

A Gentle Stroll

August 2025 — Issue Three



Dangerous Doors
by Tiffanie Gray

Collation File

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Please email PDFs of your zines to the collator, George Phillies, phillies@4liberty.net, by the first day of the month. Collation and distribution will occur soon thereafter.

Our experiment: After this first issue, A Gentle Stroll subscriptions are opt-in, not opt-out. After this first issue, you must ask to be subscribed to A Gentle Stroll, though the zine will also appear on the N3F web pages, with a rare issue mailed to all members.

General rules: Publication is monthly. Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Discussions of contemporary politics and graphic pornography will be rejected. Recall that A Gentle Stroll will appear with our other zines on our web pages, so matters you would not want seen by the public should go elsewhere. You retain all rights to your material, except that the N3F may use your submissions in this magazine, which may be distributed to subscribers and/or N3F members, and will be placed on our web site or other electronic archives.

Subscriptions: For the first six issues, A Gentle Stroll is free. After that, unless we end the project, contributors will be charged \$6 per year and be recognized as voting members of N3F (there is no obligation to vote or participate in other N3F activities). Readers are charged nothing. Contributors and readers have to opt-in to receive A Gentle Stroll. Contributors and readers also get to choose: (1) Receive only A Gentle Stroll and a rare issue of our other zines, or (2) Receive all N3F fanzines.

Editorials and Letters

We welcome new contributors N. C. Shapero and G. S. Cole, in a zine *The Fox's Den*, with an SF-inclined tale involving foxlike sapients. As the submission is quite long, it appears toward the rear of the issue.

We are asked about ordering of pages. What is the order? Cover, Collation List, and any Letters to the Editor are in front. New contributors are forward. My zine is at the extreme rear. Longer zines go more to the back than shorter zines.

I am asked about reuse of material between here and E&A. I have no problem with the possibility. I encourage the thought that your comments should correspond to the APA in which you are writing. We have in N'APA a writer who submits his NAPA zine and also his zine that only appears in another APA, complete with comments to people I do not know about zines I have never seen because they only appear in his other APA.

...Phillies, Editor

Editor:

Comments on a Gentle Stroll # 1 A Boat to the Golden Isle (Tiffany Gray)

Can Ms. Gray or our collator tell us anything about the artwork?

Zooming in, I think that it is not originally a digital work. Colored pencil or pastels, maybe? The golden leaves drifting from the central tree are a nice touch. Why is no one in the boat?

Tiffany Gray responds:

Editor:

I would be happy to talk about the artwork!

It is fully digitally painted, nothing but a blank canvas beneath, and it was actually painted live for a tutorial on advanced painting techniques using the software "PD Howler". (It was also recorded for a tutorial (Advanced Wilderness Painting Techniques).

I love PD Howler because you can mimic so many natural painting techniques with it. I taught myself digital painting by following Bob Ross videos on YouTube and then expanding it to my own ideas.

Golden trees figure prominently in folklore and fantasy, especially giant ones, so I decided to add that in. As for the boat, the participants in the zoom webinar wanted a boat, and I didn't have time for putting people in it (limited to 2 hours for the whole discussion and painting!) But, thought that it made a nice symbology, with everything else green around it, that the boat was empty and the golden leaves were flying off (dying).

Random Hopscotch #2

For AGS #3

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With nine or ten days between the Ever and Anon (or as I like to write it, Evernon) deadline and the AGS deadline, I find myself with a bit of conundrum—that being, how much (if anything) to recycle between the two APAe, given that AGS's contributors, at least in the second issue (not as much for the first issue, but we'll see how things look next week) are mostly a subset of E&A's contributor list, and one can expect the active readers are something similar.

So, then, how much to recycle between zines? I recycles quite a lot of my zine from AGS to my first Evernon zine, since I was running short on time and frankly, it was good stuff.

But given that both APAe are freely available online, I can't find it in me to do this constantly, so instead you're going to get stuff written in haste (but hopefully not regret).

The end of July has, for me, brought an almost-conclusion to the latest chapter of the highest stakes LARP I play—that being, of course, the World Science Fiction Business Meeting (online edition); a [this year] ~150 person parliamentary session in which we collectively decide how, and if, we're going to change the rules by which Worldcon governs itself and structures the Hugo awards (including how we're going to change the rules for the meeting itself). One more meeting remains—a few items of business held over from the online sessions, and one of the more fraught issues is that many of the "players" from the online sessions can't make it—it's an in person session (which is usual; the con bent the usual rules to have 4 pre-con online sessions instead of 4 at-con sessions). So regardless of what happens, I expect it to be exciting.

We've also started (in addition to other games that Lisa and I have talked about before) two Gumshoe games: One Swords of the Serpentine game to playtest an adventure series, and one Trail of Cthulhu game to playtest Boundary of Darkness, some adventures set in the "Friends of Blues" milieu, where PCs belong to a late medieval (or is it renaissance? Maybe it depends on which academic discipline you study) English secret/magical society. Lisa's running both, and in the first I'm alternating between playing the character I played in our Ragamuffins playtest and didn't create—Vittoria, young seer of the church of Bennari who sneaks out to hang with her gutter-snipe friends/gang, and my "adult" character, scholar/detective Hyacinth Contator, a sorcerer who alternates between teaching classes (mostly off session) and trying to solve crimes or mysteries. Oh, and summoning the dead/the past. She's another of my characters who reads as surprisingly innocent; she's not clueless, exactly, but so far I enjoy her having a very, um, straightforward way of seeing the world while being quite smart.

In Boundary of Darkness, I'm playing Christopher/Caroline, a maidservant who disguised herself as a man and went to war, eventually achieving a captaincy; thus she switches

back and forth between her low status female persona and her high-status military male one. It's a lot of fun, but it also involved me researching the English military in the period, where I determined to my discomfort that while rising from enlisted to commissioned rank was not unheard of, the rules meant that almost all commissions (above a certain rank and below general, anyway) were bought, not earned, as "anti-corruption" laws required that officers had to pay for a large amount of their expenses and the money for that had to come from somewhere. So I had to come up with some way my army boy managed to make enough money as enlisted soldier to be able to buy a commission when he was otherwise qualified for it but most certainly came from humble background, and it's probably not pretty (it...probably involves corruption. But how else is a worthy soldier to rise in the ranks?).

In Julian's Spelljammer game (one of the three Thursday D&D games I play, and one that I'll be logging onto in a minute since it's 6pm 2025/7/31 EDT Thursday as I write this), an amusing thing that happened last session was that, as my PC had summoned (and made a deal with) a representative of their warlock patron, the Great Weapons, the messenger arrived with an *armload* of packages for my PC to deliver to their intended recipients. As time allowed; they had not, in fact, ever made a deal to actually deliver anything (the deal was that a different PC would forge a great weapon at some point in the near future). But two off the recipients are likely people the PCs know.

And as for the rest, well, it's a really fun mystery list and while I have no idea how and whether this development will work, it's certainly a gutsy move on the GM's part, putting in a clue trail of NPCs that he's now expected to have the PCs running into at...some point later in the campaign. As to whether Peshi (the PC in question) will deliver the objects as assumed, well...it seems unlikely they'll use the objects, these almost certainly being a Bad Idea to use if you're not the intended wielder. But...maybe? Peshi has a whole memento mori aspect to them, so while the Great Weapons aren't their primary patrons, it should be pretty easy to maneuver them into situations where they think handing off one or another object is the right thing to do.

For your amusement, the list (we only have a clue about the first two) is:

- Drenna, clanless - A metal hand ornament, in the orcish style
- The one who speaks not - a plain dagger
- Agorash of Shandu - What appears to be a slightly curved single-edged sword, but made of hard wood
- Baron Dav Res - a spiked ball on a long (10 foot) chain
- Orgathangul (Name sounds sort of like it's being said underwater) - a shortsword with a hooked tip

- Captain Mathelir - elven styled shortsword

What do these mean? Frankly I have no idea. Well, except for the first two; we actually know Drenna and we've met a warlock of the Great Weapons (which is to say a Hexblade) who doesn't talk.

In other news, I've finally finished reading the comic book *DIE* (I started reading it a few years ago and stopped after I lost

the second book before I started it, and hadn't gotten around to starting again). I'm *also* continuing to read Ada Palmer's *Inventing the Renaissance*. Both have RPG applications—in one case, it's a horror (ish) story about another world inextricably connected to roleplaying games. In the other, well, Ada's insight on the manner of history has informed better game worlds, but also her details of specific lives and how they interact is enough to change anyone's idea of how a RPG relationship web can be built.

Comments on A Gentle Stroll, issue 2

Cover: I appreciate the impressionistic cover this time; it fits the "gentle stroll" title (and in fact has that title rather than some other title), an also having an impressionist title gives the APA a really different feel that fits the relaxed idea that the title connotes.

Gabriel Roark: indeed, so far, Ever and Anon's second issue has volumes close to that of A&E's at its height (well, at its height it had zines that would be carried over into the next issue because it ran out of space, but that was before my time). Added to this APA and there's quite a lot more RPG APA traffic before A&E's unfortunate demise than before. I think a lot of that can be down to novelty/excitement (and several months in which there was no outlet for our meandering writing), but some might be due to the free online format? Or people reacting to the possibility of something they liked in theory being taken away? Looking forwards to how it develops, in any case; some news is absolutely bad news but this should be interesting regardless of what happens.

I didn't write in my first issue how I got into RPGs, so I suppose I can mention it now:

In elementary school (I think 6th grade but it could have been fifth), one of my obligatory "two friends" introduced "D&D play"—which didn't really resemble D&D, but did involve the possibility of casting magic missile or fireball without any other play elements of roleplaying games or even dungeon crawlers; just play pretend with D&D elements. But I was intrigued, and got my hands on the basic D&D box (I think this involved my first visit to the Complete Strategist) and later, the AD&D Player's Handbook and DMG.

As a socially backwards kid with no D&D experience, though, I felt, however, entirely unprepared to *run* a game, and was unable to collect or join a playgroup throughout elementary school and junior high school, so my D&D "play" involved solo rolling up characters and dungeons (without any intent to *run* the latter).

I finally got to *play* D&D in high school, and the first game I remember, with upper class students, involved the game I mentioned here where we started off at high level (3rd tier—around 11th level I think), and my illusionist managed to conserve spells so well that he barely did *anything* for a half dozen sessions in which the characters met a new PC, a gnome thief-type who didn't detect evil and so was invited into the party, taking up the rear.

Then, as the party approached the coffin where the vampire boss of the castle lay, the evil deep gnome assassin (deep gnomes apparently had unreadable alignments) who had infiltrated the party assassinated my PC and the other PC magic user as the fight started.

After the expected TPK, the DM ran a few sessions with the same PCs being brought back to life in Ravenloft, but by that time the magic was gone and I moved on to other games and other groups—with a well earned lesson that as much as magic users regaining spells is annoying, it's much better to have messed about, burnt some resources, and done things in a game than not to have done them, even if it doesn't work out.

Re myself: After I sent in my contribution, George emailed

me to say there was an error with my zine—a line of what was *obviously* intended to be the first page of my zine had spilled over onto the second page.

Of course, I had no notion of pages; I write my zine in text and if it ends up formatting awkwardly I tend to leave it as it lies (in fact, my flow with Lee brooked no alternative since I was submitting via text/html and had no idea how it would lay out until Lee told me). With this APA and Ever and Anon, I suppose I have an option to muck around a bit (in fact, I did with my last Evernon zine, throwing a picture into it of the Unisphere (and a guest for scale, anonymized), mostly because I had some extra space and it made the formatting look a little nicer). But we'll see; it involves planning and not doing everything at the last minute.

Jim Eckman: Re the word Rhodomontalulous: While my search, misspelled, didn't turn up much, the Gemini response was useful, mentioning that a similar word, "rodomontade", refers to excessive boasting and derives from Orlando Furioso in Italian.

Re PBEM as fiction (and Jim's extended multiple GM, one player experiment): I mean, there's also fiction with a half dozen protagonists (like Game of Kings). My read is that a roleplaying game isn't a novel, even a play by email one, so you want a structure that will work with the participants you have to produce an interesting narrative, rather than try to match a particular external structure—but also, that every non-dangerous experiment is worth doing at least once.

Jim Vassilokos: FWIW, different topic, but Lisa's, my, and another player's attempt at a letter game worked really well for a while, but ended up going off into the weeds as we groped towards a conclusion. We should finish it some day; we've got a few ideas (finally) of how we might do that. The letter game, which is harder to find rules for now than it was formerly (it used to have a Wikipedia page, apparently) is a form of freeform letter larp in which two or more writers create an epistolary story collaboratively, by writing letters from fictional characters to one another and improvise the story as they go; in a very "pure" form the entire story/plot happens within those letters, but of course in practice there will be some side chatter if you want the result to be satisfying (in our case, we did a bit of discussion to talk about exactly *what* the medium for discussion would be [a magical Usenet] and until late in the game, most of our play was done without prior discussion. Of course, in TTRPG terms, a letter game is a strange beast; each player is their own GM by definition, with the main medium of collaboration being "yes anding" one another's world creation, but of course characters will migrate from one player's sphere of influence to another, even including PCs.

George Philies: I think your zine had a second part of No Tears for a Princess? Intriguing. how long is the entire piece?

It's interesting that both you and Jim are choosing to put your zines at the end of the APA. With E&A, I assume the choice is a continuation of the inversion in the title, but I'm not sure of your reasons—other than possibly not wanting to begin the conversation each month like Lee did?

Ronin Engineer for A Gentle Stroll #3

by Jim Eckman,
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Thoughts on Space Travel

I guess there is the ‘no travel’ option for those who love zombies and dystopias and ‘slow travel’ for those who love the idea of generation ships. *The Stars Are Legion* by Kameron Hurley, has some new ideas on this hoary trope.

For those of us who like bopping around the universe you can have small ships like the Locator 9-Bs from Vance’s *Star Princes* series that anyone can use and are inexpensive or at the other extreme starships are complicated and so expensive. Only large governments have them. I fall somewhere in the middle. My campaigns usually featured a recovered small freighter that the players fix up or something of the like. They tended to have higher tech parts that made them superior to other ships in exchange for always having to search for spares.

Next is what are all these ships doing? Is trade practical? Is it all small volume, valuable items or are there bulk freighters carrying grains to feed ‘City’ worlds ala Asimov’s *Foundation* series. I prefer few and small.

What about space combat? I hate it, one bad roll can trash an entire party, the only exception would be single occupant fighters. That lets the idiots die gloriously and the wiser live to fight another day. *Shades of Battlestar Galactica!*

Fueling and servicing the beasties, depending on costs, can be easy, or a financial or logistical nightmare. As I don’t use much money in my campaigns, I tend to make spares hard to locate and repair depots small and specialized while fuel is close to free. This makes for an occasional fix the ship adventure.

How do you fly? Are you a Newtonian craft, like Traveller, that you apply thrust vectors to or do you ‘drive’ through space, just pointing the ship in the direction you want to go? Other fun variants, solar sails, shot from a catapult, etc.

How do you handle FTL travel? Keep on trucking like *Star Trek* or jump points, or jump paths? Or galactic trains and other oddities? Limiting the number of destinations can make the GM’s job a bit easier.

How have you handled this?

Reactions to Issue #2

Gabriel Roark: Balboa Game Company’s prozine was called The Spartan. Tim Finkas and I were friends for many years along with some of the Caltech folk.

Several have asked why no EPT? #1 It’s the game that never quite made it. There have been a few hard cores that have run campaigns but mostly its one shots. #2 The Tekumel Foundation’s policy towards non-profit fan work changes on a regular basis and I don’t want to work on something that I can’t publish. #3 Barker’s legacy.

George Phillies: Balboa Game Company was a distributor that sold to dealers and employees :) It called its co-located retail outlet The War House. There was only one location for both, a converted house on Willow in Long Beach. Dunnigan (SPI), Gygax and others were flabbergasted how much product was moved thru this tiny building.

I’ve never read any of Jon Peterson’s books, so no. Which book is it in?

We toyed with En Garde a bit, it was fun.



Figure 1: Strange Artifacts by Jim Eckman

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 I-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 times.

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"*

To 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 *col-lective* 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 tan coat and golden-yellow eyes. She looked at Tal-Larn Takao do Isvan, then down at that one's drink, then looked up again. "A little bit early for that, isn't it?" she asked.

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

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

"You've done something that's wrong?" Richard/T'T'Po asked.

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

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

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

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

"I share cubic with someone..." Richard/T'T'Po began.

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

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

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

I can see that this one is going to be loads of fun, Richard/T'T'Po thought. *But it may just be turnabout. The*

gender roles are somewhat reversed, he thought, carefully keeping it within the three walls he'd managed to build.

Home is the Hunter

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adjudicator-5: Larn-Tyel Chen do Tsvo (f)
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 (36₈) Han-standard-years. The contract in question was for one-eight-fourth, four-eight-third, four-eight-squared (14400₈) bales of stage-three dunlap "of medium fibrosity". The price was at market value date-of-sale with shipping instructions and liability assignments ~~as was~~ standard both in the trade and their custom. Both knew ~~that~~ interclan feud was a possible risk at the time of their contracting. Unlike others in identical circumstances use of third-party brokers (with the slightly higher costs involved) was not part of their regular trade. In fact, no less than three times previous brief feuds had been virtually ignored by these two; trading was slowed and delivery delayed (often for security purposes, never justified) but sure. No haste was necessary in the transactions. Tal-Ika Rau do Asao, though, in the case at point began to concern herself with possible breach after deliveries had been slowed more than was normal in past trading. Seven-eights and four (74₈) nights after delivery date only one-in-five of the bales had arrived, and a further one-in-one-eight-and-six (1/16₈) were in custody of clan Asao custody (customs). She contacted Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar and requested assurances that the rest would be delivered; Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar reminded her of the normal rules – that an inter-clan feud could justify a breach of contract, each person to recover loss from their clan – but promised delivery. Three-eights-and-six (36₈) nights later, only another one-part-in-eight had entered clan Asao control. Tal-Ika Rau do Asao declared the contract void at that time, two nights after the inter-clan feud had ended, claiming non-delivery was the breach to justify it on. Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar denies any breach on her part, showing her efforts on her part to expedite delivery during the inter-clan feud were made and assurance to Tal-Ika Rau do Asao that their individual contract would be honored.

Decision: For Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar,

Tal-Ika Rau do Asao to bear costs.

Grounds: (The decision having been 2-1)

The question here is whether Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar was in breach at the time Tal-Ika Rau do Asao denied the contract. Had she been, Tal-Ika Rau do Asao would have merely ratified a state already existing. In ordinary times, non-delivery eight-squared-three-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 (74₈) nights after the fact. To break after the feud was over, Tal-Ika Rau do Asao must show that there was a breach, or bear the brunt herself. The contract was valid at the time, she had been assured of that, and so she must take the loss.

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

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

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

"That knowledge can be inferred from their intervening conversation when Shen-Ika Tau do Vakar reminded Tal Ika Rau do Asao that 'an 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 one part in twenty 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 irri-

tant – 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 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

Adjudicator-5: Larn-Ika Shen do Tsvo (f)

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 sidlined 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 members...!” She

screached 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 an 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.*

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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 Ish-rikanaiva 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 disassemble 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* – sixteen *kir*, or 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 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.*

1PMG PBEM

(One Player, Multiple Gamemasters, Play-by-Email)

How to Get Started, Part 2

Jim Vassilakos

Last month I discussed the first four steps of how to begin running a single-player/multi-gamemaster play-by-email campaign, so this month we'll start with...

Step 5: Choose an RPG Framework

In order to participate in a society, it's generally necessary to assume a role in one or more social frameworks, and each of these frameworks has its own structure, which includes various roles, each with its own rights and responsibilities. For example, the framework of family may include a mother and father acting as co-heads of household along with children who are granted rights and assigned responsibilities by the parents. The framework of work may include a boss, a layer of middle managers, and regular workers, each person's rights and responsibilities specified by contract and law.

RPGs also have frameworks, the most common being the traditional framework composed of multiple players and one gamemaster (MP1G). There's also the single-player campaign, also known as a duet, which is composed of one player and one gamemaster (1P1G). In my opinion, there are systemic problems with each of these frameworks.

Under MP1G as it's been commonly practiced for the last few decades, it's generally hard for a single player to contribute to the story in such a way that the plot is dramatically altered. Granted, old-school adventures which, at least in the early years of RPGs, focused on presenting a place (sandbox) or a situation (scenario) rather than a plot, allowed more freedom, but even then, the GM was likely to put up roadblocks to prevent the PCs from wandering off the map. The reason is that GM improvisation can be great or it can suck.

It just depends on the imaginative interplay between the players and gamemaster, how well they gel, but for the gamemaster, GMing by improvisation can sort of feel like one is performing trapeze without a net. There's no adventure there, no guidebook on what happens next.

I've read numerous accounts in *Alarums & Excursions* and online about "problem players," and I've even written on this topic¹, and I've come to the opinion that much of the time, these problem players, particularly the ones whose characters act against the interests of the party or at least without their general approval, are doing so in order to make a meaningful impact on the story. They're usually bored with whatever plot the GM is serving up, and so they almost instinctively try to make up one of their own, using their character to drive forward whatever idea they have in their mind. In a way, it's a test of the GM's flexibility and imagination.

Likewise, there are hilarious stories, presumably fictional, in *Knights of the Dinner Table*², which showcase a group of players frequently taking a wrecking ball to the plans of their frustrated GM. So this one problem, lack of player freedom, and the resulting frustrations on the part of GMs over unforeseen player actions is commonplace to the point of being mockable.

Now, there are some ways to deal with this problem within the MP1G framework. A wise woman and long-time gamer once told me that when a GM notices a problem player of this type, one possible solution is to make the person "an adversarial player and (have) him play characters

¹ See my articles in *Alarums & Excursions* #305, #307, & #308 at <https://mega.nz/folder/hGYliCKK#a0fr1dDhy3no6Ey5xNPukQ>

² <https://kenzerco.com/knights-of-the-dinner-table/>

opposed to the party,”³ i.e. playing the monsters. However, while I’ve done this from time to time, I never made it a regular thing, as I didn’t have as big a problem with this variety of player as other GMs because I ran a sort of laissez-faire campaign, where if someone wanted to venture off the map, I’d usually follow them, leaving the other players to decide whether or not to do likewise.

In some cases, the party would split up. This happened in the Star Trek PBEM I ran back in the 1990s.⁴ It’s not that I didn’t care that two of the players were fighting. I just put player freedom high up on my list of priorities and decided to let the cards fall where they may. Strong-willed players, I came to realize, were a sort of treasure. Usually proactive and comfortable with risk-taking, they could make great players for single-player campaigns.

Before discussing the problems of the 1P1G framework, however, it’s worth bringing up another problem with using the traditional MP1G framework in a PBEM. The problem is that there are usually too many narrative perspectives in a MP1G PBEM to allow the PBEM to be novelized into a cohesive narrative. Now, granted, trying to “novelize” roleplaying is an iffy undertaking in the best of circumstances. It’s so difficult to do well that few even attempt it. But if you’ve ever done it, you will likely notice this problem of head-hopping⁵ right away, as under the MP1G framework, it is quite intractable, whereas in single-player campaigns, it’s simply not an issue... unless, of course, the protagonist turns out to be highly telepathic. But rather than get into that can of worms, let’s move on to these aforementioned single-player campaigns.

I used to think 1P1G was the best way to go, that it made for the most cohesive narratives, that it was less difficult to organize from a purely logistical standpoint, that it had none of the above-mentioned problems, and, to be honest, I’m

still not entirely sure I was wrong. But I’ve GMed 1P1G campaigns for long enough now that I’ve noticed there are some downsides.

The first and most obvious is that there’s no group camaraderie. One of the joys of roleplaying under the traditional (MP1G) framework is that moment when the players turn to each other and start bouncing around ideas, and the GM can just sit back and watch them analyze the situation and determine what to do. With a well-functioning group of players who actually like each other, this is a wonderful thing to behold. Even as a player, it’s fun to engage with the other players and bat around ideas, especially when everyone is hamming it up in-character. Even if the party votes your idea down, it’s still fun, and it can be somewhat funny to watch, particularly when there are multiple players doing various accents or weird voices. An outsider who walks in might be a bit discombobulated by the whole spectacle.

Likewise, under 1P1G, there are no inter-PC subplots, because there’s only one PC. There can still be inter-character subplots, but inter-PC subplots are often more interesting, because everyone knows these are two player-characters, so whatever transpires is likely to have long-term ramifications for the campaign.

Also, 1P1G campaigns are more difficult to steer for the GM, because it’s paradoxically easier for the GM to herd a group of players than a single player. With a group of players, the tendency is for everyone to stay together, so everyone has to agree about where to go, and getting to agreement often takes time, which gives the GM time to think. However, in a single-player campaign, the one player acts alone and can therefore do nearly anything, taking the campaign in any direction they want to go on the spur of the moment, and the GM is required to respond quickly, at least in face-to-face play, and because of this, there’s a propensity for the GM to make mistakes that may end up getting embedded into the story’s plot, and these may be difficult to later correct. Even in single-player PBEMs, where the GM has plenty of time to think, GMs still make mistakes. I can attest to that.

So I thought about all these problems endemic

³ I’m quoting Lee Gold’s comment to me in *Alarums & Excursions* #306.

⁴ See Turn #46 in the zipfile at <https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/trek.html>

⁵ <https://darlingaxe.com/blogs/news/head-hopping>

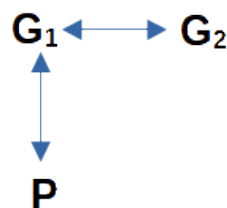
to the MP1G and 1P1G frameworks, which everyone has been using since the dawn of roleplaying. Of course, I've heard of the occasional MP2G campaign, which is an example of an MPMG campaign, and I vaguely remember participating in one, albeit only once. It struck me as being very much akin to MP1G, except the two gamemasters were struggling not to get their wires crossed by contradicting one another. I was a player, and all I can remember is that I was unimpressed. One could argue that MUDs/MUSHs with multiple administrators are also MPMG campaigns, but they're so scripted/automated that I don't really see them as RPGs. I'm not saying that they couldn't evolve into being very RPG-like. With the advent of AI, I'm sure all sorts of things are possible, but at present it's obvious to me that there's one framework we collectively forgot to explore, and that's 1PMG.

Why do I think 1PMG is worth exploring? Well, because of all the problems inherent to the other frameworks. We know these problems exist, because we've all experienced them to some degree. Now, not all gamers are going to care. The people who just want to hack away at monsters may not care that much that they're on a heavily-scripted adventure. Indeed, like the players in *DM of the Rings*⁶, their eyes may glaze over as soon as the GM starts ruminating about the backstory. But there are also those players who do care about the story. They're not just there trying to get their next skill point or experience level.

People roleplay for different reasons, and a lot has been written on this. For some people, it's primarily social. For others it's intellectual. For others, it's about the story more than the tactical or logical challenges. For some, I believe, it's about that fleeting sense of wonder and immersion that roleplaying can provoke. Ron Edwards has famously argued that people come to RPGs from either a gamist, narrativist, or simulationist perspective.⁷ And, of course, as previously stated, there are those who just want to

advance their character's power level to deific proportions. Bear in mind, many gamers inhabit more than one of these categories.

In any case, with such a plethora of player-types and motivations, my guess is that some people might be attracted to the 1PMG framework (the narrativists, most likely), and others (the gamists, perhaps) may have the opposite reaction. I don't know how to analyze this question without running actual campaigns, and since I've only run one 1PMG campaign, all I have to offer at this point is speculation. So nearly everything I'm about to regurgitate regarding establishing an RPG Framework is just a bunch of brainfarts. This stuff needs to get tested to see if 1PMG is a workable framework, and if so, to determine its strengths and weaknesses under different configurations. Having made this necessary if long-winded disclaimer, I'll begin discussing some of the alternatives.



First of all, there's the 1P2G variant where the second gamemaster (G₂) acts as an assistant to the primary gamemaster (G₁). The Player (P) interfaces mainly with the primary gamemaster, while the assistant gamemaster takes a mostly background role. This is the simplest framework to implement. It is almost the same as the 1P1G framework, which has been tried and tested fairly well. The introduction of the assistant GM eases some of the primary GM's workload, hopefully reducing the odds of GM burnout.

When I advertised on the Traveller Mailing List that I wanted to start an experimental PBEM, I was really looking for a co-GM, but Timothy, the only person who volunteered, told me that due to his struggles with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, he wasn't up for being a co-GM, but he said he'd be happy to assist, playing the odd NPC in order to "ease into how this will all work."

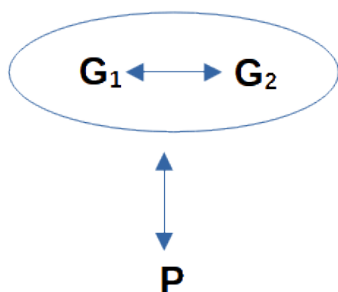
During the campaign, he nearly had to drop out due to some very serious medical issues, but he kept chugging along, helping however he could, sending me character write-ups, playing NPCs as

⁶ <https://www.shamusyoung.com/twentysidedtale/?p=612>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GNS_theory

needed, and even doing the chapter editing. Indeed, he turned out to be the best editor I've ever known.

But perhaps the most important thing Timothy did was to serve as a sounding board, listening to my half-baked schemes and giving his often valuable input. As a GM, you will need someone in this role. They can be a co-GM or an assistant-GM, but either way, having someone to talk to about the campaign will help you flesh out your good ideas and, just as importantly, sidestep the bad ones.



The second 1P2G variant involves two co-GMs acting under a set of rules in which they equally share the powers of a traditional game-master. The most obvious option that

occurs to me is that they could simply take turns. They could trade the previously mentioned roles of primary and assistant back and forth every other chapter, so that G_1 takes the lead for odd-numbered chapters, and G_2 takes the lead for even-numbered chapters.

Another method might be to randomly determine who gets to make any given ruling as situations naturally arise, possibly by rolling dice or using a dice rolling script (assuming the two GMs are physically remote from each other) that reveals the results of the dice roll to both simultaneously. The co-GMs could discuss matters, roll dice as necessary, and cooperatively develop the setting on Stage 2, all out of sight of the player (P) who's on Stage 1. The two co-GMs could, of course, apply any setting or ruleset they both agree to use, but for matters not specifically covered by the rules or setting document, a simple *luck roll* may be applied at the discretion of either G_1 or G_2 .

Luck Roll: Roll 1d6, and cascade 1s and 6s in situations where highly unusual outcomes could occur. Results are as follows:

Roll #1	Roll #2	Result
1	1	Super bad for the PC
1	2-5	Very bad
2		Bad
3		Neutral to slightly-bad
4		Neutral to slightly-good
5		Good
6	1-5	Very good
6	6	Super good for the PC

Obviously, interpretation of this rubric is situational dependent, and the two co-GMs may have conflicting interpretations. When facing such disagreements, it would be best to compromise, but if a compromise is taking too long to reach, either may call for a *luck roll* to resolve the matter. A d6 roll of 1-3 rewards the decision to G_1 , and 4-6 rewards the decision to G_2 .

You might ask, why go to all this trouble of having two squabbling GMs, when we could just have one? The answer, the reason for all this, is that two heads are often better than one. Hence, either co-GM should feel free to call for *luck rolls* to resolve even petty matters. For example:

Stage 1/Player: I walk through the spaceport, asking around if there's any ships heading to Sashkatuvich.

1/ G_1 : There's an electronic ticket service that most of them use. You can access it through your VPA⁸. You find there's a transport heading there later in the day.

1/Player: How many credits are they asking?

Stage 2/ G_2 : No. *Luck roll* it. On a 1, there's no transport until tomorrow.

2/ G_1 : Fine.

2/ G_2 : roll d6

2/dicebot: G(2) rolled : d6 --> [1d6=6]{6}

2/ G_1 : Meaning what? There's multiple transports?

⁸ Virtual Personal Assistant, a semi-intelligent AI that runs in the cloud, keeping track of appointments, etc., which can be accessed through an individual's portable computer, smartphone, or cybernetic interface.

2/G₂: roll d6

2/dicebot: G(2) rolled : d6 --> [1d6=3]{3}

2/G₂: I could go with there being two transports, or maybe a transport and a cargo ship that has an extra crew bunk, not an actual passenger stateroom.

1/G₁: Actually, there's also a cargo ship offering a ticket for what looks like half the going rate.

1/Player: What's the catch?

1/G₁: It's a bunk and locker in the crew quarters, not a private stateroom like on a passenger transport.

1/Player: That'd be okay.

Once again, the whole purpose of having two GMs and this *luck roll* mechanic is to prompt the co-GMs to think about details of the campaign that come up during play in greater resolution *and* to allow fate a hand in crafting the story.⁹ In doing so, it will hopefully get the GMing side of the roleplaying equation to be more imaginative and think in greater detail, which will hopefully lead to better (albeit slower) campaigns. Just as importantly, if used well, this method could provoke the plot to take surprising turns, possibly steering the campaign *off the map*, as it were. However, with two co-GMs to collaboratively think through consequences and adjust accordingly, I think it would be less scary, particularly for inexperienced GMs or experienced ones who are inexperienced at going off-script.

GMing, at its best, IMHO, is an extemporaneous performance that remembers to make the player the center of the campaign, even going so far as to give the player control of the game's direction, so that instead of the player continually following the GM's lead, jumping through the hoops of an adventure created before the campaign even began, the campaign is better described as the player figuring out how the setting works and then exploiting it according to the motivations of his or her PC. My guess is that this method of play could encourage proactivity on the part of players. However, it will require

⁹ See my comment to Michael Cule on the 5th page of my zine in *Alarums & Excursions* #580.

each GM to let go of the reins enough so as to enable them to compromise constructively with their co-GM.

Another option that could be attempted under the 1P2G variant of 1PMG would be to allow the participants to switch roles, playing musical chairs as it were, so that each individual could take turns playing as well as GMing.

	Ch 1	Ch 2	Ch 3
Andrea	G ₁	P	G ₂
Bob	G ₂	G ₁	P
Cathy	P	G ₂	G ₁

If $G_1 \neq G_2$ in terms of their respective powers, then:

	Ch 4	Ch 5	Ch 6
Andrea	G ₂	P	G ₁
Bob	G ₁	G ₂	P
Cathy	P	G ₁	G ₂

Then simply repeat.¹⁰ Back in my college days, we called this "Round-Robin Roleplaying," except that we were operating under the traditional MP1G framework, so the only change would be who in the group was GMing. We only tried this during conventions, and while it made for a chaotic game, it was a way for players to try their hand at GMing without having to commit to it for a full adventure.

I've never tried Round-Robin in an actual campaign, but it occurs to me that it would be interesting to see the results under the 1P2G framework, where the fact that there are two GMs might mitigate the most obvious downsides of switching GMs mid-scenario. Of course, any long-term plans on the part of any individual participant would likely be subject to change, so it probably wouldn't work for a murder mystery, but for other genres, it might work out okay. It might even be playable on a single stage using the mechanics of some Solo-RPG to generate encounters.

Although this does not yet exhaust the

¹⁰ Or if you'd rather leave it to fate, then at the beginning of each chapter, assign these roles randomly.

possibilities contained within 1P2G, let us move on to 1P3G. Aside from merely expanding the aforementioned possibilities, we can now assign more specific roles to the various gamemasters in consideration of the fact that some GMs are better at some facets of the job than others. For example, some GMs are great at worldbuilding and description, others are terrific at playing NPCs, and still others have an innate sense of story such that they usually know how best to push things along and, just as importantly, when not to. So maybe that's the answer. We could simply separate the traditional Game Master into three parts: G_S (the Setting-GM), G_P (the Plot-GM), and G_C (the Character/NPC-GM). Their respective domains might look something like this:

G_S (Setting-GM): G_S is responsible for the setting and its description as well as determining the likelihood of outcomes. In short, he or she would essentially provide the game's universe as well as the mechanics for how it works in a *Setting Document*, which is a sort of evolving guide on how the setting and mechanics of the game work.¹¹ He or she may also provide guidance to G_P (the Plot-GM) or G_C (the Character/NPC GM) with respect to how specific details of the setting relate to various plot points and character details. He or she may also wish to retain the responsibility for rolling dice, although this duty may be abdicated to varying degrees.¹²

G_P (Plot-GM): G_P takes the game universe provided by G_S and draws up the initial conditions of the story, including the likely NPCs.¹³ This can be done to whatever level of

detail G_P decides (and G_S agrees) is appropriate, and what results from this is a *Scenario Document*. G_P also narrates the resolution to in-story conflicts (situations where more than one thing could potentially happen), using the rules in the *Setting Document* to the extent he or she believes they apply, but his or her decisions can be challenged by G_S due to a perceived setting violation. G_P also provides guidance to G_C with respect to how specific details of the plot are likely to impact the knowledge and motivations of various NPCs.

G_C (Character/NPC-GM): G_C plays the NPCs,¹⁴ creating their dialogue based on the initial conditions set forth by G_P . G_C 's actions and dialogue can be challenged by G_P on the grounds of whether a given decision violates the current conditions of the plot (in a way he or she is unwilling to modify on-the-fly) or by G_S on the grounds of a setting violation (that he or she also is unwilling to modify on-the-fly).

In cases where a challenge occurs, the three GMs should discuss the situation privately on Stage 2, and if they can't come to a quick resolution, they then vote. In cases of a tie vote (such as where one abstains or there are an even number of GMs present), some random method (the roll of a d6) can be used to resolve the matter. In this way, both the setting and scenario can be modified in play.

I call this particular variant of 1P3G the SPC-Method (Egalitarian Version) in honor of the three co-GMs, but I'm sure you can come up with countless other variants.

Next month, I'll discuss various issues with respect to outlining the protagonist, determining the tense and person of the write-up, and how to actually begin playing.

¹¹ Of course, for the sake of expedience, other game systems and settings may be referenced, but any modifications should be noted. These may include expanded rules for character background generation as well as rules involving the construction of the PC's faults and foibles.

¹² Allowing an automated system to roll dice or allowing G_P to make the rolls with or without reporting.

¹³ Of course, G_S may also create scenarios and offer them to G_P to use, but G_P has the right to design scenarios

that are consistent with the setting.

¹⁴ There may be more than one G_C if need be. In such cases, G_P is in charge of assigning each G_C to one or more NPCs.

POSTSCRIPTS FROM THE PHOENIX THRONE #2

WHERE ROLEPLAYING GAMES ARE THE ~~CENTRA~~ CENTER OF ATTENTION

FOR *A GENTLE STROLL* #3

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JULY 27, 2025

FROM THE HERALD'S SCROLL (AKA, NATTER)

July is ending & Rancho Cordova is unseasonably cool, or maybe closer to the typical summertime temperatures that I enjoyed in childhood. Earlier this month, my wife & I started ice skating at a rink in nearby Roseville. Neither of us have ice skated as adults, so we come to this sport cold. I do not find the basics too difficult, perhaps because I've skateboarded since I was nine years old. They are very different sports, to be sure, but there must be some transferable benefits, like maintaining balance while in rapid motion. It is a good workout & I'm always glad to find new interests in common with my wife.

The two D&D games in which I participate continue. My friend Trevor runs the D&D 5e campaign for me & two other players. Trev is running a collection of standalone adventures called *Keys from the Golden Vault*. The adventures are heists & quite a bit of fun. On

alternate weeks, I referee an Advanced D&D (1e) campaign using *The Temple of Elemental Evil* (ToEE) modules. ToEE is at its most fundamental level a dungeon crawl, but it is easy to flesh out into a living campaign. The module describes the player character's (PC's) starting hamlet in considerable detail. The denizens of the hamlet generally belong to one of two religious factions, although the potential for overt or violent conflict is small. The eponymous temple has several factions, so clever PCs can attempt to use that to advantage. My players have made moves in this direction.

COMMENTS ON *A GENTLE STROLL* #2

Cover: *Golden Road* (Jim Eckman)

I have never read any of the Oz books, so my vision of the place is conditioned by the Judy Garland flick. It seems to me that what you've done here, Jim, imposes the Yellow Brick Road, Scarecrow, & fence onto elements familiar to Japanese & Chinese landscape

paintings. Was this deliberate?
Stylistic habit?

The wind row is beautifully done & the wash of blue on the bluff is effective at adding more dimensionality to that eminence. At its peak: is that a structure of some kind? You give the impression of movement up there, though.

Random Hopscotch #1 (Joshua K.)

Good to see you here, Joshua. I encountered your zines late into your run in *Alarums & Excursions*, so I never did get your RPG “origin story”. It sounds like we got into RPGs around the same time (both chronologically & age-wise) & that our schools unwittingly provided grist for that mill. I don’t know about you, but I certainly did not have the wargamer’s or historian’s background when I started playing D&D—nor would one expect a nine-year-old to be so equipped.

Ronin Engineer (Jim Eckman)

Your pre-Traveller campaign had good premises; I would enjoy playing in or running a campaign like that.

You mentioned Star Guard as structuring resolution of physical encounters...I take it you mean Michael Scott Kurtick & John McEwan’s *Starguard!* (McEwan Miniatures, 1974)?

Your zine reads as though you are looking for a good RPG to run the

sort(s) of SF campaigns that you would like to run, and in the process provide capsule commentaries on five SF RPGS: Call of Cthulhu (CoC), Traveller, Stars without Number, Space Opera, & Wanderer!

With respect to CoC, you wrote that it lacks the academic subgame. Do you know of an SF RPG that has an academic subgame? I do not. One possible angle for you might be to consider the magical research rules in almost any variety of D&D and retool it for academic research. The magical research rules in D&D, especially AD&D or the OSR Lamentations of the Flame Princess (LotFP) rules, require adequate research material (one must expend funds for & have space to house the research materials) & investment of time & additional money. The outlay of time & funds affects the odds of success. LotFP might be the more accessible of the two, as the publisher has an art-free PDF of the rules available for free here:

<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/115059/LotFP-Rules--Magic-Free-Version>.

Another fantasy research subgame is available on a single page in Zak Smith’s *Vornheim: The Complete City Kit* (LotFP, 2015). This subgame assumes that researchers already have access to a repository of suitable materials (books & scrolls

in Vornheim). Smith provides a flowchart through which different conditions & investment of time produces different research outcomes. I think Vornheim has several gameable hacks that could translate to SF games as well as fantasy.

The Taxidermic Owlbear website has a page of D&D retroclones, several of which are reskinned as SF RPGs. Many of the games covered there are free. It might be worth a look:

<https://taxidermicowlbear.weebly.com/dd-retroclones.html>.

RE Space Opera, did your friend ever publish their SF RPG? Do you recall its name? Similarly, is Wanderer published in any form?

RE your Bushido campaign, in which you had between 15 & 25 players, do you mean that up to 25 players participated in the campaign, or that you sometimes had 15 or more players in some sessions?

I would be remiss not to compliment you on the nod to *A Fistful of Dollars*!

1PMG PBEM: How to Get Started, Part 1 (Jim Vassilakos)

Your first guide to setting up a 1PMG play-by-email (PBEM) is excellent. The way that you describe stages of play is the most novel aspect of setup & (eventual, from

the standpoint of the essay) implementation for its Stage 2. Operating stages 1 & 3 (gameplay forum & peanut gallery, respectively) is probably familiar to many referees, contributors to RPG APAs, zine editors, & bloggers. Gamers have used these stages for a long time—consider the press in Diplomacy play-by-mail zines & some play reports in various RPG zines. I had not considered a forum for co-GMs before (Stage 2). This is a most useful contrivance.

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #2 (George Phillies)

Regarding “A Short D&D Discussion,” I enjoy the characterization of the PCs. They are pithy but evocative. Love & guffawing for Gow All-Fleeing! I hope that you will share out the PCs’ adventures in future zines.

Considering the second installment of your fiction, is it merely coincidence that the grand master & the seventh PC presented on page 2 of your zine share a given name?

DISPATCHES FROM THE FIELD: FINNEGAN TARREGA’S UNAUTHORIZED INVESTIGATIONS INTO MATTERS ANCIENT AND ARCANÉ

Here is the first installment of a serial that I wrote for *Clockwork Magazine*, a steampunk publication that was active in the middle of the 2010s. Let me know if you are

interested in reading more & I will drop further dispatches in this APA. Wesley Kawata might be pleased that this short piece is not in the fantasy camp. Copyright is to Gabriel Roark for this material.

Dispatch 1: Something's Rotten in Sikyatki

To My Fellow Antiquarians, whether by profession or avocation:

This submittal begins a serial exposé concerning the investigatory activities of the Special Acquisitions Section of the Smithsonian Institution—your author's former employer—bringing the enlightened and curious scholar suppressed knowledge of the latest in archaeological discoveries around the world, as close to the point of the spade as is practicable for your humble reporter to manage. This author was employed by the Smithsonian Institution under the expectation that said organization would support uncensored publication of discoveries made under the Institution's aegis, and that such objects as might bequeath educational remuneration upon the discerning public would be displayed at the National Museum. Regrettably, the Smithsonian has reneged on its advertisement of intent and purpose, instead consigning your earnest scholar's findings to secrecy, the very antithesis of anthropology in the public interest. Therefore, I have resolved to broadcast as widely as I have means accounts of my government-sponsored travels and research, because the implications of my discoveries are most grave for all known life on this planet.

Yours very truly,

Finnegan Tarrega

July 19, 1895

I arrived by rail in Holbrook, Arizona Territory, in time to rendezvous with Dr. Jesse Walter Fewkes, whose expedition the Special Acquisitions Section sent me to aid. He is a stout fellow, able researcher, and government man; I made his acquaintance in Washington not only because we shared membership not only in the same scientific societies, but Fewkes that worked in another arm of the Smithsonian: the Bureau of American Ethnology. Fewkes has informed me that he is bound for a ruin called in Hopi "Sikyatki", having an archaeologically superficial—if long-time—acquaintance with the place. Dr. Fewkes's intent is to enter this and other ancient Puebloan ruins, where it is hoped that bounteous yields of scientifically consequential artifacts await the spade.

July 20, 1895

There is little to be said concerning our preparations. Animals and wagons were laden with nearly a month's worth of provender and tools; Fewkes expects to supplement of our larders with purchases made in Walpi. *In toto*, our group carried a goodly store of firearms and ammunition, owing to the presence of cougars and wild dogs in the uplands. For my part, a Colt .45 revolver sufficed for a sidearm, while a Winchester rifle was scabbarded to the right of the saddle. For special occasions, I kept my Hydra repeater slung across my back. I would have preferred the Hydra to be side-

mounted, so to speak, but my train's tardiness precluded me fashioning a mounted scabbard for the weapon.

The residents of Holbrook seem possessed only of a general knowledge concerning our destination, leaving Fewkes our most learned asset. We decamped from Holbrook, despairing of this land's meteorological affinity to Gehenna. As if to underscore the territory's hostility, a gentleman of twenty some-odd years bade us ill portents as we disembarked for the highlands. Spying our party heading north out of town, the man became most agitated, abandoned his languid post outside the saloon, and assumed an ardent pose directly in our path, heedless of horse, mule, and wagon. Scarcely coherent, the poor fellow urged Dr. Fewkes—indeed, all of us—to turn aside from our errand and leave the dead to their own devices. Our men seemed unperturbed, nonchalant as our well-trained mounts went round the madman, each keeping a round, watchful eye on the flurry of verbiage and gesticulation emanating from our would-be saviour. Though I feigned a nonplussed air, I resolved to keep my hand near my repeater ere we approached Sikyatki.

July 21, 1895

Our party passed several uneventful days crossing the stony, sagebrush-covered bajadas toward First Mesa. Little moved on the landscape but our procession and our long shadows trailing eastward in the evenings. The initial rise in elevation brought relief as daytime temperatures dropped to something less than hellacious. Nights already find us all burrowed deeply

in our bedrolls, grateful for the warm knot of whiskey in our chests.

July 26, 1895

During the second watch last night, Mr. Garrett overhead a prolonged struggle between a pack of wolves and prey. He was of the opinion that the fracas ended rather too abruptly compared to previous night hunts heard on our trip. Round the breakfast fire this morning, Garrett reported his observations to the group, which met with good-natured derision from some quarters and indifference from the rest. All Fewkes had to say on the matter was, "You did well sticking to your post, Mr. Garrett. There is food enough here for you and no need to deprive the wolves of their sustenance." His statement sat well with the men, as it at once made sport of the situation and underscored an important principle in the outdoors: prey taken down by a predator means a quiet night for the outdoorsman.

This day in the saddle was much like any other: tolerably hot and entirely too sunny. As we neared Walpi—our first civilized bivouac before establishing our supply head in Keam's Canyon—the relentless, subtle incline was punctuated with gray-green juniper trees. These lasted till we at last made the mesa top.

July 28, 1895

Our expedition made Walpi today. The Hopi natives greeted us amiably enough, remembering Fewkes's visit three years before. Fewkes directed Garrett to see about hiring some local youths to assist with the digging while he conversed at length with

his old informant. I took a seat on a barrel not fifteen feet from the two men and cleaned dust from my firearms as a pretence for loitering. In this way I was able to overhear most of their conversation, which was in this wise:

Fewkes and his elderly informant (I did not catch his name) exchanged lengthy pleasantries, absorbed in accounting for the goings-on of the Walpians during the past three years. Sharing a smoke and several private jests, the elder of the two inquired in the marvellously deliberate cadence so typical of Hopi speech, "Friend, what brings you to Walpi? Your little army shows that you are intent on visiting ruins again—where are you going?"

"To Sikyatki, my friend. You told me that it is an ancient village, never trodden by Spanish boots. That fact makes the place exceedingly important to understanding where your people come from."

The older man grimaced slightly at this, "We know our history, Jesse. We do not need Americans to tell us these things. But...I know that white men listen to white men best, and your science is to your people like our medicine, our religion, is to us." The man laughed and commented wryly, "To white men, stones speak better than red men."

Fewkes took this latter comment in stride, "Red men speak better than stones, no doubt about it. Still a wise man considers what stones and trees and pots have to tell."

"Hm, yes, a man must look to the six directions and everything they contain to

understand his place in the world. You and your men will go to Sikyatki?"

Fewkes nodded and took a drag on his cigarette, "Does Lelo still live up there? Is Kanelba still good?"

"Ah, yeah, Lelo still lives up Sikyatki way. His family is doing really well. You know, Jakwaina is building a house by Kanelba now."

"Good, good. Then we shall have plenty of company during the excavation," Fewkes grinned.

Fewkes sat in silence with his venerable informant and friend for several minutes. In the deepening dusk, their faces glowed momentarily with each deep draw on their cigarettes. The elder snuffed his out in the dirt and regarded Fewkes searchingly. I watched them from under the brim of my hat, idly checking the Hydra's water canisters for leaks.

"Maybe you should do your digging someplace else this year, Jesse," the old man nearly whispered.

Fewkes raised his eyebrows at this, "Go on."

"It is something to do with the Flute people..."

"Just last year, or three years ago?" Fewkes broke in.

"Last year. You were here around their time before that at Kanelba. Now. Last year, the Flute people got together at the spring. Everything went like usual, as far as we could tell. But at the end of their ceremonies, our people here in Walpi, we all

had the same dream. And the entire village was taken with a sickness, too. Nobody died, but a thing like this has never happened in Walpi.”

Fewkes rolled his cigarette from the left side of his mouth to the right, “What was the dream about?”

“The sound of pipes in blackness. We had the sense that somebody danced to the music, but we could not see it, or them. In our hearts, we dreaded to see the dancer or dancers—we hid our eyes in the dream.”

“I see. Did any of your people awaken with a song?”

“Huh?! No, no, no. This dream was not meant to give Walpi a new song.” The old man spat on the ground.

“What then? Did the Flute people fail in their observances at Kanelba?”

“No. I went to talk with the Flutes after our dream and sickness, to see what they know. Their people, too, had a great sickness, but no dream. But something was not right at the spring. During one evening of ceremony, the priests stood a way back from Kanelba. Watching. Like with us Snakes, nobody outside of their society is supposed to be at the spring, or even seen there at the time of their ceremony. It puts things wrong. Again, the priests were watching, and finally they sent their youngest member up to bring water. He came down running after a short time, shouting, “Outsider! Outsider!” The Flutes say it was a white man.”

“You don’t say? Do the Flute people know him?”

“Yeah, they know the devil. Tall fellow, taller than your friend there.” The priest pointed at me. “Thin-lipped, too. Came among the Flutes wanting to study their baskets, he said. He made off with a kadcina instead.”

“Thieving bastard have a name?” Fewkes growled.

“Mhm. The name he gave was...Andes, no, Andrews? Hm, not Andrews...Oh! Andres. He called himself Andres. He did not speak like you Americans.”

At this point in the conversation, my right eye twitched involuntarily and the muscles in my left shoulder burned and tensed. Dr. Fewkes proved his shrewd vision then, casually inquiring, “You all right over there, Tarrega? You look fit to hurt a man just now.”

In that moment, I confess that movement felt to me a more expedient mode of expression than speech. Raising the 10-pound Hydra repeater, I disengaged the safety and brought a distant cactus into focus with the rifle’s compound scoping lenses. Without looking at the two friends, I replied, “Let’s just say that I don’t like him much.” My finger tensed a hair’s breadth from the trigger for half a minute. I reengaged the safety and lowered the firearm. Not worth the shot. The mesa was even thirstier than a yearning for vengeance, and precious water therefore was not to be wasted on temperamental target practice. I bid the men goodnight and walked back to my bedroll, wondering whether we would end up balancing our planned exhumations with a deposit of fresh corpses.

Nota bene: Finnegan Tarrega's *Dispatches from the Field* are faithfully presented by Gabriel Roark, who works as an archaeologist and cultural resources manager. Finnegan's exploits are fictional, albeit cast in real-world archaeological and social contexts. For those curious about the actual Fewkes expedition in Arizona Territory, or a sound introductory (if contemporary rather than nineteenth century) text on Southwestern prehistory, the sources that I consulted when writing Dispatch 1 are provided below. Representations of historic persons are attempted with the utmost respect; fictional contrivances might not fare so well.

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Actual Tintype Image of Finnegan Tarrega, Copyright Dan Herrera
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NEXTISH

I am still dialing in what this zine is to be. The third Postscript will present comments & perhaps responses to comments (in one section). Depending upon readers' response, Tarrega's second dispatch might appear. See y'all in a month!



Frank Belknap Long Jr. published the short story “The Ocean Leech” in *Weird Tales – The Unique Magazine*, Vol. V No. 1 (January 1925). The story features an encounter between a storm-damaged sailing ship and the eponymous ocean leech. The story illustration depicts the ocean leech as a large octopus, and the critter is described as “obviously a cephalopod” – something that has tentacles and is amorphous. From some vantage points it’s said to be white; from others it’s said to be transparent. The tentacles appear to be transparent with pink suckers, about 4” across, and an interior mouth, or “a great reddish sucker, or disk, lined with silver teeth” that appears to move about inside the creature’s gelatinous body. Sounding unlike an octopus, the creature also is described as “something mute, misshapen, blasphemous, and we saw industrious retching matter, brainless and self-sufficient”.

The creature attacks the crew by grappling them with a tentacle and then sucking blood out of their body, leaving them livid and yellow colored, with black and swollen lips, their tongue sticking out, and their body encased in yellow slime. It also attempts to haul the drained body from the ship and into the ocean. The living crew responds by being fascinated with the creature. They remain on deck, make no effort to defend themselves or even hide, and seem to be both happy and afraid at the same time.

The protagonist notes the creature has an awful stink (a “queer aromatic stench”) that causes nausea. It easily navigates up the side of the ship and across the deck and is strong enough to splinter a cabin door. It grasps and grapples with a tentacle, then moves an interior mouth toward the prey and drains its blood before taking the corpse back into the water. While the protagonist is grappled and being drained of blood, he is not afraid and experiences “sensations of pleasure” and warmth, and quivers with a “weird expectancy”.

The single crewman who largely is unaffected eventually defeats the monster with fire, which seems readily to dissolve it.

Ocean Leech

Large ooze, unaligned

Armor Class 16 (Natural Armor)

Hit Points 114 (12d10 + 48)

Speed 30 ft., swim 60 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3)	16 (+3)	16 (+3)	1 (-5)	6 (-2)	1 (-5)

Vulnerabilities Fire

Resistances Acid, Cold, Lightning, Bludgeoning

Immunities Slashing; Blinded, Charmed, Deafened, Exhaustion, Frightened, Grappled, Poisoned, Prone, Restrained

Senses Blindsight 60 ft.; Passive Perception 8

Languages None

CR 6 (XP 2,300)

TRAITS

Amorphous. The ocean leech can move through a space as narrow as 1" without expending extra movement to do so.

Aquatic Camouflage. When in water, even if the ocean leech otherwise is in plain sight, a creature must succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check to notice it. The ocean leech has advantage on Dexterity checks and saves made in water.

Blood Sense. The ocean leech can sense the presence of creatures within 180 feet that have blood.

Fascination. Constitution Saving Throw: DC 13, any creature (other than an ocean leech) that sees the ocean leech. *Failure:* the target has the Restrained condition until the start of its next turn. *Success:* The target is immune to the Fascination of the ocean leech for 1 hour. *Second Failure:* the target has the Paralyzed condition for 1 hour.

Spider Climb. The ocean leech can climb difficult and wet surfaces, including along ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

Stench. Constitution Saving Throw: DC 13, any creature (other than an ocean leech) that starts its turn in a 10-foot Emanation originating from the ocean leech. *Failure:* The target has the Poisoned condition until the start of its next turn. *Success:* The target is immune to the Stench of the ocean leech for 1 hour.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The ocean leech makes three attacks in any combination of Tentacle Strike, Blood Drain, or Constrict.

Tentacle Strike. Melee Attack Roll: +7, reach 10 ft. Hit: 7 (1d10+2) Piercing damage. If the target is a Medium or smaller creature it has the Grappled condition (escape DC 13). The target is also subjected to the following effect. Constitution Saving Throw: DC 13. Failure: The target has the Poisoned condition and repeats the save at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success. While Poisoned, the target has the Paralyzed condition.

Blood Drain. Melee Attack: +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one grappled target. Hit: 11 (2d6 + 4) necrotic damage, and the ocean leech regains hit points equal to the necrotic damage dealt.

Engulf. The ocean leech can draw a Grappled creature inside itself. Dexterity Saving Throw: DC 13). *Failure:* 10 (d6) Necrotic damage, and the ocean leech regains hit points equal to the necrotic damage dealt, and the target is engulfed. An engulfed target is suffocating, can't cast spells with a Verbal component, has the Restrained condition, and takes 10 (3d6) Necrotic damage at the start of each of the ocean leech's turns, and the ocean leech regains hit points equal to the necrotic damage dealt. When the ocean leech moves, the engulfed target moves with it. An engulfed target can try to escape by taking an action to make a DC 13 Strength (Athletics) check. On a successful check, the target escapes and enters the nearest unoccupied space. *Success*, half damage, and the ocean leech regains hit points equal to the necrotic damage dealt, and the target remains Grappled.

– Clark B. Timmins
The Ocean Leech #1
August 2025

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #3

A Parade of Boasters and Braggarts

I am asked about ordering of pages. What is the order? Cover, Collation List, and any Letters to the Editor are in front. New contributors are forward. My zine, which you are now reading, is at the extreme rear. Longer zines go more to the back than shorter zines.

I am asked about reuse of material between here and E&A. I have no problem with the possibility. I encourage the thought that your comments should correspond to the APA in which you are writing. We have in N'APA a writer who submits his NAPA zine and also his zine that only appears in another APA, complete with comments to people I do not know about zines I have never seen because they only appear in his other APA.

Comments

Golden Road ... A fine, slightly surreal cover, but highly suggestive of from whence we came.

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne: You describe a wonderful path into roleplaying. I am happy that it worked for you. Your second grade sounds much more interesting than mine. I remember See Dick. See Jane. See Spot. See Spot run. Run, Spot, run. I actually started reading on The Happy Hollisters (kid detectives) and after a very little bit Roscoe's Destroyer Actions in World War II. Starting roleplaying with Monster Manual 2 was certainly different.

Tiffanie's answer to your question appears as a Letter of Comment.

I recall magic-users with INT in the low 20s. As I recall from 50 years ago, we used a simplified interpretation of the transfer rules, the one I described. There was also a furor about elves not being allowed to become clerics, because, iirc according to Gary Gygax, elves do not have souls. Some players did not agree.

Random Hopscotch: Yet another interesting start. I believe that it is true that I played Champions III for rather longer than I played D&D, but in recent decades I have had more

or less no time for that. Inventing the Renaissance sounds amusing, but no time to read. Having also built shelves, you have my sympathies. I went through the same experience that you did. Yes, the surprise was that the person emerging from the shallows was female. At the time that was a survive.

Ronin Engineer: Yes, I remember Traveler. You have rolled up a character. It was a fine afternoon of dicing. Sorry that his first activity will be attending a funeral, his own. Rhodomontadulous is from Rodomontade, as passed through the filter of the early 19th century American Tall Talker movement. It's a splendiferous word.

1PMG PBEM: Very interesting; a well-thought-out account of what you are trying to do. The failure mode you described seems in retrospect to be very understandable. I imagine that there are other failure modes that will also be obvious in retrospect. If I were to try it, not likely given time constraints, I would certainly have a trial run for each player first.

As away to write a novel, I am reminded of my one joint writing effort, which was an epic fail. My potential coauthor was an outliner. I am a pantser. The scheme should work if the right people were there.

Could this scheme be done face-to-cafe? Consider reading up on the International Kriegspiel Society kriegspiel.org, which uses lots of gamesmasters, lots of players, and is played double-blind, so the players on each side see only their own troops, while the gamesmasters see all and send written messages to the players just as might happen in real life.

No Tears for a Princess

As I was asked, this tale is at 88,000 words, perhaps a third done, to make a fine goat-choker of a fantasy novel.

"Now, really, you should surely hold the city harmless. The Duke can't stop every common street thief."

"You know," for a half-sentence her irritation was real, "for a eight-hundred- year old master sorcerer you can be awful, awful innocent. That was a setup from the word Go! Somebody just didn't put enough bully boys into it. Against me, anyway, he didn't. Might've been enough 'gainst some people. You'd think my reputation would've warned him. But whoever did it had the city militia -- and a piece of your Guild -- in his pocket."

"And you suggest on my innocence?" retorted Grandoon.
"Oh, you're scarcely two-hundredths my age. I suppose I must be patient. You're talking about a real Trained Band of a city guard, not a bunch of village yokels whose necks will turn for a few pence."

"I know. I know! That's why it had to be rigged. On the parapet, no guards -- in fact nobody at all in the whole plaza. Right outside, two guards, two mages, and the guards hid when I approached. They couldn't've missed hearing a fight, not steel on steel, even if they're stone-drunk and half-deaf. They just stood there. Only the Duke or his cronies could do that. Rig the guard roster, put trusted people in place, order'm not to hear, and have everyone else out of earshot. The mages must've set an illusion screen, so no one in the buildings behind the plaza saw anything. I was dumb! I deserve what happened to me! I just walked into it. There's always bunches of people in that plaza at twilight, all watching the sunset. That's why I jumped into the Tressin. Didn't know what the backup was, may be more'n I could handle. At least without getting serious hurt. But a river's safe -- too big to put a spell on, leastways with me in it -- just a bit cold. It was better'n facing surprises if I stayed."

Frowning, she rubbed the back of her head again.

"Besides, those guys were half good, almost. 'Course they weren't so good as me, but they came in a bunch. From behind. The guy with the club tried coup de grace with his knife. Was he surprised when I grabbed his hand! Must not've known how easy wrist bones crush. His friends didn't help. They just stood there, the slackjaws, and let me up onto one knee. Their fancy swords might've been magic -- but only fumblefingers were holding 'em."

Grandoon stood for a moment, lost in thought, pondering Elaine's observations. She tried to sound the role of a common sell-sword, but the ideas behind her words bespoke a razor-sharp mind, if one too confident of her abilities as a warrior. "I suppose," he answered, "you might be correct. The Trained Bands are under oath to Gow All-Knowing. To avert Divine Retribution, for failing to uphold the peace, would consume no small number of crowns. However, guards who obey orders break no oath. Such orders could only come from the Duke or his loyal ministers. All that lacks is a motive. Why would the Duke want to kill you? After all, you saved his capital from the Apostate...from the tyrant Pyrrin. You're a heroine."

"You answered your own question. {em I} saved his city. Someone had to save it for him. I didn't do anything his siege engines wouldn't've done, sooner or later, prob'ly.

But I did it, not him. And he was the jealous sort, insecure, even before he had to flee Arburg, in his fancy-pink nightgown. I didn't really save his city, though. His army did that. I just jumped a few sentries."

"A few dozen, you mean," murmured Grandoon under his breath.

She snorted, annoyed by his trivial, if accurate, correction. "So he's jealous. He's got a reputation for that. Look how long his good advisors last. How do you think he got himself into this mess? Besides, people get, get uncomfortable, if I stay around them too long." She frowned again, then looked wistful. He stood quietly until she began to sip at her drink.

"You will stay, won't you? You can hardly go far in the darkness." His voice softened. He leaned toward the chair, his hand straying again over her shoulder.

"Now, really, I take care of myself. Besides, where could I sleep? Or have you got a magic guesthouse to match your magic cottage?" She leaned out from under his touch.

"There is a bed."

"And leave you to sleep on the floor? You haven't been without a soft mattress in two hundred years, and you know it!"

"Well, since you raise the issue, to sleep on a carpet might not be altogether comfortable. Of course, as you are not that young, nor precisely unattractive, one might have supposed that you would be aware of a traditional and enjoyable alternative."

Her cheeks were suddenly a rosy pink. She stared into the fire, half-hiding a smile. "Oh, Grandoon, you know perfectly well I don't like that sort of talk."

"I just made a simple observation," he said unsurprisedly. "I suppose I could do some more work this evening." He turned to his workbench and gestured. Clockwork and tools floated back into position.

Elaine sat for a while, savoring the drink Grandoon had brewed for her. It was certainly better than her familiar fare of dried beef, traveller's biscuits, foraged wild cooking greens and tea. Dry clothing and a fireplace were friendlier than the out-of-doors, at least

for tonight. Usually, she was uncomfortable under a strange roof, preferring except in deepest winter to sleep under the familiar solitude of the constellations. Grandoon's cottage almost made her feel at home, not that she had another home with which to compare. Forced rest after a narrow escape often left her meditating on her objectives for this life; tonight she wanted to avoid those considerations. Seeing Grandoon lost in his tinkering, she tiptoed to the bookshelf and pulled out a slim volume.

Far later, Grandoon paused and rubbed his eyes. A glance at the clock convinced him to dismiss his work. Elaine was buried in her book, deep in thought, while he walked behind her. She resisted only slightly when he leafed it back to see the title page.

"Treganth? {\em Elementary Principles in Symbolics}? For all its slight size, the {\em Tractatus Symbolicus} is a most weighty tome."

"Yeah, by the end, you have to be careful how you follow it. He sneaks his arguments up on you, bit by bit, in the earlier chapters. Then he ambushes you, making everything come together, all at once. Could we talk about it?"

Grandoon looked prayerfully at the ceiling. "You certainly could ask smaller favors. Few indeed are the mages who penetrate the core of that volume, let alone its closing. But why? You're not Illuminated by the Presence, as you've noted more than once."

"Because it's there. So I'm talentless, and can't set the teeniest spell. So I have my private Silence, which damps all I touch." She reached out and cupped a lamp in her hands. The light spell within glowered red and died. "I can still want to know. I can still teach the Art, except no one listens to me. And magic is a part of the world. A big part, where armies are concerned." She removed her hands from the lamp, which flared back to life. "Just because the Presence is silent to me now, doesn't mean it always will be. Besides, it, it..." She looked into the fire. Her voice faded. "It does run in my family, sort of." She stared at the floor, suddenly very quiet.

Grandoon peered at her downcast head. She was entranced by ancient memories, gray and gloomy. Finally she dragged out a smile. "May be tomorrow?" she whispered. He nodded agreement.