one is the same mind-hunter that I bought the larga meat burnt ribs from.’*

“But Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan saved me from further injury, honorable *Tchel-yii*. I owe him the courtesy of a visit. And...”

“It wasn’t my choice, honorable ship-sister. I have orders that I cannot ignore. Only family relations. Not even all clan sisters are allowed.”

**That shirona of a Clan Elder!* Ishrikanaiva ‘cast to Richard/T’T’Po.*

The *Tchel-yii* stiffened, her ears went flat against her skull, and lips pulled back to show gleaming white carnassials.

*‘Crap! The **last** thing we need is a dominance battle here in the lobby. With a **mind-hunter**. Ishrikanaiva may be intelligent, but she clearly lacks wisdom,’ Richard/T’T’Po thought.*

Then the true cause of the *Tchel-yii*’s aggressive posture came through a bead curtained entryway. It towered over even the Sitekii, its scent was strange; neither the friendly female scent Richard/T’T’Po was used to, nor the bitter scent of another male. *‘That being is more than half again as tall as Ishrikanaiva!’*

The being looked out on them over a shorter than usual muzzle, her yellow-gold eyes almost seeming to glow, as if with some inner power. “The cousin, I will allow to see my younger brother. This ... *animal* ... that stands next to Tal-Tal Po do Ashan, I do not recognize, and I will not permit it to take *one more step* into my domain. I give you my name’s word that...”

“Please, Healer-Second,” the *Tchel-yii* interrupted, “stop before you say something that this one would force you to regret. *Say no more!*” the last was delivered with a low growl in the officer’s voice that made chills run up Richard/T’T’Po’s spine.

Richard/T’T’Po bowed and bared his throat, first to the healer, then to the *Tchel-yii*. *I do **not** want to get between these two in a dominance battle; please whatever odd Gods of the Galaxy that there are, let me get through this in one piece! I just want to see Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, he thought, continuing his thought within the innermost wall. Let the Tchel-yii read **that!** It’s true. And no deeper. I hope.’*

After several tense moments—*perhaps a long eight-count*, Richard/T’T’Po thought—the Healer backed off and bared her throat to the *Tchel-yii*.

“May this one be escorted to his cousin’s current location?” Richard/T’T’Po asked, bowing and baring his throat to the Healer, then bowing lower, baring his throat, and holding the pose a three-count longer to the *Tchel-yii*.

“Follow me, little one,” the Healer said, and spun around, her brush tip missing the *Tchel-yii*’s muzzle by bare centimeters.





It took perhaps a hand's kir to reach where Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan was being kept. The Healer allowed Richard/T'T'Po to enter the treatment room, and stood stock-still in the entryway, turning her back on the two males. Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan was in a chamber, completely submerged in a blue-green bubbling fluid. His fur was missing over his chest and face; skin warped and bubbled as Richard/T'T'Po watched.

"I can see Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, but ..." Richard/T'T'Po began.

“His soul-self is ... dormant. He has six chances in eight of surviving. We are in the process of repairing his lungs. There was also damage to his neural system; we have yet to fully assess the damage in that area,” the Healer said, in a cold, almost mechanical voice.

‘She said that he is her younger brother. I can just imagine what it must have been like growing up as much as he has with that figure standing over him. And he has more than one of these beings in his immediate family?’ Richard/T’T’Po thought.

“He carries half of the genes. Were he not a ‘failed one’, he would look much like me. And he would share my Power,” the Healer-Second said.

“I thought that I kept my thought...”

“Within the walls? Think of me as the equivalent of every Tchel-yii-first you might meet in your worst dreams,” the Healer-Second said, and turned to face Richard/T’T’Po. “If my Power lent itself, with The Huntress’ Grace, to matters of the soul-self, as a Healer-of-the-Mind, even your thoughts within the innermost wall would be mine to view without effort. Keeping your innermost thoughts **out** of my mind would require concentration and effort,” she said. “That Power is only held by one of my two sisters.”

‘Gods above! To have to grow up with one of these ... are they second variety or third?’ Richard/T’T’Po thought, trying to keep his thoughts within the innermost wall.

“That is an unresolved question,” she said. “You may now leave. We will know if my little brother is going to his next incarnation within the next two nights.”

Richard/T’T’Po bowed to the Healer and bared his throat, again, and made as quick an escape as he could.



Back in the lobby, he could see that Ishrikanaiva and the Tchel-yii-Second were standing and chatting, the scents that his him were ... comforting. Richard/T’T’Po took a deep calming breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth with an audible “whoosh”.

“What does he look like? Will he recover? Was he responsive? Did you...” Ishrikanaiva asked rapid fire, when she saw Richard/T’T’Po.

“Slow down, Ishrikanaiva. My apologies, Officer, but...”

“You wish to deal with your fellow adjudicator-student’s questions. Just try and keep her from causing all of us trouble, please?” the Tchel-yii said, bowing and baring her own throat.

Richard/T’T’Po quickly returned the bow, being careful to bow lower and hold his bow a few heartbeats longer than the Tchel-yii held hers.

“Ishrikanaiva, I can answer your questions on our way back,” Richard/T’T’Po said.

“As the honorable gentlebeing wishes,” Ishrikanaiva replied, and bowed low to Richard/T’T’Po.

On The Shuttle Back

“First question: is his current incarnation expected to continue?” Ishrikanaiva asked, a low whine in her voice.

“The Healer said that he had a six-in-eight chance of surviving. But I have a question for you. I’ve never met a Healer before,” Richard/T’T’Po said. “Medical practitioners, yes. But never one of those ...”

“Creatures?” Ishrikanaiva asked.

“Yes. I know next to nothing about them. What, if anything, do you know about them?”

Ishrikanaiva snorted; a half bark, half snort. “They’re another product of the mutations from the early Diaspora, combined with early genetic engineering experiments, intended, according to the histories, to correct some of the radiation induced mutations that weren’t all that favorable.”

“But that Healer, she didn’t seem...” Richard/T’T’Po hunted for an appropriate word.

“She didn’t seem to be one of the Free People? There are some who say that ones like her are what the Free People will become sometime in the far future, a few eight-sixth generations from now.”

Richard/T’T’Po shuddered. “She didn’t seem very ... nice,” he said.

Ishrikanaiva laughed. “Your talent for understatement is unmatched, sidar-ko.”

“I try to be honest, Ishrikanaiva of the Sitekii.”

Ishrikanaiva sighed. “I can hope that Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan survives. I want to tell him...”

After a dozen heartbeats of silence, Richard/T’T’Po asked, “tell him what?”

Ishrikanaiva shook her head. “He risked his life for mine. I know that *bloodright* only applies to males, but ... this situation leaves me confused. He risked his life, and he may not survive the consequences of his actions. I live,” she reached up and rubbed the regen packs on her ear and face, “and it is because of him. And I’d be telling a lie if I said that I don’t find him physically attractive.”

“So, seems simple to me. If he recovers, you tell him what your feelings are. Perhaps ask him if he might enjoy your company at some point.”

Ishrikanaiva laughed. This time it was anything but a joyful laugh. “And have him ... no, he wouldn’t be ill mannered. But ... after what he did, I just don’t understand. I’d want to know, first of all, *why* he did what he did.”

“Why he risked his life for you? I’d say that the answer to that is likely simple.”

“But I’m not of your clan...”

“But you *are* a citizen of the Tal. And, well ... to be honest, you’re interesting to be around; you’re intelligent, you’re friendly, you have a strong moral center...”

The response from the Sitekii was another snort. “And if you were there, would you have tossed me—and another injured female—over your shoulders and just run us both to a survival pod? And if you’d managed to carry two individuals massing three times your mass that far, would you go back for more?”

Richard/T’T’Po held up his hands, palms toward himself in surrender, “I like to think that I would try. To be honest? If I managed to haul just *you* to a survival pod, I would likely have been winded. If I’d managed getting you and one other person to a survival pod, I would have crawled to a pod myself afterwards.”

“I just want to see your cousin again, to thank him at the very least. And, to be honest, to ask him what he sees in me that he would risk himself. That’s a question that I think he would answer honestly, and one that only he **could** answer.”

“That, I’ll grant, is an honest assessment of the situation. I’ll take it as a given that you’re being honest with me – on a subject that must be difficult for you to discuss.”

Ishrikanaiva laughed. “You have *no idea*,” she said.

Three Nights Later

The Healer that brought Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan to the residence was draped in yellow; Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan was in a wheelchair, his head slumped to one side, a breathing apparatus covered his muzzle completely.

Richard/T'T'Po looked up at the golden-eyed demon leading the automated wheelchair, careful to keep his face neutral. He couldn't help but feel fear; but he could refrain from any visible sign thereof—except for the scents that boiled off him.

“This control will allow you to move the patient's chair about,” the Healer said, handing him a small control fob. “He can be fed through the machine port, here,” she pointed to a covered opening in a box set at the patient's side. “Use citizen basic mix 4, ground up to a paste – you have a food processor capable of this?”

“Yes,” Richard/T'T'Po said, swallowing back bile.

I am in here, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan ‘cast, **just ignore the casing. I will recover. The regeneration going on now is all ‘inside’. And the fur will grow back.**

“Is there anything else that I need to know?”

“No, the gene package will be maintained in any case. It is what is of value,” the Healer said, then turned and walked away without another word.

I can ‘cast, I just can’t speak right now. You showed admirable restraint, cousin. Given my elder sister’s demeanor, I am not at all certain that I could have done as well, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan ‘cast.

“Can you even taste what that ... thing ... feeds to you? And how...”

No, and I’d rather not think about it, cousin. I am plugged in both ways. The unit has an expandable ‘bag’ for refuse, which will consist of dead red blood cells for the most part. I’m afraid that I can’t hook it up to the sandbox myself. There’s instructions downloaded to your account.

“There’s someone whom I think will want to speak with you. The ...”

The ship-sister Ishrikanaiva. I’ve also received a request for a meeting from the ship-sister Tal-Tiran Chai do Hvar, one of the other ship-sisters who was injured in the incident.

“You’re a hero, cousin. What you did...”

Was no more than what was necessary. I’m just one male, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan. As you will learn yourself, we’re just penises with legs. If there are enough of us...

“That’s not true. Each of us can contribute more. You’re studying to become a *d’aka-troven*; you may even become a member of the Board of Strategy. And me? I’ll be an interpreter-of-the-law, if I study hard enough. We can change things!” Richard/T'T'Po said, *and I know that we can change things for the better, even if only in small ways*, he thought, careful to keep his memories of the *Mistress of the Skies* within his innermost “wall”.

Philosophical discussions are a bit beyond my current capabilities, cousin. Could you drive me into our shared sleeping quarters? Put me into a corner where I won’t get in the way.

“How long will you be like this?” Richard/T'T'Po asked.

If the Healers are correct, I should be my old self—rather more or less—in between six and eight-and-two nights. Though I’ll not be returning to my martial arts classes for at least a season. They left exercise programs that I’ll need to work through to improve my ‘wind’ with the new lungs they put in.

“New lungs? You were...”

Breathing vacuum for a hand's ral or more - I'm afraid I lost all sense of time. And no, I can't tell you anything about the Forge - I didn't get that far. I rather doubt that the Huntress appreciated **this little jest by her kit, Istiru.**

“I think that Ishrikanaiva will have a thought or two regarding your brush with the claws.”

I'm sure that she will. As will the pilot-trainee that I also saved. There are times when life gets complicated.

“Dare I say that I seriously underestimated your talent for understatement?”

Wheel me into a corner, and let me rest. Just warn me when any females come 'hunting' for me.

“I will,” Richard/T'T'Po said, and piloted the other—“his” cousin—into a safe corner.



Ishrikanaiva stood, head slightly bowed and bent, exposing her throat, by the entryway. Richard/T'T'Po sat, waiting for nearly a *kir* before speaking. “There is no need to stand on ceremony, gentlebeing *sidar-ko* Ishrikanaiva,” he said.

“Would the honorable *sidar-ko* permit this one to enter?” she asked, with a low undertone whine.

Richard/T'T'Po sighed. “I think my cousin and I would both prefer it if you don't crawl on your belly, gentlebeing. You are...”

“Terrified, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan.”

“Of what? You have met him, and you haven't offended him. In fact, I think he rather liked the way you handled that ... rather unfortunate ... incident with our study partner.”

“That's not what terrifies me, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan. He saved my life, and I don't know why.”

“I thought I provided a good reason.”

“You did - and it would have been doubtless good for you. But your cousin is ... he is ...” she swallowed and then took a deep breath. “He is so beautiful, and...” she sank down until her head was below the level of the seated Richard/T'T'Po's head.

Another hand's ral passed—a long *ten count*, Richard/T'T'Po thought—before he spoke into the growing silence. “If you keep freezing up, this conversation will take several *san*. Come in, sit down, and I'll brew some tamse for you. Please do so, now,” he said.

The cringing Sitekii managed to practically crawl in to the living area and settle herself on an empty pad.

'If she keeps acting like this, I can just imagine how Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan just might respond,' Richard/T'T'Po thought, for once letting this line of thought slip out behind the “Walls”. *'Perhaps a hint to Ishrikanaiva will help,'* he thought, carefully keeping *this* thought within the innermost “Wall” of self. It took two *kir* to brew the tamse; *'roughly five minutes, and she's still cringing,'* Richard/T'T'Po thought. *'I'm going to have to chance doing something, here.'*

He set the bowl of tamse in front of Ishrikanaiva and settled down opposite her. “When I bring out Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan to ‘speak’ with you . He's not able to speak right now...”

“Is it a permanent loss? Nerve damage instead of a simple loss of the cords? Why...”

“He’s on a breathing tube, and he’s ‘plugged in’ to a life support unit. He is *temporarily* unable to speak. So, knowing him, he won’t ‘cast to you first. I think that he’ll be able to ‘cast to me, then I’ll say what he *would* have said, but can’t.”

Ishrikanaiva hiccupped. “Of course,” she said, “I wouldn’t expect him to be so impolite as to ‘cast first to a female.”

“Is your stomach bothering you? Or have you been...”

“Crying? Yes. And trying to work up the courage to see Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, here.”

“What is the worst that could happen? If he’s too tired to meet briefly with you, it shouldn’t be regarded as a rejection of further contact. And I rather doubt that he’d be rude about anything, even if he *doesn’t* want to see you again—something which I rather doubt it true,” Richard/T’T’Po said. ‘*At least, I don’t think he dislikes Sitekii in general—or this Sitekii in particular. And he seems to try to be polite with everyone.*’ “Why don’t you finish your tamse, and I’ll check with Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan to see if he’s up to receiving visitors.”



Richard/T’T’Po let out the breath he’d been holding in with an audible “whoosh” as he closed the door to the sleeping chamber behind him. “Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, are you able to receive a visitor?”

Depends on who it is. I’d really rather not meet any of my teachers right now he ‘cast.

“No such luck. Ishrikanaiva is lapping up tamse, waiting to speak with you. I thought that you might ‘cast to me, and then I could speak for you,” Richard/T’T’Po said. ‘*Thank all the Odd Gods that I read up on customs, “males should not ‘cast first, nor ‘cast to non-clan; to do so is extremely poor form”.*’

A clever solution to an irritating problem, cousin. Agreed, and ... this one thanks you for your assistance in advance he ‘cast.

Richard/T’T’Po took the control fob, opened the door, and piloted Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan out into the living/work room. “Ishrikanaiva of the Sitekii, the honorable clan brother Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan awaits your communication eagerly,” Richard/T’T’Po said, as he preceded the injured *Shidran-Kas* into the room.

Ishrikanaiva jumped up and bowed low from the waist, baring her throat as she did so.

An acrobat, Richard/T’T’Po thought. *If I tried that move as quickly, I’d likely end up landing on my nose.*

“Honorable gentlebeing Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, this humble individual wishes to learn the reason that the honorable ship-sister saved this worthless...” Ishrikanaiva machine-gunned her words out as fast as she could, still holding the deep bow.

Step in, cousin. She’s going to embarrass herself, and me thereby. Let me speak through you...

How... Richard/T’T’Po ‘cast, silently agreeing, but confused ... until he began to speak, words that he did not try to speak.

“I am speaking through my clan-brother-and-cousin, honorable gentlebeing ship-sister Ishrikanaiva. Please sit, and do not bow. I cannot return your courtesy currently. Seated, and sitting tall, you should be about at eye level with me, this ‘contraption’ serving for now as a raised dais,” Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan said through Richard/T’T’Po’s mouth.

Richard/T'T'Po watched the Sitekii as she seated herself; her eyes were wide with shock. *'Both of us, ship-sister,'* he thought.

"My Talent is ... a bit stronger than you might expect; a side effect of my rather unusual genetics, gentlebeing ship-sister. My apologies if I frighten you—and I apologize for the shock this method causes in my clan-brother-and-cousin; I had thought, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan, that everyone was aware of my capabilities within the Clan," Tal-Sora Pa said.

Ishrikanaiva recovered before Richard/T'T'Po did. "This one was not aware of the strength of the gentlebeing's Talent. But it makes my thoughts more confused, given your presumed ability to read others, why would you risk yourself for..." she stopped, licked her lips, and lowered her head.

"For someone from an outcast branch of the Free People? I would have thought that such worries would not be found in one who has managed to prove herself a candidate for adjudication training: to become a giver-interpreter-and-maker of the laws? Aren't such individuals trained to understand themselves first, before they can understand others?"

"It is part of the more advanced training, ship-sister. But even though this one has begun her studies, it ... is hard at times ... to fully apply ..." she stopped again, her mouth opening and closing.

"The teachings to oneself. Understood. Have you looked at yourself in a mirror, lately?" Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan asked, through Richard/T'T'Po.

Ishrikanaiva sat, looking confused.

Ye Gods and Little Fishes, Richard/T'T'Po thought, when Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan didn't immediately supply words for him to parrot. "Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, she doesn't see herself the way you might. Why don't you just come out and tell her what you see. And why you risked your life for her?" Richard/T'T'Po said, looking over at "his" cousin. Tal-Sora Pa was looking like he swallowed something too large to get down his throat. *Children! Or ... teen agers!* Richard/T'T'Po thought, very carefully keeping this thought within the innermost "wall". It was a hand's ral—*'a long ten count,'* Richard/T'T'Po thought—before Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan "spoke" again.

"This one, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, finds the honorable ship-sister quite attractive. This one found her attractive the first time that we met. Your wisdom took a bit longer for this one to recognize – but your handling of my anger..." the speech halted for several ral, "demonstrated a maturity and wisdom that this one sometimes lacks. Qualities that this one admires...and the thought of the honorable gentlebeing 'breathing vacuum' ... well ... I just couldn't let the Huntress have her way. Like Istiru at the Great Theft, I could not help myself."

"And the other one: you carried two of us..." Ishrikanaiva asked in a whisper.

"The pilot, Tal-Tiran Chai, has been helping me with ship-handling...it would have been dishonorable for me to have left her there, bleeding. And you were bleeding – both of you were only semi-conscious; you could never have reached safety without assistance."

"But you went back..."

"A male's sole value as seen by many in the Collective is his genetic contribution. As a failed healer, I have provided sperm donations at regular intervals as part of my duties. It is only females who can add to the Collective; and the number of males required to maintain the population is far less than the number of females. One male can provide the necessary sperm donations for several females. So..."

"Claws! You're more than just a 'genetic bundle', Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan!" Ishrikanaiva interrupted. "Never think that that is all you are good for! You're intelligent, your ... beautiful ... and ... I'm just an ugly..."

"You are not ugly. Look at yourself carefully. Your eyes, they're that wonderful gold color. Your fur is that beautiful shade of tan, your scent..." the speech stream stopped. Richard/T'T'Po looked over at Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan. *'His ears are flushed with blood – he's blushing. So, Mister "trust no female, ever" is attracted to Ishrikanaiva.'* He

looked back at Ishrikanaiva, who had turned away and was pointedly **not** looking at Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan. And her ears were flushed with blood as well; Richard/T'T'Po could practically see the heat pouring off them.

“I am speaking for myself, now,” Richard/T'T'Po said, “and I think that perhaps we should consider resuming this discussion later? When the two of you can recover your composure. There is no need to be embarrassed at honest feelings; though I suspect that both of you are having trouble dealing with your emotions right now. Perhaps...”

You show great wisdom, clan-brother-and-cousin. More so than might be expected of such a youngling. This one thanks you for your assistance Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan ‘cast.

“You are correct, I think,” Ishrikanaiva said. “Your understanding goes beyond the law, friend-and-study-partner. And I accept your advice,” she finished, stood, bowed low to Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan. “Would this one be able to meet with the honorable ship-sister when she is recovered from her injuries?” she asked.

Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan nodded in the affirmative, not apparently trusting himself to speak, even through Richard/T'T'Po.

Ishrikanaiva backed out of the room and into the corridor before turning to walk away.

I find myself tiring, clan-brother-and-cousin. Could you pilot me back into the sleeping chamber? Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan ‘cast.

“Of course,” Richard/T'T'Po said, and afterwards settled back down in the living room. ‘*Tamse. Definitely tamse. A nice **large** bowl, this time. I think I earned it.*’

The Ghost House, continued

By Fara Shimbo

Chapter 16: An Unwanted Way Forward

Evelyn carried a pile of laundry down the hallway, past Phil's room. Once again the "Recording! Quiet!" sign was taped to the outside of the door. She stopped a moment, and listened. She heard Maddie's voice say:

"That was our special guest, Michelle D'Artagnan! She will be visiting us each---AHHHHHH-CHOO! ... Okay, do over."

Evelyn sighed. "That's what you get for locking yourself in a room with no ventilation!"

"I can edit that out later," came Phil's voice.

Evelyn walked on. As she opened the linen closet door, she heard a rumbling in the distance. Going to the nearest window, she looked out over the forest behind the house, having determined it to be the source of the noise.

There was a rumble, and a loud CRACK! And a large tree, which may have stood there for hundreds of years, came down.

Evelyn decided to call Mrs. Jolie to see what was going on.

The sound was heard at Léonie's house as well. "Oh, no, they started!" Maddie yelled and she and Phil jumped up.

"Not so loud, we can't let them hear us!"

Maddie snorted. "They'll just think it's deer or something like that!" she said. "Léonie! What can we do? We have to stop them from wrecking your house!"

Léonie did not appear, but somehow, Maddie and Phil knew she was there.

"Okay, okay, let me tell my story, and then we better get out of here before they get any closer."

"Léonie, you're a ghost, can't you throw sugar in their gas tanks or something?!" Maddie whined.



“Maddie—”

“Oh, fine, go ahead and tell your story. I’ll think of something.”

“We have to summon Léonie!”

“Sorry-not-sorry but I can’t play the piano. You should have brought Jade with you.”

“Jade needs to stay home so Shiro will stay home and bark at stuff, so Mom thinks we’re home.”

“I thought you told her to just play the recording we made.”

“Yeah, but moms are suspicious, and I thought since she’s YOUR grandmother—”

“Oh, just tell your story. Get on with it already.”

Chapter 17: Phil’s Story

Once upon a time there was a young man and he had a secret book that he needed to hide. The book was a present for his wife and her birthday wasn’t for a couple of weeks so he needed to hide it somewhere she’d never look.

There was a problem, and the problem was that he and his wife had a kid who was sneakier than anybody in the whole world. Every single time the young man thought he found a place where he could hide the book, there was his little kid in her fuzzy footie pajamas watching everything he did and he didn’t even know how she got there. And the real problem was that no matter what he did or what he told her he knew she was going to rat on him, because she always did and she always enjoyed it and his wife thought it was funny which it wasn’t.

After a while, the young man got this idea. He said to his kid, “I need to hide this for your mommy. Can you find me the best place to hide it? You go hide somewhere, and when I can find YOU



then I know it will be good because you will find the best place and it will take me forever and ever to find you, and if I can't find you, mommy won't be able to either!"

The toddler thought this was the best idea ever and she ran out of the room.

Then the young man hid the present under the bed. He thought that would be good because his wife never looked under the bed on account of maybe there were spiders there and once she found a snake there and she was terrified to look there so it was a good place.

Now that the present was stowed away, the young man went into the living room and sat in his favorite chair and relaxed because he had nothing else to do that day, for once in his life, and he was very happy.

Then his wife came in and she said, "Where is our child? It is too quiet in here."

The young man suddenly remembered that his child was told to hide somewhere and he told his wife this and she rolled her eyes and said she wondered if he had thought this through and they should go find her.

The wife said, "Probably she is in the bedroom under the bed with the spiders and the snakes, for she is a very strange child, you know."

The young man got up and went to the bedroom because it was just like his kid to have hidden where he told her exactly not to be and he didn't want his wife looking under the bed first because she would find the present if she did. So he got to the bed first and looked under it and said, "She's not here," which satisfied his wife that she was not there.

So next they looked in the closet, because the toddler liked to hide in closets because she said they smelled nice. The toddler was not in the bedroom closet and nothing looked like it was not where it belonged which would have been a sure sign that she was there not long ago at least. But she was not there either.

They looked in the toddler's room next and she wasn't there.

"See?" the young man said to his wife, "if we only had a dog, we could ask the dog. The dog would know and we wouldn't have to search."

The wife turned to him and just looked cross. Then she said, "You don't think she tried to climb up the chimney again like she did last year, do you, Ralph?"

"No," the young man said, and he shook his head. "Last year she was small enough to fit up there but she is a bigger girl now and she wouldn't fit. But I will look there anyway just to please you, my darling," and he looked there to please his wife but the toddler wasn't there.

They looked in the living room. Then they looked in the bathroom. Then they looked in all the cabinets in the kitchen and they even looked in the garage but they didn't find the toddler.

Finally they had no place else to look except for the bedroom. The young man said to his wife, “She can’t be in there because I was in there and I told her that she should go hide.”

And his wife said, “Why did you do that?”

And the young man said, “Because she was being a pain in the neck and bothering me when I didn’t want to be bothered.”

The wife said, “Why didn’t you want to be with this sweet, innocent little child, she is such a dear, don’t you love her?”

“Of course I love her. I love all my children equally, you know,” the father said because when you’re a father you have to say things like this even if you know and everyone else knows it isn’t true and nobody believes you.

The wife nodded, kind of like the right thing had been said, and said, “Let’s go check the bedroom.”

And there on the bed, they saw the toddler, jumping up and down the the young man’s present in her hand! “Daddy, you didn’t hide it right! I had to climb all the way down under the bed and there were spiders and snakes and a dragon and two owls that eat presents! So I saved it! Next time, hide it right!”

“Honey,” said the wife, “you know there are no dragons and owls under the bed. Yes there



are some spiders and once there was a snake but they don't take presents and open them, you silly little girl!"

"I told you to go hide somewhere," the young man said. "Why didn't you do what you were told, you bad child! No dessert for you tonight! That's it!"

"You didn't hide it right!" the child insisted. "Mommy would have found it there! So I had to get it and hide it somewhere else. I had to be VERY BRAVE to go under the bed!" she said and stuck her tongue out.

"Wait," said the wife to her husband. "You bought me a present?!"

The young man put on a sour face. "It was supposed to be a surprise and now it's ruined."

"Well," said the wife, "if it is ruined, it was ruined because our daughter was being very, very brave. So that makes everything good. You may have dessert after all, my little dear."

The child handed the present to her mother, put her nose in the air, and walked away to her room. "I don't want any!" she called, and then she slammed her door.

"See," said the husband, "if we had a dog instead of a little girl, this would not ever have happened."

The wife sighed and opened her present. It was a book all about dogs.

"Okay, we'll get a dog," the wife said. "But we're keeping the toddler, too."

So you the young man was a bit happy.

The End.

When Phil turned around, he could just barely see Léonie looking at him, shaking her head. She was smiling, but she didn't look happy, Phil thought. Like all adults, he thought, of course she just didn't understand.

Maddie came running up to him and yanked his arm. "We gotta go! They're coming! Knocking down trees and all! We have to go, *now!*"

As Maddie and Phil exited the window, they could hear a couple of men talking. "Where's the electrical box? Are all the utilities cut off?"

"Yeah," came Mr. Jolie's voice. "I had that done years ago to save money."

"Good. So, as soon as we can clear the road and get some dumpsters in here, we can get started."

"Excellent. Can't wait," Mr. Jolie said.



To Be Concluded...

The Accidental Lunatic

by Marjorry Donatello

1 November

Yes, I know. I'm late. Exams: poof! I live again.

You know, got an email from a friend of mine Earthside. Told her about exams. She was outraged! Haven't done exams where she lives, not for years. Apparently, theory is, trust that students learned, and don't damage their self-esteem. She says it's really insulting, being tested, because if you had good teachers you will learn. Right? HA, that's not what happens here!

First, yeah, we have exams.

We have TWO exams per course!

First, prof breaks the class into a few groups of four or five. Each group gets a problem to solve. And you don't get to pick the people, either! Open-book exam. Use any means you can or want to get an answer or build the project or whatever. For this ONE exam, you can use your phone or your implants or whatever. Because you know, Wargentin has a rule that no electronic devices are allowed in non-electronics classrooms unless they have tenure.

There are a few of those here, they say. Two have tenure and two are new. One is a dragon. And one is, told, but don't believe, biosynthetic, but whatever.

Anyway, after that exam, there are individual exams. Individual, write-on-paper, absolutely no electronics of any kind, use only whatever knowledge is lurking in your head, solve a series of problems. Or whatever as the course requires. No phones. *Absolutely* no implants. I got told there were special-trained RATS, actual lab rats! Climb over you and smell for ink and stuff because sometimes people write on their clothing or themselves and YES, they do this! One kid in my class not only got called out in front of the whole class, but was made to wash the stuff off in front of the whole class and then expelled! And no, I don't think this was a set-up because this kid was in our class all semester. In the museum in town there's a ballpoint pen on display, some kid carefully etched equations all over it in teeny little script. Sign next to it: "Let This Be A Warning To You All."

They give you little blue exam books and sheets of questions and pens and off you go.

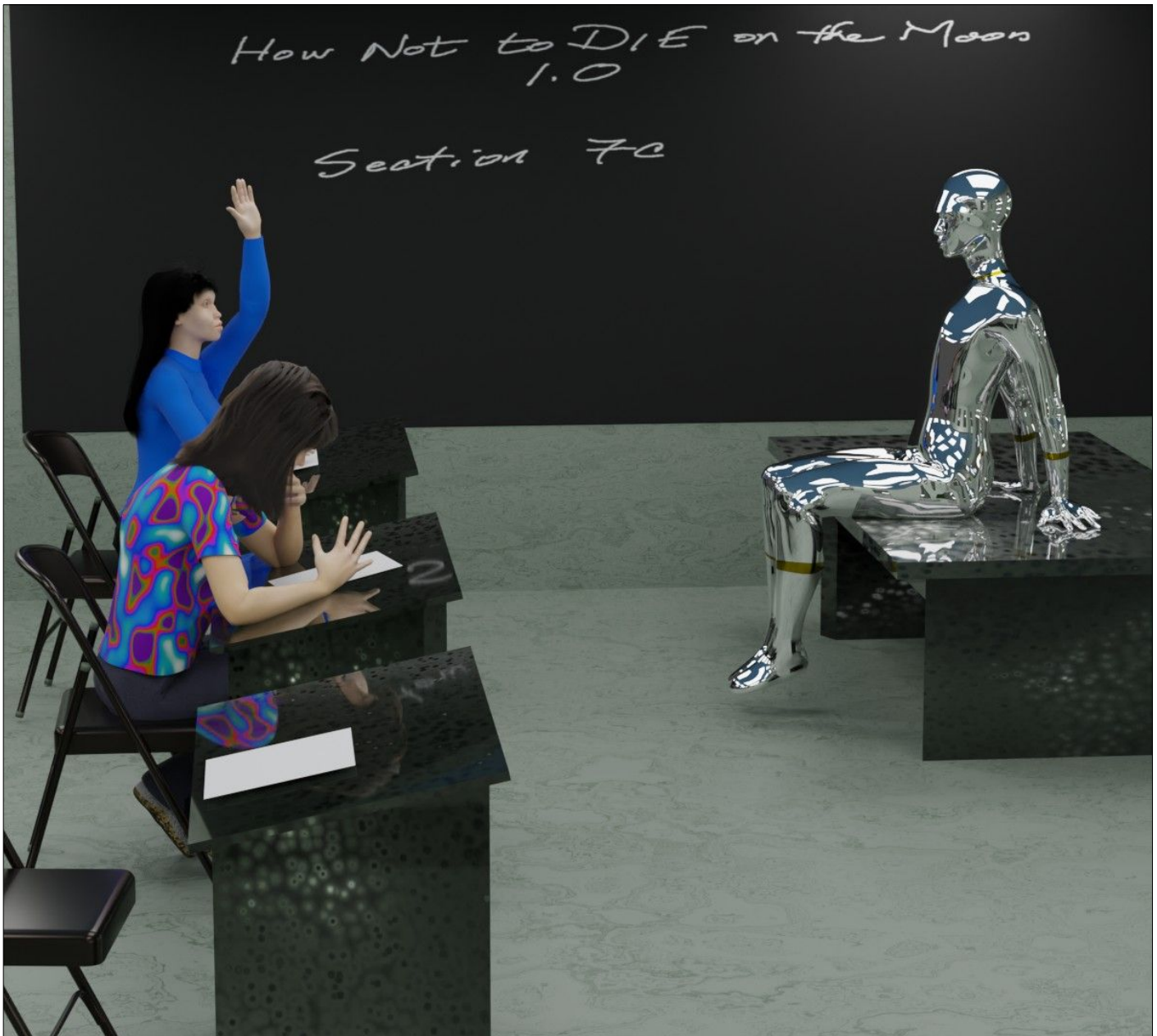
So off I went. Waiting for grades now. Never so much anxiety over grades in my whole life. I mean, knew it was gonna happen when I got here. But still.

And do they scan the room for signals going in and out? Oh yes they do! All semester.

Interesting thing: one of my classes was proctored by Ranger the Robot. This is, I swear, just about the most disconcerting thing that can happen to a person. Here you are, trying to dig out stuff from your brain, right?

Ranger is a humanoid robot of no particular gender. Usually he's called "he." He has mirror skin. Can change how reflective it is. Works outside in the sun during the day and I guess being very mirror-y helps with that but really? Does he have to use it indoors? No. Gives you a headache! Look in his direction, everything around him is reflected and instead of doing your exam you're staring at him trying to see if you can spot

yourself in the reflections. Forget complaining. If you get distracted, they tell you, that's your problem. Remember, they always say. You are on the Moon. The Moon's one and only goal in life is to kill you!



About Ranger, I know three things: He is considered one of the Four Greatest Punmasters in the Orion Spur; he is a pretty decent guy once you get to know him. And he is extremely hard to get to know.

Shall I accept the challenge? We shall see.

Well, I made it through those exams. A lot of my friends didn't. Too much stress I guess, and my "Senior Sister" told me, "Ha, those were the easy ones! Just wait!" but she's probably just teasing me.

Things on the Moon in general are getting dicey because the Moon is peopled by people being people. The Chinese base near Shakerlton has been declared part of China because it has been occupied so long and run under

Chinese law so long that yeah, why not. OST, the Artemis Accords, and all its successors, explicitly prohibit this; but China never signed any of them, so there!

So now there is a mad scramble either to say “Yeah, that applies to us too!” because A., they don’t want to start another hot war with China, and B., who’s gonna stop them when Earth is still reeling over the war with China which still hasn’t officially ended. And it looks like India is getting ready to restart it because China is diverting the water from the last few Himalayan glaciers because they “need” it (or at least that’s what they say anyway) which... honestly all of youse people, didn’t we grow out of this already? On, and the First Nations Front is still intent on having all Lunar settlements dismantled...

And here’s Wargentín, this “piddling little hippie commune” with 400 people and 430 cats, and a leopard, and some sheep, and a couple cows, and lots of pretty birdies, and hectares of cultivation, and it’s so groovy and everyone hates us, but they leave us alone.

What I want to know is, why?

Yeah, we have a dragon. And the dragon has friends. We have big laser canons that can detect and shoot down even tiny meteoroids that might hit the domes (though yeah, of course, a few get through now and then). No military presence at all. None. Zero. No weapons that anyone admits to other than the meteoroid lasers. So... why?

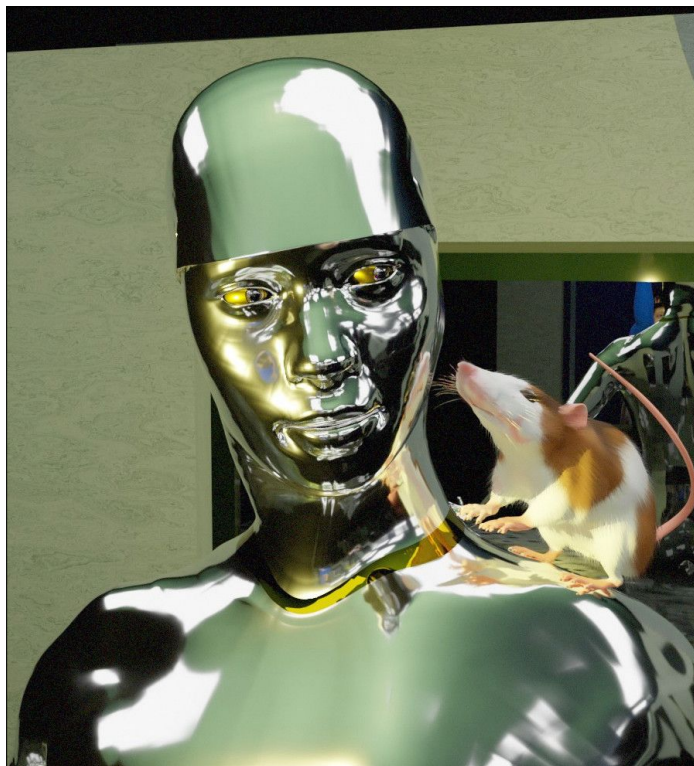
Everybody’s got a theory. Like, the guy who bought and built the town knows “everything” about “everybody” who is anybody. Or we have a secret weapon someplace in the lava tubes. Or, you know, all kinds of outrageous stuff. So far as I can tell, Wargentín’s only export is research and education. And for the United States that seems to be a really good reason for opprobrium.

Oh... and that God Box that I was given? Yeah, ain’t done much with it. Studying for exams. Getting my radiation exposure checked. Getting my healing leg checked. Don’t have to wear those support socks anymore, yay, but I’ve gotten really used to them and they’re comfy, so. Anyway, helping with the cleanup and replanting after the flare—and it’s a good thing it wasn’t head on because a couple of the stations east of here are still without internet! Can you just imagine? What did people DO before the internet? Life must have been SO boring!

Regarding what’s happening with my inheritance, there’s no news. Both sides are standing firm. I guess, waiting for someone to blink. I can out-not-blink a cat.

Oh... something else I should mention we’re doing this week: we’re dusting.

Yup, all 400 people are dusting. We’re dusting everything. And since it’s moon dust we’re dusting, we aren’t doing anything that remotely resembles wiping. Moon dust is just tiny little sharp chips of glass with an electrical charge. You don’t wipe it, you don’t sweep it. You can either vacuum it up with this weird, special vacuum what’s got weird, special filters in it that clog up just about immediately, or else you can rub a piece of wool (I told you, we have sheep) on a balloon and carefully, carefully pat the wool on what you’re dusting and hope you pick up everything. Then you hang the wool in a jar that has a charged plate on it, and you flip the



switch and hopefully the dust falls onto the plate. If it doesn't you switch the polarity. Sometimes you just switch the polarity anyway because what the hell. You do not under any circumstances shake the jar. The wool is usually only good for two or three wipes before it needs some other treatment to get off the remaining dust.

Lunar dust really sucks. I mean, when you go outside, you have to wear a spacesuit, right? You come in one airlock and take the spacesuit off and put it in another dust collector and hope for the best. Meanwhile, you are in a jumpsuit that you wear underneath the spacesuit and *somehow* dust gets on that, though not nearly as much, and you take that jumpsuit off in another airlock and throw it in the wash where they actually wash it in water. Wargentin has a stupid amount of water; they had to dig for it, really deep, but there was plenty, and then the Alien Cat brought a comet, so... anyway. Usually by then they let you in the city proper.

We were all given—at random, I'm told—something or someplace we had to clean up. And what did Yours Truly get? “The Piano.”

I figured, oh, no problem, just a little electronic piano, what could be bad. Then when it was announced that I had to clean the piano, there was a lot of laughing and cheering and carrying on, and, what?!

Wargentin has a FULL SIZED, GENUINE, WOODEN, GRAND PIANO!

The first thing I thought was, “How did they get a PIANO up here?!” And then it occurred to me. Grand Pianos have tops that open. Inside was a harp with 264 metal strings. And I had to dust *every individual string*.



I think I got up to the

$E\flat$ below middle C before I couldn't stand it anymore and stood at the window and screamed!

There was a general cheer from everybody else who was dusting. Apparently there was some kind of betting about at exactly what time I would stop and scream while dusting the piano because screaming while dusting piano strings is a common reaction to having to apply a charged piece of wool to 264 individual piano strings.

Some days, I hate this place.

And, while we're dusting *everything*, some specially-trained folks are

dusting the cats. Believe it or not, they have a special Cat-Dusting Vacuum for this. Most of the cats love it. Some, they need to be sedated.

Also, for those of you who simply MUST know, how many cat boxes does Wargentín have? Hundreds. And what happens to the contents of those? They're made into soil and fertilizer and... things. The actual litter is regolith that's been put through a rock tumbler to take off the sharp edges. The pebbles become litter and the powder is used for all kinds of things.

Nothing goes to waste here.

Except my brain.

Tonight I am attending a performance by the Wargentín Crater Gilbert & Sullivan Society. They have redone *The Barber of Seville* in the style of G&S. I suspect it will be cringe-worthy, but you never know.

Trouble Brewing

Episode 8: *Trouble Shared is Trouble Squared?*

1 THE BRIDGE OF THE TROUBLE

1

DORCAS is trying to make herself comfortable, with little success. The BRIDGE CREW turns to her from time to time, perhaps wondering if there's anything they can do, but are otherwise quiet.

DORCAS (V.O.)

First Officer's Personal Log, 25th Day of Autumn,
Year 1 of the Trouble.

Bridge is very quiet today. What Captain calls, "sercon." No playing D&D today. Told crew, if nothing to do, no need to sit at the station, but nobody left. Everyone sitting where they should be. No talking. Like a funeral, but everyone angry. Is much concern among senior officers, and easy to tell, the rest of the crew is also upset. Are all scientists. It's that feeling when waiting for grant proposal to be approved before you can carry on with what you really want to do. Do not like this. Admiral has taken Captain's yacht, Max and Stingers, and Vinny. Gone off to look for Captain. Apparently, have leads.

Bridge is too quiet. Quiet is making everyone unhappy.

I am grateful that Captain's chair can be adjusted for people with tails.

Do not know what to do with myself at this point. Not happy. Waiting is my least favorite activity. Everyone else too, I suspect.

Also, was warned, watch for suspicious activity outside ship. Think I know perfect person to do this.

RHOSHENG

Incoming message from the Admiral aboard the Amelia, Dorcas-san.

DORCAS

Roger that. Play, please.



ADMIRAL

(voice sounds somewhat filtered and distant)
Commander, this is a status report. Amelia will be entering hyperspace shortly, so this may be my last transmission for a while. Status report on the *Trouble*, please?

DORCAS

Maintaining station on orbit. Nothing new to report.

ADMIRAL

Has there been any report from T'Pryl regarding the Babel Fish device?

DORCAS

No, ma'am. Have not heard. Could ask?

ADMIRAL

Have T'Pryl report to you. We need to get that online, as soon as possible, for ship's morale. I'm leaving that project in your and T'Pryl's hands.

DORCAS

And Sandor-san.

ADMIRAL

Thank you, yes. I'll be back in touch once we reach our destination. If you don't hear from us in seventy-two hours Trouble's shipboard time, brief ranking officers and report your status to Starfleet. Admiral out.

DORCAS jumps onto the Captain's Chair and broods.

2 INTERIOR, The AMELIA

2

The *Amelia* jumps out of hyperspace so that the Stingers can search for any signals from Neodymium (the Stinger who is with the Captain on the Planet of the Graduate Students).

The ADMIRAL is sitting at the controls of the *Amelia*. VINNY is beside her, trying to stick his head out a window and failing. MAX and several STINGERS are sitting on a bench behind her.



ADMIRAL

Amelia, do you know where we are at this point?

AMELIA

Yes.

ADMIRAL
(dourly)

Well...

AMELIA

You're no fun anymore. We are at 8243 x 56908 x 2345.

ADMIRAL

Are we still in Federation space?

AMELIA

We are a couple dozen light-years outside of Federation space.

ADMIRAL

Whose jurisdiction are we under?

AMELIA

Nobody's, to the best of my knowledge.

ADMIRAL

Max, are the Stingers picking up any signals?

MAX

Nothing yet. Admiral. A vague direction. Less vague than before, but only barely statistically significant.

ADMIRAL

Amelia, are you able to lock in on the Captain?

AMELIA

I too have a general awareness of her presence, but nothing definite. The Stingers looking for their missing fellow would be a better indicator than I.

ADMIRAL

Amelia, can you communicate directly with Max and the Stingers?

AMELIA

I am able to communicate with and understand Max. He can translate for me.

ADMIRAL

Max, work with the ship, er, Amelia, to locate the

Captain. See if you can get a better fix. Amelia, how long have we been away from the Trouble, in Trouble time?

AMELIA

Three hours. Why don't you go have some tea? Or a nap? I have lots of music and the like.

ADMIRAL

Amelia, am I distracting you?

AMELIA

Well, I do have limited resources when it comes to paying attention to things, Admiral.

ADMIRAL

Riiiiiiiiiggghhht... Maybe I'll take a nap. When you can lock on a signal, proceed in that direction, and wake me up if you find her, or in two hours, whichever comes first.

VINNY

YIP!!!

NICK

MEOW!!!

ADMIRAL

All right, all right, I'll feed you first.



3 EXTERIOR, PLANET OF THE GRADUATE STUDENTS**3**

The CAPTAIN is still sleeping on her rock. She has removed her jacket to make a pillow and keeps trying (unsuccessfully) to make it into a comfortable shape. Finally she gives up, and opens her eyes. It is a very foggy morning. CHIP and OTHY, the Murchee who took the chocolate-covered Babel Fish device, are next to her, peering down at her. OTHY is holding what looks like a tiny version of the Instrument (which is still in place on the beach).

CAPTAIN

(waking up in alarm.)

You know, you could scare someone to death, brooding over them like that.

OTHY (via small instrument)

You boring.

CAPTAIN

I sleeping. Sleeping, good. Waking up, bad.



CHIP

Having made a lot of progress overnight is also good, don't you agree?

CAPTAIN

I'll let you know if it's good after I've had a wash and some breakfast. What's there to eat around this joint?

EBBET

Awake at last, I see, well, there's something in my cabin that can pass as coffee on a good day.

CAPTAIN

Feh! I never touch the stuff. Well, I never touch the stuff unless I'm intent on causing panic. Is there any tea on this planet?

EBBET

Interesting; I've never asked them for tea. Othy, how about it? Tea for the Captain? Tea! Fermented leaves boiled in water. You know...

OTHY and CHIP briefly confer.

CHIP

Our friend here will alert the others and see what they can come up with. I'm told they make a very good pizza.

CAPTAIN

They can't. If you don't have real mozzarella and stuff, making good pizza is impossible. I know I come from a place of perfect pizza and besides, you don't eat pizza for breakfast. I want a cup of tea. And maybe some toast. How hard can it be to make toast?

EBBET

Out of what?

CAPTAIN

Don't spoil my morning.

The captain stands up, and walks down to the beach. Performs ablutions, dives into the water, and splashes about for a bit; exits the water, shakes like a wet dog, dries off, and puts clothing back on. She returns to the sleeping rock and uses the blanket to towel her hair. OTHY runs down to the beach and dives into the water, and disappears.

CAPTAIN

Time to submit a report, I imagine. Speaking of which, what have you been up to all night, o master cryptographer of mine?

CHIP

This Self could not sleep. Too much noise at the instrument so, This Self went to investigate. This Self was able to add much to their understanding. This Self was very surprised to find that These Selves had no idea, firstly, that sound could be used for communication. This is the first planet This Self has ever heard of where sound is not used for communication, at least not by the larger lifeforms This Self has encountered. These Selves do everything regarding communication with touch, and, when underwater, electrical pulses.

EBBET

So how do they know what they know, for example, about things I've needed to stay alive here?

CHIP

These Selves have been able to decode pictures from the files they have gathered with their hairball computer. To them, all books are picture books. They have done their best by looking at pictures. And they do well with limited sight, in a way This Self has yet to fathom.

EBBET

But surely they must have noticed writing, a lot of pictures have writing.

CHIP

These Selves have noticed these things, but apparently interpreted them as decoration, or simply as noise. They are incredibly smart in many ways, but in other ways, apparently they are simply not attuned to grasp certain things. They would make a fascinating study, we should consider adding one or two or five to the crew.

CAPTAIN

Interesting proposition, that. The more so because I know a lot of people who, if I did that, would be seriously annoyed.
(captain grins)

CHIP

This Self has made a full report of what she has seen, and has downloaded it to your Babel Fish.

CAPTAIN

Thank you, Chip. I will go through it as soon as I've gotten some calories in me.

Captain gets up and walks toward Ebbet's cabin. Max follows. Just as they arrive at the cabin, there comes a scrambling noise behind them. A large group of young Murchees are running up from the water, and one of them is carrying a table box. It hands this box to the captain. The captain sits down and opens it. Inside, is a bowl of cereal.

CAPTAIN

Rice Krispies?
(Captain tastes the cereal)
Rice Krispies! Thank you! I like this stuff!

EBBET

I wonder what those are made of...

CAPTAIN

Who cares! I don't even want to know what the real ones are made of!

CHIP

This Self strongly encourages the Captain to read the report. There is information there that may be of a sensitive nature to the Federation.

CAPTAIN

Oh, joy...
(Suddenly, as if stunned)
Hang about! *Chotto matte, kudasai!*

ALL

(startled)

What?!

CAPTAIN

If Murchees can't see detail, why do they have such complicated skin patterns?

Those who have eyes roll them. Everyone else just deflates.

them OTHY, are sitting around a box-table. CAPTAIN, EBBET and IGGY are eating.

CAPTAIN

(to nobody in particular)

So, apart from we're in a globular cluster, nobody knows exactly where we are, neh?

EBBET

Not a clue, sorry.

CHIP

From the inside, all globular clusters look the same.

CAPTAIN

That still puzzles me, though.

EBBET

What puzzles you?

CAPTAIN

That, as you say, Murchee vision is really bad, but they have very intricate skin colors and patterns. This has to be, to be seen by something. If not other Murchees, then what?

CHIP

This Self thinks that the patterns are a leftover from before the species was Uplifted.

CAPTAIN and EBBET both stop eating suddenly.

EBBET

I thought that was illegal!

CAPTAIN

Within the Federation, oh, yes. But the Federation isn't the Universe, not yet anyway. How do you know about this, Chip-san?

CHIP

This Self has been busy decoding their communications. These Selves are avid story-tellers. These Selves told me their Origin Story.

EBBET

(after a short pause)

Well, can you please share it?

CHIP turns to OTHY. They touch each other briefly with antennae and tentacles.

OTHY

(very haltingly, through the Mini-Instrument)
We ... live in water, in deep. Live, eat, make more
us. Come Who-Watch. Who-Watch take...

OTHY and CHIP confer briefly.

CHIP

"Young," or "new."

OTHY

Who-Watch take New away, and New come back, are
different. Talk is more precise. New can spend short
time out of water. Who-Watch make Schools. Who-
Watch...

Another short conference. OTHY seems irritated, probably at not being able to
tell the story as it should be told, but soldiers on.

OTHY

Who-Watch teach us, learning is everything. Murchee
must learn. Who-Watch make Murchee-World collect
Others so we learn lots. Then, something happened to
Who-Watch. Say, "We go Home now." And much fire, and
Who-Watch are gone.

CHIP

Who-Watch, as Those Selves are called, were common
bipeds, as Dorcas-san is. Those Selves came from
another place, they said, not this world. Maybe
Those Selves will return, and the Murchee expect
that should this happen, they will be able to
impress Who-Watch with all that they have been able
to learn. It is the guiding principle of the culture
of These Selves, you see.

OTHY takes some time to talk to the other Murchee by touch. There is much
excited "muttering."

OTHY

Yes! Yes! But question... what is "star?"

CAPTAIN, CHIP and EBBET all look inquisitively at each other.

EBBET

You live in an enormous cluster of stars. Surely you
know what a star is.

The MURCHEES babble among themselves again. CAPTAIN is suddenly
introspective.

OTHY

No.

EBBET

But... look!
(Making a grand gesture, including the whole sky.)
Nothing but stars, everywhere you look!

The MURCHEES are utterly baffled.

CAPTAIN

Murchees can see light, nu?

CHIP and MURCHEES confer again.

CHIP

These selves can "see" light and shadow, but, This
Self thinks, they see the sky only as if it were
overcast.

CAPTAIN

But they do see differences in brightness.

CHIP

Yes.

CAPTAIN

Can they—can you—tell the others what pattern you
have seen?

CHIP translates this.

OTHY

Yes.

CAPTAIN leans back, thinking carefully for some time, eating the while.
Everyone else regards her expectantly.

CAPTAIN

If two of you see something, and you see it slightly
differently, can you combine those images in your
mind?

Much back-and-forth between CHIP and the MURCHEES

CHIP

With a little practice, yes, to an extent.

CAPTAIN

(grinning)

Okay, then. Othy, Murchees, go back to your school,
and get, say, 12 more Murchees, and bring them back
here with you. Bring Murchees who have very, very

good memories.
 (grinning very widely)
 I have an idea.

5 INTERIOR OF THE AMELIA

5

The Admiral is seated at a station staring into space. She looks very relaxed. A very excited Vinny jumps on the chair, yipping in Morse Code.

ADMIRAL
 (waking from a nap)
 Slow down Vinny. Say that again. My morse code isn't what it used to be.

VINNY
 Yip-yip-YAP-yip yip-YAP! Yip-yip-YAP-yip yip-YAP!

ADMIRAL
 Start from the beginning.

Vinny pauses then repeats.

ADMIRAL
 "Fa?" Fa! You found her!

Max and his Stingers come running over too.

MAX
 Admiral-sama, the Stingers have a definite fix!

ADMIRAL
 Amelia, is that correct?

MAX gives a short "huff," feeling he hasn't been believed. He tries his best to hide it, though, and the ADMIRAL, her attention elsewhere, does not notice.

AMELIA
 I have a good fix on Fa's personal Babel Fish device. I think. Looks like she may be carrying spares again and left one somewhere.

ADMIRAL
 Sounds like her. Are you tracking her or just a fish device?

AMELIA
 The device is activated therefore the probability

is-

ADMIRAL

-Good enough.

AMELIA

The general consensus seems to be a globular cluster
at 24507 x 5867 x 18

ADMIRAL

Set a course for wherever she is. Are you getting
any readings from the Stinger?

MAX

Yes Admiral.

AMELIA

The data indicate that the fish, therefore the
Captain, and the stinger are in close proximity.
Shall we off, then?

ADMIRAL

Off we go!

6 PLANET OF THE GRADUATE STUDENTS

6

On the beach. About fifteen MURCHEES, including one rather large one, are standing in a line. CAPTAIN and CHIP stand in front of the line, EBBET and IGGY are looking on from a distance. CAPTAIN has the STINGER on the end of a long pole, which she is showing to the MURCHEES.

CAPTAIN

Okay, everybody listen up!

CHIP taps OTHY, leftmost on the line from the CAPTAIN's POV, on a fin, and the message is passed down the line.

CAPTAIN

I want all of you to pay close attention to the
Stinger here. I want *all* your attention on the
Stinger.

CHIP intercedes again.

CAPTAIN

I am going to hold the Stinger up, and you keep watching it. When I say, "Go!" I want you, Othy, to tell the Murchee on your left what you see, including the background. Every detail! Now, I want you to imagine that the brightest parts are very bright, and the darkest parts are very dark.

CHIP intercedes, this time in a more protracted conversation. The information goes up and down the line again.



CAPTAIN

Then you (pointing), I will call you Two, compare what Othy tells you to what you see. Think of the brightest parts as very bright, and the darkest parts as very dark, same as Othy. Then Two, you combine the images in your imagination, and tell (pointing again) Three the combined image you imagined. And Three, you combine that with what you saw. And so on, all the way down the line. When you get to Fifteen, you, Fifteen, pass that image up the line, all the way back until everyone knows that

final image. Does that make sense?

CHIP and OTHY confer again, and there is much touching up and down the line. Apparently, the Murchees are very excited by this.

CHIP

I think These Selves understand.

CAPTAIN hoists the STINGER on the pole high over her head.

CAPTAIN

Go!

The MURCHEES all "talk" at once.

CAPTAIN

No, no, no. One at a time. (Pointing) You first, then you, then you... got it?

OTHY

(after communicating this up the line)

Okay.

The MURCHEES get to it, drawing their images on each other's fins. With each iteration, the drawings become more pokes and swirls than scribbles, but it is a slow process, and some Murchees apparently ask for the information to be repeated. EBBET walks up to the CAPTAIN.

EBBET

Exactly what are you doing here?

CAPTAIN

(Quietly to EBBET)

I've just, I hope, turned them into a telescope array, sort of like all those old radio telescope arrays from the 20th and 21st centuries.

EBBET

(giving up hope)

Oh, well, then, in that case...

After a while, the largest MURCHEE has assembled an image, seems to deflate somewhat, and points its front end toward the sky. It passes the image along. One by one, the Murchees seem to be overwhelmed, confused, excited, shocked... By the time the image reaches OTHY, sensawunda has taken over the entire group.

CAPTAIN

Othy, please draw the new image on the sand so I can see it.

OTHY, after a poke from CHIP, pokes holes, surrounded by swirls, in the sand with a tentacle. CAPTAIN walks over to the drawing, looks at it, compares it to the sky in the direction the MURCHEES were pointed, and nods. She stands back, and addresses the group, very satisfied.

CAPTAIN

(trying to be self-satisfied and smug but only producing profound Geeking-Out pride)
Thank you, everyone. I pronounce you all the Van Gogh Squad. And those bright blobs you have together-seen? Those are stars.

The MURCHEES are astounded. As a group, they turn in another direction, to do it all again. One of them leaves and dives into the ocean. As it does, the STINGER on the pole leaps down, lands on the CAPTAIN's head (frightening IGGY who runs into EBBET's cabin) and stands at attention, its bioluminescence very bright indeed.

CAPTAIN

(to Stinger)
What's wrong with you?

The STINGER smacks the CAPTAIN on the face with a tentacle, and then resumes its stance, "feet" down, arms raised straight up.

CHIP

By Jove, I think she's got it...

7 EXTERIOR, PLANET OF THE GRADUATE STUDENTS, LATER THAT DAY

7

The CAPTAIN and CHIP are lying on the Same Old Rock. CAPTAIN looks



rather worn out. With CHIP it's hard to tell. The CAPTAIN appears to have a handful of M&Ms and is downing them one at a time.

CAPTAIN
Are they gone?

CHIP
They are gone, yes.

CAPTAIN
Buonu.

CHIP
They mentioned putting together an orchestra.

CAPTAIN
Where do they get all this energy from? I didn't even have this much energy when I was a horse-crazy kid galloping up and down the streets of Brooklyn!

CHIP
Learning something new and wonderful gives you such energy.

CAPTAIN
Oh yeah? Then why have I not got any?

CHIP
Ah, that is because you are doing the teaching.

CAPTAIN
(nodding)
Explains a lot..

CHIP
They are looking for us Certainly, they are.

CAPTAIN
Well, yeah, everybody loves a good court-martial.

CHIP
Don't be so pessimistic.

CAPTAIN
Why?

CHIP
Permission to speak freely?

CAPTAIN
Always, Chip-san.

CHIP
In that case, do not be so pessimistic, because I

said so.

CAPTAIN

Well, you know best...

CAPTAIN reaches behind an ear and scratches. Takes off the Babel Fish device, turns it over a couple of times, and puts it back. Taps on it once or twice. Takes it off again, shakes it, and puts it back.



CAPTAIN

Amelia?

CAPTAIN taps on the device again.

CAPTAIN

Amelia, you there? Over!

CHIP Looks up and flicks her antennae around.

CHIP

Amelia-your-yacht?

CAPTAIN

I think so. I'm just getting static but it's familiar static.

CHIP

Why Amelia? Why not the *Trouble*?

CAPTAIN

Yes, that is... concerning if it's correct.

NEODYMIUM the Stinger jumps on the CAPTAIN'S head and starts acting as if sending semaphore signals.

8 INTERIOR, the AMELIA

8

The occupants of the Amelia look attentively out the windows as the ship leaves orbit. Admiral sees the island and recognizes, on a magnifying viewscreen, the Captain and Chip.

ADMIRAL

Amelia, complete one more orbit and collect standard data before we land. Max-san, have your stingers communicated with each other, yet?

MAX

Yes, Admiral. We are recording their conversations and archiving the data they are sharing.

AMELIA

Looks like they're having fun down there.

ADMIRAL

How so? What are they doing?

AMELIA

Were it any other planet I'd say they're playing a concert, with the Captain conducting.

ADMIRAL

What kind of concert? Amelia, it's time to establish

contact with the Captain. Can you use her fish for two-way communication?

AMELIA

Of course.

There is a moment of static, then Captain's voice is heard, with an enormous amount of cacophony in the background.

ADMIRAL

You sound like you're having lots of fun. Should we go back to the Trouble and leave you to your fun?

CAPTAIN

Tsk!

(Captain snorts)

Nice of you to drop in! Come on down! We're having a blast! And the food is good.

(Apparently to the noise-makers)

All right, all right, settle down a minute.

ADMIRAL

Well, if the food is good, maybe we'll stop by for just a minute.

CAPTAIN

Amelia, the ground here is fine to land on, so just come in wherever you want. So, Admiral, what brings you out all this way? However far away this is? And where's my ship?!

ADMIRAL

Amelia, land when conditions are right. See you soon, Captain.

CAPTAIN

WHERE'S MY SHIP?!

ADMIRAL

Which one?

CAPTAIN

Germaine....

ADMIRAL

We are preparing to land. The *Trouble* is currently in command of Dorcas-san. They are currently maintaining orbit around Beta Kerrotyn.

CAPTAIN

Roger that, I suppose. You'll have to tell me why Amelia is here and the *Trouble* is at B-K when you get here. See you soon.

9 EXTERIOR, PLANET OF THE GRADUATE STUDENTS

9

CAPTAIN, ADMIRAL, CHIP, MAX, STINGERS, VINNY, EBBET, carrying IGGY the Cat, OTHY and BOODRY are standing in a rough circle. AMELIA is in the background.

CAPTAIN

Admiral Swanson, may I present Mr. Ebbet, whose first name I don't know because he's never told me; Iggy the Cat, who used to be Lt. Gussar Ishen Mala's cat but is apparently now Mr. Ebbet's cat. I believe you already know Chip-san.

And this, (pointing to the Murchees) is Othy, and this one, I think, is Boodry. They have a very long story.

Ebbet-san, this is Admiral Germaine Swanson, my bestie from Academy days, my master geologist, Ens. Mkås-Maäha, better known as Max; and my very good dog Vinny.

EBBET

A blue dog with hooves?!

CAPTAIN

Yes, and he's a very, very good dog, aren't you, Vin?

VINNY

Yap!!

ADMIRAL

Pleased to meet you, Mr. Ebbet, Othy and Boodry. Are you residents of this planet?

EBBET

Me? No, no... from what the Captain tells me, I got here the same way she did. Just scooped up from Beta Kerrotyn somehow. (Waves at the Murchees on the beach) The Murchees have lived here since, oh, since Hector was a pup, as my great grandma used to say. There are thousands of them; underwater, you know. But they can live on land, for a little while anyway. Captain's teaching them Beethoven and how to sing the alphabet to melodies the alphabet was never meant to be sung to.

CAPTAIN starts singing the alphabet to *My Darling Clementine*, stops abruptly when everyone else stares, and shrugs.

ADMIRAL

(Aside to Captain) Getting bored, were you? Do you want to go home? We're heading that way, you know.

CAPTAIN

(after a short cogitation)

Well, as much as it's been the basis for a whole new doctoral thesis... Yeah, i think it's time to go home.

OTHY seems to startle, and the Murchees start talking amongst themselves.

EBBET

(Looking in the open door of the Amelia)
That's really a remarkable ship! How could you afford such a thing on a Starfleet salary?

CAPTAIN

(smugly)

I have a rich uncle who loves me.

EBBET

(Turning and sighing)

I don't doubt it.

CAPTAIN

(to EBBET)

Well, you coming?

EBBET

Well...

Can you take me to Beta Kerrotyn?

CAPTAIN

We can, yes... why?

EBBET

Oh, I don't know... and besides. I don't even know if the Murchees will let me leave.

ADMIRAL

How can they stop you?

EBBET

(to Othy and Boodry)

I don't know, but I'm sure you can if you want to.

OTHY

Can if want to, yes, can if want to.

OTHY confers with CHIP.

CHIP
Captain-san, Othy proposes a deal.

CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL exchange glances.

CAPTAIN
Okay, I'm always interested in a deal.

AMELIA
(from far off)
You can say that again!

CAPTAIN
(to Amelia)
Shut up, you!
(to OTHY)
What are you proposing?

CHIP
Othy says they will allow Ebbet to leave, providing we take Othy also.

CAPTAIN
Oh, really?

ADMIRAL
Why?

CAPTAIN
(to the Admiral)
Apparently, this whole planet is a huge university, and everybody here is studying something or other. They were studying me and Ebbet. I'm sure there are plenty of other people around they're studying. I guess if we take Othy, that'll be good for post-doc work.
(to Othy)
I'm afraid I don't have quarters for a Murchee at the moment, you guys are pretty big.

OTHY
Is not problem! You watch! Interesting stuff!



OTHY confers with BOODRY and after a moment, Othy's color begins to fade.



Soon, all of OTHY's appendages begin to shrink into sahn's body, leaving a plain, colorless, round ball inside of which, organelles are visible. After a few moments, the organelles begin to move as the ball elongates into a dumbbell-shape.



CAPTAIN leans down, and peers closely at OTHY. OTHY becomes longer and longer, and the dumbbells form into two balls with just a small string between them.



BOODRY walks over, and smacks the string with one of sahn's tentacles. The two halves separate, and slowly become opaque. Bumps appear where tentacles will soon begin to appear.

BOODRY confers with CHIP

CHIP

Boodry says, you take one Othy. The other Othy stays here, can compare later when one day we bring your Othy back. Younglings are adaptable in ways adults are not. The Murchees will supply food for the

Trouble to replicate.

The CAPTAIN, now sitting on the ground, leans in to peer at the younglings.

CAPTAIN

Hmmm...

BOODRY

Othy-Who-Goes must return to share knowledge. Will have much, much, much fame and status on return!

CAPTAIN

Yes, of course...

CAPTAIN stands up, considers the two younglings. Turns to the ADMIRAL.

CAPTAIN

What do you think?

ADMIRAL

Makes sense. If it will enable us to get off this place. We can discuss the possible repercussions back on board the *Trouble*.

CAPTAIN

Ooo, fun...

EBBET

You never know, they may want to join the Federation one day.

CAPTAIN

They can't. No uplifts, no genetic mods. Look at all the crap they gave Chin-Riley! Like it was her own fault. You know whom I blame for this? I-

ADMIRAL

Yes, we all know whom you blame, let's not get into that just this moment.

CAPTAIN

All right, all right, let's not. In that case, (turning to the Murchees)
In that case, I will adopt one as a pet.

The CAPTAIN leans down and picks up the nearest Youngling.

CAPTAIN

I will hug him, and squeeze him, and call him George.

EBBET

Oh, come on, you can't keep an intelligent creature as a pet!



Mew!

IGGY

EBBET
(Rubbing IGGY's ears)
No, she can't, can she?

CAPTAIN
(to ADMIRAL but gesturing to EBBET)
I rest my case.

Purrrrrrrr...

IGGY

CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL walk toward the AMELIA.

CAPTAIN
(to EBBET)

Well, are you coming?

EBBET
(Looks from Captain to Admiral)

Did you say yesterday that Ruba Lacincia was on board?

ADMIRAL
I believe she is still on board.

EBBET
In that case, I'm coming.

ADMIRAL, CAPTAIN, VINNY, CHIP, IGGY and STINGERS board the AMELIA

10 INTERIOR, ENGINEERING

10

SANDOR, T'PRYL and JASKEERAT SINGH are sitting at a display, drinking coffee, considering schematics, drinking more coffee, and also drinking coffee. In between sips they argue about what it is they're actually trying to accomplish. SWANSON enters.

SINGH
Oh, hello!

SANDOR
Yes?

SWANSON
T'Pryl, I need to speak to the Admiral immediately.
Where is she?

SINGH
We're very well, thank you, and yourself? You are well? Welcome to Engineering. Coffee?

T'PRYL
The Admiral has gone to fetch the Captain. Both are on their way back and will be here shortly.

SWANSON
Where has she been?!

T'PRYL
I was not given that information.



There is a whoosh of doors opening, and one of Swanson's operatives enters.

OPERATIVE

Sir, something has been found on the planet.
Something we think you really need to see.

SWANSON

I'll be there shortly.
(To T'Pryl)
Notify me immediately when she gets here.

SWANSON leaves. T'PRYL, SANDOR and SINGH carry on arguing, discussing, swearing and drinking even more coffee.

11 INTERIOR, the AMELIA

11

AMELIA is once again in space. The CAPTAIN is lying on a bed with VINNY acting silly on the floor. The ADMIRAL is sitting on a bed opposite, and EBBET is sleeping in the navigation chair. GEORGE the MURCHEE is in a large bowl of water on a table.



EBBET

Did your ship have to be quite so thorough in checking us over?

AMELIA

Yes. It gives me great pleasure to see you squirm.

CAPTAIN

Oh, just wait until Ratty gets to us...

CAPTAIN stretches and wriggles. VINNY upends himself in delight. EBBET relaxes and is soon snoring.

CAPTAIN

Ohhhh... this is so much better than a rock. SO...

CAPTAIN rolls onto her side to face the ADMIRAL.

CAPTAIN

Exactly how much trouble am I in? Like I care, but one should be prepared.

ADMIRAL

Captain, since Amelia has given the okay, you are back in charge. The com is yours.

CAPTAIN

Well of course it is. It's my yacht.

AMELIA

Says you!

CAPTAIN

(rolling eyes)

What do you think they'll do to me? Starfleet, I mean.

ADMIRAL

I do not believe you voluntarily went AWOL. So, I'm sure they won't courtmartial you. You are on a research mission so interacting with the natives was both required and unavoidable. I look forward to your report.

CAPTAIN

Oh yeah... gotta dictate a report...

ADMIRAL

I bought myself a little trouble by putting your second-in-command in charge when there is a ranking officer with command training on board. I doubt some in Starfleet would approve of my reasons. My goal was maintaining your command when you got back. Once a senior officer takes over you have the devil to pay to get your command back.

CAPTAIN

I know. Oh wait... better idea. The Babel Fish has been recording everything, I could just download them that, and they can all watch it.

ADMIRAL

Amelia, how are we doing on time? We need to be back to the Trouble before the watch changes. (To Captain), I left orders that the ship was to leave orbit and follow us if we didn't return in time. Even if that means stranding Swanson and his men planet-side.

CAPTAIN
(snarkily)

Oh. This sounds serious. Strand your husband planet-side? That certainly is a not-too-subtle way to say, "I want a divorce."

ADMIRAL
Nothing like that. He is under his own sealed orders. I'm suspicious about why they sent him on a shake-down mission on this ship. It stinks of covert operations and spy stuff. I don't want you or the Trouble mixed up in it.

CAPTAIN
I've heard stories about his missions. He doesn't do subtle, does he?

ADMIRAL
(Smiles) Nope. Impulsive, spur-of-the-moment and dramatic, yes. Subtle and by the book? Never.

CAPTAIN
Reminds me of me. But what I want to know is, why'd he get assigned to my ship anyway?

ADMIRAL
You have just the right size and designed ship for his type of clandestine operations. I wonder how many layers of the Admiralty are interested in this little mission of yours.

CAPTAIN
Oh, all of them, I expect. I foresee Interesting Times ahead. Being brought to the attention of people in high places, having friends at my back and enemies who are patient. Getting what I asked for. The whole Chinese Curse thing. Especially the ones who get their knickers in a twist about the Prime Directive, and if they give me any guff about influencing people who've already been influenced by somebody else—

ADMIRAL
Would they really have a case?

CAPTAIN
Have? No, of course not. But if breaking the PD makes that Kirk brat a hero, I really dare them to take a Big Sister on.

EBBET
(talking in his sleep)
Ruba... Ruba...

CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL turn to each other and give each other knowing looks.

12 INTERIOR, THE BRIG

12

RUBA LACINCIA is sitting sulking when EBBET walks in, carrying IGGY. RUBA turns to EBBET and stares. There are sounds of greeting and gossip outside the door as it closes.

EBBET

Hello, Ruba. Long time no see.

RUBA

(getting misty-eyed)

Wilberforce? You're... Uhm... well... have a seat then. Where have you been?

EBBET

Oh, you know. Around. And what a long, strange trip it's been.

RUBA

Well, tell me!!

NOTA BENE: This is the first time we actually see RUBA smile.

EBBET

(sitting down, petting IGGY)

It will take a while. But there's something we need to discuss first. The Captain insisted.

RUBA

What do we need to discuss?

EBBET

Remember a year ago you asked me to marry you?

RUBA

Yeeesss?

EBBET

Well, I talked it over with Iggy here. I said, "Iggy, old pal, Ruba puts up with me. And look at me, Ig, old boy, my chances of getting anyone better are pretty nil, and—"

RUBA launches herself into EBBET's arms and hugs him fiercely.

RUBA
Wilberforce, you rat-bastard!

EBBET
(contentedly)
And Iggy makes three!

13 INTERIOR, THE BRIDGE OF THE TROUBLE

13

The TARDIS doors open, and the CAPTAIN, the ADMIRAL and RATTY walk out. CAPTAIN holds up one hand in the Vulcan Salute, and the other in a Peace sign. Live Long and Prosper, in Peace.



DORCAS

(jump-flapping onto the back of the Captain's chair)
 Captain on the bridge! Excuse me, Admiral on the
 bridge! And Captain!

The Bridge Crew stands and claps.

CAPTAIN

Applause? You're giving me applause? This is how you
 greet a Sicilian who's been away for more than three
 minutes?!

The bridge crew looks at the ADMIRAL, then at the CAPTAIN, and hesitates.
 CAPTAIN looks at ADMIRAL.

CAPTAIN

(Indicating herself and the crew)
 May we have a moment?

ADMIRAL sighs and shrugs. DORCAS and CAPTAIN run into each other's arms like
 two third-graders who haven't seen each other since kindergarten.

DORCAS

FAAAAA!

CAPTAIN

DORCAAAAAAAAAAS!

CAPTAIN and DORCAS separate, and Captain and crew greet each other in various
 ways. A few paper cranes fly through the air. CAPTAIN collapses into her
 chair. DORCAS collapses in the chair on CAPTAIN's right.

CAPTAIN

(to ADMIRAL)

Have a chair. Have some tea! Where's the Tea Lady?!

ADMIRAL

You are in command, Captain. (Admiral steps towards
 the Ready Room as the Bridge crew take turns
 greeting the Captain and asking for news.) Err. Fa.
 We do need to debrief before we release any official
 report.

CAPTAIN

Tsk! We don't stand on ceremony here. We dance up
 and down on its grave! I will tell you all the whole
 sordid episode shortly. Right now, I'm just happy to
 see all your smiling faces or waving antennae.

ROSEY the ROBOT comes in with a tray of tea, to loud cheering. ADMIRAL begins
 to leave.

RATTY

Hold on a minute. Sit down. No one is taking the Com until I clear them. Technically that includes you, Admiral. You were off the ship, too.

CAPTAIN

We were checked out by Amelia. I'd trust Amelia with my life and yours, too.

RATTY

Yes, but does Amelia trust you? Now sit down or I shall taunt you a second time.

Ratty continues to scan.

CAPTAIN

I like the new feathers. *Très chic.*

DORCAS

Will be fabulous in a week.

RIA

Shall I set a course to somewhere?

CAPTAIN

Yeah, Starbase A-You're-Adorable, I have people I need to have an argument with.

SANDOR

The five-minute argument? Or are you thinking of taking a course of ten?

CAPTAIN

I'm thinking of *giving* an entire semester of 13! Now. There's that little matter of my Level 53 Mage who was hit with the Second Childhood curse...

The CAPTAIN waves a hand, and a D&D board, featuring a baby in a wizard's hat, appears.

CAPTAIN

There. I can start undoing the damage while I tell you all about my Long, Strange Trip. As for the rest? Helmsman-san, *deal us in!*

The *Trouble* departs.

THE END

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Deliberately
Left
Undisturbed*

