

# RETROZINE

Two Fandom  
Elders,  
One More Time!

August 2025 \* Issue 16

## In This Issue:

Part 4 of "Seeing Double" by Fára Shimbo

Back To School ... in a Dream by N.C. Shapero and G.S. Cole

And Season 2 Episode 4 of the Adventures of the Trouble  
by its crew



# RETROZINE 16

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Got questions?

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**THE DEADLINE FOR NEXTISH (No. 16, Winter 2025) is September 21, 2025**

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# Seeing Double, Part 4

by Fara Shimbo

## Chapter Fifteen.

### Things Get Worser.

Ranger eventually made his way to Residential Dome, where Dark Jon and Thobo and Lillian Neeth and a couple of other Wargentines were playing Frisbee on the beach. All were fully dressed and all were thoroughly soaked, except for Dean Glipner, who stood well off to one side, apparently so about to bubble over with glee that he was unable to participate. Between tosses, Jon was prattling on about some Febenaqet folks he wasn't getting on very well with. It seemed they were strange people who were male and quadrupedal as children and female and bipedal as adults. They lived on a "loose world" with no sun and didn't get along very well with anyone, actually, especially each other. But they were too stuck up to go to war and do the galaxy the tremendous favor of killing themselves off so one had to put up with them.

Ranger bleeped at Thobo and when Thobo bleeped back in acknowledgment, Ranger considered joining the game and conversing with Thobo privately by radio, but instead he tapped Thobo on the back and motioned for him to follow.

"What's wrong?" Thobo asked as they sat down behind one of the sand dunes.

"I seem to have created a monster," Ranger said. He told Thobo about his meeting with the older satamuri. Thobo, in turn, told Ranger what Jon had told him about Brebi.

Ranger stared for an uncharacteristically long time. "Where's Maki now?" he asked. "Haven't seen sahn since yesterday," Thobo said.

"And the others?"

"Them neither."

"I don't like this," Ranger said, "do you?"

"I'm waiting to see how it all turns out," Thobo said. He got up and rejoined the game. "What do you suppose they've been doing all this time?" Thobo said as he caught the Frisbee and sent it slowly flying again.

"Oh," Ranger said, standing up and leaning against a potted palm, "probably trying to figure out a way to steal that opal."

"Hah," Thobo said. "No way! I've got it right here." He patted his pocket and came to a dead stop.

Everyone stared. "What's wrong?" said Lillian Neeth, who deep in her heart of hearts was sure that one of these two was going to blow a fuse some day.

Thobo reached in his pocket. He checked his other pockets too. He looked so much like someone whose face was about to turn brilliant red that everyone imagined that it did.

At that moment, three satamuri faces appeared, like crocodiles on the surface of the lake.

“WHERE IS IT?!!” Thobo roared.

The satamuri heads turned to each other and back. The purple one rose just enough to that it’s mouth was out of water. “Don’t tell me you lost it,” sahn said.

Thobo dove in after the satamuri. He was quick, but he was not really a swimmer. When he surfaced again he held a handful of fur and sand, but the amphibian satamuri had gotten clean away. Thobo came to the surface and floated on his back like an old mattress.

“Did they get it?” whined Dean Glipner. “I couldn’t stand it if they got it! Jingles is so dumb he should be a ringer! Are you SURE you didn’t just drop it?”

Thobo paddled water until he beached himself. He stood up miserably after a second or two and said to Jon, “What am I supposed to do now? Chase them across half the galaxy?”

Jon’s eyes turned brown. “Oh, no need for that. The little goons never leave orbit until the matter is resolved, or at least reaches some kind of all-encompassing melodramatic stalemate.”

“Well,” Thobo said in a dead-pan that always heralded Gloom of the Worst Sort, “what if I refuse to play?”

Jon fluffed his mane. “Since you have a friend among them you might be able to get away with that.”

Thobo made a noise sort of between a grunt and a car stalling in the middle of a busy intersection. He stalked off toward his flat.

Jon fluffed his mane again. “Maybe he just dropped it when we dunked him before,” he said. He dove into the lake, where he appeared to swim about as well as a tank.

But as he disappeared under the water, the last layer of greyed skin, left over from the decontamination process he’d gone through before he arrived, floated away from him. When he came back out again to say that he’d found nothing, his skin was its normal, silken blue-black.

Everyone said “OOOOOOOOO!!” and crowded around Jon to peer and touch. “I must be clean,” Jon shouted to Ranger who was still leaning on the palm.

“This happens often, I take it?” the robot said.

“Everywhere I.....” Jon ended the sentence with what could only have been a sneeze. He pushed through the crowd. “I must be allergic to something in the water,” he said by way of excuse.

“Oh yeah really?” said Consuelo Lopez, who handed him a towel.

Jon refused it. “Thanks, but I’d better get back to my ship and get clean,” he said as he headed out the dome.

Back home again, Thobo started toweling his hair. Jon, he remembered, had had an allergy attack in response to Thobo’s woolen scarf when they first met on the Klysadel; he had to wash in acetic acid to get his skin to stop itching.

He stood and stared for a few seconds and his very possibly dead plant. Better idea. He ran down the hall, stripped and stood under one of the wall dryers. He wanted to be thoroughly dry before he got into a flightsuit. Nothing was worse than being a warm damp body in a cold spacesuit because helmet fronts did not come with defoggers, not even the “guaranteed fog free” kind, which seemed to need them most.

He passed Ranger in the tube which led from Residential to Main Dome. When Ranger asked him where he was going, all he said was “Out.”

He stopped by the lobby of the spaceport to pick up his suit, but didn't put it on. He thought of just leaving a note for Kaye saying that he'd taken it himself (the senior class often took it for less than charitable purposes). But he realized that either the seniors or Serai Yodo would look for a note long before Kaye ever noticed it, so he wrote:

"Seven balls of slime were transmogrified into giant, pig-licking squash courts. How many were left?"

He stuck the note on the wall and left.

In the doorway he stood perfectly still. He watched for any tiny motion and listened for all small sounds. Only when he was confident that he was not being followed did he go on. He went around the corner and down the stairs which led to the underground.

## Chapter Sixteen.

### The Android Caves In.

He was getting, he realized as he walked, as close to meditation as it was probably possible. Or as close to mania...

When he was first built, he was so "leaky" in radio waves that Jon Seales (Senior), the project head at the time and Jon Seales' (Junior's) grandfather, used to complain that he (Thobo) would be the first person ever to fail his FCC approval. Most of that problem had been fixed by the time he'd made it to Wargentín, mainly because he not only interfered with everyone's wifi, but because he even interfered with some of the instrumentation in the spaceships he was supposed to be testing. Almost all of the rest he had managed to fix on his own (or, many years ago, Jon and Maki had helped him with it).

But he was sure that somehow, some way, there was just a little more, and that all some enterprising satamuri or honors student had to do was isolate that minute bit and then follow him wherever he went.

So, to make sure no one ever found the opals, he had pre-programmed several routes to the spot where the opals were found (with, of course, several emergency interrupts). He did not think and he tied his hearing only to the interrupt lines. Hopefully, like a grass-hopper, even he wouldn't know exactly where he was going; making it that much harder for some predatory senior—or satamuri—to second guess him.

When he passed people in the hallways of the Underground, he deliberately did not not-ice them. Nor did he notice the reaction this created in many of them: that creeping sensation you get when you're sure you've just felt a wasp alight on your back.

He walked very deliberately and circuitously through the tunnels for nearly a half an hour before he came to one of three airlocks (chosen at random) that led to the partially excavated tunnels he needed to travel through next. When he was certain he was alone, he put on his spacesuit very deliberately and disappeared, taking a mop with him.

In some places he had to clamber over piles of rubble from old caves-ins and in two places had to clear away debris from new ones. In one last place he cleared away the debris, crawled most of the way into a smaller tunnel, and then carefully replaced the debris.

Everywhere he went, he patted the ground with the mop tips to erase any footprints he might have left behind.

When he was nearly six clicks away from Wargentín, inside a series of tunnels he'd carefully dug by himself over the years, the program ended and the world came back. He was standing in front of a large boulder. He moved the boulder away. Behind it was a deep cavity. He knelt down so he could see inside, and raised his flashlight. He knew exactly which stone he wanted. It was right—

It was gone.

So were all the others he'd dug out.

So were the many still embedded in their matrices.

And so was the vein of rock he'd scraped them from.

Thobo ran to his second source, a half a mile away.

That source, as well, had been completely cleaned out.

He turned around quickly, staring at the ground for footprints, but he found none but the ones he'd just left, that he hadn't bother-ed to wipe out with the mop. Maybe some-body else did! He examined the mop care-fully. There was nothing unusual about it. It was dirtier than it was usually, so it probably had recently been used—but at least, not for the purpose for which he'd just used it him-self.

He scanned around himself, but saw no-thing. He began to run back, through the narrow tunnels (where what he was doing, all crouched down, could hardly have been cal-led "running"), through the debris pile which again, he carefully replaced. A spot of color caught his eye then, a fleck of brown and black on the wall, a fleck of yellow? Wrong colors. Ocher or something, he said to himself and ran through the tunnels, back through the airlock, through the underground and Main Dome and Residential and finally into his flat.

The box of Cat Show ribbons and the banner were still on the table. He dumped the ribbons out. All the "lesser" marbles and dumbbells were there. He examined each one carefully; indeed, they were the ones he'd collected and chosen.

It dawned on him that in erasing his own tracks he was also erasing those of the thief.

'Maybe I ought to get a bloodhound...'

Now what good is a bloodhound in a spacesuit? Maki had once made an excellent tunnel-bloodhound, but that was without a spacesuit, and in a tunnel which had at least a tiny bit of air.

"May we come in?" came a voice from the doorway.

When Thobo turned around, Serai Yodo and the Twins trotted in through the hallway door.

Thobo watched them and said nothing.

The twins, cackling maniacally at each other, jumped up onto the kitchen counters and snapped at Thobo's spider plant. Serai Yodo leapt up onto the table and peered at the gems. Sahn stared Thobo right in the eyes.

Thobo stared back.

The twins started wrestling and wrestled themselves out onto the terrace. Serai shook the box. "I suppose you wouldn't just let me see it," sahn said.

Thobo stared back.

"I promise on my Luck that I will not take it from you, sharethe, as you are a friend of my friend. Won't you just allow me to admire it?"

Nothing. Nothing with a vengeance, as far as Serai could tell.

Serai hissed and hooted and leapt out the kitchen doors. Thobo locked the doors after sahn, and locked the hallway door too. Then he turned down all the lights and sat and thought.

## Chapter Seventeen.

### Things Get Worser Yet.

Serai joined the two other satamuri and all three headed into Main Dome for an evening of subversion. Serai seemed remarkably pensive. “Do you know,” sahn said after a while to Maki, “how those gemstones arise?”

Maki laughed.

“Well how do you suppose we could find out?”

“Who knows?” Maki said.

“We could have Soaru scan one of the obtainable stones and then we could synthesize others,” Nahi said.

Maki and Serai gagged in disapproval. They all sat down in the grass behind Shechem the Tailor’s.

“Why not get a stone and scan it and then just scan for similar material on the ground?” Maki said. “This whole crater is filled with lava from just one large eruption. Where there’s a lot of something in one place there’s bound to be a little everywhere.”

Serai Yodo huffed. “When I hear talk like that, I begin to believe that Kissim is right when sahn says we are getting soft. That’s so easy! I could have snatched up every stone in that place and walked off with them without him moving.”

Maki sneered. “So could any of us.”

Nahi beamed.

“That’s not what I mean!” Serai said. “I mean without any sneaking at all.”

“He didn’t snatch them away from your reach?” Maki said with eyes and ears wide.

“Absolutely not. He stood there practicing to be comatose. I was ready to swear Ael Rahin if he’d only let me admire the good one. But no response.”

“Not even a growl?”

“Not a word. Just stared. Tracked me as I moved, but just stared.”

Maki ruffled. “He hasn’t done a Grand Sulk in a long time!”

“He should talk to Brebi. All Brebi does anymore is sulk,” Nahi said.

“Brebi complains we are softening, and aren’t enough many-wise,” Serai added.

Maki laid out sahn’s ears. “Let’s not have this conversation again. You know, though, I wonder where Brebi is...” Maki’s fur stood all on end.

Nahi and Yodo hooted in concern.

“Thobo said nothing to you at all?”

“Absolutely.”

“He dove at you in the pool, and said ‘Where is it?’ It must be gone! Brebi thinks we’re getting soft... perhaps Brebi took it!”

Now everyone’s hair stood on end. “And Thobo thinks I took it,” Serai said. They all hooted and growled. “I’ll have no one accusing me of stealing anything I didn’t steal!”

The others screeched their approval.

“Of course,” Nahi said, “maybe Brebi doesn’t have it! Maybe Thobo just dropped it somewhere.”



“He’s pretty careful,” Maki said. “That would be extremely unlike him. Especially not something as coveted as that opal. Oy, there’s gonna be some great screaming and misery when folks around here find out that thing’s gone!”

“It’s that valuable?”

“Well, when Thobo had it on display when the Cat Show was announced, there was a lot of fighting between otherwise close friends as to who was going to win it.”

“Which means that maybe Brebi didn’t take it! Maybe one of those silly two-legs took it!” Nahi said.

“Also possible,” Maki admitted. “Hard to imagine, but possible.”

“You mean I could be blamed for some-thing some filthy, two-leg mammal did?!”

“Sad, but possible.”

“Outrageous, but possible! You know what this means!”

“Of course, it means we have to find out who stole it and steal it back!”

“Well,” Maki huffed, “that sounds either like keen fun or suicide.”

“Wonderful! Where do we start?”

“At the scene of the crime, of course,” Nahi said.

“Do we know exactly where that is?” Maki asked.

“We could ask,” Nahi said, ruffling sahn’s mane.

“Ask whom?”

“Oh.” They sat and stared at their toes.

“Maybe Dark Jon knows something,” Serai said suddenly.

“Knowing Dark Jon,” Maki said, “I’m amazed he managed to stay here this long. You know this place is full of cat hair.” They all stared at their toes some more.

Suddenly Maki jumped up, and ran off at a gallop.

The other satamuri ran off after sahn. “We’ll ask Ranger what he knows about this,” Maki said between bursts of echolocation. The three of them dove together into the Underground.

Once down in the tunnels, Maki attempted to find Ranger by locating his scent on the ground. Sahn ran back and forth, carrying sahn’s tail up and slashing to and fro, and nose almost on the ground, cackling and echoranging loudly and occasionally emitting hyaena-like yelps.

Nothing. Maki began to howl in frustration. The other satamuri followed suit, howling in encouragement.

And then a curious thing happened. All at once, because the echoes of their voices were so beautiful, and for other reasons only satamuri know, Maki sat down and just howled, in a very peculiar and satamuri-like way. The sound reverberated in the miles of corridors until it sounded as if it came from every-where. The other satamuri added their voices ... the sound was eerie and melodic... Someone appeared with a flute and played a slow, easy, seafaring tune.

And from all around other voices joined in; not in sarcasm or one-upmanship, but be-cause it seemed the right thing to do... and every voice sounded as if it belonged.

The music went on for an hour, and when it was over, the satamuri had completely forgotten why they were in the under-ground in the first place.

## Chapter Eighteen.

### A Talk With A Little Goon.

“It’s not true! Tell me it can’t be true and I’ll enjoy living again!” screamed Lillian Neeth, who had organized the Cat Show.

“Sorry,” said Thobo, who was hanging by his elbows from her terrace, “I guess you’ll just have to kill yourself. It’s gone. One of those big cats took it.”

“Well, hell, Thobo,” Lillian said, running her fingers through her hair in the same way one rubs them through barbed wire, “surely you can find it, I mean, really! We can’t have the show if we don’t have a really terrific prize, like I mean who in the world is going to admit they have a stupid cat if we don’t make it even worth their while a little anyway, and then you can turn around and on earth you can sell those things for your LIFE even!”

“Say again in English?”

“Oh you know what I mean! I have to have it back! Can’t you or Ranger or somebody get it back?”

“By tomorrow?!”

“By tomorrow. By now, by yesterday already! Who are you kidding?”

Thobo shook his head.

Lillian went completely hysterical, and Thobo lifted his elbows, fell to the street below (crushing a bed of marigolds and asparagus) and went on his way.

He put the conundrum out of his mind and taught his class as usual, but when it was over, everyone hounded him about the opal. No matter how earnestly he claimed he had no idea how to get it back, that excuse some-how wasn’t enough.

He made it back to his own flat only by racing madly through the tunnels, screaming like a maniac, when the Shift Change bells rang. It amazed him, he thought as he fed his cats, how Wargentines could stay calm, efficient and unruffled through meteor showers, cracks in the dome, crashes of experimental spacecraft—but something like this... or, heaven forbid, a blown fuse at the radio station or worst of all, a loss by the basketball team, sent them into uncontrollable panic. Many people attributed this effect simply to over-crowding, and Thobo was inclined to agree.

He turned on the terminal embedded in his kitchen table and leafed through his class file to see if any of his students had handed in their theses yet.

Nope, not a one.

Suddenly, and with rather a start, he remembered Little Krilla Milla and her clipboard. Her clipboard which carried real wood paper (*feh! Trayf!*) which could not be washed and reused but could be burnt away to hide all evidence of what had been written upon it.

And then he got a horrible idea.

He grabbed a couple of Eskimo Pies out of his freezer and headed for the Underground.

He figured he wouldn’t need to find out exactly where Little Krilla Milla lived. He seemed to be a magnet for her these days. And sure enough, it wasn’t long before she and her clipboard found him. He pretended to be fascinated by a readout on a wall meter and when she crept close enough, he walked toward her casually, staring, peripherally, at the paper. “Hi,” he said,

“Hi, Doc,” she said sweetly as she snatch-ed the clipboard to her breast. “Wacha doin’ down here?”

“Oh, I’ve got a proposition for you. Have an Eskimo Pie?”

“Sure!” Little Krilla Milla snatched up the goodie.

“I need a spy,” Thobo said as he unwrapped his own ice cream.

Little Krilla Milla beamed. “Why?”

“Well, a while ago, I had a little some-thing stolen from me and, naturally, I’d like to get it back. Now, the person who took the thing is a really decent thief and I’m sure is carefully watching me,” he leaned forward and grinned, “you know what I mean?”

Little Krilla Milla nodded rapidly.

“I figured you would,” Thobo said, leaning back against a wall. “So as long as we’re mutually understood, I thought maybe you wouldn’t mind helping me out here and shadowing Serai Yodo for me.”

“The one with no hair?”

“The very same.”

“So what do you want to know?”

“Where Serai Yodo put the opal so I can get it back. I, uh, I need it by tomorrow night.”

“An’ you don’t expect I’m gonna do you a favor just for an ice cream sandwich.”

Thobo grinned again. “You mean you wouldn’t do a favor for one of the professors who has to grade your thesis?”

Little Krilla Milla leaned forward with the same grin. “I may be an undergraduate but I’m as greedy as anyone else.”

Thobo shrugged and sighed. “What do you want?”

“An A?”

“Sorry, nothing academic.”

“Well ... can you arrange for me to get inside Fa Chen?”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what I want.”

“I’ll have to clear it with Chen before I can promise anything. And you’ll have to promise to keep your grubby little paws off everything!”

“I can arrange that. As soon as you get the OK, I’ll go to work.”

“Well, the best I can do is ask on your be-half. And besides, Chen seems to be occupied right now visiting some old school chums.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I guess it’s as close as I’m ever going to get. OK, I’ll buy that. Done!” she screamed and offered Thobo her hand. Thobo shook it without otherwise moving.

“Where do I find Serai Yodo?” she said.

“I don’t know,” Thobo mumbled. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

Little Krilla Milla burbled and danced all the way to her room.

When Thobo got back to his own flat (after

fighting through people with questions and annoyingness), he lay back on his hammock and replayed his peek at Little Krilla Milla’s notepad with the anticipation one normally finds in a deranged politician about to demand a recount.

The scrawls on the paper were fairly remarkably incomprehensible. He realized after quite a while that he could only match the patterns in about half of them.

‘It’s all Greek to me,’ sprung immediately to mind.

..... “a-HA!” He got up and ran to the kitchen table, and punched up the Greek alphabet.

But no matter how he compared and deformed and compared again, he could still only match about half the symbols.

Well.... a-HA again! He called up the Cyrillic alpha bet, and sure enough, almost all the characters (when properly mangled) matched.

It said, "*Goyorni smetna hofisku chenya.*" Now, what did that mean in Russian?

Something about "cream cheese."

In Bulgarian it made even less sense, and he actually had to pay to get into a data base to find that out. It wasn't very convincing Romanian, either.

After about half an hour, Thobo was forced to admit that the possibility that Little Krilla Milla would be taking notes on cream cheese was very small.

What he was left with in the end was the certainty that Little Krilla Milla flunked Penmanship; something he could hardly fault her for, as almost no one could read Thobo's handwriting either.

He wandered into his living room and flopped onto the couch. It was very disconcerting to spend the end of the day in any way other than in the company of close friends, reading aloud or agonizing or playing or just relaxing. It had been that way for many years. Now he had spent his evenings alone for half a week. Even Ranger, who was almost always free late in the day, had been busy, tracking gas leaks for a new section of Underground, and still seemed to be—although surely he must have done it at least twice by now.

Jon was holed up in his own starship, as he tended to be allergic to everything, and needed the time alone to detoxify.

.... wait a minute here.

Thobo sat up and stared at the wall.

Now you can't trust a senior, no matter what the reward, he thought.

So naturally you send the senior out for something but to be safe, you go and get it yourself anyway. Having them go get it for you just takes their mind off physically assaulting you for a while.

Pistachio ice cream had worked in the past, but just because it worked on one satamuri doesn't mean it would work on any other.

Threats of death and poor hygiene had also worked once, but while he figured he could cow one satamuri if he needed to, he had a feeling he shouldn't try three of them and their starship.

So what was left?

He sifted through seven years worth of information and came up with only one possibility: a challenge to HONOR.

The android grabbed his flight suit and stomped off to the spaceport.

To Be Continued...





# 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. Ok, 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”. Ok, 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? Ok, 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 caffein-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-Eights-and-Six (36<sub>8</sub>) Han-standard-years. The contract in question was for one-eight-fourth, four-eight-third, four-eight-squared (14400<sub>8</sub>) 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-eights and four (74<sub>8</sub>) nights after delivery date only one-in-five

of the bales had arrived, and a further one-in-one-eight-and-six (1/16<sub>8</sub>) 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-eights-and-six (36<sub>8</sub>) 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-eights-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-eights-four (74<sub>8</sub>) 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 interclan 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 useable 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 futureward 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’. Kanja 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.

*Ok, 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 8 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 her 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 if 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 – and just before the pod disconnected, a second set of doors closed, locking him in. *Ok, 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. *Ok, 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 a quick 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 machinegunned 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 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.*

**S.S. ELEGY - SHIP'S DISPATCH #2987****Origin:** Starlight Gallery, Deck Seven Forward**To:** All Passengers and Crew**Subject:** *Midsummer Vernissage*

The Starlight Gallery announces the opening of its *Midsummer Vernissage*, a one-night exhibition of works created en route from Theta Prime.

- **Highlights** include First Officer Malrin's series of *Vacuum Etchings*, rendered by holding brass plates against the ship's outer hull during micrometeor showers.
- Passenger Lilienne Dorr's *Kinetic Orchid Sculptures* have been mounted in zero-gravity frames; attendants advise not to inhale too closely.
- The captain has contributed a single piece: an untitled study in oil and engine lubricant, depicting "The Way Home" — or possibly "The Mess Hall After a Storm."

Art lovers are reminded that last season's *Living Fresco* in the forward lounge is still growing, and may now ask you for small change or snacks.

Dress is formal, but paint-spattered coveralls will be permitted for working artists. Wine service begins at ship's dusk; expect a short lecture by Chief Engineer Ralth on "Why Sculpture Belongs in the Engine Room."

Signed,

—Purser Halm, for the Starlight Gallery

# The Adventures of the USS *Trouble*

## Season 2, Episode 5: Trouble Indemnity

**1 INTERIOR, a generic stateroom in a superfast shuttle.**

**1**

ALEXANDER MAYELL is talking to his father, RICHARD MAYELL, on who is appearing as a very distorted hologram. A. Mayell's aide, Huong Ng, is standing by, looking extremely uncomfortable. R. MAYELL looks annoyed, disappointed, and determined, all at once. A. Mayell is standing at attention, ready to listen to, and agree with, everything his father says.

R. MAYELL

No matter what that woman says, the creature "George" is almost certainly still on that ship, somewhere. I know her. I know what she's like.

A. MAYELL

Yes, Sir, so you've told me many times.



R. MAYELL

(Apparently not having heard his son speak)  
Prepare to take your people and thoroughly-  
THOROUGHLY--inspect that ship. I want detailed  
accounts of the entire thing, AND its crew. If she  
gives you any pushback, any at all, you are to go to  
Admiral Swanson and demand that the captain's orders  
be countermanded. Actually, I think I'll speak to  
her myself about this.  
And your image is distorted, son.

A. MAYELL

Yours is as well, Sir. Must be interference from  
the nebula between us.

R. MAYELL

Damn all nebulas! Hazards to navigation and security  
every damn one of them.

A. MAYELL

Yes, sir. Damn all nebulae.  
(Wanting to say something else but changing his  
mind)  
As for the other matter, Sir, surely ... Yes, Sir.  
Understood.

R. MAYELL

Do not disappoint me.

A. MAYELL

I won't, Sir.

R. MAYELL

See that you don't. I would hate to bring you to the  
attention of your mother.

The hologram sputters and goes blank. A. MAYELL turns about and sits at a  
desk. He has a rather supercilious expression. He opens a small tablet.

A. MAYELL

Lt. Alexander Mayell's personal log, 2505.25.  
Father has just given me my orders. I am to  
thoroughly inspect the USS Trouble and report back  
on any irregularities I might find therein. And also  
see if the creature "George" is still on board,  
which somehow I doubt but I daren't say so.  
I have given myself an additional order. There is a  
persistent rumor in my family that there is some  
enmity between Father and Captain Shimbo, dating all  
the way back to some incident in fourth grade, about  
which nobody in the family is willing to speak. By  
the grace of St. Constantine, I am determined to  
find out what that incident was, as it certainly  
must be incredibly damning if both of these people

have been nurturing it for sixty years...

(to Ng)

Oh, by the way, you may notice that the captain often refers to me as "Rimmer." I have no idea why and I'm pretty sure I don't even want to know why. So if she does it, just know she means me, and ignore it.

NG

I will make a note of that, Sir.

NG watches as MAYELL disappears into an adjoining room. He considers, his expression become increasingly curious.

FADE

## 2 Interior, Captain's Quarters.

2

CAPTAIN, DORCAS and ADMIRAL SWANSON are standing around in the Captain's bedroom. CAPTAIN is trying—and failing—to arrange her hair nicely. She is wearing her dress uniform jacket. DORCAS is preening her feathers. SWANSON is drinking tea.

ADMIRAL

Have you met Alexander Mayell before?

CAPTAIN

Yeah, first when he was fourteen or so. And several times since then. Only briefly but that was enough. Scrawny little kid with what they used to call "helicopter parents." Also five, count 'em five, helicopter big brothers. That had to be rough.

ADMIRAL

What was Mrs. Mayell like?

CAPTAIN

(Shrugging)

Doting, in a, "Come back with your shield, or on it" kind of way. A very typical Constantinian master of realpolitik.

CAPTAIN turns to DORCAS and makes a bizarre kind of strangling whistle. DORCAS looks up and blinks several times.

DORCAS

What you said?

CAPTAIN makes (what she thinks is) the same whistle.



DORCAS

No, no, no. Is completely wrong. First you say,  
 "Stomach is crumpled feel wrong," THEN you say,  
 "Chest is fuzzy, is empty." What wrong with you?

CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL look at each other and shrug.

DORCAS drops an overly preened feather on the floor, and makes a slightly clearer version of the CAPTAIN's whistle.

DORCAS

That mean, "On stomach, feel wrong."

DORCAS makes another whistle that sounds almost exactly the same.

DORCAS

That mean, "Over stomach, feel bad." Really. Like  
 you much, but you are exhausting.

ADMIRAL

(Pointing)

Are you going do anything special with that feather?

DORCAS

No. Is no good. Can probably sell to crew.

ADMIRAL

It's beautiful.

DORCAS leans down, picks up the feather, and hands it to the ADMIRAL.

DORCAS

Trag es in gesunterheit.

ADMIRAL

(taking the feather)

Thank you, I'll cherish it.

DORCAS whistles.

CAPTAIN

That means, "It's nothing."

DORCAS

(huffily)

No it doesn't.

CAPTAIN

(Looking in the mirror)

How do I look?

DORCAS

Ridiculous. Go naked. See if I care.

CAPTAIN

No, would just scare them to death.

All three leave.

*Tune in next issue for the **next thrilling episode!***

[WIRELESS DISPATCH | S.S. ELEGY | AT SEA AMONG THE STARS]

To: Shore Chronicle Archive - Priority: Routine, with poetic inflection

From: Purser-in-Charge, Deck Seven Lounge

**STOP** PASSENGER KNOWN ONLY AS "THE PROFESSOR" REPORTS LOSS OF  
EXPERIMENTAL LUGGAGE CONTAINING SMALL COSMIC WEATHER FRONT **STOP** LOCAL  
BAROMETERS EXPERIENCING *UNSEASONAL LIGHTNING* INSIDE CARD ROOM **STOP**  
CHIEF ENGINEER RECOMMENDS MOVING BRIDGE TO STARBOARD WINDOW UNTIL  
STATIC CLEARS **STOP**

DINNER TONIGHT TO FEATURE *TIDAL SOUP* SERVED IN ACCORDANCE WITH OCEAN-  
CURRENT TABLES — PASSENGERS REQUEST TO BRING THEIR OWN COMPASSES  
DENIED **STOP** CAPTAIN CONFIDENT COURSE REMAINS TRUE DESPITE NAVIGATION  
NEEDLE SPINNING LIKE A DERVISH **STOP**

CARGO BAY REPORTS UNSCHEDULED VISIT FROM CREATURE RESEMBLING CROSS  
BETWEEN CORMORANT AND ARMCHAIR **STOP** CREATURE FOUND NESTING IN CRATE  
MARKED "MILDLY IMPORTANT" — STATUS OF CONTENTS CLASSIFIED UNTIL WE  
KNOW WHICH END BITES **STOP**

WE CONTINUE ONWARD — WEATHER INSIDE SHIP VARIABLE, OUTSIDE CLEAR AND  
SPARKLING WITH UNRELIABLE CONSTELLATIONS **STOP**

— *Filed with mild alarm and a dab of butter-fingered optimism* **STOP**