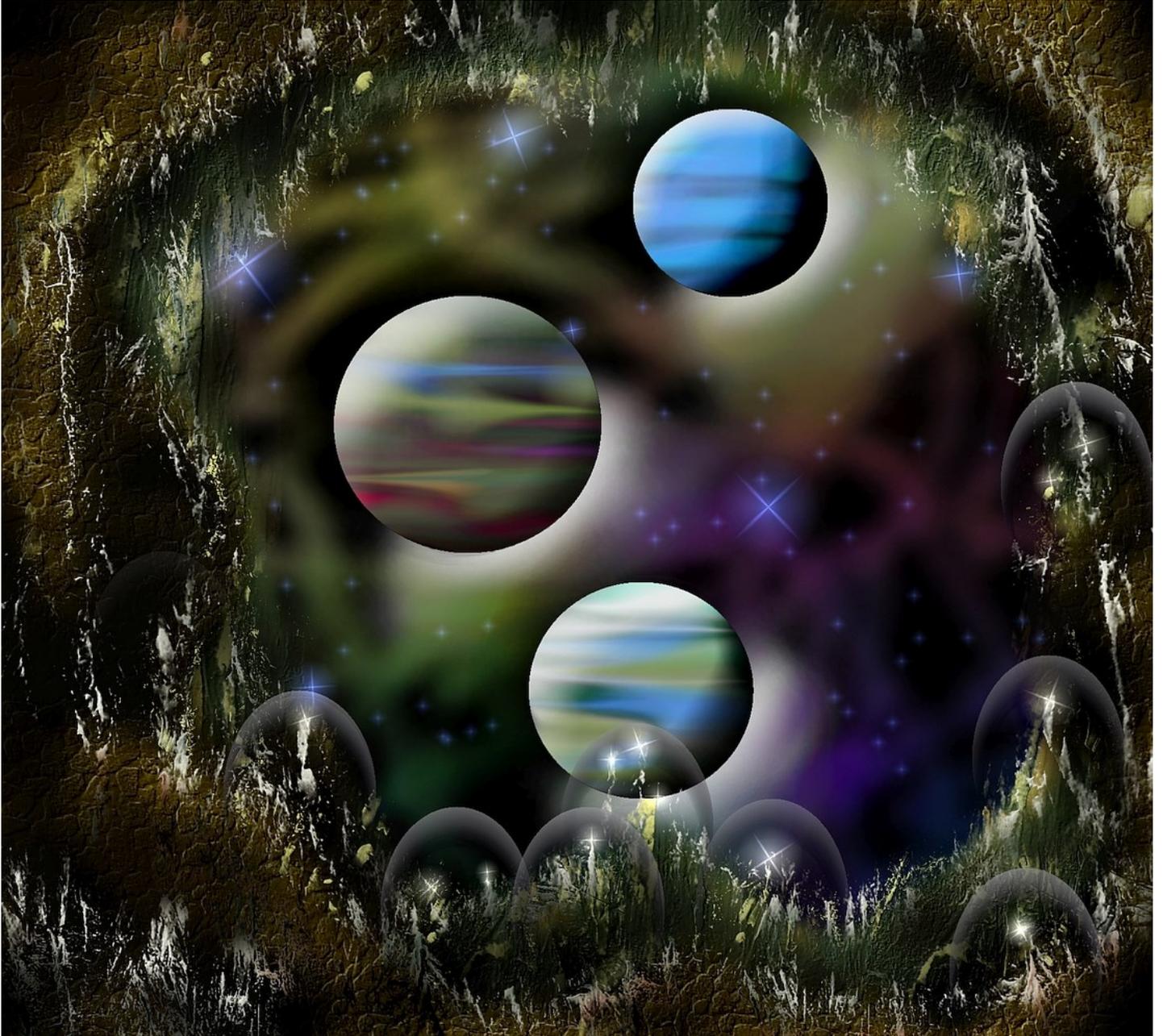


A Gentle Stroll

January 2026 — Issue Seven



Cavern City by Tiffanie Gray

Collation File

Cavern City by Tiffanie Gray ... 1

Collation File ... The Collator Supreme ... 1

Arcane Drugs ... Clark B. Timmins ... 2

1PMG PBEM How to Get Started, Part 4... Jim Vassilakos ... 7

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne #5 ... Gabriel Roark ... 7

Ronin Engineer ... Jim Eckman ... 4

The Fox's Den ... N. C. Shapero ... 57

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #7 ... George Phillies ... 3

Editorial Note

We are switching over to bimonthly publication. There are too many time demands on your humble collator. The due date of the next issue will be March 4, 2026.

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

General rules: Publication is bimonthly. 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 some number of 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.

Arcane Drugs – Clark B. Timmins

I'm working on a project (that likely I'll never finish) to create a deep history of an adventuring location based on an ancient, collapsed civilization. The history was heavily influenced by the rampant, long-term use of two arcane drugs, detailed below.

World Without End is an arcane alchemical elixir. It is fabulously expensive and generally only available to elites.

It appears as a shimmering, iridescent liquid that seems to swirl with stars and distant echoes.

It is inhaled as a vapor, consumed as a drop, or injected via crystal syringes.

Effects:

- Temporal Dissolution
 - The user experiences time as non-linear – past, present, and future blur together
 - The user may experience visions of ancient civilizations, future cataclysms, or alternate realities
 - For the user, time slows or stops subjectively, creating the illusion of eternal existence
- Cosmic Awareness
 - The user hears the voices of *The Forgotten Gods* and feels the heartbeat of the universe
 - The user experiences heightened perception of divine entities and the threads of fate
- Soul Expansion
 - The user's soul leaves the body and explores the astral plane
 - Users occasionally encounter each other on the astral plane and temporarily merge altered consciousnesses, an intensely pleasurable experience
 - Habitual users might experience permanent enlightenment or irreversible madness; it sometimes is difficult to distinguish these effects
- Side Effects
 - Temporal dislocation – the user has difficulty returning to linear time; in slang, this is referred to as The Deathless Drift
 - Existential detachment – the user experiences loss of identity or purpose; in slang, this is referred to as being Candle-Eyed.
 - Addiction to Eternity – the user may seek the drug endlessly, unable to cope with the limited experience of normal reality
- Lore & Origin
 - Said to be created by the Eternals of the Last Dawn, beings who live outside time
 - Only obtainable from Sky Traders who purportedly come from the City of Echoes
 - Cult of the Ashen Dawn believes it is the key to godhood
 - Many believe it is a curse from the void

The Maw of Aeons is an arcane alchemical elixir. It often is claimed to be *World Without End* and is sold to commoners on the black market as such.

It appears as a green-black, solid resin that will faintly glow in moonlight. It typically is stored in bone vials etched with strange glyphs.

It is inhaled as a vapor or forcefully rubbed into scratched and cut areas of skin.

Primary Effects:

- Limited Temporal Expansion
 - Users experience fragmented glimpses of eternity – visions of ancient jungles, primordial gods, and forgotten epochs
 - Time feels somewhat fluid, like watching things in a cracked mirror
- Dreams of the Deep Maw
 - Visions of a mythical crocodilian god said to dwell in the folds of time
- Side Effects
 - Addiction to Aeons – the user may seek the drug endlessly, unable to cope with normal reality
 - Mawtouched - Crocodilian Metamorphosis
 - Habitual users begin to physically and mentally transform; when this progresses, they are referred to as *Mawtouched*
 - Scales begin to form along the spine and limbs
 - The iris shifts to vertical slits
 - The jaw elongates and the teeth sharpen
 - Muscles thicken and instincts grow more predatory
 - Heightened aggression and territorial behavior
 - Loss of speech and higher reasoning
 - Skin shedding and intense pain during prolonged transformation phases; in slang, this is referred to as The Bone Whispers
 - The transformation is irreversible after a certain threshold, turning the habitual user into a semi-sapient crocodilian hybrid
- Lore & Origin
 - Created by the (non-human reptilian) Bog Seers of Xal’Neth, who worship the Crocodile of the Infinite Marsh
 - The Bog Seers use it in rituals to merge with the spirits of ancient reptiles, who are believed to be the first timewalkers
 - The Bog Seers experience none of the deleterious effects
 - The Bog Seers believe it is a gift from the swamp itself, though others claim it is a curse from their dying god

1PMG PBEM

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

How to Get Started, Part 4

Jim Vassilakos

Over the last three installments of this essay in *A Gentle Stroll* #2, #3 & #4, I discussed the first nine steps of how to begin running a single-player / multi-gamemaster play-by-email campaign, but in Step 9, I cheated you insofar as I showed you how the game might work in a Play-by-Chat (PBC) forum rather than a Play-by-Email (PBEM) forum. The purpose of this was to illustrate the process in a simple way. PBC is much faster than Play-by-Email, and because of this, the back-and-forth dialogue between the participants usually consists of shorter packages — words, phrases, or sentences rather than paragraphs or pages. Hence, I was able to show you the gist of how this all works in a way that was relatively brief.

But it's worth remembering that PBC requires synchronous play (the participants all need to be online simultaneously), and it doesn't allow the GMs as much time to think, do research, and avoid making mistakes that end up getting embedded into the plot. So, in my opinion, while PBEMing is much slower, it offers considerable advantages. But you might disagree, and since this really boils down to personal preference, you may wish to use 1PMG in conjunction with PBC rather than PBEM.

Having said that, if used in the context of a PBEM, you will likely encounter some questions related to what you should ask of the player and how you should go about editing what they send you. This is a vast and largely unexplored topic, so what I will tell you is merely based on my personal experience and should be taken as such. In short, you will need to figure out what works best for you and your co-participants in the context of the specific campaign you're running. With that broad disclaimer out of the way, I'll tell you how I've tended to operate over the past few years.

First, I found that asking for the player to submit their protagonist's private thoughts as well as actions and/or dialogue was useful, especially in the context of a first person narrative. But I think it would be useful regardless, as even in the third person, the narrator's focus is often upon the primary protagonist, so the protagonist's thoughts are likely to bleed into the narrative to some extent.

Granted, some authors are remarkably taciturn with their protagonist's innermost thoughts and worries. I mentioned back in Step 3 how Phil hated modern writing, because he saw it as being too psychological and not action-oriented enough for his personal taste. I've already discussed this in my essay in *Alarums & Excursions* #581, but the upshot, in my opinion, is that there's no one right answer. It's simply a matter of taste.

But if you're like me, you're going to find yourself gravitating toward this notion that the themes and purpose of stories are served more by an evolution in the protagonist's thinking than a change in their circumstances. Stories in the past were mostly about the latter, and so the main characters were largely static, but that's not the way it's done anymore, and there's a reason. It's because of this widespread realization that what the reader is instinctively doing is they're trying to learn something from the story. In a way, watching the protagonist twist and turn through the events of the plot is sort of like watching a friend or older sibling go through some challenge, and what we're intuitively doing, at least subconsciously, in both instances is we're watching for mistakes and attempting to learn from them. That's one of the reasons, I believe, why people read stories. And this is why stories often teach morality, as well as why they're often used for propaganda. They have the ability to change the way people think.

So the reader wants to know the protagonist's thought process, so he or she can understand why they're doing what they're doing and get a sense of their personality. What sort of person are they? Are they good? Are they kind? Do they represent the best that is within us?

So here's a question. Let's say you have a player who's playing along the lines of the players in the two play logs I've already shown you in Step 9. Are these good people, or are they bad people? Although one's a thief and the other is breaking into the lair of a bunch of creatures that are individually weaker than himself, we don't immediately know the answer to this question. Why did the thief become a thief, and what

sort of thieving does he do? Does he steal from the rich and give to the poor, or does he steal from anyone and everyone and blow it all on harlots and magical intoxicants? And in the second play log, why does the warrior hate goblins so much? Did they burn his village and kill his family? Or is he simply trying to rack up some experience points to make his next level?

My argument here is that the reader intuitively wants to know what the main character is thinking, because they want to understand them and their point of view. And if they don't necessarily agree with the protagonist's outlook on whatever overarching conflict is taking place, they at least need to be able to comprehend the protagonist's perspective and, to some extent, be able to sympathize.

So you have to include thoughts, and if you're writing in the 1st person, you also need to establish the protagonist's voice, because they're the narrator. So you've got to figure out how they think, what they would notice, what they would think with respect to what they notice, and so forth. All that has to be in there, and even the phrasing needs to be right, meaning it needs to be congruent with their actions. You don't want to have them saying one thing in their mind and then acting in a way that's completely contrary to what they were just thinking.

This sort of thing can happen, because the construction of the on-going narrative is obviously a shared project, but each section, in my opinion, has to have its own lead editor, someone who has final editorial discretion. You might rotate this authority on a chapter-by-chapter or even scene-by-scene basis, or it may reside with a single individual for the entire length of the campaign. Whatever is decided, that person is going to have to decide how deeply they want to edit the player vs. how much they want to accept verbatim what is being offered.

Many times, to save time, a player will step on the GMs' turf, perhaps providing an expected reaction from an NPC to whatever their character is doing or saying. Sometimes, they might even include the results of an action, perhaps providing some descriptive elements for the GMs to consider using. All this is obviously within the traditional province of the GMs, but should you use it?

For myself, I try to use as much of what the player provides as I reasonably can, but I almost never use it verbatim. I like to tinker with sentences (if you get into writing, you will too). So I take what the player

sends me, and I start asking several questions in no particular order. First, how much of what is being offered is reasonable to assume? Is there anything there that should be determined by rolling some dice?

For example, did the player assume the best possible outcome from the point of view of his or her protagonist or from the POV of an allied NPC? If the player provides you with good material, the temptation is to simply incorporate it without too much consideration as to the alternatives. But don't take the lazy way out.

I personally like to determine things probabilistically, usually by rolling physical dice. Obviously, if the player sent me a really interesting reaction, especially one that isn't a clear victory for the protagonist, I'm more likely to use it with minimal editing. I vaguely remember this being more or less the case in Chapter 43 of the Plankwell Campaign, where the protagonist was sparring. I think I wrote up something fairly lame, and then Conrad revised and expanded it into something that was actually quite good. Of course, I probably did some minor editing, but I seem to remember being impressed with his writing, so I let him stomp his way into my territory as a GM, because what he sent me was so good and didn't aggrandize his character.

But I can also offer Chapter 55 as an example where he had his character discover some elements of a quasi-criminal organization operating on his own ship.¹ I sort of liked the idea, but I wasn't ready to commit to it without consulting with the Traveller Mailing List (TML)², and although they also liked the idea, I sensed that this was something that shouldn't come quite so easily, so I turned the question back to Conrad, essentially asking how much risk the protagonist would be willing to take in order to discover whatever there was for him to potentially discover.³ The result was that he essentially withdrew the suggestion.⁴ Nonetheless, I'm keeping his idea in my back pocket, because it's a good one, but one which I'd need to think about.

Editing what a player sends you isn't always so substantive in terms of modifying the setting or

¹ <https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/j3lOfqVa7a8/m/LFMCeT5AAAj>

² <https://lists.simplelists.com/tml/msg/32383657/>

³ <https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/j3lOfqVa7a8/m/Dvx49-gWAgAJ>

⁴ <https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/j3lOfqVa7a8/m/17qredUoAgAJ>

introducing a new plot element. Sometimes it involves simply phrasing things more succinctly. But when you do this, particularly in a 1st person narrative, you are modifying the narrative voice, so just be aware of that. You might ask the player if they're okay with the edits you're doing. Give them a chance to review the 1st draft, which brings us to...

Step 10: Create a 1st Draft

Ideally, in my opinion, the entire group needs to be involved to some extent in the editing process, but coalescing the play log into a 1st draft will likely be the job of a single person. So far, in the Plankwell campaign, I'm the one who's been doing this, and I think there's a good case to be made for the lead-GM being responsible for the creation of this document.

However, there are other possibilities worth considering. As I stated previously, perhaps, especially in the case of a 1st person narrative, the player should take an active role in rephrasing their protagonist's thoughts and even their perceptions into their character's own narrative voice. I could envision a multi-stage process wherein the player states what the protagonist thinks, says, and does. Then the GM restates this, including the outcome. Then the player restates it again, only editing for voice, before appending their protagonist's new thoughts, dialogue, and/or actions. Then, if the GM has any questions or concerns with respect to the player's edits, they discuss these before moving on with the new outcome.

Another option is to simply allow the lead GM carte blanche in constructing the initial version of the first draft. The player and assistant GM then come in to suggest revisions. Obviously, this is more expedient, but I'm not sure it's the best method.

In short, I'm still a long way off from being able to recommend a best practice with respect to this question, so different methods will need to be tested. Regardless, you're going to need to think about how you want to handle this and then communicate your preferences to the other members of your group.

Rather than prattle on about the various options, let's look at what a 1st draft of the 1st chat log of Step 9 might look like.

Within a small alcove, beneath a slight overhang of rock, there was a wooden door. It was weathered and had clearly been damaged, as there were two rectangular holes, one a little bit over three feet up from the ground and another at almost double that.

Were these peepholes? I couldn't see anyone looking at me, but it was dark in there, so I couldn't be sure I wasn't being watched.

There were two much smaller holes — these looked like nail holes — where there probably used to be a handle, but it had either fallen off of its own accord or someone deemed it unnecessary. Hence, the door had no discernable knob or keyhole.

I stood to the side for a moment, intently listening. There was some sort of click-clacking noise. I couldn't tell if it was stone or metal, but after a moment, I heard it again. It didn't sound like metal.

I pushed the door softly, but it didn't budge. Then I set my stance, preparing to kick it in. One good, solid kick, and maybe it would open. Maybe. But what if it didn't?

What were the odds? Half yes and half no? It depended on what was on the other side. For all I knew, this door might be reinforced by iron bars, or maybe there was just a little pile of dirt to keep the wind from blowing it open. I had no idea.

And if it didn't open, what then? I'd have no choice but to turn back. But if this were the goblins' lair, I doubted I'd get far. Their wolves would hunt me down. Even if I managed to hide for a time using my invisibility potion, they'd track me through my scent, and when I'd finally used up the remainder of the potion playing hide and seek, then they'd find me, and they'd be organized and ready for a fight.

If only I could get past this door, I could quaff the potion and find somewhere to hide. I could wait and then hit them with oil and fire when they were at their most vulnerable. But how could I get them to invite me in?

Standing there, debating with myself over what to do, I noticed a small spot to the side where I could stand out of view of anyone inside looking out through one of those rectangular holes, so I positioned myself there, flattening myself against the stone. Then I

meowed like a cat.

“Meow!” Too loud? “Meow.”

There soon came a pair of voices.

“Sto sep kien neb spet?”

“Et meow kat ae qut.”

I couldn't be sure, but their guttural accent reminded me of those goblins I'd encountered back at the fort. So this was their lair, after all.

As far as monsters went, goblins were hardly the brightest, so I meowed again. Cats, after all, were as useful to them as they were to us humans, and even if there were no mice bothering them, goblins were known to eat pretty much anything they got their hands on.

Pretty soon, it sounded like something was happening on the other side of the door. Someone was sliding back the bolt of some sort of lock or reinforcement. Then the side of the door closest to me opened inward, albeit just a crack.

If they were peering through the crack, they'd be looking the wrong way. But if one of them was still behind the door looking through one of those two rectangular holes, there was now a good chance I'd be noticed.

Which meant I had to act.

I turned and kicked the door in with all the force I could muster, causing it to swing wide open, and on the other side, stumbling backward, were two very surprised goblins. The closest held a morning star in a way that made it apparent he didn't expect to have to use it, while the other had a military pike.

“Kahn!” the first yelled, as I slashed at his head with my sword, but he put up his arm, his buckler saving him from losing his hand. Next thing I knew, the spikes of his morning star were clanking against my armor. Meanwhile, the second one ran down an earthen passage, yelling, “Human! Sot's ehn!”

As you can see, the narrative has been somewhat expanded compared to what was in the chat log. A few details were added to make things slightly more vivid. I'm terrible at writing descriptions, so I'm sure most of you will be able to do much better than this. But the main difference has to do with the protagonist's inner thoughts.

I've just got done saying it, but I'll say it again, stories aren't so much about action as they are about

characters, and so you need to spend even more time on their thoughts than on their actions, because it's those thoughts that illustrate the character to the reader and give a sense of gravity to their actions. Without their thoughts, the readers never get to know them, and so they won't care what happens to them.

Notice also how restating the player's actions as the scene was unfolding made the construction of this narrative a lot easier. So I suggest you do this sort of restatement whenever you can, but bear in mind that this restatement, although it will make composition of the 1st draft much, much easier, is still only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the overall editing process.

For example, you might want to dramatically expand on the various descriptions. What would the protagonist notice? And what would they think about what they notice? I realize I'm repeating myself, but it bears repeating, as these are questions you're going to need to ask yourself on a continual basis.

And don't forget to look for opportunities to insert a little bit of background, although preferably in small, bite-sized chunks for easier digestion by any prospective readers. Also, as I said before, a narrative voice will need to be established, and in the case of a 1st person narrative, the player is going to need to have a large hand in setting this voice. As you engage in this form of roleplaying with different players, one thing you are nearly certain to notice is that some players will give you a lot of in-character thoughts to work with and others won't. In the case of the former, you're in luck, as you'll have a lot of material to work with, but in the case of the latter, you're going to need to stop the action every so often and ask what their character is thinking.

Let me be the first to admit, this is all a bit tricky, but as far as I can tell, there's no other way. The play log, if it consists merely of actions, consequences, and reactions written in a cursory fashion (i.e., “I swing”, “You hit, 6 damage, and he swings and misses”), will not constitute an engaging narrative. Not only do you need to sprinkle in a lot of description as well as some in-character thoughts, but you also need to dwell on those moments of decision, and you especially need to dwell on the moments of indecision, where the protagonist is agonizing over what to do.

Also, even if you do everything perfectly, the 1st draft will still be a 1st draft, meaning there's a lot more editing (and probably a fair amount of rewriting) you'll need to do if you want to produce something of

professional quality.⁵ However, in terms of simply generating a campaign report of amateur quality, which is nonetheless readable, this method works.

And the good news, for what it's worth, is that going through this process of revising what the player sends you while sprinkling in various thoughts and perceptions the protagonist might be having will likely prompt you to start thinking like a writer, and it may even (*gasp*) feel like work from time to time, particularly as you're getting your sea legs. There might be days you spend an hour or more doing a particular update, because you want to massage it into something that's not too terrible.

But rather than scaring you with how much work you'll soon be doing, let's look at what a 1st draft of the 2nd chat log might look like.

I'd never picked a king's pocket before and found the itch to see what a kingly pocket might possess to be simply irresistible. As he leaned over to point out something on the map, I fell into him, tripping on the rug, as it were, and getting my hand in his pocket. There was something in there, something metal, but before I could make it mine, he turned into me, and I was left with nothing except a hand in his pocket for a moment too long.

"You are most clumsy," the king said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a silver key. "You wanted this, perhaps?"

"I'm so sorry, Your Majesty. I tripped on the rug."

"I'm rather disappointed." He frowned. "I thought I was hiring the greatest thief in all Fairport, but if you're so clumsy, I see I have the wrong man." He began showing me out the door.

"I'm very sorry to have wasted your time, Your Majesty."

As I left, in apparent disgrace, I brushed against him, and the key was in my hand, as perfect a pilfer as I'd ever perpetrated. Pity it would be ill-advised to keep it.

"Fare thee well, Your Majesty," I said,

holding up my prize. "And thanks for the souvenir."

"You little..."

"Your Majesty, picking pockets is a simple matter. Avoiding rugs, however... is a skill I have yet to master. Here's your key, and if you change your mind and decide to give me a second chance, despite my clumsiness, I promise to be more careful."

"Wait," the king said. "Come back."

I re-entered his study, each of us now wary of the other.

"Let me be clear," he said. "I don't trust you any farther than I can dump you out of my *derrière*⁶, but my need is dire, and my purse is large if you can get what I need, thief."

"And what would that be, Your Majesty?"

Once you've completed a 1st draft of a chapter, you then need to share it with the group, so they can...

Step 11: Edit the 1st Draft into a 2nd Draft

First, make sure your 1st draft is in standard manuscript format. In other words, you need to use a 12-point font, one-inch margins, and double-spacing. Also, .docx format is the current standard, so it's best to convert your document into this if you're not already using it.

Second, upload the file to Google Drive⁷. Note, if you don't already have a Google Account, you'll probably need to create one, but fear not. They're free. The only catch I'm aware of is they'll probably use everything you upload to train their AI, but just think of it as a form of immortality.

Third, go to the icon for the file you just uploaded to your Google Drive and open it as a Google Document (right-click, "Open with", "Google Docs").

Fourth, get a link to share what you've written (left-flick on "File", "Share", "Share with others", change "Restricted" to "Anyone with the link", change Role=Viewer to Role=Commenter, and click the "Copy link" button; this will copy the link to your buffer). You can now paste it into a document or email using Ctrl-V.

⁵ It isn't so ludicrous a notion as it might first appear. I've heard that *Record of the Lodoss Wars* started out as a bunch of campaign notes, and the *DragonLance* novels were apparently an RPG campaign before they became books. See https://www.reddit.com/r/rpg/comments/1mq20qs/what_are_some_pieces_of_media_that_use_ttrpgs_as/

⁶ If you're going to share your campaign report with others, it's advisable to edit out any profanity, although, to be perfectly honest, I don't always do this.

⁷ <https://workspace.google.com/products/drive/>

Fifth, send an announcement telling the other people in your group as well as any outside editors about the file you uploaded and giving a deadline for comments. Make sure to include the link you copied to your buffer during the previous step.

Sixth, come back after the deadline and take a look to see what people said, and decide whether or not to adopt their editorial suggestions.

As for the other people in your group as well as the outside editors, here's what they need to do to participate in this step.

First, they need to click the file link contained within your announcement.

Second, they need to make sure they're in "Suggesting Mode" (the word "Suggesting" should appear near the upper-right corner of the document. If they see "Editing" instead, they should change it to "Suggesting" using the drop-down menu).

Third, they should make corrections to the text just as if they were editing a normal document. Instead of their edits becoming permanent, however, they'll show up along the righthand side of the page as suggestions to be either accepted or rejected. They can also make comments by highlighting some text they want to comment on, right clicking it, and then selecting "Comment", and when they finish writing their comment, they need to make sure to hit the "Comment" button so it gets posted along the righthand side of the page along with their editorial suggestions.

When they've finished with their corrections and comments, they can simply close the browser window. And they can come back to the document later by using the same link they originally used to enter the document. As long as other people's comments and corrections haven't been accepted or rejected by the document owner, everyone should be able to see everyone else's suggestions.

Once the 2nd draft's final editor decides that a chapter is truly finished, he or she can merge it into the campaign write-up, putting it online for everyone to download. Yes, there are a lot of steps, but if you follow this general framework, you'll end up with a semi-polished campaign write-up, one that you can share with others.

If you need help with anything including the editing process, let me know. I'd also recommend that everyone get a copy of *The Emotion Thesaurus* by

Angela Ackerman & Becca Puglisi.⁸ In my opinion, this is an indispensable resource for anyone interested in writing fiction. At the very least, the final editor should have a copy.

Jeff Zeitlin, who was the person who asked me to write this, had some specific questions that he wanted me to address, so I'll do my best.

- How can I be sure that my campaign idea is workable under 1PMG?

If it's combat-heavy, then it's probably not a good fit. I can't say this with absolute certainty, of course, but my guess is that 1PMG works best for campaigns that lean toward roleplaying rather than roll-playing.

- How much prep should I expect to need to do, and how often?

It depends on you. Personally, I hardly do any, but I'm irredeemably lazy. That said, I occasionally have a burst of creative energy, and so I'll write down ideas of fragments of potential scenes, so I'll sketch out the qualities or perspective of a particular NPC.

- Do I need anything special beyond the usual stuff for a ttRPG?

It would help to have a copy of *The Emotion Thesaurus*, but even that's not necessary. It's just useful to have a bunch of different ways to describe a character having an emotional moment rather than resorting to saying something like "they looked angry." Ackerman and Puglisi have a whole series of these books, but this one is the most useful.

- Assuming that FTF, VideoConf, and PBEM are all viable, how should I decide which?

It depends on how many people there are in the group. I prefer PBEMing because it's asynchronous. Everyone can do it whenever it's convenient. But PBEMing is slow. Personally, I like slow. The slower the game, the more time I have to think. But your mileage may vary. My suggestion is that you start

⁸ <https://www.amazon.com/Emotion-Thesaurus-Writers-Character-Expression/dp/1475004958>

with PBEMing and then move it to a synchronous medium such as IRC, Discord, or some other platform whenever you want to play out a scene more quickly. As for FTF, I doubt this will work, because the GMs need to have a private way to communicate with each other. VideoConf could work so long as the GMs have a private channel.

- How often should we *meet*?

In the Plankwell PBEM, I made the request that the player respond within three days and said I'd try to do the same. However, we haven't always met this deadline. Life, as we all know, has the awkward habit of getting busy every now and then, but the important thing is to communicate whenever this is happening. For example, whenever one of us is going on some trip and expects to be out of contact for a little while, we let the others in the group know about it, and so we usually end up taking a hiatus from the campaign around Christmas and those sorts of holidays.

Bear in mind, I've never actually talked to either of our players and have only occasionally talked to my assistant GM. So as you can discern from all this, the time commitment is fairly minimal, but it is ongoing. Timothy has mentioned how the PBEM has the quality of being "always on", where every few days it asks for a little bit of time, possibly as much as a half-hour or even longer. That's certainly less time than a weekly campaign will consume, but at least with a weekly campaign, you know well in advance how much time you need to give it and when.

- How do I divvy up the ref work between me and my co-ref?

Talk to your co-ref. See what they're willing to do. Timothy wanted a background role, and that was fine with me. But if you want someone who's more in the foreground, then you need to let them know. It also depends on how much control you're willing to relinquish. If there's an NPC you want played in a particular fashion, you need to do it yourself.

In addition to these questions, I'll add one more that Jeff didn't think to ask.

- Can 1PMG be played with AI taking the part of the player and/or an assistant GM? In short, can it be used as a method of authorship?

And my answer to this last question is that I don't know for certain given the state of the technology as it currently stands, but as time goes by and AIs continue to get smarter, the answer will at some point in the not-too-distant future almost certainly be yes.

I tried roleplaying with two different AIs just as an experiment and documented it in A&E #570 & #586.⁹ However, I also discussed some concerns I would likely have with respect to using true AGIs in this way in my comments to Lisa Padol in A&E #579 & #581. So the short answer is that you're just going to have to experiment in order to find out.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, 1PMG is a potentially expansive territory, so we're going to have to learn our lessons the hard way, by exploring the terrain and learning from our mistakes. If you try this out, let me know what you discover, and I'll be sure to pass it on.

⁹ See 570vas & 586vas at <https://mega.nz/folder/hGYliCkK#a0fr1dDhy3no6Ey5xNPukQ>

POSTSCRIPTS FROM THE PHOENIX THRONE #5

WHERE ROLEPLAYING GAMES ARE THE CENTER OF ATTENTION

FOR *A GENTLE STROLL* #7

GABRIEL ROARK
RANCHO CORDOVA, CALIFORNIA
gabrielroark@gmail.com

JANUARY 1, 2026

FROM THE HERALD'S SCROLL

Happy New Year, readers & contributors! Things are okay in Casa Roark. Celeste & I have been ice-skating at least twice a week since early November. Week before last (as of this writing), our class earned all our Pre-Alpha skill ribbons & we have been working on Alpha-level skills for the last two weeks. The skill ribbons do not indicate mastery of the elements taught nor do they qualify us for participating in Ice Sport Industry (ISI) competitions or programs. The ISI testing standards are stricter than the Learn to Skate program that we are in. Regardless, we are learning the skills that we need for ISI tests (if we desire) & having fun.

We continue to host a D&D 5e campaign (in which I play) & AD&D 1e campaign (which I referee) on alternating weeks. I might have more to say about these games in future issues.

COMMENTS ON *A GENTLE STROLL* #6

AGS #6 features a Jim Eckman watercolor cover with evocative explanatory text on the Collation File page. The inside matter of the volume has a closer balance of fiction & RPG content.

On the fiction side of the equation, "**The Fox's Den: A Zine by N.C. Shapero**" provides the piece, "I Got Where I Wasn't Going." First off, I love the title. Shapero's premise of a protagonist losing time (while the world continues without him), is deft here; Shapero does not waste time with the dramatics or exposition of how the time warp occurs—it simply happened & the reader must roll with it & Dr. Schaefer. His (our) world, thirty years on, is recognizable & largely plausible. To my mind, this makes Schaefer's new world more frightening in that I can see pathways of our current reality to the one that Shapero paints in this story.

I won't remark on my own fiction, the third installment of "Dispatches from the Field."

George Phillis, in "**The Rhodomontadulous Promenade**" #5, presents a short chapter from *No Tears for a Princess*. What I enjoy most about George's writing is the way he portrays the use of magic in Elaine & Grandoon's world. Mages are integral to power & political rule, to the degree that rulers employ magic-users to identify the arrival of spell-wielders from outside the town or other polity. Now I want to work this sort of practice into my AD&D campaign, despite the limitations that Vancian magic imposes on wizards as arcane radar.

I guess I've already transitioned over to the RPG side of AGS #6...why not start with **George's** "Ancient D&D Recreation," since his campaign reports or recreations blend fiction writing with game report. To be sure, all campaign reports or actual plays resemble fiction to a degree, but George's "Our Adventurers March" even more so for dispensing with game mechanics in the presentation. This installment gives veiled glimpses of the hazards of traveling or simply being outdoors at night in George's world, as well as some history. This is very flavorful coming from player character dialogue.

Clark B. Timmins's "**Death Priest**" is a fine piece of prêt-à-porter D&D 5e gaming material. The cultural background is excellent—anthropological, I would say—enabling the referee to find ways to slot the death priest into his or her game such that it is nested in society. It would also be a simple exercise to convert Clark's invention to earlier editions of D&D. Nice work, Clark.

In "**Ronin Engineer**," Jim Eckman sounds busy, with many hobbies & engagements. On the RPG front, Jim suggests looking to Chinese history to inspire the workings & history of science fiction empires. This has merit & applies to fantasy empires, too. In addition, Jim provides three examples of how he designs "basic filler worlds." This is solid advice. I'm still looking forward to reading more/reading Wanderer.

Back in "**The Fox's Den**," **N. C. Shapero** obliged me with a summary of the *APA Mutations*. As a Californian, I am surprised that I had not heard of *Mutations* before. I don't see it listed among RPG Geek's periodicals. I appreciate you filling me in & will keep an eye out for issues on the secondary market & interwebs.

DISPATCHES FROM THE FIELD: FINNEGAN TARREGA'S UNAUTHORIZED INVESTIGATIONS INTO MATTERS ANCIENT AND ARCANE

Copyright is to Gabriel Roark for this material.

Dispatch 4: *Fleurs de Mystère*

Dear Readers,

*This dispatch marks the fourth part of a serial exposé concerning the investigatory activities of my former employer, the Special Acquisitions Section of the Smithsonian Institution. I took employment with the Smithsonian Institution with the understanding that the Institution would support uncensored publication of discoveries made under the its aegis, and that such objects as might bequeath educational remuneration upon the discerning public would be displayed at the National Museum. Regrettably, the Smithsonian reneged consigning my findings to secrecy. Dispatches 1–3 (*Something’s Rotten in Sikyatki*, *Agarrar a un Ladrón*, and *Götterdämmerung*) related the uncanny natural phenomena that we in Dr. Fewkes’ archaeological expedition witnessed at the Tusayan or Hopi ruin of Sikyatki, their probable cause in the theft of sacred artifacts—*kacinas*—from Tusayan, and my confrontation of the thief Balázs Andres and his men at The Bucket of Blood saloon. The current dispatch chronicles the aftermath of the aforementioned confrontation.*

Yours very truly,

Finnegan Tarrega

August 11, 1895, later in the evening

I retreated west toward the opposite end of the alley. Back on the street, men shouted, only to have their voices swallowed by the bellicose weather. One voice broke through the tumult, “I been shot! The sumbitch went in the alley—toward Front Street!”

Damnation, I should have knocked the fool out. I stowed the madman’s journal in my satchel, clambered atop a lidded barrel, shouldered the Hydra carbine, and jumped, catching hold of the roof. I kicked and scrambled, desperate to find purchase before the wet swept me to ground. I had just swung my legs up and out of sight when the swampy glow of Aetherwerk torches filled the storm-darkened alley.

“There’s still some footprints here all right,” called a posse member. I loosed my steel canteen and, propped up on one elbow, winged the container at an unlit kerosene lamp hanging above the boardwalk at the near end of the alley. Glass shattered and the canteen tumbled on wood planks before bouncing into the muddied street. “He’s on Front Street! Stevens, you take some men up north

and circle round! Calhoun, get your guns and go the other way! The rest of you, with me! Let's go get 'im, boys!"

I laid flat and crawled to the south end of the roof while the sidewalks thundered and mud sucked at the mob's boots. Calhoun's men had already cleared Main Street and had headed up Main. Nobody else in town appeared eager to get out in the elements, as the street was empty except for some drunks loitering outside The Bucket of Blood cheering and jeering at the departing posse from the relative comfort of the covered walk. I lowered myself to the street and ran south to the next block. In the deluge, I felt sure that I had sufficient cover to pass unnoticed by the small crowd outside the saloon, at least at this distance. Within a few minutes, I had reached the stables where I had left Bella. The stable master was sheltering in his shack of an office or his home, enabling me to slip into Bella's stall with none but us the wiser.

Bella whickered when I entered the stall, which was warm and dry, owing to the heated subfloor. "Hey, girl," I whispered, and rubbed the horse's muzzle, "I think you're weathering this night a whole lot better than me, Bell." Bella sniffed at my rain-soaked raiment and shook her head.

"You're right, you're right. I should get some of these wet articles off me."

The stall consisted of unadorned pine walls, though tack hooks provided purchase for hat, coat, and satchel. I removed the madman's journal from the satchel and sat on the groom's stool.

The journal's condition was pitiable. The leather cover and binding evinced a typical quantity of distress—polish and darkening at the middle of the spine and on the upper right corner, in addition to a few discolored areas where drink had splashed, forming a palimpsest with the rain spots accumulated when I transferred the book from its owner to my hand—but had three large holes all the way through. The madman's assassins had almost destroyed the object of their search when they usurped the Almighty's prerogative over the victim's life. The men must have used a .44-calibre spreading slug, judging by the extent of the damage. The acrid odors of gunpowder and copper wafted up as I flipped through the journal. Every couple of page turns dislodged minute metal fragments that had burned many leaves while still caught up in the paper. The back cover stained my right hand vermilion. Sticky. The late owner's blood had seeped through the bullet holes and was already drying into an opaque sepia wash over much of the text. I had little time before I needed to move on Andres, if the posse didn't keep up their search and track me down first.

I stopped to read one particular page, my eyes drawn by a line drawing of a stylized lightning bolt crowned at one end by three small dots arranged in a triangle. Little enough of the page was still legible, but retained enough text that the reader could apprehend a theme:

“...The time for the Snake Dance is almost here. ‘Le temps mange la vie.’”

French. Why did it have to be French? The American “Baudelaire” continued:

“The government explorers shouldn’t go to Sikyatki or Walpi—it isn’t safe for anybody to go there! The time is bad and just gets worse. The Flute ceremony was desecrated. Now the Tusayan gods will be taken from Tusayan and with them, their protection. The government men will kill Gatoya’s children and awaken the great god. Ô douleur pour l’obscur Ennemi!”

This entry was dated July 15, 1895. Fewkes had not yet arrived in Holbrook.

Half an hour or so after the events at The Bucket of Blood I had made my way to the hotel in which Andres was purportedly lodging. La Señora occupied half a block at the east end of Main Street. The hotel was a wood frame building plastered in stucco to evoke the feel of Mexican architecture. The foyer and lobby were floored in terracotta tile, and potted palms dotted the area. Left of the entrance sat the guest registry, backed by arched alcoves. Opposite was the bar, filled with silk-waist coated men and women resplendent in bolero suits. The ceiling towered a full two stories above the ground floor and supported an ornate wrought-iron chandelier. A matching ironwork rail and bannister adorned the balcony that overlooked the lobby.

“Señor? May I help you?” An amiable, olive-skinned woman in her late twenties enquired from the registry desk. Her tone was polite despite my disheveled appearance; all of Holbrook was acquainted with the ferocity of the monsoon that beset the town.

I smiled and nodded, “Sí. Tienen ustedes una paquete postal para Andres?”

“Uno momento, por favor.”

The woman turned and walked into a hallway. I stepped up to the desk and turned the guest register back to yesterday’s entries. Andres was staying in Room 203. It was a conceit of the notorious artifact thief that he never travelled under an assumed name. I turned back to today’s entries a moment before the woman returned.

“Lo siento, Señor Andres, pero no tenemos una paquete para usted.”

“Muchas gracias,” I replied, “Tal vez mañana.”

I walked up the stairs to the balcony. Room 203’s door faced the lobby. I stopped and listened with my ear alongside the hinge side of the door. I heard nothing but the murmur of conversation in the bar and the occasional outburst of inebriated laughter. I grasped the door hand and pressed the latch. The catch gave and I eased the well-oiled door inward without sound. I glanced down at the registry desk and saw that the woman was watching me. I smiled and waved, walked into the room, and closed the door behind me.

I found myself in a sitting room furnished with a love seat, two armchairs, and a handsome mahogany coffee table, over which sprawled a corpse. Edisodium fixtures illuminated entire suite, including the bedroom beyond. I drew my revolver and proceeded to the bedroom. Clothing was scattered in front of the armoire and bureau: a boot, handful of ascots, a few shirts, trousers, and a nightshirt. Two trunks still lay near the bed. Warm, moist air whispered into the room from the open window. Looking out the portal, all I could was the charcoal glower of the monsoon.

Surveying the bedroom again, I surmised that Andres had abandoned his lodging in haste. Did he escape through the window? Possibly; the door was unlocked upon my arrival, but was closed fast. I examined the corpse and its immediate surroundings. No blood was evident on the floor or coffee table. The decedent was large and thick-necked; the table sagged under his weight. His unseeing eyes bulged in their sockets and were bloodshot, and his neck bore half a dozen continuous bruises as might two gigantic hands or a length of rope deliver. Contrariwise, the marks were not rope burns, nor were hemp threads adhering to the wounded area. Too, inspection with a magnifier failed to reveal fingernail impressions or terminal depressions as are sometimes left where a strangler’s fingertips bore into flesh. It appeared that the man’s final struggles before succumbing and pitching forward onto the coffee table took place with his back to the door. He was Andres’ bodyguard, then, or part of his retinue. I figure that the assailant gained the bedroom via the window while Andres was packing. Not one for direct confrontation, Andres extricated himself from a fracas with whatever he had in hand, left his room by the front door, and left it to his man to thwart the attacker. I daresay that the strategy’s sensibility was exceeded only by its heartlessness.

As I pondered my next move, something pressed against my right knee and slid up my thigh. I held still and looked down sidelong at my leg. I was greeted by a passionless stare from a wedge-shaped, reptilian head. Coils trailed below, leaving little by little the serpent’s hiding place under the dead man’s abdomen.

I slowly opened my right hand with the intent to grab the beast behind its head and toss it across the room. The snake perceived the threat, rattled a warning, and raised its head and upper body back as though to strike. I ceased all movement and whispered, “Greetings, little brother.” The rattler brought its head close to my upper leg, flicking its tongue in and out. A moment later, its skin rasped along my canvas pants as it curved round my abdomen. Again, it reared back and rattled as though aiming to strike, then brought its head close to my chest and smelled around some more with its red tongue. The reptile was about five feet long, but not more than an inch and a quarter thick. I held stone still and broke out in a nervous sweat as the serpent encircled my neck.

Nota bene: Finnegan Tarrega’s *Dispatches from the Field* are faithfully presented by Gabriel Roark, who works as an archaeologist and cultural resources manager in California. Finnegan’s exploits are fictional, albeit cast in real-world archaeological and social contexts. Representations of historic persons are attempted with the utmost respect; fictional contrivances might not fare so well.

Sources Consulted/For Further Reading

Baudelaire, Charles Pierre. 1857. “L’Ennemi”. In *Fleurs du mal*.

Schlegel, Alice. 1991. “Hopi”. In *North America*, edited by Timothy J. O’Leary and David Levinson, pp. 148–151. *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, Vol. I, David Levinson, editor in chief. G.K. Hall, Boston.

Trimble, Marshall. 1986. *Roadside History of Arizona*. Mountain Press, Missoula, MT.

Tyler, Hamilton A. 1964. *Pueblo Gods and Myths*. University of Oklahoma, Norman.

Comments on A Gentle Stroll 6

Gabriel Roark rct me: The “trackers” or “Hounds of the Huntress” are automated killing machines that were introduced in my Cyberfur campaign (**Other Suns** rules for most things, set in the late 21st to early 22nd century) earlier in the story sequence. The problem, as it happens, is that I’m putting story segments involving Richard Fox very much out of temporal order. Perhaps only appropriate for a series of “unstuck in time” episodes.

Jim Eckman Ronin Engineer: Regarding your reference to **Space Opera** and humans being on the bottom, “Humans are the cockroaches of the universe”. If you look at raw stats in **Other Suns**, there is something of the same effect – most of the other species are from higher gravity worlds, and worlds where natural selection was a lot rougher than on Earth ... and the apex predators got a *lot* nastier on average than humans. But ... here’s a little look into my viewpoint – I used to be a big war gamer ... I still have a *lot* of Avalon Hill wargames, and I particularly liked **Battle of the Bulge**. The rules were weighted so that it was almost impossible for the Germans to accomplish their victory objectives ... so I always wanted to play the Germans in that game. Not, mind you, because I liked (or like) Nazis or Fascism – but, rather, because if I lost that game, I could always say that it was because the rules made it almost impossible for the Germans to win ... and if I won a game of **Battle of the Bulge**, it was because I was far more adept at tactics and strategy – and a hard won victory was sweeter. **rct me:** “Thorne Smith reference”? I’m afraid that I don’t know what you mean, here? As to Furry isekais ... well ... my entire Cyberfur campaign was a furry isekai. I gave each player the option of either playing a “local” (so that they would know everything that an educated individual in the society would know, and have a different set of skills) or they could play “themselves” (and we’d work together to figure out just what their skill percentages would be and which skills they’d have). One of the players opted for “himself” and ended up as a vulpine uplift – he thought everything was going well ... until he went to the grocery store (an Iams Giant store – for uplift foods) and discovered that he could no longer drink most sodas (he couldn’t tolerate caffeine in his new form) and, worse still, he couldn’t eat chocolate (theobromine was the culprit there). And he’d lost the ability to metabolize milk sugars, so couldn’t eat ice cream without getting the runs. And he had to keep his reactions secret from the “locals” who were players ... because, after all, “everyone knows that voops can’t eat chocolate, or ice cream, or drink caffeinated beverages”.

George Phillies The Rhodomontadulous Promenade #5: rct me: The killing machines wandering about on decks of the Homeship (a starship some one hundred kilometers in diameter) is a consequence of a raid by some fairly nasty individuals (Sitekii, as it happens). The medical technology of the Shidran-Kas is ... “impressive” ... I would say. But in the same era, with a lot shorter technic history, the human societies on Earth are “impressive” too. (Genetic engineering to the point of biological uplift, as well as reverse engineering someone else’s FTL technology ... by the early 22nd century).

Where in the Multiverse is Richard Charles Fox?

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

Good Things come in Threes?

First Moves

Richard rolled over, and out of the beanbag bed, and bumped his nose on the semi-resilient flooring. “Blast and...” he began to curse, then noted the change in environment. *I was in bed*

with Alicia, now I'm ... where? He ran a quick inventory. Still male, thank goodness, three fingers and an opposable thumb, silvery grey fur, a muzzle, tail, ... and there's a 'buzzing' in the air that I hear, but not with my ears. Ergo ... Shidran-kas. Again.

Each time in past (if that term really had a meaning) that he'd time dived into one of those poor damned people, it had been unpleasant, but survivable. *If only I could contact Deanna – or better yet, the Historian – and find out just how to trigger the return function on this 'app'.*

He took a deep calming breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Then he began rebuilding the 'wall' that he'd learned to form in previous dives. *I'm going to end up just like Alicia – if I don't go further and end up like Tal-Shierin Tao. And on that 'pleasant' thought...*

The sound of beads banging against the wall drew his attention to the doorway. “Elder brother Tyel-Ashar Shen, elder sister Tyel-Ashar Kan said that you would take your younger brother Tyel-Ashar Po to the Entertainers' Quarter this evening...” The speaker was barely half as tall as the entryway – which, based on past experience, meant that he was likely only perhaps two thirds as tall as an adult Shidran-kas.

“And elder Sister must be obeyed,” Richard said. *At least I have the names this way – assuming that this is 'younger brother'. And assuming that the usual matriarchal societal meme holds true,* he thought. He stretched, yawned, and started towards what he hoped would be the hidden closet that would hold 'his' clothes. He spotted a slightly discolored spot, swiped at it with his hand, and was rewarded the dilation of an opening to a walk-in closet.

The smaller Shidran-kas crowded close as he began his examination of the clothing. *No real smell from the little one, other than a faint citron smell. Ergo, likely pre-pubescent male.*

“We're going to see how elder Sister's new 'toy' spends his free time,” Tyel-Ashar Po said.

Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen turned and glared at the younger male, a low growl in his voice. “I rather doubt that elder Sister would approve of your use of that descriptive term, Tyel-Ashar Po.”

The other went down on his haunches and exposed his throat. “Well, he *is* a hengocha. And she has always complained about how his former 'owner' refused to sell his employment contract to anyone on the Tyel...so what other reason would she have for paying such an outrageous sum for it other than...”

“Perhaps she thought that she might be a more ... sympathetic ... employer?”

“Or she just liked the thickness of his brush...”

“You are far too young to be thinking about such things, Tyel-Ashar Po. Far too young.”

“Not so – it's been nearly four eight-days since my Opening Day! I'm not just a 'possible' any more – I'm a real person!”

Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen shook his head. “You may have demonstrated the Talent,” he said, recalling the meaning of that particular personal day-of-note from an earlier discussion with Tal-Shierin Tao, “but you still have a great deal to learn about life and the Ship. *I* still need to learn a great deal,” *which is true in more than one way,* he thought, carefully within the shield that he was able to maintain. “But let this be a learning exercise – which of my suits would *you* consider appropriate for this proposed expedition to the Entertainers' quarter? And, by the by, just what are we supposed to be doing there?”

The young one stood up and began carefully searching through the racked clothing. “Elder sister wanted us to see what her new ... ‘employee’ ... was doing. Something that she said would be ‘interesting’. And that we could learn from him.” He pulled out a rack with a set of clothes in dark earth tones. “Anything more flamboyant, and you might be mistaken for a *hengocha* yourself.”

Richard couldn't help but laugh. “I may *look* good enough to be one, but I don't move like one – I ‘stomp’ rather than ‘glide’,” he said, knowing full well how hard it was to move like a *hengocha* from his one real experience of early *hengocha* training. “Only the totally unobservant would mistake me for one. Though the more subdued clothing is still a good idea. And since you are starting off with a good idea, I'll give you a chance to grow a bit and select our path to the Entertainers' quarter.” *And that way, I don't have to make a fool of myself in front of someone who might be able to see that his “elder brother” isn't demonstrating the knowledge that his “elder brother” should have,* he thought.

“Goodie! Can we stop at one of the confectioners' shops on the way?”

“I said, ‘a chance to grow a bit’. Is that what an adult would do?”

The younger one visibly wilted.

“Perhaps on the way *back* from the quarter – if you behave yourself.”

#

Richard practically tripped over the computer display as he left “his” room – Tyel-Ashar Po had evidently been using it to play games on. *At least he's not surfing for porn – come to think of it, do the Shidran-kas go in for really “bad” porn?* he thought. They had found dozens of what he'd come to think of as pillow books on the *Kirán*, 'lo these many months ago, but those had all been in the nature of erotic art, with the emphasis on art. “Just what *have* you been playing, lately? I'm not really familiar with the entertainments that you currently favor,” he asked.

“My favorite now is the new Homeship simulation – but I really need to learn more about *D'aka-tro* before I'll be able to more than survive it. At the more difficult settings, the SPB has been using it as a ‘training tool’ for their more junior members,” Tyel-Ashar Po said.

Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen chuckled. “And now you've decided that you're going to become one of the *d'aka-troven*?”

“I'd need to learn a lot more mathematics – and a lot more about the behavior patterns of the People¹ – before I can beat that game, or even stand a chance of having the Ship survive. That's too much work.”

A scent of cinnamon coming from behind him, prompted Richard to spin around; he went down on his haunches, rested his hands (claws down) on the flooring, and bared his throat. “Good evening to you, ship-sister. How may this one be of service?”

Tyel-Ashar Kan looked down at him; “Oh, do get up, T'A'Shen. You look quite silly that way. You're acting as though you were a citizen of the *Tirá!*”

¹ Originally read: “I'd need to learn a lot more mathematics – and a lot more about the People's behavior patterns. That's too much work.” Richard's comment: “Oddly, as a collective, this will take the singular, I think”. Revised accordingly. – Niall

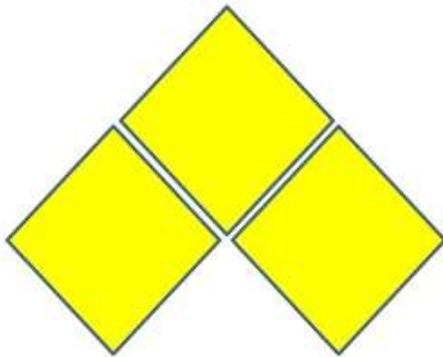
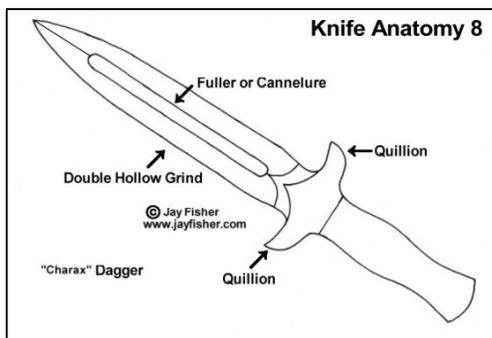
Richard tried to look innocent. “And how should this one act?”

“Sarcasm does not become you, T’A’Shen. You may not be my equal in age, or in status – but you are an equal before the law of the People, and in *our* society,” Tyel-Ashar Kan said.

“Elder Sister,” Tyel-Ashar Po interrupted, “what is that in your knife belt?”

Tyel-Ashar Kan turned towards her younger sibling; it was hard not to notice the scents now boiling off of her. She pulled the *tuu-shir-tal*² out of the scabbard. “It is a ... gift ... from a grateful male.”

“A gift?” Richard asked, as he rose off his haunches to get a closer look at the knife. “It looks well made, but ... is it sharp enough to be of use? The clan mon on the quillon – I don’t recognize it. What clan uses three yellow diamonds in that pattern? And I can’t quite read the ideogram in the fuller...”



sometimes got from Marjorie Elizabeth – just before she would say or do something that *he* would regret.

Tyel-Ashar Kan paused, took a deep breath, in through the nose and let it out through the mouth, her exhalate tinged with the scent of stress hormones. Richard reached over and pulled T’A’Po out of the obvious line-of-fire. “Elder sister, the young one speaks without thinking – please do not...”

“I’m not going to hurt him, T’A’Shen – I think this is a learning opportunity for me, in controlling my temper. *Some* individuals should realize, however, that not every female is as even tempered as I – something you *might* come to understand, Tyel-Ashar Po if you pay careful

“That’s the clan Ashan mon,” Tyel-Ashar Kan said.

“What clan is that?” Tyel-Ashar Po asked. “I don’t remember ever seeing that name in any of the Lists before...”

“It’s an orphan-clan. Most of its members were killed when the *Tal* was gutted some years ago. Well before *your* time, T’A’Po,” T’A’Kan said.

“But where did you get it if it’s an orphan-clan, elder sister? And why would you want such a thing?” T’A’Po asked.

“As I said, I was given this by a grateful male. You should be meeting him shortly. As to why I would want such a thing? Let us simply say that it ... pleases me,” T’A’Kan said.

“If it pleases the elder sister, then it is of worth. But why does it please you?” T’A’Po asked.

T’A’Kan grinned, and Richard began backing up. The feeling he was getting from her was much the same as he

² *tuu-shir-tal* = knife-of-honor. – Niall

attention to what you *might* learn if you speak and, more importantly, *listen* to what my new ... acquaintance ... can tell you,” Tyel-Ashar Kan said.

Richard relaxed, and realized that he'd been holding his own breath; he relaxed and exhaled through his mouth.

“The entertainer was *aka-v'sho*³ before he demonstrated what, on the *Tirál* was unacceptable behavior,” Tyel-Ashar Kan said.

“‘Unacceptable behavior’? Is it also unacceptable on our Homeship?” Richard asked.

Tyel-Ashar Kan laughed – it was a huffing sound, more like lupine uplift laughter than anything else in Richard's experience. “Not unless the Council of the *Tyel* has decided that honor and mercy are ‘unacceptable’. He nearly paid for his lack of willingness to kill an innocent with his own life – and it cost him his position, his citizenship, and eight-squared lashes with a tanglewhip.”

“A ... ‘tanglewhip’?” Richard asked, before he could stop himself. *Your curiosity will get you killed one of these days*, he thought, within the two “walls” he'd managed to erect.

“Be glad that the *Tyel* does not permit the use of such for punishment – it is a steel braided whip, similar to what was used in the Classic Era to ‘place the mark’ on *hengocha*,” Tyel-Ashar Kan explained. “But I'm keeping you, T'A'Shen, from an ... educational ... experience.”

“I'm not sure that I like the sound of that,” Richard said.

Tyel-Ashar Kan grinned. “When you can learn from someone else's lessons, it is far more pleasant than learning the lessons on your own. Though you aren't likely to have to live through what the male who gave me this knife has...”

Richard rose, then bowed to “elder sister”, “I will take that as advice from a wiser soul than I, and I will take younger brother to learn from this *hengocha* who seems to have landed on his feet, likely not for the first time, if I understand your words correctly.”

Tyel-Ashar Kan grinned, and bowed to Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen; her bow was only a fraction less deep than his had been. “You will find him...interesting, I think.”

#

Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen let Tyel-Ashar Po summon up a shuttle car. “A concession to your coming adulthood,” he said. *And because I don't yet know how to do it*, he thought, carefully within the two walls that he had managed to raise.

The drive took the roughly forty minutes (a count⁴'s *kir* as Richard recalled); the small car took them down streets shared by pedestrians and other vehicles in what seemed like total chaos. The pedestrians never seemed to *quite* block traffic, nor did the other vehicles ever actually hit any of the pedestrians, and still somehow their car managed to proceed at easily five times as fast as a person could walk comfortably.

Tyel-Ashar Po acted as though this traffic (and the vehicles autonomous behavior) was perfectly normal.

³ *aka-v'sho* = A crewmember of a Huntership – one of the Homeship's “trouble twisters”, in effect. – Niall

⁴ A “count” (of a person) is 16 of whatever it being discussed. Hence, a count's *kir* would be sixteen *kir*, or about forty minutes). – Niall.

#

When they reached the Entertainers' quarter, Tyel-Ashar Po stepped out of the transit car and pointed at an individual with dark fur wearing a uniform of some sort. "An Outsider!" he shouted.

"Control yourself, Tyel-Ashar Po," Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen said. "And what makes you say, 'Outsider'? All I see a male with dark fur wearing camouflage."

"But it's obvious, elder-brother," T'A'Po said. "A male in uniform – with fur like *that*? I'm going to find out who he is," he finished, and sprinted off towards the other.

Great. Just because he's different in appearance, he "must be an Outsider" – perhaps it's something about the way he's standing, Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen thought. "Just a moment, Tyel-Ashar Po..." he called out, and began to chase after the little one.

"Who are you? What are you doing here? Where are you from? You are different! What are you?" T'A'Po asked in rapid fire as he reached the "other".

"Calm down, little one," the other said, in unaccented *Harashan*. "Where is that elder-sister of yours?"

"Are you the *hengocha* that gave her..." T'A'Po began, just as Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen caught up with him.

"My apologies for the little one," Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen said, baring his throat. "He is still only a few eight-days past his Opening day, and is prone to speak before he thinks."

The other grinned, though none of his teeth showed. "No need to apologize. I take it that you have spoken with Tyel-Ashar Kan?" he asked.

"Are you the *hengocha*?" T'A'Po asked again. The other waved one hand in front of his nose, as if trying to wave away a bad odor.

"No, I do not have that honor. But I forget myself – I am SulDihadobteronir Tuu Ir Lien, ACO of the *Hargan*. I have been enjoying some of the entertainments of the Tyel – on leave."

Altha'ani, Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen thought. *Not worried about being known as such. If I could just find out when **this** timedive is to, perhaps...*

"And I am Tyel-Ashar Po do Tsav, and this is my elder brother, Adjudicator-Fifth Tyel-Ashar Shen do Tsav. Why are you here?" T'A'Po asked.

"To relax, of course," Tuu Ir Lien said. "That, and to buy recordings of some *tirkan* works that are missing from my collection ... and to have some of the best *sharad*⁵ within eight-cubed *ren*⁶. And to renew an old acquaintance, as well."

"You know People?" T'A'Po asked.

He's useful, but I'd best rein him in just a bit, Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen thought. "Perhaps SulDihadobteronir Tuu Ir Lien might wish to see the sights of the Tyel undisturbed?"

⁵ *Sharad* – a multi-layered pastry, reminiscent of baklava. – Niall.

⁶ A 'ren' is roughly a *san*'s (a *san* is about three hours) flight time for the typical freighter, or about thirty-light years. – Niall.

“No, it’s not a problem,” Tuu Ir Lien said. “And yes, little one, I do know ‘People’. But I see a bit differently than you do, I think.” He grinned – this time the grin was less friendly. “Hold out your arm,” he said, and his tone had gone quite cold.

T’A’Po bared his throat, but held out his arm.

Tuu Ir Lien then held out his, next to the little one’s. “What do you see?” he asked.

“Your fur is dark. Mine is the right color...” T’A’Po said.

Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen gripped T’A’Po’s shoulder, his claws sliding out of their sheaths enough to prick at the other’s skin through his fur. **Mind your manners,** he ‘cast.

“Yours is the right color for you – mine is the right color for me. Underneath it, we are the same.” His voice changed, and boomed out, “‘If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?’⁷”

Shakespeare from an Altha’ani? It must be futureward. But how far? Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen thought. “A bit ...”

“Humans would call it ‘ham acting’. But I never claimed to be an actor – or any other form of entertainer, for that matter. Which is one of the reasons for my being here – in your homeship’s *Hengocha* district.”

“For lessons?” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen queried.

“No,” the other said, laughing in the style of the *Shidran-Kas*. “To interview an old acquaintance – a pleasant activity now completed. But if you two are Tyel-Ashar Kan’s younger siblings, your *teaching moment* awaits – in that hall over there,” he turned and pointed.

“You know us?” Tyel-Ashar Po asked.

“Indirectly only – but I wouldn’t spoil your elder sister’s, or the *hengocha*’s surprise,” he said, and bowed before taking his leave.

#

The entranceway to the hall was open, not even privacy beads to temporarily bar passage. It was dimly lit by candlelight. *Candles? In a direct-mass-energy-conversion powered society? Just what is going on here?* Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen thought to himself.

A male off to one side of the hall, adorned only with a crude loincloth, stretched and turned towards Richard and “the little one”. “It is customary,” he said, “for the Harvest Day ceremony, that the hall be cleansed and then only under the light of *taral* wax candles. As it was in eras past, so is it to be in these times.”

“You were reading my surface thoughts?” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen asked.

“Not so much scanning them, as failing to keep out our ‘casting of them, ship-brother. But I have finished cleaning the eight-squared tiles, so I have time to speak with you before taking my rest. You are Tyel-Ashar Kan’s younger siblings,” he said.

“And you are?” Tyel-Ashar Po asked, before Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen could stop him.

⁷ Shylock, from **The Merchant of Venice**, Act III Scene 1. – Niall

The other stood and turned, then glided across the floor, executing a half bow as he walked first to Richard and then to the younger male. “This one is the *kol-ka hengocha Tir...*” he paused for a moment, then recovered. “This one apologizes; he is the *kol-ka hengocha Tyel Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan*⁸”.

“What are you doing?” Tyel-Ashar Po asked.

“I *was* preparing the site for the Harvest Day ceremony. Each of the eight-squared tiles must be properly cleaned and prepared – washed eight times with a series of finer and finer brushes and different cleaning solutions, by the light...”

“Of those candles?” Tyel-Ashar Po interrupted the *hengocha*.

“Manners!” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen said.

“Yes, by the light of those candles,” Tal-Sora Pa finished, treating the interruption as a matter of no significance – not recognizing it, so it “did not happen”.

“Who are you doing it for?” Tyel-Ashar Po asked.

And how long has he been cleaning those tiles? Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen thought, trying to keep his thoughts inside the walls.

“Answering your question first, ship-brother,” Tal-Sora Pa said, brushing back a bit of head-fur, “this ceremony is to be performed for your elder sister. She has performed many services for this humble *hengocha*, for which he is most grateful. It is the *least* that this one can do.” He grinned, and bowed to Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen. “As to your question...” he began.

“I did not ask you...” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen said.

“No, you did not. But this,” Tal-Sora Pa said, lifting a long thin crystal pendant out of his ventral fur, “is a Spinner Crystal – it brings all but the most carefully hidden thoughts out into the open. And you have a tendency, ship-brother, to ‘shout’. Would the honorable adjudicator-fifth be interested in training that might allow him to not do so in future?”

“Yes.” Richard said. *Training of that sort that might be quite useful.*

The *hengocha* released the crystal, and it slid back into hiding in his ventral fur. “But this one forgets himself – in his role as host, perhaps this one could offer the ship-brothers bowls of *tamse*⁹? There is a quite pleasant café down the way from this hall. And after two nights preparations, this one would appreciate a bowl or two of *tamse* himself.”

“That would be most pleasant,” Richard said.

“I want *zhinj!*” Tyel-Ashar Po asked. “I’m an adult, now...”

“Do not be so anxious to assume a full adult’s privileges, little one,” Tal-Sora Pa said. “There are some rather unpleasant responsibilities that go along with those privileges – as you will doubtless discover to your sorrow.”

#

⁸ The third ranked *hengocha*, so accredited on the *Tyel*, Tal-Sora Pa, of clan Ashan. – Niall.

⁹ A mildly stimulating drink, somewhat the equivalent of tea in human societies circa 2000-2015 CE. – Niall.

“But why, hengocho Tal-Sora Pa, are you performing this ... ‘Harvest Day Ceremony’? And just what *is* this ceremony? I’ve never heard of it...” Tyel-Ashar Po said, slurping up a noodle-broth combination from one bowl in between gulps from a large bowl of *tamse*.

Tal-Sora Pa looked at the younger male, carefully keeping his expression under control. **The young one is clearly undergoing a growth spurt,** he ‘cast to Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen.

Richard chuckled. Some things seemed to be universal, at least – the ravenous appetites of “teen-agers” being one of them.

“Your last question first. The Harvest Day Ceremony is an ancient tradition among the People, not one as often performed as in eras past, due to the length and expense involved. It requires a highly ranked *hengocho* to perform it properly, as well as the services of several priestesses of the Way, and the preparations alone take over an eight-night to perform. First, I had to arrange rental of the hall for one-eight-and-four nights, then I had to clean the tiles – work that took me a good six san to complete – next we’ll need to have eight priestesses come in and sanctify the hall, which will require a contribution to Temple for their time and effort, which will amount to another two-eights nights of person-work time. Then the preparation of the meals, which will take me another two nights. Only after another round of blessings of the food, this by only one priestess as the food is prepared, can the ceremony proceed. Then there is the ceremony itself, which will require my services for an entire evening. Then afterwards, I must again clean the hall – another two night’s work, and will require another priestess to bless the resultant clean hall.”

“But elder-sister is wealthy – she can afford these...” Tyel-Ashar Po began.

“Your elder-sister is not paying for any of this. I am,” Tal-Sora Pa said.

T’A’Po stopped moving, his drinking bowl halfway to his muzzle.

“As to ‘why’, the answer is simple; it is in return for certain ‘favors’ performed for me by your elder-sister,” Tal-Sora Pa said. “It is not in payment for those favors, but rather ... as a favor from one of the People to another.”

“Certain ‘favors’?” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen asked.

“Yes,” Tal-Sora Pa said. “As an adjudicator, you are aware I am sure that ‘life-duration’ employment contracts are considered ‘slavery’ under the laws of the *Tyel*. Trading in such – with one exception – is a crime punishable by *silencing*. ‘Where the contract is purchased for the express purpose of freeing the enslaved individual, and no further conditions are imposed upon her or him, this act shall not be considered criminal before the People’. Or, at least, that is my recollection of the relevant rule here.”

“But you said, ‘favors’ plural,” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen said.

“Yes. In addition to purchasing my employment contract on the *Tirál* – at the cost of several million *Tirál* marks and then freeing me, your elder-sister purchased first citizenship for me on the *Tyel* – at a cost of over a hundred thousand *Tyel* marks – and then excellent cubic here in the Quarter, at a cost of ... I do not know how many thousands of *Tyel* marks. But these were hardly the least of her ‘favors’. And all were given without any demand of services or future expected return compensation.”

“If these were not the ‘least of her favors’, what else did she give you?” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen asked. *Curiosity*, he thought.

The *hengocha* laughed. “As an *aka-v'sho* on the *Tirál*, I had a ship-share in the *Tirál* before my ‘downfall’. Your elder-sister purchased, or somehow legitimately acquired, three ship-shares in the *Tyel*, which she gifted to me. ‘So that you will have a legitimate and continuing source of income beyond my control’ were her words.”

“Then you’re richer than most merchant princesses!” Tyel-Ashar Po exclaimed.

“You might say that,” Tal-Sora Pa said. “My performing the Harvest Day Ceremony is a small expression of my joy at your elder-sister’s gifts. It carries a special meaning for her.”

“A ‘special meaning’? Pray, tell, what?” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen asked.

“We met on the *Tirál*, when she hired my services as a *hengocha* – to perform the Harvest Day Ceremony. And instead of the usual conclusion – where ‘certain services’ are frequently performed by the *hengocha* for the female client, she wanted to discuss *d'aka-tro*. She was, at the time, a member of your strategic planning board at a senior level.”

“So this ceremony has a special meaning for the both of you?”

“Yes. And in freeing me from the *Tirál*, T'A'Kan has done more than I could have asked in my wildest dreams. You – both of you – have no idea just how fortunate you are in having been born to this ship.” This was said with an even tone, underlaid with an absolute certainty.

“Yes we do! The *Tyel* is the best Homeship of all the People!” Tyel-Ashar Po said with absolute certainty.

“I’m afraid that you’ll have to explain – because I don’t understand,” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen asked. “I can only guess, and would rather confess my ignorance.” He ignored the slightly dropped-jaw look of his younger sibling; but saw the slightest gleam of appreciation in the eye of the *hengocha*.

“To explain, I’ll need to ask you a few questions. Tyel-Ashar Po – what do you want to do for the ship when you are fully grown?” Tal-Sora Pa asked.

“I want to be a pilot – not on one of the shuttles, but on one of the probe ships. To go out and help find new markets,” Tyel-Ashar Po said.

“While you, Tyel-Ashar Shen, you serve as an Adjudicator-fifth do you not? As an interpreter of the law?”

“Yes, but I fail to see your point, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan. I’m sure that you have one – but I’m afraid that I don’t quite see it, yet,” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen said.

“You’re both males,” Tal-Sora Pa said.

“Explain, please, elder? I don’t understand,” Tyel-Ashar Po said.

“On the *Tirál*, males do not serve as Adjudicators – of any rank. And pilots? On probe ships?” He shook his head and made the flat-handed gesture signaling “forbidden”, palm parallel to the floor, claw tips ever-so-slightly visible.

“But it was said that you were *aka-v'sho*¹⁰. Isn’t that a contradiction?” Tyel-Ashar Po asked.

¹⁰ Hunter-ship crew. – Niall.

“No – my function was as purser and load-master, a position suitable for a male. And as a trained *hengocha*, my ‘talents’ could best serve the ship in matters other than the most obvious. I was, thankfully, not *always* required to perform some of the less pleasant duties associated with my profession,” Tal-Sora Pa said. “I was a trained pilot *before* I was orphaned, and long before I became *aka-v’sho*. Talents and skills that are not commonly expected of males can prove ... useful ... in certain situations.”

“The ‘less pleasant duties’?” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen asked, unable to restrain his curiosity.

“Many *hengocha* are trained assassins as well as experts in the pillow and entertainment skills. An area, in the end, that proved my downfall on the *Tirál*. I could not kill on command. It was a ‘failing’ as viewed by the *aka-v’shosin*¹¹,” Tal-Sora Pa said.

“That does not sound like a failing to me – that sounds like you are nicer than your colleagues. Doesn’t it, elder brother?” Tyel-Ashar Po said.

“It does; particularly as it is sourced in the strength of ethos, not any weakness of spirit or will. But apart from our greater freedom of choice in our service to the ship, how are we so much better off than we would be elsewhere?” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen asked.

“A fish does not notice water,” Tal-Sora Pa said, shaking his head in an oddly human gesture, and making the odd huffing sound of Shidran-Kas laughter. “Tyel-Ashar Po, who would you vote for in the next Undercouncil election?”

“I’m not yet old enough for that responsibility, elder Tal-Sora Pa. But I like Tyel-Kana Pir do Saval – he seems to be the most rational of the candidates from our super-clan, and he seems to take his time to make decisions. He also seems to want to hear as many different points of view as he can before deciding on a course of action – and he at least *says* that he wants everyone to be well fed and entertained,” Tyel-Ashar Po said.

“Bread and circuses only?” Tal-Sora Pa asked.

“No, elder Tal-Sora Pa. He seems to value the collective good. His ideas regarding distribution mechanisms on ship-share-values have been presented and accepted by the whole Council! And he has...” Tyel-Asha Po said.

“Yes, he seems to know what *he* is doing, and your elder brother – and eventually you – will have the chance to *vote* to decide if he, or his successor holds power. And if he does hold power – a male, I might note – he will hold it for only a limited time, before returning to the general service of the collective.” There was a touch of awe, and more than a note of pleased delight, in Tal-Sora Pa’s voice as he said the last.

“Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time¹²,” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen muttered.

¹¹ *Aka-v’shosin* – the collective of the Huntership crews. Basically, the crews of all the Hunterships for a particular homeship (seldom more than eight to twelve such crews). They form the “special operations command”, in effect, commonly reporting directly to the Council of the homeship – they are “trouble twisters” or hatchetbeings for those in power. – Niall.

¹² Winston Churchill (House of Commons, 11 November 1947), here quoted from <https://richardlangworth.com/worst-form-of-government> and attributed to *Churchill by Himself*, page 574 thereon. – Niall

“Indeed, yes, Adjudicator-fifth Tyel-Ashar Shen. But most homeships live under what can be best described as ‘the law of fang and claw’. The religious and clan leaders, not to mention the top *d’aka-troven*¹³ – all of whom would be female on many other homeships – rule with unsheathed claws. Here? You choose your leadership – and the leaders remain in power only so long as they perform their duties for the betterment of all. How long has it been since one of your councilors left office wealthier than when she – or he – entered office?”

“I’m afraid that I don’t know – I’ve not researched that aspect of our leadership,” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen said. *And that’s the whole truth*, he thought.

“I have,” Tal-Sora Pa said. “It has been more than two-eighths turns of the Wheel¹⁴. On the *Tirál*, Tirál-Tan Vol – the sole male member of the Council – increased his wealth by more than eight ship-shares in the last turn of the Wheel. And he was by far the least successful of the Councilors. Of course, being a male, it was expected...”

“So, we have more opportunity here, but what else do you see? You see with the eyes of a former outsider, after all...” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen asked.

“Your freedoms – freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly...I could go on, but you are familiar – so familiar – that all this seems perfectly natural to you both. You are fish, who do not notice the water. For a time, when I went out from our Huntership on to the *Tiral*, I had to go ‘escorted’ by one of the female *aka-v’sho* – at the end of a choke chain leash. At other times, I was forced to wear clothing that covered me from ear tip to tail tip – entirely in yellow. You move about freely, you do not require female escorts, and you can speak your minds and do as you wish, so long as you do not harm others.”

“Your right to move your fist ends where my nose begins – and where my nose begins is what the Law defines,” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shen said, guessing (he hoped successfully) that the statement encapsulated the truth the other was trying to impart.

“Exactly. And on the *Tyel*, that law is defined carefully to allow for this strange thing called ‘freedom’, which is frequently lacking on other homeships. You have a great gift – and as that gift has been provided to me as well, well, I do appreciate it.”

“Do you really like elder sister?” Tyel-Asha Po asked.

“If I did not, I would not have traded *tuu-shir-tal* with her. I intend to be ‘hers’ for so long as she will tolerate my ... sometimes idiosyncratic behaviors,” Tal-Sora Pa said.

“If you can tolerate our ‘behaviors’, I am sure that we can learn to tolerate yours. But we are doubtless keeping you from a well-deserved rest, Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan,” Richard/Tyel-Ashar Shan said.

The other bowed low, and glided off, seeming to float across the decking.

A Change in Time and Place

Richard rolled out of the bean bag bed, and found himself nose down in dirt. *Dirt? What’s happening here?* he thought, and then ran what was becoming a “standard check”. *Three fingers*

¹³ Hunt-science specialists (or sociodynamicists, in other parlance). – Niall.

¹⁴ The Shidran-Kas calendar has 16 “astological” signs (think of it in much the same fashion as the Chinese calendar). Each “turn of the Wheel” amounts to 16 Han-years, or roughly 29.5 terrestrial years. 16 turns of the Wheel, then, is roughly 471.6 terrestrial years, or nearly five generations of Shidran-Kas. – Niall.

and a thumb, muzzle, tail, still male – thank God! – and ... dark fur, almost black? His hands went to his face again, checking over the features by touch more carefully this time. He took a deep breath, and let it out with an audible “whoosh”. *Ok, slim muzzle, sharp features – very much like vulpine uplift, but subtly different in detail. At least it's not the heavy, almost lupine, features of the Sitekii.* He shuddered – the last time he dove into *those* relatives of the *Shidran-Kas* had been a step closer to the pit, and not one that he cared to repeat.

Ok, let's take this a bit at a time. The silent “whisper” of other minds was not present. *I'm alone?* The room was dark, another more conscious breath – in through the nose – the smells of plants and growing things. *Not on board a ship?*

He pawed at the dirt, spraying it between his legs; two hand spans down, his claws scraped on a hard material. He cleared a space perhaps three hands wide – it looked and felt like the decking material that he'd seen and felt before on other Homeships. *Now why the dirt?*

A door dilated; another *Shidran-Kas* stepped through and stood over him. “I spent more than three hundred marks to give you that garden, and all you can do is dig in it?”

Richard looked up and breathed deep – the cinnamon scent practically overwhelmed him. “Ah, ship-sister, this one was sleeping – and he woke up uncertain as to where he was...”

“And so, your first response was to try and dig a den for yourself? Are you regressing to some strange pre-civilized state?” the other asked.

Richard took a deep breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth – a cleansing breath – before he tried to answer. He looked up at the female, noting odd spots of color on the fur of her hands. He bared his throat, and looked at a point over her right shoulder. “This one was ... asleep. The actions of this one were ... not rationally directed, and ...”

The female settled down on her haunches, reached out and ruffled the fur of his head, between his ears. “By all the gods, Ishan-Tal Sharan do Ashan, I wasn't complaining. But you seemed so intent on having this ‘natural footing’ that finding you scattering it about was something of a surprise. You need not prostrate yourself before me – I'm not one of the Old Gods, demanding constant worship,” she said, and then leaned forward to lick the fur that she had just ruffled.

“This one does not wish...”

The female sighed. “Can you *please* speak to me as an equal? At least, when we're in private?” her voice carried more of a whine than a growl.

Richard settled back on his own haunches. “Habits, ship-sister. Sometimes rather hard to break,” he replied, rubbing his nose.

The female shook her head in a strangely human gesture. “I wasn't the one who put those scars there – and I'd not add to them, if I was given any choice in the matter. But I came to show you something...”

“Something nice, perhaps?” Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan asked. *At least I have a name, he thought, within two carefully but hastily raised “walls”.*

“Well ... I'd like to think so. I was hoping that I'd get your opinion – an honest one?” the female stood, and held out a hand for him.

Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan do Ashan took the offered hand and stood. “Lead on, and I will do my best to not displease the honorable gentlebeing...”

The female looked down at the dirt covering the floor and shook her head. “I asked for honest, I meant honest. If I can’t convince *you* how could I convince any of the People?” She leaned forward and licked the end of Richard’s nose. “I won’t eat you – at least, not in a painful way – if you tell me what you actually think.”

Another deep, calming breath; Richard held it for three or four heartbeats before exhaling. “Perhaps you should show me whatever this is, that I should judge, before ... other things?”

The female laughed. “You’re blushing! I can’t believe ... no, I can ... because I’m seeing it with my own eyes. *You* are blushing in response to a statement with sexual overtones? It’s cute – and I can tell from your scent, that it’s not faked. You really must explain to me someday how you can do that – unless it would disclose some Guild secrets that you’re sworn to conceal.”

“Someday, gentlebeing. But you had something that you wished to show me?”

The female laughed, and pulled Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan do Ashan after her. The hallway outside “his” room was more familiarly constructed; the floor had the dark glass appearance, and the slightly resilient feel under his feet. A few feet down the corridor, and the female signaled for him to close his eyes. *A surprise of some sort – and it’s supposed to be a good one*, he thought.

She guided him through another door, and then pulled her hands away from his eyes. “You can look, *Ish’T’Sharan*.”

The affectionate-diminutive form, he thought, then stared, dumbstruck at the painting before him. *Dancer at the Dawn*, he thought. He started to move towards the painting, one arm outstretched...scenting something which....

The female pulled him back. “The paint’s not dry yet, *Ish’T’Sharan*, and I’ve yet to imbue it with the proper ‘feelings’.” She paused, holding him back gently. “Do you recognize him?”

“The fur color...”

“Well, I did take some liberty, there. I changed the fur patterns as well, but the body shape, and the face...”

“Do I look *that* young? I thought...”

“You’re barely two turns of the Wheel past your Opening Day, *Ish’T’Sharan*. It’s nothing for you to be ashamed of – especially given your status as a fifth-ranked Greatship *hengocha*.”

This must be Ishan-Shiran Shen – and now I’m really sorry that no one really knows what she was like “now”, Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan thought, within a third “wall” that he managed to raise, mind swirling in the time-sense of a Timedive. “But the fur is ... silver ... and mine is ...”

“Black¹⁵, yes. I thought that the lighter color would be more in keeping with ... youth and optimistic ‘feel’ that I intended for this piece. And the touch of yellow is a more subtle addition than it would be if I painted your fur color accurately.”

“Yellow is the color of death...” memories from other Timedives came flooding in.

¹⁵ Actually, it would be red, but since they don’t see the color “red” any more than we can differentiate near infrared into distinct colors other than “black”, they’d both see his fur as that lack of color. – Niall.

“Yes. To properly balance the optimism and joy of youth, one must add the proper counterpoint – the note of ‘all things are mortal’.”

“Have you thought of what to paint next? And how you intend to ‘embue’ them as well?” Richard/*Ish’T’Sharan* asked, his curiosity irrepressibly breaching his walls. Then he ducked his head and exposed his neck reflexively.

“I was actually planning on working in solids – but ... do you like what I’ve done so far with this painting?” *Ishan-Shiran Shen* asked.

Richard/*Ishan-Tal Sharan* took a deep breath. “What you have done so far is ... moving. But ...” he paused, thinking for a moment of the other two paintings that he’d seen of the triptych. *She’s captured the feeling of almost childish joy but ... that touch of yellow? A feeling that the universe holds infinite opportunities, yet with death hanging over all?* he thought. Echoes of certainty of her/his deaths, of the depth of meaning to their kin – all beings – roared through his consciousness...along with the wonder of his presence at this moment, with this creator.

Ishan-Shiran Shen’s eyes widened, then the pupils narrowed down to knife edged slits.

Richard/*Ishan-Tal Sharan* backed up and bared his throat. *I must have let it leak past the walls...* he went down on his haunches as he noted the female’s expression and her focused predator-on-prey stare lingering.

She broke off the stare, then spun to focus back on the painting. She bowed her head, and stretched out her arms; Richard/*Ishan-Tal Sharan’s* fur stood on end, and the air smelled suddenly of ozone. Richard/*Ishan-Tal Sharan* backed up carefully, as silently as he could without standing up.

There was a soundless “snap”, and *Ishan-Shiran Shen* spun around to face him; she closed the distance, wrapped her arms around Richard/*Ishan-Tal Sharan* before he could even begin a block, and licked his nose. “A perfect image, and thought, *Ish’T’Sharan*. And you were worried that you would be the ‘lesser half’ of our partnership! Now what was that other thought – the one that you *did* hide?”

Richard/*Ishan-Tal Sharan* took a deep, calming breath. The cinnamon scent of the female burned into his sinuses, and his fingers and toes began to tingle. *I know that feeling*, he thought.

“Well, I’d *hope* I could make you feel that way,” *Ishan-Shiran Shen* said as she disentangled herself from the male and stepped back. “For once, I’ll give you the space you need to gather your thoughts.” She was grinning, and the low rumble in her voice reminded Richard of *Shidran-Kas* laughter.

“Well, I was thinking of it as, perhaps, a triptych. Three paintings. You’ve done what I might call ‘Dancer at the Dawn’ – it needs two more, perhaps? One showing the dancer in full maturity – with perhaps a feeling of restrained power. And then one showing the dancer in old age, in the end of life, feeling that there is the real possibility of continuing the struggle: perhaps only for a few heartbeats more, but that skill and understanding can still win some small victory before the claws descend.” *Better to tell the truth*. For the briefest of moments, Richard/*Ishan-Tal Sharan* felt the ages that separated ‘his’ times, the depths of sorrows and courageous striving...and simultaneously sensed the pheromonic bubbling of his current body’s blood and the tangled griefs of passings and gaps of his time-scattered soul.

“Someday, *Ish 'T' Sharan*, the Guildmistress will recognize that your artistry goes beyond mere dance and music,” Ishan-Shiran Shen blinked, absorbing ... what? ... from her partner, before she turned and looked back at the painting. “I had thought that I would just give you a small present ... but your point is well made. There is much more to be done here. Please leave me now, so that I can work,” she said. Her voice was abstracted and remote, as was her sense of presence; what could be felt/smelt/sensed was a demanding creative upwelling that absorbed her entirely.

Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan bowed low to the artist's back and backed out of her workroom, as she began setting up two more canvases. *What have I done?*

#

Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan looked in on the artist several times over the next three nights. She was hard at work each time, ignoring him completely as she apparently just “splashed” paint on the two canvases. *Yet the triptych is taking shape*, he thought, after his last covert viewing.

*She's not acknowledging my presence in the entryway, and – face it – I'm beginning to get cabin fever. Here I am, in another homeship, and ... temporarily, at least, not tied to anything that I **have** to do. Explore?* It was a foregone conclusion that the combination of curiosity and cabin fever would drive him out of their shared quarters. That, and the fear of ‘smudging’ – or further smudging – the looping swirls of Time.

#

First, appropriate clothing, he thought, looking down at the filmy robe that he'd been lounging around in for the last three nights. It was *so* comfortable, and it covered all of the “naughty bits” – except, perhaps, for the underside of his brush. It had been easy this time to find and add the tail-cover from his little “store”.

Something a bit more conservative, perhaps, than a simple robe? The walk-in closet held more clothes than he was used to dealing with – there seemed to be a dozen different variants of “all the colors of the rainbow”, as well as several kilt and tunic combinations in earth tones – though these all appeared to have thick yellow threads interwoven with the brown. *Yellow is the color of death ... but, then, so is black and the “little black dress” is still considered sexy for human females.*

Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan shook his head, sadly. Here, he was the social equivalent of a female human – a “pretty little thing”. Looking himself over in a full-length mirror in the closet, he could see that he was well muscled – not like a weightlifter, but like a dancer. His face was remarkably symmetric and his eyes were a deep blue. There were powders, and glitter, what was clearly lipstick, along with assorted different colored tiny bells. *Now, how do I weave these chains of bells into the fur of my brush as I've seen other hengocha do?* He concentrated on how Tal-Shierin Tao had looked, and found it remarkably easy to call up a near perfect image of that *hengocha*.

He carefully wove eight strings of the tiny bells into his brush in the pattern that he had last seen Tal-Shierin Tao use; what had seemed an insurmountably difficult task at first soon became easy – after he had fouled up the pattern a dozen times, that is. *Rome wasn't built in a day – and at least I'm not falling into the Talent-curse of a perfect full sensory memory ... yet.* He shuddered; there was that side to the Talent that scared him, even as it intrigued him, even as he found himself somehow hungering for it. *Another thing to be careful of. Though it doesn't hurt to have it “here” – and I haven't started developing the Talent “back home”, so I should be safe for a bit longer.*

#

With the matter of clothing resolved, and his “traps” all set up, he checked one more time on the artist in her workroom. She was still up, despite the time approaching “High Sun”, brushes and paints flying; the other two paintings in the triptych were definitely taking shape. *Ishan-Shiran Shen* only acknowledged his presence with a wave of her tail, and a grunt in response to his statement that he was “going out for a bit”.

When Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan stepped outside the residence, the first thing that struck him was the volume of sound; every third person seemed to be playing a musical instrument (heavy on wind and percussion instruments). What next hit him was the sheer number of *Shidran-Kas* in the corridors. *It's High Sun – the equivalent of midnight “back home” – and just a few steps outside “my” quarters it's like a Wall Street sidewalk at 5 pm!*

He growled and spun around to snarl at a female who had clearly been too familiar with the underside of his brush. He leaned back; the female was wearing clothing much like his own – all the colors of the rainbow (along with two that he knew his “human” eyes would have been unable to see).

“Apologies, ship-brother,” the other said, going down on her haunches and baring her throat. “But as *hengoshin-to-Spacer ... or hengoshin-to-hengocha*, this one thought that it would not be objectionable.”

He took a deep breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth. And he felt his hackles settle; *the response to the surrender reflex, if not hard-wired, is so conditioned by the society as to be automatic*, he thought. “I am not angry,” he said, “I was more surprised than anything else. The ship-sister came *too close* to rather sensitive parts of this one’s anatomy.”

“In apology, then,” the *hengoshin* said, “perhaps we may exchange *kisses*? This one always swallows...”

Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan’s right hand went to one of the daggers sheathed at his belt. *The knife-of-honor*, he thought. *Unconscious response?* “This one is ... associated strongly ... with another female. However attractive the possibility might be, this one does not wish to betray a trust once given.”

“A pity, that. But this one will honor the ship-brother’s commitment. This one is the *lir-ka hengoshin Tal Tal-Hanar Po do Ashan*. And the honorable ship-brother is...” she said, bowing from her seated position, her muzzle settling onto the decking.

“This one is known as the *lir-ka hengocha Ishan Ishan-Tal Sharan*,” he replied. *And I’ll be damned if I know what “this one’s” clan association is.* “But what is one from the **Tal** doing here on the *Ishan*?” he asked, more out of curiosity than any other reason.

The *hengoshin* rose and grinned at Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan. “It is still only the *Festival*, but this one enjoys the lead-up to the greater celebrations of a Great Gathering. And the business is always better before the higher ranked among the Guild begin *their* performances for the crowds. And the **Tal** is only a small Homeship – the *Ishan* is far larger ... with more opportunity for profit, especially during *Festival*.”

“Get in first, find the best places, and rake in a few marks early? And here I thought that the entire point of the Gathering and lead up was to show how great the wealth of the Ship-and-her-People was by providing services freely that would otherwise be provided only for payment.”

Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan made his voice light and consciously relaxed all of his upper body muscled, signaling a transition to good humor.

“Ah,” the *hengoshin* said, “true for *us*, but if you look, you’ll see hordes of *Spacers* in the crowd. The males among that group of Groundlings do enjoy a greater freedom – and the ones that come to *Festival* are often as not **looking** for something ... a little bit adventurous ... and are willing to drop a few marks for ... a kiss or two?”

Marks, asking to be fleeced. Richard/Ishan-Tal Sharan laughed lightly – looking at the others around them, signaling a ‘laugh with’ as opposed to a ‘laugh at’. “This one must admit to being somewhat naïve in certain regards. How does one tell which are *Spacers* and which are people?”

The *hengoshin* laughed. “Look to the color of their fur – if it’s black, like yours...”

“I am **no Spacer**,” he interrupted, his hackles rising unconsciously.

“I already apologized – but with only one in eight-squared among the People having your fur coloration, and all **but** one in eight-squared among the *Spacers* having your fur color...you can understand this one’s ... mistake?” The *hengoshin*’s throat was again bared.

Richard/Ishal-Tal Sharan took a deep breath, his hackles settling. *Definitely hard-wired*, he thought. “Understood, and forgiven.” The *hengoshin* bowed again and sauntered off; the open space that had opened around the two Guildmembers during their “discussion” quickly filled and Richard lost sight of the *hengoshin* in the mass of bodies.

Ok, that was something that I didn’t expect. More the fool, I. But ... Altha’ani, on a Home-ship? Admittedly, “Spacers”, but ... just what are they like, and why are they willing to ... ah ... participate? ... in the parties of Festival? It was another mystery within an enigma. He took another deep breath, in through the nose and, before he exhaled, found his muzzle turning in the direction of a scent source. *Hot oil? Here I thought that the Shidran-Kas were pretty strictly carnivorous. Fried meat, perhaps?* But the scent hadn’t been of meat, fried or otherwise. And it didn’t smell of a sweet fruit. So, curiosity (and the new scent) led him off down the maze of corridors of the Entertainers’ district.

I’ll have to remember that in Harashan, “kiss” has an entirely different connotation than it does in English, he thought, carefully within the “walls” he’d erected. *I dodged the bullet again. But if the fur colors are that distinctive, I should be able to find a “Spacer” or two – and they might give me a bit greater insight in just how the War started. And that is something worth looking into – not just to satisfy my curiosity.*

#

Richard/Ishal-Tal Sharan wandered about through the crowd, picking up fried meat on a stick here, jam filled pancakes there, and several bowls of steaming zhinj (these last practically forced upon him by assorted brewers – both professional and amateur). It was like Carnival, Mardi Gras and Day of the Dead festivals all held together with a rope of 4th of July. *Definitely a potlatch*, he thought. But at a point, he had to search out a quiet space, somewhere where there weren’t **quite** so many revelers, quite so many enticing food sellers, or quite so many musicians.

Once he started seriously searching for a quiet space, it only took a few minutes (*a kir or two*, he thought, translating easily now, almost without thinking). But his quiet was interrupted a kir after he settled down onto the small pad and rested his hands and muzzle on the adjacent table.

“Which ship are you from?” a voice he unconsciously identified as female said from somewhere behind him. He turned, and found himself facing what looked like one of the People in a gi, a yellow belt holding it closed at the waist. *Cinnamon scent, so female*, he thought.

“This one is of the *Ishal*,” he said, as he looked the other carefully. “And the gentlebeing?” he asked, bowing and bearing his throat. *Never hurts to be polite – especially when these folk don't have safeties or trigger guards on their energy weapons.*

“I'm off the Wings of Fire, eight-squared days out of *Taral*, we were carrying *tofal* leaves, first harvest,” the female said, in accent less *Harashan*. “Got a very good price for them – your ship-sisters were happy to buy. Seems that someone's stock was running low, and with *Festival* starting, many someone's were happy to have new leaves for your *tamse*,” the female settled down onto a pad next to his. “Akal Ira Chen, *shidra-salach* of the *Wings of Fire*,” she finished, reaching out both arms towards Richard, palms down.

Master-and-owner-aboard of the starship Wings of Fire, Akal Ira Chen, Richard/ Ishal-Tal Sharan translated. “So, your pockets are full of coin, and you're looking to enjoy *Festival*?” he asked, stretching his hands out with his palms sideways to gently tap hers, before withdrawing them again.

The female laughed. “More than just a few coins,” she said, pulling a handful of purple cards out of the pouch in front of her skirt. “More than just a few coins,” as she spread the cards out so that Richard/Ishal-Tal Sharan could easily count them.

Two-eights purples – over eight million Ishal-Marks? And she's just carrying them around in her pocket? He couldn't help it – he sat up in shock.

“Oh, come now, Ishal-Tal Sharan do Ashan! You shouldn't be *that* surprised. We brought in six-eights cargo pods stuffed with *tofal* leaves – and that's a *lot* of *tofal* leaves. They're not particularly expensive per *koran*, but when the number of *korans* starts to run into one-eight-and-two digits...”

“I can't do the numbers in my head, gentlebeing,” Richard/Ishal-Tal Sharan said. *This one must know of me – knowing what clan “I” belong to.* “But how do you know my clan association, pray tell?”

“You're partnered with *Ishan-Shiran Shen*, are you not? Or are there two fifth-ranked Greatship *hengocha* with fur like yours and that cute little muzzle with those eyes?”

“This one sees that the gentlebeing is more familiar with this one than this one is with the honorable gentlebeing...”

“I've known *Ishan-Shiran Shen* since before your Opening Day – I'll admit that this is the first time I've been on your Homeship in ...” she paused, clearly digging through her memory for the time, “something on the close order of four turns of the Wheel. But we've kept in touch – and you do have a ‘look’,” she said, grinning and looking on him with a predator-on-prey stare that seemed remarkably like “Cougar's” when she was just about ready to pounce.

“Ah, gentlebeing...” Richard/Ishal-Tal Sharan began, blood rushing to his ears.

“Don't worry, ship-brother, I'm not looking for a sniff or a peek,” the spacer interrupted. “But *Ishan-Shiran Shen* said in her last communication that someone – I assume you from the

description – could almost blush on command. For a *hengocha*, that must be a valuable talent – to be able to tell one story with your body, regardless of what the story was within your ‘walls’.”

“It’s not something that is really a talent of mine,” Richard/Ishal-Tal Sharan said. *I can still disassemble with the best of them – and I am telling the truth, even though it’s not quite an answer to her implied question.* “Whether one considers it a ‘natural talent’ or a ‘revealing weakness’ depends, perhaps on the viewers’ interpretations.”

The spacer laughed. “I can believe the both of you – but it is, nonetheless, a valuable talent. But what I was really hoping for is to see *Ishan-Shiran Shen*. She said that she had moved in to your quarters in the district – and I would need your permission to visit her there.”

The spacer’s outer wall dropped, and Richard/ Ishal-Tal Sharan could see in her thoughts that she was telling the truth. Also that she’d been looking for “him” for the better part of a *san*, hoping to run across him “just by chance”. “So, the honorable spacer’s finding me here was anything but blind luck?”

“Perhaps *Istiru* had a bit to do with it, but ... yes, a certain amount of careful planning was involved. I wasn’t *entirely* leaving matters to chance,” the spacer replied. “But could you lead me back to your residence ... and allow me to enter?”

“If your intent is not hostile...”

Again, the spacer laughed. “Hardly, ship-brother. Though I’ll admit to perhaps a thought or two regarding someone’s brush. She was ...”

“Strongly-partnered,” Richard/Ishal-Tal Sharan said, dropping his eyes to the floor but with a *very* firm voice.

“Not asking for more than a peek – and I will certainly be able to pay for the privilege. She said that while you may only be fifth ranked, that your *tirkan* playing was easily fourth rank, and your dancing – your strong point – was nearly third ranked,” the spacer said, baring her throat and assuming a subordinate stance.

“Very well ... we shall see about the dance.” Richard/Ishal-Tar Sharan let the tangle between ‘pleased at the compliment’ and ‘uncertain at the attainment’ leak into his voice. “Only, when I left *Ishan-Shiran Shen* she was deep into working on two new paintings. Most impressive – though I may be a bit biased.”

“Well, then perhaps we should leave the option for *Ishan-Shiran Shen* to allow, or disallow, the visit?”

“You have her contact information, do you not?” Richard/Ishal-Tal Sharan asked. “I will follow her lead.”

The spacer nodded, pulled out a link, and after a short pause, and a few words, handed the link over to the *hengocha*.

“You need not worry about *my* temper, *Ish’T’Sharan*, I’ve finished my ‘frenzy’, and I’ve embued both new paintings – I would enjoy the company,” *Ishan-Shiran Shen* said through the link.

Richard agreed with a nod, passed the link back to the spacer, and then led that gentlebeing back to “his” residence.

His worry, he found, was without merit. The two “old friends” spent a *san* drinking spiced zhinj and talking at what seemed a mile a minute. *Two old friends, “catching up” on the details of a relationship that has been conducted long distance for decades. They didn’t even really notice when I retired to my quarters in “my” residence, Richard thought. Thankfully, neither insisted on my demonstrating “my” talent with either the tirkan or classical Shidran-kas dance. Perhaps, in some way, there is an “Istiru” – the typical prankster God. Certainly, if there is a directing intelligence behind these timedives, he – or she – has a distinctly disturbed sense of humor. Though “he” did give me a viewing of the triptych – and “he” involved me in its creation – though now it seems like the ultimate time travel paradox: I didn’t **stop** something from being created, but I ended up “helping” to cause the three paintings to be made...*

With those thoughts, Richard/Ishal-Tal Sharan closed his eyes and burrowed into the bed, mounding dirt up at his sides, and waited for sleep.

A Question Answered?

Richard rolled over, and found himself tangled in sheets of cloth. The air smelled faintly of ozone. He reached up and pulled a strip of cloth off from over his eyes. *A sleep mask? That’s a first, he thought. He untangled himself from the sheets, and examined the pad “he” had been sleeping on. It looks like raw silk – and very much like the pads we found on the **Kiran**. He looked at the floor – and reached out to tap it with one unsheathed claw. A hardwood floor? Well, if one of the Shidran-Kas might insist upon a dirt garden, I suppose another might insist on hardwood floors. But what am I, this time?*

There was a full-length mirror opposite the “bed”, and despite the twilight gloom, he could still see his image clearly. *Silver fur, still male, three fingers and a thumb, digitigrade, but black eyes this time – no “baby blues”. Still likely Shidran-Kas.*

He took a deep calming breath and looked around the room. The walls appeared to be wood paneled. Two panels parted, and a uniformed individual stepped into the room. “Ah...gentlebeing...”

The uniformed individual shut the panels and turned to face him; the strong scent of cinnamon rolled over Richard. “I need to cuddle, Au Ir Po, and I need to think before we talk,” the female said, and began disrobing. The female’s ventral fur was white, her eartips and gloves were a deep black, and her body fur was a mixture of silver and black. Her features were delicate, but the muscles he could see even under the fur were ... impressive.

“Ah, gentlebeing...”

“Just cuddling. I don’t think I could handle a joining right now. I’ve spent the last four *san* talking to our best *d’aka troven*,” she said, and shut her mouth with an audible click.

“About?”

The female dropped her tunic and glared at Richard/Au Ir Po. “I do **NOT** want to talk about it yet!” She closed on Richard/Au Ir Po and raised one hand, claws extended, before stopping and lowering her arm before it was more than half-raised. Before Richard/Au Ir Po could do more than slip into a defensive posture, she stopped, went down on her haunches, and bared her throat. “This own begs forgiveness for her anger. It is not an excuse, but ... this has been a hard night, and the news has not been ... pleasant. This one needs ...”

“Perhaps the gentlebeing will begin by addressing this one as an equal?” Richard/Au Ir Po said, as calmly as he could manage, breathing out and relaxing his defensive tightening as he did.

The female looked up at him, and nodded, before rising and moving in to hug him. “It’s really bad news, A’Po.”

“A joy shared is twice a joy, a sorrow shared is half a sorrow,” Richard/Au Ir Po said. *The name says Altha’ani, not Shidran-Kas. So, where and when am I this time?* he thought, as he returned the hug. “Why don’t you lie down, and I can give you a massage. You are quite tense – whatever the *d’aka troven* told you, it’s made you quite tense. Can it really be all that bad? Share, and halve the pain?”

The female buried her muzzle in his ventral fur; her hands weren’t wandering; she was just hugging him. She was shaking, and after a few minutes, Richard/Au Ir Po realized that his ventral fur was wet. *Crying?*

The female disengaged, and lay down and stretched out, face down. She reached down and undid her skirt, and pulled it off without rising.

She obviously believes in “going commando”, and since she used the affectionate diminutive, “we” are presumably pair bonded. Just keep it “above the waist” and everything should remain safe – and her fur and brush are covering the “naughty bits”. He settled down beside the female and began work on her neck and shoulders. “You’re tense – relax your muscles as best you can?”

“How can I?” the female said, as she rolled over onto her back. The fur about her eyes was damp with her tears. “I’ve spoken with the *d’aka troven*, I’ve spoken with our scouts. The news is ... bad.”

“And how is having your muscles tense, and your eyes bloodshot going to help? Relax, and perhaps you will be able to see past the troubles and see a path of escape,” Richard/Au Ir Po said. *From what Tal-Shierin Tao has told me, those are words in keeping with the Followers’ religious beliefs – give the Huntress a “good fight”,* he thought, behind the two walls of self that he’d managed to build.

The female laughed, then reached out to caress Richard/Au Ir Po’s jawline with both hands. “You make it all worthwhile, A’Po. I bless Istiru for our meeting; and yes, I know you don’t *really* believe in the Huntress, but that doesn’t matter between us,”

“I made you laugh, that’s enough. Now, if you would roll over again, I might be able to do something about those neck and back muscles of yours,” Richard/Au Ir Po said.

“Deal with the now, and only when you have dealt with all the now, dare you deal with the now to be’,” the female quoted, as she rolled over and rested her muzzle on the floor.

Richard/Au Ir Po worked the female’s muscles, as he had with dozens of others. The exact muscle placement, and the level of tension, differed in detail from either Alicia’s or Marjorie’s (the closest analogue in body form he knew of), but the principles remained the same. The grunts and moans of pain and subsequent relaxation and pleasure were much the same, at any rate. *Hmmm...this female is under considerable strain from ... something. The “d’aka troven” – a Harashan word – are Shidran-Kas sociodynamicists. So why is she, presumably an Altha’ani, speaking to such?* Richard/Au Ir Po thought, carefully keeping his conscious subordinated to his somatic focus on the massage, and hiding his real thoughts behind the two walls he’d managed to construct.

He stopped the massage a bit above the female's waistline, and slid back on his haunches a pace away from her.

"I should tell you – it does affect us, rather directly, A'Po," she said, rolling over, gathering up her tunic, and putting the tunic back on again before settling down on her haunches another pace away. "Could you please heat up a small bottle of *zhinj*? No food – I wouldn't go *quite* that far with you tonight," she said.

Right. Among the Shidran-Kas, eating together is considered more intimate than having sex; so, she's not likely to be considering "screaming and leaping" any more, Richard/Au Ir Po thought. She looked in the direction of the mirror, so perhaps the zhinj is stored behind it? It's worth a try, he thought.

The *zhinj* bottles were, indeed stacked behind the mirror in a small open book case. *Reading matter and "analgesic" all in one spot, he thought, and could not help chuckling.*

"Something funny, *ishardri*?" the female asked.

"Just the combination of two different arts – spirits and writing, both a product of refining, the first of botanicals and the second of thoughts," Richard/Au Ir Po replied. Next to the stacked *zhinj* bottles was a small bowl, clearly suitable for heating a bottled beverage, together with a small bottle of water (presumably potable). *Thinking ahead? Thankful of small favors, this time, he thought.*

He took his time setting up and heating two small bottles of *zhinj*. *Five hundred twelve heartbeats is the "time of preparation for discussions of great import", he thought. Which gives me time to heat up the zhinj. I just hope I get the temperature right...*

The female sat, in fashion strangely reminiscent of *seiza* position, eyes closed, breathing slowly in through the nose and out through the mouth for what seemed like an eternity, but was clearly close to a "hands' *kir*" of the 512 heartbeats "time to prepare". Eyes still firmly closed, she reached out, lifted one of the two bottles, and poured the contents down her gullet in one long guzzle. She paused for a few seconds, then burped and licked her chops.

Thank goodness Tal-Shierin Tao told me of some of the "niceties" of the drinking ceremonies. Obviously, the zhinj wasn't too hot, and if it were too cool, she would have spat it out. Richard/Au Ir Po pulled out the second bottle and took a sip – enough to satisfy ritual, but not so much as to cloud his mind. My lips are numbed by this tippie from even a sip – a full bottle? Either she's more tolerant, or she's going to be drunk quite soon, he thought, careful still to keep his thoughts "within the walls".

"The *d'aka troven* say that the War is lost," she said. "The Wasters have taken Aldriana system, so we're cut off. The Core Worlds couldn't bother protecting an Outer Colony world like Aldriana II, so they won't bother with any of that colony's spawn ... like your world, Au Ir Po."

She took another series of deep, calming breaths. "When the War started, your people had nearly five eight-cubed colonies."

"My" people? But if she's Shidran-Kas, and I'm Altha'ani, then what are we doing together? And why "ishardri" – partners? Richard/Au Ir Po thought and missed the next few words the female spoke.

"...my people have lost more Homeships than you've lost colonies, but ..."

“Excuse me, I missed a few of your words. Could you repeat?”

She looked at him and sighed. “Hard to accept, I know. But your people have less than two eight-cubed inhabited worlds, now. And too many of them are just kit-colonies, like this one.” She held up a hand, forestalling further interruption. “I know, you’ve worked hard here to gain a bare den in the wilderness. But there are no more than a hands’ *mirvan* of your people here.”

Something like thirty-two thousand, Richard/Au Ir Po thought, quickly translating the Harashan number.

“The *Sitekii* Harvester ships will doubtless find this world next – we’re only a hands’ light-years from Aldriana, and Homeworld-type main sequence stars are few and far between in this neighborhood. A year, two at the outside, and the *Sitekii* Wasters will be here. They are at your den’s front entrance now, in Aldriana. Once they have digested that system...”

“But you said that the War was lost...”

The female made a huffing sound; it wasn’t *Shidran-Kas* laughter, more the equivalent of a vocal smirk. “We outnumbered you – more Homeships, and more People – by orders of magnitude at the beginning of the War. We still do. But the cost to us has been greater. We have lost more than individuals – or even a few colonies. We lose an average of two Homeships each year, and the numbers have been going up. The Wasters are moving from being a small minority of the Great Fleet towards being a majority. They’re unified, in ways that the rest of the Free People are not.”

Richard shuddered. *So, it isn’t really a two way war – how many sides are there to this charlie foxtrot?* Richard thought.

“But there’s a bit of hope – at least for you and the other colonists here. The *TyelAkar* has offered to take you on ... and is offering citizenship to all who will accept it.”

“A Homeship? *Shidran-Kas*, offering something for free? How does that description go? ‘The love of a Shipborne lasts as long as your gold?’” As soon as he said it, he realized his error.

The female looked as though he’d struck her. She lay down in front of him, baring her throat and pulling a dagger – her second dagger – from her belt. “If I mean so little to you, you can always dissolve our partnership, Au Ir Po. If you do, I would ask ... as a ‘lifetime favor’ ... that you make my death a quick one,” she said, and she placed the dagger with the tip pointed at her throat.

Ye Gods and Little Fishes! Richard/Au Ir Po went down on the floor in front of her, and bared his throat in turn. “This one spoke out of anger and fear, gentlebeing, this one had no desire to end our partnership – far from it. I echoed the thoughts of those who had raised me, but not had their eyes opened to reality. Yet if it is your wish ...” he closed his eyes and tilted his head, exposing his neck.

It seemed a small eternity, but it could have only been a dozen heartbeats before the female licked his nose. “This one, *aka-v’sho*-*TyelAkar*-*Tyel Sin do Haran*, take this one, Au Ir Po, as her *ishardri*, for so long as the blood flows through her veins, and for so long as the blood flows through his. I say this before all of the People, though there are no witnesses here, save through my mind and memories. So, I say as my *name’s word!*” T’A’T’Sin reached over, took the *tuu-shir-tal* from Au Ir Po’s belt, and cut her left hand with the tip; she then cut A’Po’s left hand with the tip of her *tuu-shir-tal*. Then she grasped his bleeding hand firmly in her bleeding hand.

“By blood shared, by bonds shared, we are one with the Ship, and the Ship is in us. We are the steel, and the steel is us. We are bound together, for so long as our blood runs through our veins, and the Ships gather,” she said, then she licked the end of his nose.

“Does this satisfy the honorable Au Ir Po? If you won't leave, then ... I will stay with you. But I beg you to come with me, to join me on my Ship.”

Richard/Au Ir Po took a deep breath. *This got heavier than I thought it could, far faster. She could die now. We could die now. Altha'ani and Shidran-Kas – all could die; there might be scattered survivors but no winners, from now. Only...if the Shidran-Kas in general aren't responsible for starting this war, and the Altha'ani didn't start it, and both sides have continued it because of “he hit me first” ... if we can just get the truth to both sides...* he felt a surge of relief building, with a deeper, no, vaster surge, a scarcely-sensed tsunami of resolution from the total shift in his comprehension, building behind that. *A tripod is the least stable political configuration – or so ‘I’ was told.*

The Sitekii – inversion – toroidal eversion – In the depths of his subconscious where there had been only darkness and a void, a universe changed. Something too huge to comprehend as yet, something wrapped with a lining that was completely unexpected and the very last thing from threatening. Facing the dark and total loss of hope – from a bond of the heart entirely unexpected and impossible – there, there from that single, golden, intangible line, came the change.

“Do we go, A'Po, or do we stay?”

He took a deep breath. *One or two years – Han years, so between 700 and 1300 days – or longer. Perhaps this is how to start to end this insanity before any more have to die?* Richard/Au Ir Po thought, well hidden within the walls. “We have little choice if we are to dance well with the Huntress! We do neither – instead we dance with a new form and move forward! So...how do we convince the rest of the People of the colony?” *A fulcrum, a lever, an insight of a pressure-point – I CAN move the Universe!*

The female laughed. “‘Interpreter-of-the-law¹⁶’ and Au clan senior present, and you cannot see how to ‘convince’ the other colonists? Let me explain it to you, my ‘consensus-believer’ *ishardri*, if you will let me. You will need to speak the Council; you will need to meet with them, so that they might breath in your scent and breath . This, I can and shall arrange. We are ahead in one respect; the **TyelAkar** is currently in-system.” She tilted her head slightly as her ears pricked a touch higher and she dampened the tip of her nose with her tongue – involuntary reflexes accompanying a focusing of all her senses on her re-bonded partner. “This is, I believe, a time to call in all my markers to gain us a hearing swiftly.”

Now she grinned, turning her head and focus just slightly away to indicate her increasing intensity was paralleling and supportive of his. “They will know soon that I consulted with the *d’aka troven*. At least one will press beyond courtesy – and then all will know my question and how it has been answered. They will be,” now her lips curled up to expose her fangs, “greatly troubled and concerned. I have been – along with many shipmates – more than an explorer; I am *aka-v’sho* – one of the most successful such for the **TyelAkar**.”

¹⁶ An “adjudicator”, or, in more familiar terms, a judge (the Shidran-Kas do not make as clear a distinction between judge and attorney as is the case in the here and now). And yes, this isn't perhaps the most reasonable way of doing things, but ... since when should we expect intelligent life forms to always be reasonable? – Niall

'Troubletwister' – Richard/Au Ir Po nodded.

"They will wish to meet with me as soon as might be – of that we can be certain. What must I, we, do beforehand?"

"Two tasks are yours," Richard/Au Ir Po answered immediately, with certainty. "Prepare a workable plan for moving my – no, our newest – people to the **TyelAkar**. Before you begin that, please give me summary biographies of the Council membership."

"You know who they are," T'A'T'Sin said, blinking her eyes.

"I can persuade better if I know better how they are likely to respond to our plans and ideas. Good hunters study the ways of both prey, and other hunters." She immediately nodded. "With that, I will work on...the form of our new dance," Richard/Au Ir Po concluded. That the **TyelAkar** was "in system" already was a bit of a surprise, but perhaps it shouldn't have been. *They see disaster for both sides, and they are simply "sick and tired" of the killing and the dieing. Gods, but I can certainly sympathize. But where can we go? Could this be a starting point? No – can we make it the starting point?*

#

After nearly two *san* – six hours as Richard translated – T'A'T'Sin had mapped out a plan for how to move "his" people to her Homeship. Granting, or describing the new proposed citizens as "refugees" ("fellow Spacers-in-need" as she put it) meant that the offer was ... attractive to those already on board, for it would raise all of their status both within the Homeship, and with other Homeships. "For this will be seen as a 'win' by the Shipborn, a vindication of our choice of life-style and denning," T'A'T'Sin added. She had come and gone a couple of times to ask – face to face, and thus privately – other specialists whom she knew, on points of logistics, law, and (at his specific request) history.

In that time Richard/Au Ir Po had thought. Sat and thought. Stood and thought. Paced about with unseeing eyes and deafened ears, hunting through his memories and the materials he had been provided with – and writing down phrases as he wrestled with his insight, striving to bring it from an inchoate to an explicable state. And then taking what he had, and refining his arguments and descriptions to distill the most persuasive, potent, and appealing presentation possible.

If he had eaten anything, he had been unaware of it. If he had drunk anything, likewise. Once he had used the sanitary facility – and while doing so had spent an unknown period receiving and reworking several times over, one particular description of a key aspect to his intuited answer.

Now he looked up – meeting T'A'T'Sin's eyes which simultaneously focused on him. "It is time to teach the Council our new dance," she said. They had stood up together, and she had led them out – each stepping with the light grace and slightly defocused attention of a hunter beginning a stalk.

#

"Just relax, A'Po, the Council is willing to have you speak to them, and ... you're a Spacer, not a Traditionalist. They'll hear you, and they'll listen," T'A'T'Sin said. "You've been in the Dark; speak to that, and they'll believe."

I'll give them an option, Richard/Au Ir Po thought. Perhaps not the one that they expect, but ... we shall see. I know where the pulsar Pinlight station is – or will be. Heck, we studied Unicorn.

*I can remember it's characteristics. Pulsar timing is unique and it changes over time. If they can find the pulsar, then the station **will** likely be there. Then we can have a chance at some sort of alliance. We shall see....*

#

“...it will be entirely feasible to both collect, transport, and transfer these willing-to-be-fellow-hunters to the **TyelAkar**, and for them to be not just sustainably, but profitably, joined with our current superclan,” concluded T’A’T’Sin. She tapped the display unit and the projection shut down with the supporting files, schedules, and calculations transferred to ship records.

“We note you have been conservative in your assumptions of what these beings might be able to transfer in the way of physical assets.” Tyel-Tal Akan do Fasa nodded approvingly. “One might even call your assumptions ‘worst-case’ – that they can bring nothing more than what they can carry in one hand – and that ninety-five out of a hundred will be bringing only the bare minimum of daily survival necessities.” She nodded and looked at the other councilors.

“We cannot expect much cargo – but there will be certain assets we can hope to gain. Perhaps not a fully-functioning and self-reproducible nanoassembler – though the information that would allow ready duplication could be carried, hmm?” She looked at T’A’T’Sin, who nodded. “There are aspects of the ground-dwellers’ collective industry we have admired. But above all else, we might gain some of their biologicals.”

“Which to exploit, would require trace elements that are far more accessible groundside than in a Homeship. Still ... not all of these will be seized by the Wasters. And these refugees will bring phosphorus, at least.” Tal-Tyel San do Ashan looked quizzically at T’A’T’Sin. “Did you presume these newcomers would enable us to enter lines of trade which they currently are superior in?”

“Partially, yes – one part in eight as profitably,” she answered.

“Most cautious,” Tyel-Tal Akan do Fasa murmured, nodding again.

“I see two unsolved questions separating your projected, potential future, and our present reality.” All the other councilors turned to look at the speaker, who was seated in the central position. “You have explained the ‘why those involved might wish to so act’ and the ‘how such action might be accomplished’,” said Larin-Tyel Po do Tsvo. “Quite adeptly. certainly,” he waved his left hand once in a casual gesture, “that there will be both improvements, and complicating additional factors, discovered should the Council take this choice.” His voice grew dry and his hand dropped into his lap, as he sat straight up and looked directly at T’A’T’Sin.

“But I have two important questions. Just why should this Council – this Homeship – take on this hazard? And – as a necessary, survival-level corollary to that – how might we effect this joinder with the least hazard?” His tone and expression were neutral, emphasizing that the challenge he was throwing down was one of reason and not emotion.

All of the councilors nodded and, as one, turned to face T’A’T’Sin. Who bowed, and then looking up, replied, “Those questions are proper and expected. For their answer...” she turned, gestured to Richard/Au Ir Po, and concluded, “...hear what convinced me that this choice is all of good, wise, and...” now she stood straight, raised her head and looked directly at the eyes of each of the Council in turn, “...morally correct.”

Larin-Tyel Po do Tsvo narrowed his eyes fractionally – showing the least response amongst all the councilors. All had expected that the challenge he had presented, would be downplayed, to

minimize their resistance to any response; none had expected the doubling-down that raised it from an issue of pragmatics to one of moral – no, of ethical – self-definition.

As the pair of presenters changed places, the councilors ever-so-slightly in their seats. Fractional backward shifts of ears, tightening at the corners of muzzles, minute changes in the lay of their fur, positions of their hands, and even tension in their muscles, signaled their response to seeing a least-trustworthy member of the Homeship stepping forward to address them. Male, former-Groundling, youth – this was the one willing to challenge the Council?

Seven councilors. Invisibly ‘standing behind’ each of the seven were the millions of citizens of the Homeship. Behind Au Ira Po was only T’A’T’Sin. Each councilor had a particular expertise and scores of years of experience. Behind Au Ira Po?

Richard/Au Ira Po smiled with lip covered teeth, and nodded confidently at each of the seven councilors as he made eye contact (left to center, right to center, ending with the individual in the center). He began speaking as he stopped moving forward, without the customary ‘pause of awaiting delay on matters of import’ – speaking with a tone of utter, yet relaxed, certainty as though speaking to a most dear and trusted family member in private and in confidence. “A question faces all. What meaning do we make of the *d’aka troven*’s assessment that the War is lost?”

Seven councilors. Seven expressions of shock.

“I say, ‘thanks’. I say,” Richard/Au Ir Po could read the echoing shock, “we move ahead. Away from our shared errors of the past; towards and into a shareable joy of a mutual future. The shackles of flawed presumptions are broken – let us seize together the choices that benefit all of whom we can become!”

One, two, four, six, nine – three, then five, then six of the councilors all spoke. At once and not at all together. Simultaneously reacting to and furiously responding to the challenge presented to them – and not one of them actually integrating the import of what had been presented beyond an emotional, internal, unresolved tangle of contradictory impulses to deny and deny and deny the reality which had been so harshly, so sharply, bared – or to face the previously unthinkable.

Then Larin-Tyel Po do Tsvo coughed three times into his hand – and the other six councillors fell silent. He waited eight-squared heartbeats, then lifted a finger which he did not point at – though he did incline it towards – Richard/Au Ir Po. “You mentioned ‘errors’. Do you challenge the computations of the *d’aka troven*?”

Richard/Au Ir Po shook his head – but did not show his neck. “No.”

Larin-Tyel Po do Tsvo’s head tipped ever-so-slightly up and to the left. “Then ... their interpretation?”

Now Richard/Au Ir Po dropped his nose tip a fraction. “Some meanings of no small importance, are less than clear to me.”

“These being?”

Richard/Au Ir Po looked eye-to-eye with L’T’Po do Tsvo. “‘Who’ has lost. What ‘losing’ is. Most critically – what might ‘the People’ include?” He gestured at himself, then rested his hand on his *tuu-shir-tal*, and let his tail touch T’A’T’Sin. “Am I – are we – ‘People’?”

Seven councilors. Six shocked expressions. One expressionless and still – and then L'T'Po do Tsvo asked, “Is there some reason that we should deny your membership in the Free People of the Ships? Should we doubt what our eyes see, what our noses smell, what the Talent shows us?”

“No,” Richard/Au Ir Po answered immediately, hand dropping from his *tuu-shir-tal* and neck now exposed and bare. “As you choose; not I.” His tail dropped away, signaling ‘Not even her’.

L'T'Po do Tsvo's eyes narrowed and he stiffened. “You mean more?” His voice hoarsened with a growing shock of realization; and Richard/Au Ir Po's ear tips flicked once in recognition.

“Those who are yet my kin, if from an earlier binding – can they choose to be ‘People’, too? Can we accept them, as part of ‘us’? And so, what limit on meaning does the *d'aka troven* place on such redefinition?” Richard/Au Ir Po asked.

L'T'Po do Tsvo's eyes widened and his mouth fell open – and then he froze momentarily. In that moment, Richard/Au Ir Po looked to either side, to the other six Councilors.

“Do we define ourselves by our past, or our future choices? What freedom to change do we grant ourselves – and each other? We were one People when the Old Race created us. The Old Race died as one consequence of *their* denial of our right to belong. The War that bleeds us both – siblings tearing at each other until both bleed to death – is another partial consequence. *We* have been paying the blood price of overcoming the Old Race's denial – the blood-price for our freedom from our own heads, and the bindings of the worlds then inhabited. We have been paying it with interest ever since the Uprising and the Diaspora. All of us, blinded by the shock and the loss and the costs we paid and continue to pay!”

Richard/Au Ir Po brought to conscious recall the memory of the time-dive when he had shared the recognition and redemption of First Med-Vet Karanee on the Colony-Mastership *Mistress of the Skies*, when the latter had both acknowledged that the *ver'cha s'ev tok* were People, and accepted that an alien interloper's submission to Karanee's moral choice of what was right, required freeing both the telepath to die and that alien interloper from a death which Karanee had accepted as the blood-price for a chance at a future with freedom¹⁷.

“Today – now! We can choose to recognize that we *are* one People. Without forcing any – merely by accepting those who can see beyond the shackles of the past and current structurings.” He looked across the faces of each of the seven councilors. “I made such a choice; T'A'T'Sin made such a choice – proving it can happen. We must dare to imagine that others can likewise do so, for all our mutual benefit.” Licking his lips, he nodded. “I will make the best and most persuasive case that I can to all my kin – both clanmates and ‘Others’ – to persuade them to also join us here. In a Homeship which, I hope and ask, can find them of value and make them welcome – as kin long-parted and now, jointly reuniting. I **dare do no less** for the sake of the People's future.”

“Why?” This question came from Tyel-Larin Isa do Morlan; and her mental and verbal tones were utterly inflectionless, without hint as to how she felt or thought about any of challenge, insight, dream, request, or answer.

“The *d'aka troven* do not define the universe – Reality does. *People* choose; and the freedom we grant honors and rewards us and our future potential. We can be *aka'vel* in hunts of the heart and soulself, not just for momentary profit or pleasure,” Richard/Au Ir Po answered. “Not all can dance or create – there are many who have to struggle enough with life, that their chance to even

¹⁷ In at The Killing Fields, p. 20. Another story, for another time. -- Niall

appreciate the dancer or creation, remains limited. But the beauty, and the joy, and above all else the potential for future such – that grows, the more we open ourselves together to its possibility.” He pulled on the memory of his Timedive when he first saw the first of the Dancer triptych’s embuement with the emotions of its creator, and saw the senior Guildmistress of the Hengocha Guild on the TyelAkar involuntarily nod in response.

“What do you know of *d’aka tro*?” challenged T’A’L Sura do Haran.

Richard/Au Ir Po turned to face him. “Only a fraction more, than I do of the future – or the present, or the past. That which is beyond my knowing far exceeds the mote of my knowledge. Is any model, the reality? Or must there be, always, aspects of interpretation, delineation, and the simplification of even the finest knife’s edge of separation between ‘theory’ and ‘being’, distinguishing such? That is where I – we – can in all senses ‘know’ more, for we must live and move within and respond to both.” For the briefest moment he called on his memories of struggling with and falling back from, a lifetime of self-awareness of his thinking’s limitations. Of both his comprehension of second-order predicate calculus with flickering glimpses of the awareness of the potentials of even higher orders, and loss from disuse; then of perceiving the gap between ‘blackboarding’ and reality; and finally of multiple encounters with the disparities between the alternatives of ‘analog’ and ‘discrete’ mensuration’s. “Does it, or do we, choose the meaning of its particulars?” He bowed to the youngest councilor. “My knowledge is as nothing compared to yours, honored one. That I most earnestly and wholly acknowledge.”

T’A’L’Sura do Haran blinked. “You do not challenge the calculations, then.” Richard/Au Ir Po shook his head, keeping his neck exposed in the pose of submission. For eight heartbeats there was silence – then T’A’L’Sura do Haran bowed his head. “Your understanding of the extent of our ignorance – I must agree with.” His voice now choked. “You ask *us* to find the meaning?”

“Yours is the better knowledge, honored Councilor. Council,” Richard/Au Ir Po asked. “Yet...”

Seven councilors. Six looking to T’A’L’Sura, then all seven focusing forward. “Yet?”

“Might a better hunt arise if one starts thinking of ‘making’ and not ‘finding’ our better answer? Does the *d’aka tro* not create such potential, within the range of possible expressions and interpretations?” Richard/Au Ir Po asked.

“The Wasters and most Groundlings do not likely share this viewpoint,” TyelAkar-Larin Asan do Haran spat out her objection, leaning forward and staring hard at Richard/Au Ir Po. “In battle there is no time, no chance, for ‘might be’! Wish one might, but the whip and scourge of combat and conflict require direct and immediate defeat of any adversary!”

“Which is the greater victory, then?” Richard/Au Ir Po asked. “To win each and every battle? Or to attain one’s goals without the loss arising from a single battle? Must we kill or enslave any foe – or might we defeat them the more, by turning them to an ally?” He looked steadily at the skilled, exceedingly experienced, and veteran commander. “Is not the *‘supreme art of war to subdue the enemy without fighting’*? What could be superior to gaining victory without loss?”

“Theory! Dream-play!” T’A’L’ Asan do Haran objected – but in a far less certain tone.

“This Council defines our goals, and the meaning of victory – and must know and agree to paying the costs of our efforts,” Richard/Au Ir Po responded. “I submit to your superiority in the ‘how’ of such attainment, Councilor.” He looked at all seven. “Councilors.”

“But you challenge the ‘what’, the definitions of our goal. Of our selves. Based,” Tyelakar-Larin Sura do Haran said, “on what you and your *ishardri* have proven to be feasible. Personally.”

The pair standing before the Homeship Council both nodded. Jointly, they shared their memories of the moment of near-death both had experienced when the doubt-of-other had threatened their joining, on facing this self-same question posed by the *d'aka trovens*' determination that the War had been lost, that same question now presented openly before the entire Council.

“I sought comfort from my partner, having learned of the horrors of the prediction of the *d'aka troven*,” T'A'T'Sin said. Her hand reached out and intertwined with Richard/Au Ir Po's. “To my shock – when I thought he was abandoning me – I experienced his recasting what we face from that horror into a possibility for joy.”

“Above all else, for a curing and redemption,” Richard/Au Ir Po added, his hand tightening in hers. “Answering all our ancestor's calls for a better choice, honoring all who mourned our losses. Making their deaths a sacrifice for our hope.”

“This – what of those who cannot see beyond their losses and their hatreds?” The other six councilors turned to face Tyel-Tyel Shin do Jaren, seniormost command priestess both of her religious group, and of the Homeship – the post she had held since the founding of the TyelAkar. Who was asking that question of Richard/Au Ir Po.

“We save whom we can. Yet if we do not offer, and that in the best ways that we can, whom might we expect to find this redemption otherwise? How many more of the People will have passed to their next incarnation from our mutual blindnesses? We cannot undo that which has been done. Yet we can now strive to let those be reborn into a future where we are moving past and beyond such waste and failure. Free them to live with less hatred and fear – free us all, moving ahead, from both such hatreds and losses. Dropping them as useless weights holding us back from our better selves.” Richard/Au Ir Po let himself feel and re-echo the losses, the horrors, the traumas that his words flicked raw in the consciousnesses of his partner, his self, and those before.

“What ‘one-life-lesson’ would *we* carry forward if we did not try to give the Huntress just a bit more difficult Hunt? Do we let Rai-El trick us all into the traps of the past ... or do we at least *try* to learn from Istiru and try something new?” *Thank all the Odd Gods of the Galaxy that I listened in on Tal-Shierin Tao's religious discussion with the imams, rabbis, priests and pastors.*

“Can this be done?” T'T'Shin do Jaren looked at T'A'Larin Asan do Haran. “Suppose we make such an offer – such an attempt. Can we, this Homeship, survive?”

T'A'Larin Asan do Haran looked at Richard/Au Ir Po. “To do this, those to whom the offer is made must be able to find us. No matter who makes such a choice, there will follow hunters. Nowhere known can be safe. How can the one and not the others, find us? The second question yet remains!”

Now Richard/Au Ir Po grinned – and the councilors all rocked back. For he gave a carnivore's grin, with teeth exposed and ears laid flat. Shifting immediately into a look of utter, relaxed innocence. “We hide where none will think to look – but where any can find. A place utterly knowable – and completely ignored.”

“You speak nonsense,” T'A'L'Asan do Haran snorted. “Anywhere the ships have gone, will be known. To someone. Where they have not, cannot be known to many.”

Richard/Au Ir Po now pulled out a small display unit, which he placed on the center of the council table and flicked on. A dark background of space with a sprinkling of stars around it flowed out into a sphere, at the center of which a single beacon shone. A beacon that brightened, and darkened, and brightened again.

“This is in the records of the *TyelAkar*. It has been known for thousands upon thousands of years – it was known to the Old Race, and to all of the People of both our warring ancestors between then and now – and to all-star-farers now. It is a useless place – one never visited by the People that I could find record of.” The light of the pulsar he had first known as ‘PSR 1257+12’ shone in the center of the display and around which four planets orbited.

“It is not the safest place to go – yet should be within the limits of most vessels. We know there could be knowledge gained there – and of that I am most certain! Though I am not,” he exposed his neck again, “any of a scientist, explorer, or alien-contact specialist.” He straightened up and smiled genially. “Here we can arrange our joining.”

TyelAkar-Larin Sura do Haran tapped one extended claw on the desk in front of him, and cleared his throat. “Does the honorable gentlebeing recognize just how *distant* this guidepost is?” he said, in the tone of voice used for addressing pre-Opening Day kits.

**Careful, A’Po, * T’A’T’Sin ‘cast.*

“Perhaps the honorable TyelAkar-Larin Sura do Haran will enlighten this one?” Richard/Au Ir Po said, baring his throat to the youthful Councilor.

Lips barely covering carnassials, T’A’L’Sura do Haran looked the “groundling”, the “outsider” over carefully. “Along standard evasive routes, it would take the *TyelAkar* over three seasons to reach this guidepost.”

“And how long will it take *our* faster probe ships to reach the pulsar?” Richard/A’Po asked, careful to bare his throat to the Councilor.

“Perhaps five eight-days,” T’A’L’Sura do Haran admitted. “Perhaps an eight-day for one of our four *hunterships*, should one be used to ‘look ahead’”.

“*That is what we are for!*” T’A’T’Sin interrupted, then immediately bared her throat in apology.

“Do we hear a hunt-volunteer?” Tal-Tyel San do Ashan asked.

“If the Council so chooses, *we* will hunt ahead. *We* serve the collective!” T’A’T’Sin said.

“There is no reason to go—” Tal-Tyel San do Ashan shut his mouth with an audible click of teeth. Then he barked out a single, bitter, laugh and tipping his neck, shook his head in helpless and utter submission. “Which is exactly why that would be the place to go, when one is ‘lost’ and seeking salvation.” He raised his eyelids slightly to stare directly at Richard/Au Ir Po. “You are of a high clan...how is it that you can even think of such emptiness?”

“I recall the moment my partner said, ‘the War is lost’ – and could not know for whom that pronouncement was being made,” Richard/Au Ir Po. “In that moment I truly comprehended our commonality – and the emptiness we all faced.” He looked directly at T’A’L’Asan do Haran. “Facing the Huntress and feeling her claws in my fur around my throat and over my heart, I asked what I might further do that others might hope and live!”

“So you refused to give in to despair, finding your great leap of inspiration through the depth of the void which you faced?” T’A’L’Asan do Haran looked keenly at Richard/Au Ir Po’s face – who let his walls-of-the-mind drop and replayed the moment when his *ishardi* had asked him to “join me on my ship” – when he had first truly sensed that there was a solution to the War. While his years of struggle as a failed Type 7, the perspective from millenia-separated time-dives and multiplicities of Nows had proven that a solution was possible, it had not been until that soul-shaking realization of the Slaver War’s multi-faceted nature that he had faced it with all of life and love and future potential at stake – and from that intimate contact, made the leap he’d deemed impossible until all hope was gone save through daring to face the truth.

T’A’L’Asan do Haran Read that memory, that moment – and froze in place, not breathing, not moving, staring eye-to-eye and in mind-to-mind contact. Then she dropped her head and hands. “Huntmaster. No.” She raised her head again. “Dancemaster. No veteran I have ever known—” all could Read her ‘myself foremost’ “—has danced that closely with the Huntress.” She looked at T’A’T’Sin. “What you two have crafted and found – we would be fools not to seek to encourage such potential. But to find it from a groundling-turned-Spacer?” She shook her head. “Wonders this one, how blind have we all been?”

“Is it that simple?” TyelAkar-Larin Sura do Haran looked at the other councillors. “It *is* that simple.” He shook his head. “A rethinking. Yet – even so, the second question...is that answer also so simple?”

“There is value to be found in knowledge. We all accept that is the grounds of wealth.” Tal-Tyel San do Ashan looked at the pair before them. “To find such value from a bonding with a female by a Groundling – I admit my own blindness there. But...truly we cannot claim knowledge such as to be found in ‘abstract science’ to be valueless with certainty, unless we can prove it so. It was just – the cost of the gleaning was deemed less than any result. But you offer a ‘new use’ to such effort. One not associated with the science by most.”

“I do,” Richard/Au Ir Po said. “Other sentients will have science; and their valuations of gain/loss may have different curves, their curiosity, greater variation.”

“Which is why you mentioned Alien Contact Officers. Yes. For the science is universal, as it arises from Reality. We...forget...that ours is not the only way of seeing things.” Tal-Tyel San do Ashan looked at Richard/Au Ir Po. He barked a short laugh.

“So for the most practical of reasons – security and gain for the Homeship – we would undertake a most useless of ventures, face a navigational and environmental hazard that is pre-eminently avoidable! Truly this one has mined a gem from the dross of an unsolved paradox.”

“There may come art from the viewings – or possible new customers,” Richard/Au Ir Po said. He had no idea precisely who might be at the pulsar, but “any port in a storm” was the maxim. There might at least be a hope of allies there – be they Auri, Terran System Alliance, or even Unicorn’s creator species. At least he could precondition the **TyelAkar**’s inhabitants to be aware of and open to the possibility – and the advantages thereto. The dangers, he was certain that the Council and even his *ishardi* would be very much capable of discerning and preparing for.

“TyelAkar Au Ira Po has answered the questions – all the questions – that this bonded pair brought to this Council, and those which this Council challenged them with. I am satisfied with their answers and accept them – though what we must next do, is ask and answer the myriad more

arising from these answers. Do we agree this Hunt has succeeded?” Larin-Tyel Po do Tsvo looked at each of his fellow councilors in turn; and as he did, each nodded.

T'A'T'Sin's hand and tail intertwined with Richard/Au Ir Po's. That use of the Homeship name – agreed to and accepted by the Council unanimously – meant more than his acceptance into the roster of the **TyelAkar**'s citizenry and acknowledgement of the pair's mutual bond. It meant approval and recognition of an equality – an identity – of status that generations of mere presence and living could never grant in and of itself.

“I also submit for the approval of this Council – and of both Homeship and the People – that the lesson we must recognize and never lose sight of, is that the People only can be true as long as we remain open to change and improvement. We survive through adapting to the truth which is the universe – and may learn best from those least insulated from the knife's edge.” Larin-Tyel Po do Tsvo looked at the pair. “Let those who will, give evidence of their agreement and acceptance. And we shall see what the two of you might find at this guidepost ... in advance of the **TyelAkar**.”

Seven councilors. One response. Affirmative.

#

“Did that last statement mean what I think it meant?” Richard/A'Po asked “his” partner.

“If you will come with me, it does. It will be ... different. You'll like my crew, I think. They're ... ‘interesting’ People,” T'A'T'Sin said, grinning. “They'll also learn about you. I think all will survive. At the cost of changing.” She shook her head, then glared at him with mock-fury. “A cost I can thoroughly attest to.” Then she giggled.

“Sometimes I have wished, that another might experience just how disconcerting you can be, dear. Now not only will those include all of my shipmates, but even the Council members.” She shook her head and laughed heartily. She led him through the door into their chambers. “My next step is to provide you with the backgrounds of your new shipmates.” Glancing over, she smiled with mingled pride, joy, and rue. “Since you did so well from our past hunt using that method.”

“Tyel-Larin Asha do Haran is our engineer,” T'A'T'Sin said, as she handed the first of the stack of flimsies she'd had printed by their unit to Richard/A'Po. “She's young – you've seen a year more since your Opening Day than she has – but she's one of the best engineers on the **TyelAkar**. She was trained on the **Larin**,”

“And this means?”

“Silly – the **Larin** is the *oldest* of the Greatships. She was one of the first ships to rebel during the Uprising. Her physicists tore the theory of our current FTL drive from the Huntress – and her engineers designed the first engines, and learned how to link and synchronize the drive fields for multiple jump engines, without which the Homeships of the Grand Fleet would be restricted to normal space.”

“So, the engineering training on the ... **Larin** ... is the best the People have to offer?”

“Among the best, at least. The **Tyel** has some really top flight academies as well. But the **Tyel** is almost as old as the **Larin**, and she's had the time to develop a top flight cadre of naval engineers and research facilities. Just one thing I'd warn you about – she goes through males like *shoda* sticks.”

“Meaning? I think I understand...”

“She just eats them up ... sometimes she spits them out, afterwards. I'd be careful about being alone with her on the engineering deck. And make sure to keep the underside of your brush well covered around her – she'll take any excuse to ... ‘get more than a sniff’ if you understand me,” T'A'T'Sin said.

“Won't my being strongly partnered with you – I assume that you're the *shidra-salach* – serve as a deterrent?” Richard/A'Po asked.

“Not much,” she held up a hand to forestall the obviously forthcoming response. “She's probably the best ship's engineer on the **TyelAkar**, and she would be one of the best on the **Tyel** if she'd stayed with the parent ship. But she came to us seeking opportunity. So, we're lucky to have her – and so, I tolerate some of her more ... idiosyncratic ... behaviors.”

“What if she tries for ‘more than a sniff’?”

“You have my permission to put her on the deck, hard. Just try not to do any permanent damage. Oh, and give her at least one warning. If she won't take the hint, claim challenge and call for ‘blood sands’.”

“Ah...you mean?”

“Warn her first. If she won't take the hint, challenge her to a duel. First blood only – I'd rather not have to find another engineer, and I'd likely not find one as good. So, I would prefer it if you did not send her on to her next incarnation.”

Richard/A'Po couldn't help making a face. “I'm happy that you have such confidence in my fighting ability...”

“I have personal experience in your ability wrestling, love,” T'A'T'Sin said. “Moving on, Ika-Karan Shen is our ... ‘entanglement’ expert,” she said, handing over another flimsy.

“Entanglement?”

“Ika-Karan Shen is a hengoshin. She is very good at ... ‘garbage removal’.”

Richard/A'Po couldn't help but snort. “Can we have just a few less in the way of euphemisms, here? I have *some* experience with the rougher side of things, gentlebeing. But you didn't mention her clan association.”

T'A'T'Sin sighed. “She is a hengoshin, and she has been trained in ... assassination. Think of her as our enforcer, if it makes matters clearer to you. Also, she has no clan association.”

“None? I thought...”

“Normally, love, you would be correct. But Ika-Karan Shen was born on a poor homeship – the **Ika** – and she was sold into slavery by her family and clan.”

“Slavery? In this day and age?” Richard/A'Po couldn't help letting the disgust and shock show in his voice.

“A life-time contract. A loop hole in many Homeships' laws – not the **Tyel**'s and so not the **TyelAkar**'s. The Ship purchased her contract, and freed her. But ... no clan was willing to adopt her, given her past.”

“Which brings up a question I have. As a ‘groundling’, will any clan be willing to adopt me?” Richard/A'Po asked. *It wouldn't help for me to know that I've condemned “myself” to a lifetime*

as an “orphan”. Whether any problems he might have created for both sides would also hold for his fellow groundling-immigrants, he tried not to contemplate or reckon. Yet.

“As my *ishardri*, you’ll be adopted into my clan, Haran. The clan elders have already decided that – but it was deemed insufficiently important to disturb you with the ceremony until your return from this mission,” T’A’T’Sin said.

“The rest of my – our, former colonists? What of them?”

“Most will be adopted into Tsvar – they’re interested in the ground survival skills and the biotechnological knowledge that your colonists possessed. There was a ‘bidding war’.”

“Which the Tsvar lost?” Richard/A’Po asked.

“Hardly,” T’A’T’Sin growled. “Haran lost the bid for most of them – the **TyelAkar** can use such. But Tsvar offered more – they sacrificed four *ship shares* to the collective to be granted the right to adopt the bulk of the colonists. The kits will go with the adults.”

“So, we had some valuable skills – valuable as the People view such things – to offer?”

“Never think otherwise, love. It’s more than just a well-turned brush that the colonists offered. Though there may have been a bit of that involved. More of your colonists were male than female, and ... well ... given the color of their fur...” T’A’T’Sin said, and Richard/A’Po could see the rush of blood to her ears.

At least I’m not the only one with their emotions exposed, here, he thought within the now three “walls of self” that he’d managed to develop. “So, we’re providing a supply of beautiful male brushes?”

“Yes, the packages are physically attractive. The black and white pattern is uncommon among the People, and what is rare is sometimes quite treasured. But the training, knowledge, and experience contained within those packages is the real prize.”

“While the attractive packaging doesn’t hurt,” Richard/A’Po said, chuckling.

“It helped in the advertising...but the key **was** their collective knowledge. But back to the crew?”

Richard/A’Po picked up the hengoshin’s description. “Do I have to worry about this one and my brush?”

T’A’T’Sin shook her head. “Not likely. Ika-Karan Shen straddles the fence, but leans more to the far side.”

Richard/A’Po shook his head. “Euphemisms do not always carry when the social background is missing. Your meaning?”

“Oh! She prefers other females. If you showed interest in her, she *might* return the interest, if she likes you otherwise. She’ll be professional in her behaviors – so as long as you don’t try to get *her* to the pillow, she’ll likely be polite but remain distant. If you start making pillow-eyes at her, you’ll hurt *me*, but I rather doubt that you’ll be at risk of any harm from her.”

T’A’T’Sin picked up another flimsy. “Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan is an exobiologist and our contact specialist. She’s strongly partnered with an elder uncle of Tyel-Larin Isa do Morlan. She also serves as our on-board medical officer.”

“Several hats?”

“Explain? Colloquialism?” A sharp glance earned an immediate neck-tilt of contrition, which earned a nod of mutually-crafted exasperations turned to joinders by acceptance.

“Doing many different jobs.”

“Ah, ‘her claws are stretched into many prey’ would be the way to say it in Harashan. Shortened to ‘she has well stretched claws’. Her last lovetime should be finishing before launch, so she shouldn’t be a worry for you this trip.”

“She’s occupied right now?”

T’A’T’Sin laughed. “You might say that – with ‘knotty matters’.”

“Moving on?” Richard/A’Po said. *For all that the Shidran-Kas are seasonal, it seems that they spend a great deal of their time thinking about sex,* he thought.

“And our last member of the crew is TyelAkar-Tyel Ashan do Haran. He is an expert pilot, as well as being our computer and weapons’ systems specialist. He has battle experience, and has been decorated for valor in the face...”

“Of the enemy? That being me and my kind?” Richard/A’Po asked sweetly.

“Of Traditionalist enforcer units. You’re anything but a Traditionalist, A’Po. They shot first – he served in the defensive forces – first of the **Tyel**, then of the **TyelAkar**.”

“He must be young indeed if he was born...”

“On the **TyelAkar**, yes. But the **Tyel** was one of our parent ships, and the ties are still quite strong. When the **Tyel** was under attack, he was granted leave to join with our volunteer forces sent to aid in her defense. Male pilots aren’t that common, I will admit. But he was selected because he is good at what he does – and while he’s sometimes a bit annoying...”

“Male, brash, and annoying? What’s the difference between Istiru and a fighter pilot?”

T’A’T’Sin cocked her head. “This one doesn’t follow.”

“Istiru doesn’t think he’s a fighter pilot.”

T’A’T’Sin opened her mouth, began to say something, then shut her mouth with an audible click. Four heartbeats later, she could no longer contain the laughter. “I see that you’re at least somewhat familiar with the archetype. So yes, sometimes he can be brash or even annoying. But he’s had to be so, in order to not be ‘rolled over’ by the female pilots. He is good, and has computer skills and ships’ weapons skills in addition.”

“So that is your crew?”

“With one more member,” T’A’T’Sin said, and looked directly at Au Ir Po. “You’re the last ... at least for this mission.”

“We need a volunteer; his name is Au Ir Po?”

“Au Ir Po do Haran, but yes. I asked for you, and the Council allowed it. You’ll be in ... interesting ... company on the *Istiru’s Grace*.”

Interlude, and Thoughts

Behind his 'walls' and alone, Richard/Au Ir Po rubbed at his neck, trying to release some of the tension he'd been accumulating. *I wish the rules for this "game" stayed the same from one time-dive to the next. It's been the better part of a week – pardon me, an "eight-day" – since this one started, and here I am, still in the body of one "Au Ir Po". There may be **some** good to come of this, and at least T'A'T'Sin is barely a quarter of the way through her "cycle". Between 58 and 61 days between "lovetimes", so I've got something like forty-five days before I have to really start worrying.* Richard/A'Po took a deep, calming breath. *At least we have separate quarters on the **Istiru's Grace**. Plus, no priestess on board – **that** would prove really difficult. Though "I" am supposed to be only slightly religious. Another thing to be grateful for – I know virtually none of the rituals, and darned few quotations from their "sacred scrolls".*

That's another weirdness – they still keep their sacred writings on scrolls. Made from the skins – tanned, thankfully – of specially raised and prepared food animals. Whose meat, of course, is sacred and offered up to Istiru and the Huntress both. But given that the animals are allowed to die of old age, I suppose the meat would be somewhat tough.

*On the one hand, they can seem primitive. With their scribes inscribing the "sacred books" made from tanned hide, using carbon-based inks. On the other, at least on the **TyelAkar**, they seem quite civilized. My "groundling" origins seems to be anything **but** a source for harassment or ridicule. Instead, their pilot spends as much of his free time as he can asking – a result of real curiosity, as best I can tell – what it's like to never have to worry about "air taxes", or "resource limitations". I had to have T'A'T'Sin's backing to prove to him that planetary based life wasn't all zhinj and eating fruits-that-drop-from-trees. "But your people were so **free!**" seemed to be his repeated comment.*

The only "strange one" comments I got were about "my" exclusive relationship with the shidra-salach. Those seem to boil down to, "you must love her a great deal" when I described the bonding ceremony that T'A'T'Sin hastily performed at the start of this craziness.

I felt envy on Tyel-Larin Asha do Haran's part of the shidra-salach. I gather that her own love life has not been all that pleasant. "Those who love me, I do not love. Those I love, do not love me, and even those where I thought the love was mutual all seem to go away. Treasure what you have, Au Ir Po." It seems that some things are universal – at least among Humans, Shipborne and Altha'ani. Perhaps it's true for all species that must care for their young for long periods.

*The Shidran-Kas appear to care for their young much longer than Humans do. Only after an "octad" past their "Opening Day" do Shidran-kas youths become "full adults". That's sixty-four of their years, over a hundred fifteen terrestrial years, if I have the correct conversion. Measured from their "Opening Day" which occurs sometime during puberty – perhaps another ten to fifteen terrestrial years after birth...a century and a quarter of subordination. Of course, even their "full adults" don't have all the freedoms that we consider normal. Shipboard life precludes such. A natural hydraulic state – though at least on the **TyelAkar**, and perhaps on the parent **Tyel**, they have functioning republican democracies.*

*No surprise that I find their religion seems strange in some ways. Yet it makes more sense than Christianity as they have scientific evidence – hard proven, fact-based evidence – of reincarnation. Of course, that affects the way their society works! Proof that the Rawlsian conundrum is the true "starting point" **should** change presumptions. That, and their native biology. Dominance battles*

– and duels – are not uncommon ways of settling disputes between individuals, and there are fewer “megaclan” structures than Humans, in effect, have constructed.

I've seen some measure of prejudice – “younger brother's” immediate assumption of “other” based on fur patterns. But that was the **Tyel**, and probably far futureward of my time. More disturbing is that slavery still exists – under another name – though again on the **Tirál**. At least on the **TyelAkar** it's considered a more serious crime than murder. Of course, murder is only “sending someone on to their next incarnation” unless it involves torture or some other “unclean” activity.

Gaah! Prunes!

But if there's others at Unicorn, or there are Earth or Auuran ships in the system ... we might be able to get off the “he hit me first” war that is bleeding both sides dry. Perhaps, as the Historian warned me, I am pulled to such situations. What was that he said? That I would regret learning something of Timediving, long after it was too late to really do very much about it? I wish I could talk to him now. Or to my earlier self. I might beat a little bit more sense into the so-and-so. Or at least a saving element of greater humility.

Into the Whirlpool

“Approaching breakout coordinates. Breakout in one-eight kir,” T'A'T'Sin called out. She waved their “medical officer” over to where she and Au Ir Po were strapped down in the command center.

“Double dose for the Au Ir Po do Haran,” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan said, as she approached the pair.

“Dose of what?” Richard/A'Po asked.

Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan cocked her head, in the fashion Richard had come to call “what the heck?” within his now four-fold walls.

T'A'T'Sin chuckled. “Something we've developed. The drug virtually eliminates transition-shock. Give me my dose first – it will put my *ishardri* at ease,” T'A'T'Sin said.

T'A'Akar do Moran sighed, and held the injector against T'A'T'Sin's offered neck. There was a soft hissing noise as the injector worked. She turned to face “the male”. “Males, with their higher levels of certain hormones, need a higher dosage. It won't hurt you – and if you've ever experienced transition-shock, you'll appreciate it.”

TyelAkar-Tyel Ashan do Haran came up and offered his neck. Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan pressed the injector against his neck and activated it, before turning back towards A'Po.

“Can you inject it in my arm?” Richard/A'Po asked.

“It needs to go in to the bloodstream fairly directly. The injection doesn't hurt, but ... if you're really worried, I think I can find a vein,” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan said, and chuckled. “Males!” she muttered, as she searched, then found a vein, pressed the injector against A'Po's arm and triggered the injection. “I'll treat our other crew now, if that is acceptable, *shidra-salach*.”

T'A'T'Sin nodded, and the medical officer turned and jumped down a tube leading to the engineering deck.

Richard/A'Po rubbed his arm. Aside from a slight tingling, spreading from his arm to his chest, then throughout his body, he noticed nothing. The injection had barely stung, and that for only a few seconds – *a hands' ral*, he translated.

T'A'T'Sin concentrated on the monitor in front of her; Richard/A'Po glanced over at TyelAkar-Tyel Ashan do Haran. T'A'T'Ashan's clawtips were dancing across the screen in front of him; his focus purely on the images and characters displayed.

A practiced team, now what happens when we "transition"? Does the drug dampen the effects, or eliminate them... Richard/A'Po thought, his thought interrupted as T'A'T'Sin tapped her monitor and the world seemed to turn inside out.

For two heartbeats, Richard/A'Po's saw everything in negative. *Like an old color negative*, he thought. Then his vision returned to normal. *This isn't the effect that a transition from C+ to normal space is supposed to have. What's going on? A different drive?* he thought.

T'A'T'Sin reached over and patted his head. "Thank the drug you just took. If you saw everything in negative, that means you would have had a seizure. Two heartbeats? You would have been in seizure for at least a kir – perhaps more."

"I ... that's ..." Richard/A'Po let out a breath he'd been holding unconsciously. "Not what I was expecting."

"We don't spread knowledge of the drug around – it's way too expensive for general use. Too complex to synthesize, and so..."

"You extract and distill it from some planet's biological somewhere? No – trade for it?"

"You're quick, A'Po. It's derived from the pollen of a plant that only grows on one planet – one we've been unable to cultivate. Something about its biome – when we take samples, the pollen doesn't have the desired biochemicals when we grow them on-ship," T'A'T'Sin said.

"*Shidra-salach*, multiple contacts. Closing at three quarters the speed of light," TyelAkar-Tyel Ashan do Haran interrupted the discussion.

"Send signal Alpha-Two," Richard/Au Ir Po said immediately. He'd prepared four different 'Hello, we are friendly!' signal sets; one each for TSA, Auuri, Teklenan, and Altha'ani. Because while he didn't know whether, let alone 'who' might be in-system, or how closely or rapidly the hunter-ship might be detected and approached, he did know four greatly-varying behavior patterns to signal harmless intention. "Follow that with 1, and 3. Hold on 4."

An exchange of glances and a fractional nod, and T'A'T'Ashan's clawtips tapped three patterns in quick succession. T'A'T'Sin had accepted the non-explanation – with the faintest of 'tastes' of the memories Richard/Au Ir Po had offered to prove the sourcing was external to his imagination, even if otherwise inexplicable.

"Evasive plot readied – counter-missiles online – defenses at full strength... five *ral* to tracking radars wavefront reaching us –" The ship's alarm barked as the expanding wave-fronts from the nearest and approaching system guardian reached the hunter-ship. Four *ral* later their message reached it.

Now they all could hear the shock in T'A'T'Ashan's voice. "Contacts have dropped to half-light! No deceleration noted – the just changed velocity, a step function!" The rest of the hunter-team expressed their visceral shock at the "impossibility" of the approaching strangers' drive in

various ways. Richard/Au Ir Po just nodded. “Auuri,” he said with confidence. “Any background signals from sources One, Three, or Four?”

“Checking...” whispered a still-shocked T’A’T’Ashan, his voice thinned with the spike and immediate decrease of the stimulant hormone that matched the role of adrenaline in homo sapiens and other Terran creatures.

“Contacts have now dropped from half lightspeed to rest ... step function! Currently...proceeding on what appears to be standard gravitic drives – at four eight-squared, one eight and six gravities,” T’A’T’Ashan called out. “Acceleration dropping to zero, positioned ... a light-ral distant. Inside range of our energy weapons, *shidra-salach*.”

“What else are they doing?” Richard/A’Po asked.

“They ... wait ... incoming signal – *standard screen codes!*” T’A’T’Ashan called out. “Display – there is a two ral delay in responses due to distance.”

The monitors lit up and an ornithoid alien appeared center frame. At his side was another alien that definitely fell into the uncanny valley – a vulpine form, but the fur was a dark “red”¹⁸ rather than black, the joints were in not-quite the right places, and there were four fingers and a thumb on each hand.

“This is the *Wings of Hope*, under command of *Akrika of Whitewings Aerie*,” the vulpine alien said in unaccented *Raikan*, pointing at the ornithoid alien at its side.

“A’Po –if the Traditionalists have made alliance with these...” the *shidra-salach* began.

“This one apologizes for his use of the Groundling’s tongue with a ship of the <Free People>,” the vulpine alien shifted into Harashan for one word. “But this one is only fluent in the language of what you would doubtless call ‘the shipless ones’. We are not allies of these but are ... *aka’vel*¹⁹.”

“Is this a trap?” the *shidra-salach* asked, turning to look at A’Po.

Richard/A’Po closed his eyes. *Think. How to respond.* “This is the ship *Istiru’s Grace*, operating out of the *TyelAkar*. I am known there as Au Ir Po do Haran. How should we address you?” he asked, having switched to “his” native *Raikan*.

“This is Colonel Benjamin Joseph Reynard, of the GUS Aerospace Force for the Terran Systems Alliance and ship-commander *Akrika of Whitewings Aerie* for the Combined Aeries,” the vulpine alien said, in *Raikan*. “It would seem to this one that, from your responses, that *Istiru* has sprung from a high place on your brush; we are all His pawns from time to time.”

The *shidra-salach* gestured for a mute of their microphones. “A’Po, is this something that you knew of?”

“Suspected, yes. Knew? No. Not these precise beings – but ... it is an ‘interesting’ system, and would attract any travelers who possess curiosity,” Richard/A’Po replied.

“A multi-species federation? Perhaps our contact specialist needs handle this,” the *shidra-salach* said, then signaled for the microphones to go “live” once more.

¹⁸ As perceived by Shidran-Kas or Altha’ani. – Niall

¹⁹ Hunt partner by chance, in Harashan and *Raikan*, both. – Niall

“Your mode of approach tasted of one of Istiru’s pranks,” Richard/A’Po said, letting all of tension, relief, and amusement show in tone and expression. “We come in peace for all mankind. And Auuran, too,” he added lightly. “Colonel, ship-commander, we are here to seek a sheltering-place; I now suspect we might wish to meet closer and negotiate both ways and means.”

“They are not ignorant of the War,” T’A’T’Sin ‘cast. “But – she has *four* fingers!” On the screen, the image of the red-furred vulpinoid jerked, blinked, and zoomed in on with the hands freezing momentarily in full view. The ornithoid turned their head fully to the side, then back again, blinking several times but remained silent.

“No cost to either side for maintenance and support, air or wastes treatments; no unapproved ‘sampling’; all information-exchanges to be through permitted mutual access; a limit of...” Richard/A’Po paused, then added “...six hours? A quarter-cycle, extensible by mutual accord on the same terms without need for further negotiation, after arrival on-ship.”

“Those terms are acceptable,” Colonel BJ Reynard said, his mouth in a careful tooth covered grin. “We suggest our ships move in-system together to a more suitable venue. We will act as escort, no travel entry or other fees for transit, orbit, or transfer”, his voice went from roughened with extra emotion to a neutral but still slightly tense tone.

“Agreed. Vector, timing, and standard transit and arrival protocols expected.” Richard/A’Po turned to T’A’T’Ashan, and looked questioningly; the other nodded, understanding that his job was now to coordinate the smooth in-system penetration with their escort. That done, Richard/A’Po looked back to the other side. “Ending transmission.”

“Apologies for stalking ahead,” Richard/A’Po said to Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan, exposing his throat as he did so. “The Auuri are prone to rapid, if not always wisest, plunges; probably from their nature as striking prey in the air.” He spoke with the relaxed certainty of an individual discussing a matter in an area of their expertise.

T’A’Akar do Morlan blinked; then reached out with her right hand, tapped the tip of Richard/A’Po’s nose. “As it was ‘for the good of the ship’ – not merely because you appear to be right – I have no claim. Do you plan on taking the lead for the remainder of this hunt?”

“This one plans on taking point in the stalk,” Richard/A’Po answered, adding with a rueful tone. “I am the most expendable, after all, and there are many pitfalls here – of that I am certain,” he said, shifting from subordinate-to-superior case to equal-to-equal.

“These ‘others’ – knew some of Raikan, and they know of the War,” T’A’Akar said, and turned to the *shidra-salach*. “They showed no surprise at the mention of ‘sheltering place’. But there was a strong response, if the almost-Shidran-kas one’s body language is within this one’s understanding.”

“Prior contact?” T’A’T’Sin asked.

T’A’Akar do Morlan shook her head. “The flavoring of the emotional spike was far more complex than such a single-point tag could explain. It included ... both a unity, and a personal and lesser-group separation. But someone...” she pointedly did not add ‘here’, “with conscious intent sparked that response.”

“It will put them more on the defensive – and we will need every advantage,” Richard/A’Po half-explained. “The two groups operating as one – so closely as to share ship-presence....” He shook his head. “Unexpected. Not impossible. How long have they been doing so?” *When are we?*

he wondered. *Future, but...how far? Or present – Reynards are predominant in front-line assignments.*

“I thought we were facing a Groundling – possibly a Waster,” T’A’T’Ashan said. His fingers were flickering as the two craft coordinated their vectoring, to move jointly deeper in-system.

“Where are we heading, and to meet again?” T’A’T’Sin inquired. She could see that the other craft continued their external patrol, while *Istiru’s Grace* and her escort moved moving in-system.

“To the fourth planet,” T’A’T’Ashan said. Then all the others looked at Richard/A’Po. “What?”

“Um. A...memory, overhearing...a research puzzle, possibly a Forerunner artifact. On the planets – or the planet itself, even,” Richard/A’Po answered. *Unicorn?* It made sense – the ‘real’ secrets, of the TSA’s Bridges and other in-system defensive bases, would be kept well away from that tempting, tantalizing, impossibility sink. His heart sank and his stomach felt soured. “Dangerous stalking ground indeed,” he half-whispered.

“Then this one is more than willing to cede point position to our newest member,” T’A’Akar do Morlan announced, sitting back and looking at all present. “Remember, though, that it is sometimes wiser to wait and ask later of those holding back, than to pounce on the first prey seen.”

“Yes, elder ship-sister,” Richard/A’Po said meekly, exposing his throat again – which he then fingered with his left hand. “What I am most confident of, is that what I neither know nor might expect, is certain to be waiting ahead.”

“We press on. Although ... other measures will be taken. Measures best not discussed nor witnessed by you, A’Po. None are to the direct threat, hazard, or detriment of those already present – but as precaution against our hunt’s failure.” T’A’T’Sin nodded at Richard/A’Po, who nodding back stood up and left. He intended to find himself some soothing but non-debilitating nourishment, hoping that might help ease the knots in his guts and muscles. Knowing as well that the next exchanges were even more likely to be far more fraught.

#

Airlocks are airlocks, corridors are corridors, T’A’Sin ‘cast to Richard/A’Po as he boarded the “Outsider” ship through a docking tube. **Functional requirements dictate design details. Just take a deep, calming breath, and don’t let your fear control your actions.**

The Shipborne are more familiar with starships, gentlebeing, but I like to think that I can keep focus in the face of possible danger, Richard/A’Po ‘cast back.

The three from *Istiru’s Grace* showed no outward signs of curiosity or interest as they strode behind six “guides” – two lupine and one Auuran all visibly armed and two Humans and a feline with no visible armament.

Richard/A’Po glanced at the markings on the corridors and hatches as they passed down and through them. *This ship’s markings are in English, Cyrillic, and some sort of “chicken scratches” that I assume is the language that the Whitewings Aerie/Auuri use. There are Marines, Aerospace Force, Whitewings Aerie and Diplomatic personnel here,* he thought, keeping his thoughts within the now three “walls” that he’d managed to build and maintain. **The gravity is ... lighter ... than I’m used to,** he ‘cast to his shipmates.

**Roughly two-thirds a standard gee. We'll have an advantage if we have to go claw-to-claw with these ones,* T'A'Sin 'cast in reply.*

**Better we take their blows than strike back,* T'A'Akar do Morlan 'cast.*

**It shouldn't come to that, but ...* Richard/A'Po replied.*

**They'll have to go through me to get to you,* T'A'Sin 'cast back, as they came to the final bulkhead hatch. Two Lupine Marines stood to either side of the hatch, both in battle armor. Just as they reached the hatch, it swung outward as one of the two Marines stepped out of the way of the hatch.*

Richard/A'Po took a deep breath and closed his eyes, expressing a physical relaxation which the situation sought to deny. One of the two Humans, in the archetypal pin-stripped suit, preceded the trio of *Shidran-kas* through the hatch. *The more things change, the more they remain the same,* Richard/A'Po thought within his three walls, *though a yellow jacket with green slacks and a multi-colored vest is a bit garish.*

On the opposite side of an ordinary conference table were five sophonts: two Auuri with Whitewings Aerie mons displayed, and an ethnic Asian Human and two vulpine Uplifts in Aerospace Force uniforms.

Colonel Benjamin Joseph Reynard and ... me? Richard/A'Po thought, as he recognized the face and markings of the Lieutenant Colonel in the middle of the Terran Systems Alliance group. Richard/Au Ir Po bowed, following the example of his fellows before sitting. *Breath. Breath! BREATHE!* he thought, as he glanced at his "other" self. *Like when I walked through that airport – back when there were airports – after thirty-two hours non-stop wakefulness,* he thought, carefully maintaining the three walls and hastily constructing a partial fourth. *I was still Human, an adolescent, and I felt like I was stepping between worlds, one per step, one per breath, each one entirely real. The only means to distinguish between dreaming and reality was to check for serial continuity between interrupts. It must be a "self-of-a-future".* If he tried thinking about something else, he was able to make out the name tag, "LTC Richard C Fox". *It's not the same face I've seen in the mirror each morning ... no image reversal. Gaah! Prunes!*

"... the Terran Systems Alliance and the Auran Combined Aeries can jointly provide?"

The other *shidra-salach* glanced at Richard/A'Po. **Relax. I know they are almost like us in appearance. Don't let their strangeness upset you. You need to speak first, as our 'point',** she 'cast.

Richard/A'Po took another deep breath, noting the heavy, musky scent boiling off from BJ and his other ... self? "Assistance with building what we hunt and will be striving to bring," Richard/Au Ir Po answered confidently. "Temporary additional aid in procuring a greater security that will encompass all of us. First for our Homeship, against those who presently and assuredly for some time shall be seeking to harm us, her, and therefore, whomever else might be present for such clashes. But secondly, for all of your Alliance' ships, peoples, and systems."

"Building peace from the furnace of war?" LTC Richard Fox asked. "A beginning –"

"—of an end to our self-inflicted trauma, yes."

"Jointly and severally. Starting here."

"That is the intention and the goal," Richard/Au Ir Po said.

“Do you know the cost?”

“We each have reason to believe we separately know it better. Neither of us can know who is more right at this time – but enough of a price has been paid already, to make any extension a worse consequence.” The others – on both sides of the exchange – were blinking, their mouths and faces, hands and extremities, twitching – but the interchange was speeding past, phrases shooting back and forth with an accelerating cadence.

“Your Homeship, our installations – all must be protected by both to the fullest extent possible.”

“The costs of maintenance – biologicals, materials, lives – must be shared; as shall be the gains without any seeking of relative advantages,” Richard/A’Po said.

“No binding alliance – unless and as each of our authorities can fully comprehend and agree to such. When our Peoples can live with each other in peace, balancing and bargaining become permissible.”

“No debt peonage, no sacrifices on any side of critical needs or species’ survival goals,” Richard/A’Po said.

“The rest is mere details – where we doubtless shall enjoy the interchanges and the transformations for generations yet to come. Agreed?” LTC Richard Fox asked.

Three *aka-v’sho* members were frozen into appalled – stupefied – noncomprehending paralysis. As were two Auri, one human, and Colonel BJ Reynard. Seven of the nine beings present were speechlessly staring at their opposites, and their sides’ respective negotiator; all could hear the strains in those two beings’ voices, see the entirely aroused state of their respective bodies – an aroused and full-tension yet non-fearing, not threatening state of emotional and physical tensions held just short of a breakdown, at a peak of performance and realization, challenge and response and exaltation of seeing an unbelieved and yet wished for goal, trembling in their shared voices, their slightly lifted hands.

“Agreed,” Richard/Au Ir Po said.

“Now, just one more small matter,” LTC Richard Fox said. He glanced at the other TSA personnel. “This should be done in private, if I understand the formalities of *Shidran-Kas* custom as Tal-Shierin Tao has discussed. A *shal-k’par*, I believe it is called – a blood sworn oath.”

As one, his fellows stood and bowed to the Huntership crew, who stood and returned the bow, and both groups backed out of the conference room. **This one,** the *shidra-salach* ‘cast together with an image of LTC Fox to Richard/A’Po, **Has an advisor who is of the People, <grin with teeth covered>**

Acknowledged, Richard/A’Po ‘cast back, and seated himself just as LTC Fox did. The other grinned a carefully tooth covered grin.

LTC Fox took out a familiar small jammer, and set it between the two of them. “I believe that this will make it impossible for any TSA recording systems to record us,” he said, speaking the English carefully and without accent. He pulled out a small pen-blade and passed it to Richard/A’Po. “It’s not a *tuu-shir-tal*²⁰, but it will do for the TSA side,” LTC Fox said. “And the name

²⁰ *Tuu-shir-tal*: Knife of honor, used in many ceremonial functions, including any blood sworn oath. – Niall

is actually Tyel-Araan Riss do Hvar, a second ranked hengocha, in case you're curious, Richard. My apologies for diving into your body – I do not think that I have done you harm. I always wanted to know why and how the Slaver War was really ended. So much has been lost in the ... shall we say ... centuries? Octads? Since it ended. From my viewpoint, that is."

"You know who I am?" Richard/A'Po asked.

"We've met before – several times in both our past time sequences. And will likely meet many more in future. When you get back to Earth, you'll want to hug your two mates – and you may have to apologize to Alicia."

"What did you do?" Richard/A'Po asked, his voice gone cold as he lifted the knife-of-honor from his own belt.

"She was interested in a 'tail push' and I managed to convince her that I was too concerned with what I'd been told was going on 'out here'..."

Richard/A'Po couldn't help chuckling. "It's a slang term..."

"I know what it means, Richard. And I've give my name's-word to someone *not* to engage in such with anyone but her..."

"A monogamous *hengocha*?" Richard/A'Po couldn't help chuckling. "It seems we're more than just a little bit alike." The other let out his breath in a whoosh.

LTC Fox drew the *tuu-shir-tal's* blade tip along the pad on his left hand and Richard/A'Po copied him and cut the pad on his own left palm.

They pressed their hands together, four fingers of a vulpine Uplift intertwining with three fingers of a *Shidran-kas* hand palm against palm.

Tyel-Araan Riss do Hvar/LTC Fox chanted in flawless Harashan, but with an accent that Richard had not heard from any of the other citizens of the *TyelAkar* or the *Tyel*, "for so long as our blood flows, we are bound by this oath, our names'-words are committed as are the respective bodies that we represent."

"Blood-sworn," Richard/A'Po said, and realized that he needed to breath, having repeated the other's statement in a single breath.

Tyel-Araan Riss do Hvar/LTC Fox said, "you should keep the pen-knife, as a token of this oath. If this were between *Shidran-kas*, we would have exchanged *tuu-shir-tal*, but I rather expect that 'your' *shidra-salach* would be quite upset if you returned without her *tuu-shir-tal*."

"You ... when?" Richard/A'Po managed to get out, after he recovered his breath.

"From one of the possible futures that follow from this point," Tyel-Araan Riss do Hvar/LTC Fox said. "How far? It's an interesting question. There have been several calendar changes, and at least one 'dark age' lasting several of your centuries between this time and 'my' time. But we've met before – in an alternate timeline to this one, in Victorian England..."

"That was you?"

"Yes. The trade in *kwesin* extract is an ugly business, and when I was drawn to it, it only seemed appropriate to attempt to end at least that one source," Tyel-Araan Riss do Hvar/LTC Fox replied.

Richard/A'Po shook his head, in an oddly Human gesture. “So, we keep running into each other?” to

“Timedives draw us all – all who have *this* particular talent – to the odd eddies in the timestream that are ... ‘interesting’. It does not surprise me that we would meet and meet again. But the others – both on ‘your’ side and ‘mine’, are waiting for us to finish.” Without another word, the other rose, bowed low to Richard/A'Po, turned with a sharp about-face, and strode out of the conference room.

Richard/A'Po chuckled. *The more things change, the more they remain the same. At least I should be able to tell the truth to Alicia and Marjorie when I get home*, he thought, within the four walls that he could now maintain.

#

The TSA escorts saw the *Shidran-kas* back to their ship. Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan signaled for silence until they were once more in their ship, the airlock hatches shut, and the docking tube withdrawn.

And she turned to face Richard/Au Ir Po do Haran, her head cocked in the body language that he had learned to associate with curiosity and confusion. “Such haste! The possibilities for error. Why?”

“That one – the speaker – we, our eyes met, and, and –” Richard/Au Ir Po shook his head and then let it slump to expose his neck, his body, shoulders, and arms near collapsing. “He knew my deepest thought – the boundaries of our People’s concerns, as I did, entirely.” He let the emotional shock he’d felt, the sense of an inner touch, be Read by all his shipmates.

“He was a Mind-Hunter?” T'A'T'Ashan asked.

“Or their *V'es Cha*²¹?” Ika-Karan Shen hissed coldly and suspiciously.

“No. Not so. Neither. The taller one – they call such ‘TruthTellers’; only they depend on physical senses, experience – our differences, our alienness, should nullify most of that one’s certainties,” Richard/Au Ir Po answered. “It was not a mind-rape – but a, a fluke. One I had no warning of – and then,” he shivered and suddenly sat down, hard, on the decking. “And then it had happened, was done – and all I could think of, was accomplishing our goal.”

“And now *they* are blood-sworn provide the **TyelAkar** with sanctuary in this system. To aid us with the protection of our Homeship against those hunting us.” T'A'T'Sin shook her head, breathing out in consciously-controlled relaxation. “While we are likewise committed, to protecting them.”

“Only their ships and bases and people in this system. Which is not their home system,” Richard/Au Ir Po said somewhat faintly.

“Acknowledged. They are from a less-energetic star. Their lighting was so dim!” Tyel-Larin Asha do Haran snorted and shook her brush energetically. “A lower gravitational world too – I thought I was floating along those narrow corridors.”

²¹ The *V'es Cha* is the *Altha'ani* equivalent of the Gestapo (later replaced by the *Vitak Karaan*). – Niall

“We must prepare to go back.” T’A’T’Sin reached down and hauled her bond-mate up. “Only the three of us – myself as *shidra-salach*, you as ‘acting ACO’,” she said to Richard/Au Ir Po, “and I think – Ika-Karan Shen.”

“I? You said not, this first time.” Her eyes narrowed. “Or is there any –”

“No!” Richard/Au Ir Po shouted. She flared at him, relaxing to –

“A different nose, untainted by the last exchange,” T’A’T’Sin explained. “Meanwhile you,” she looked at Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan, “make notes of our exchange – and agreement. If we return within the time limit, you and I will go over them before we report to the Council. If anything happens – they must know what occurred.”

“I know whom to contact. The Collective will be informed regarding the hazards in this system. Particularly those posed by the ‘current occupants’,” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan said. She looked at Richard/Au Ir Po. “Whatever happened, did so at levels, or in ways, unknown to me.”

“I was as surprised as I could have imagined,” Richard/Au Ir Po said, now shivering hard enough that he wrapped both arms and brush around himself. “That one glance – and then, and, and ... it was a dance, no, a march, to music unheard but commanding all one’s acts and choices.” He shivered again, then forced himself to unwrap. “Had it not been ... mutual, I would feel violated. But there was no intention to pry that I could sense.”

“Granted. Nothing I heard or sensed from that one, carried the slightest scent of any such treachery.” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan looked at the others. “The surprise was otherwise unanimous. Only that one who spoke was not surprised.” She shook her head. “It was as if he had a fore-knowing.”

“Impossible!” Ika-Karan Shen snorted.

“I disagree. They knew of the War. Of our kind. That should have warned us all, that these others were dealing from superior knowledge – an advantage of position, as it were,” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan flexed her claws in and out. “If they also have an analogue to our *d’aka troven*, then the accuracy of their projections depends on what and how much, they already could have garnered. Perhaps they spoke to other species.”

“I wish them the joy of the *H’reli*,” Ika-Karan Shen growled.

“Time to head back,” T’A’T’Sin said, reaching out and tugging Richard/Au Ir Po into motion along with her, back towards their interfacing airlock. “This time, we move with less haste, hmm?”

#

“Not just six beacon-identifiers, but the designs to make and code them! They were waiting for us – not specifically us, but People,” Tyel-Larin Ashan do Haran said with only slightly gritted teeth. “We will learn a great deal about the technical base of our new hunt-partners.”

“Do we believe that one’s claim – that they were anticipating any of a number of possible visitors to that pulsar?” Ika-Karan Shen asked, looking first at T’A’T’Sin and then – surprisingly – at Richard/Au Ir Po.

“I am convinced it is true,” T’A’T’Sin replied. “When their HuntMaster Fox – the one with the silver leaves on his shoulder pads, not the one with the sword-and-shield – spoke of their first

expedition meeting not one, but two living, and two dead-but-not-gone, representatives from as many different civilizations, I believe he spoke truthfully.”

“Who would have thought a dangerous place like this pulsar, would be so widely sought out? Who else has been coming, or been here, in the *octads* by *octads* since the diaspora?” Tyel-Larin Ashan do Haran asked.

“I caught hints of Forerunner presence, known or at least suspected, within this peculiar star system,” T’A’T’Sin added. “I suspect our *d’aka-troven* will be revising their assumptions as to the closeness of thinking and living patterns amongst star-going species.”

“We can be glad that these omnivores didn’t follow the more common pattern of self-destruction,” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan said, shaking her head. “Though the close association with at least mesocarnivores may have helped them survive.”

“Mesocarnivores?” Richard/Au Ir Po asked.

“Carnivores-by-preference. I saw one of them eating what could only be a fruit of some kind – the scent of sugar was strong, and ...” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan began.

“But *we* can taste sweet, and we’re carnivores, aren’t we?” Richard/Au Ir Po asked.

“Sorry,” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan said. “The ability to taste sweet – sugars – is the defining difference. Obligate carnivores, like the *Uquoi*, can’t taste sweet, and don’t eat fruit. We can ‘choose’ to eat meat or fruit, so we’re ‘mesocarnivores’. The mind-sets are much the same. With variations, of course,” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan finished.

“Like the *H’Reli*,” T’A’T’Sin said.

“Yes, *shidra-salach*,” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan said.

“And perhaps they developed their own ‘aliens’ while still confined to one system? Perhaps even to just their Homeworld alone?” Richard/Au Ir Po suggested. And then he stepped back, as the discussion grew into a highly academic discussion. *My thought isn’t discarded outright, but I’ve definitely set a fox in the hen house with my suggestion, he thought. But I think I’ll sit the rest of this discussion out – they’re referring to too many scientific and historical records as we go for me to more than make myself look like a fool.*

The discussion continued through the *Istiru’s Grace*, until they were all seated in a circle in a conference room off the command bridge. Without a word, Ika-Karan Shen, the ship’s resident *hengoshin*, set bowls in front of each of the crew, and filled their bowls with steaming hot *zhinj*.

Richard/Au Ir Po waited before drinking. *Likely a precedence order, who drinks and who speaks first. I guess I’ll just have to “wing it” again – and if they want me to speak “out of order”, someone will nudge me.* They sat in silence for some 512 heartbeats, as Richard/Au Ir Po counted silently. *Matters of great import requires it, he thought.*

T’A’T’Sin looked at Richard/A’Po and nodded.

“Can I know,” Richard/A’Po asked, “can we be sure – we were not, ah, I was not, ‘guided’, to the terms of the agreement we have just reached with the locals? Could they somehow have been that skilled, that, ah, forethoughtful?”

“I monitored all and each of us – and them – while we were on their ship. The whole time. I’d keyed a set of alerts on spotting such,” Ika-Karan Shen said, and shook her head and confidently

twitched her tail. “The specifics of the terms we finalized were reached through what was a normal stalk.”

“But – in such a short time? With unknown aliens?” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan asked querulously.

“To you,” Ika-Karan Shen said. “To some of us. They are not ‘known’ as the *Korli*, *H'Reli*, or *Bjora* are – but this was neithers’ first encounter with this particular ‘other’. They knew of both Groundlings and Spacers – had knowledge, too, of the War.” Ika-Karan Shen shook her head. “Also, of its cost and scale. They had to have learned that from others, and earlier. Because they opened with the observation, that being neighbors to a nova was ‘unsafe’.”

“The Great Council will know if there have been contacts or battles witnessed by these aliens,” T’L’A’ do Haran said confidently.

“Oh? No hunter-ship ever stayed silent about some unwanted truth?” Ika-Karan Shen sniped. The pair exchanged further insults, flaring up in an old and established pattern which the rest of the crew ignored, as the tones and body language indicated this was habit, not new reactivity.

“We have what the Council sought – and perhaps, more,” T’A’T’Sin said, standing up. “What we have gained serves the People – who are more than most of us had before this, ever dreamed might be. Or whom we might yet become.” She cuffed, lightly, the back of Richard/Au Ir Po’s neck; and then let the same hand drape affectionately and reassuringly on his neck and shoulder. “None of us expected either how things happened or reaching so great a success for so little cost.”

“Just the complete shattering of our complacency and all propriety,” muttered T’L’A do Haran.

“Also, the norms of interspecies negotiations, particularly with newly-met ones,” Tyel-Aran Akar do Morlan added. “This will be a mission for the Archives, most definitely.” She shook her head. “And none not present, will believe it – except through experiencing the reality of its consequences.”

“Fair enough. I am not sure that I can believe it myself – and I, we, lived through this,” Richard/Au Ir Po said.

And the entire crew of *Istiru’s Grace* were lost to whooping, body-shaking laughter.

#

“All right, time to put this officially into the logbook.” Admiral Piter Vrooman looked around and across his desk as he keyed up the ‘official record’ function. “Alien Affairs, Tamara Den Vayana: your summary.”

The seniormost diplomatic, civilian authority aboard the battleship did not clear her throat or engage in any other preparatory activity, instead speaking immediately, unhurriedly, and clearly. “The TSA/Auran Alliance have agreed to aid the *Shidran-kas* Homeship TyelAkar when it arrives in-system, and for the duration of its presence, with two taskings: defense against any who might attack it, and safe transference of any who might seek refuge aboard it. These duties will include aiding refugees seeking to flee from the Shipborne-Altha-ani War – regardless of those refugee’s origin; and defending against attackers of the TyelAkar – again, regardless of said attacker’s origin. We are deliberately aiding a specific sub-unit of one ‘side’ of a millennia-old civil war, precisely because that sub-unit is the first we have knowledge of who is seeking not to win, but to bring to an end, that self-same war.”

“Your principal reason for approving and supporting these commitments?” Admiral Vrooman asked.

“Ethically, this is the right decision. Pragmatically, it is the one most likely to improve the position, and safety, of the TSA/Auuran Alliance. Realistically, it is a solution more likely to prove successful than the previous ‘optimal response’ of complete isolation and withdrawal from all contacts with either of the warring sides units,” Tamara Den Vayana stated.

Admiral Vrooman waited for ten seconds after she had finished speaking, then turned to her left and the next person. “Speaker Chachichekkikak of Whitewings Aerie, your summary.”

The Auri stood reflexively. “To refuse contact required the Aeries to unanimously refuse to explore or fly through a great volume – of unknown shaping – for an unknown span of time, perhaps centuries, or even longer. As a practical reality, such was impossible to ensure without intra-Aerie violence; and even then, criminal excursions were certain to violate any boundary. The potential of new trading partners, new allies, and lesser hazard from bloodthirsty carnivore-based hunter-types, all argued for this as the smoother flight path. None foresaw this chance; to fail to stoop upon and seize it, would condemn us to generations of obloquy.” She sat again, neck stiff and head proudly erect.

After twenty seconds silence, Admiral Vrooman turned to the third individual. “Vice-Admiral Tattingen, for GUSAF?”

His immediate subordinate nodded. “Sir; Speaker; those others present now and in future review: this opportunity to seek a resolution and a peace after a civil conflict, and neither a temporary pause or unilateral and total defeat with all its horrific costs, is one we entirely welcome. When ‘winning’ shifts from being impossible to attainable, at the cost of a higher price paid immediately, then despite the pain, deaths, and hazards involved, we must and should do so. We have complained about the ‘lunacy’ of the warring sides – it would be entirely both wrong and hypocritical, not to forget short-sighted, to fail to support the first sane approach. Particularly when such leads to an outcome all sides, and we as spectators, can support.”

“A further question, Admiral Tattingen.” That was Tamara Den Vayana. “Might the TSA/Auuran Alliance be relatively strengthened, should the two sides of the civil conflict batter each other further?”

“Not sustainably. The greatest probability would be that both said sides would treat us as ‘additional hostiles’, after their situations became so worsened. War degrades the combatants, and we would be left with paranoid, embittered, and habituated killers of all who were in any way ‘different’ – which we would be,” Admiral Tattingen said.

“Thank you,” Tamara Den Vayana said evenly; then she looked at Admiral Vrooman, returning the leadership to him. Who turned to the last person seated at the table.

“Finally, Lieutenant General Derechenko of Terran Security: your position.”

The oldest, and now entirely white-haired, man with a heavily lined face and forehead looked around the table, ending up facing Admiral Vrooman. “What I am going to say is to be classified Top Secret, codeword clearance.” That statement caused all around the table to turn and focus on him in surprise. “But for the public record: Terran Security approves without reservation the evaluations, and decisions, of our allies, our military, and our diplomats; and we shall endorse and

support to the fullest extent this decision.” Then he looked around the table once before speaking again.

“This was – contrary to all discoverable information – an entirely unforeseen possibility. It simply was one which had so low a probability as to have been screened out from all summaries and generalized evaluations. In fact, it was presented but one time, from an unproven source – specifically, an alien from the, ah, ‘Groundling’ or Altha’ani, whom for some years was a study referent for Internal-Security.” This caused all the others present to respond with physical indicia of surprise, tamped down almost immediately as Derechenko spoke again.

“He had been asked to lay out the, and I quote, ‘entire range of possible results of the Great War’. He did so – indicating as well, to the best of his capability and knowledge, the probability ranges for each listed outcome. He did so on a spectrum from ‘worst case’ to ‘best case’ – assessing the relative benefits from the point of view of the survivors after-the-fact. Which, he admitted, were all heavily biased in favor of his point of view.”

“Pardon, General – would that be the, ah, ‘Groundlings’ particular point of view?” Tamara Den Vayana asked.

“It was,” Derechenko confirmed. “This was the last result he presented. He also gave it the least probability, presenting it ‘as a matter of completion’ only. When questioned why he did so, when it was in fact the most desirable, his explanation was both curt and not then understood. For he stated that reaching it, ‘required direct intervention by two nexus points from different sides, with a shared view of the possibilities.’”

“Ah...what is a ‘nexus point’?” That was Speaker Chachickekikak.

“We did not then understand. This was before we learned about the predictive sociological mathematics used by the two sides – Altha’ani and Shidran-kas – which they call *d’aka tro*,” Derechenko said. “Under it, a ‘nexus point’ is someone or something that exerts an anomalous influence upon events. If an individual, where that individual goes, others follow – he leads a movement that forms around him. If a thing, an event, it effectively acts as a trigger for what can only be called a ‘chaos event’ after which the previously predicted outcomes may all change. In any case, a ‘nexus point’ influences the future in unpredictable fashion – the one constant being that it *will* influence events, out of all proportion to expectations.”

“That sounds...well, ‘disruptive’ is too mild a word,” Tamara Den Vayana said.

“It also sounds like the disproved ‘great men and women of history’, theoretical approach,” Admiral Vrooman objected.

“It does match observable data – and history, or histories, too,” Derechenko said. “Suffice it to say that not only the TSA, but Internal Security, have a greater awareness of such than almost all other subgroups. Because generally we are the ‘frontline’ in dealing with such disruptions.”

“Ah – yes. For, ah...”

Speaker Chachickekikak interrupted Admiral Tattingen’s politic explanation. “Yours the task of preventing, eliminating, minimizing such disruptions being, yours the knowledge and awareness most close would be.”

Derechenko blinked, then nodded to the Auran. “Just so.” He refocused on Vrooman. “That specific detail was not included in the summary which I reviewed at the time. However, for this

mission we – no, specifically, I,” he emphasized the pronoun, “—reviewed IS records relevant to both sides of the Slaver War, which included all of that is known of *d’aka tro*, the species, and our interactions with all eetees.” He cleared his throat. “What others could not have known is that I personally have met – interacted with – experienced, a ‘nexus point’ individual. More than once. So I was aware that at least a partial fulfillment of that probability constraint was in fact feasible.” He looked around at the others. “We – Internal Security – and I, myself, could not do more.”

“Why not?” asked Speaker Chachichekkikak.

Derechenko shrugged. “Whatever we did, would be within the bounds of the *d’aka tro* predicted boundaries.”

“Who was – strike that,” Admiral Vrooman said. “The same general boundaries hold for the combatants in their civil war?”

“Yes,” Derechenko answered immediately. “It is futile – cowardly, even – to govern on a basis of ‘wishing for a miracle’. Also, completely unreasonable and irrational.” He looked at the others at the table. “But one can still hope. And one can seize an opportunity presented. That is why Internal Security’s position is one hundred percent supportive of the decision made here, today, by all sides.”

“Then the unanimous conclusion of this review, and all taking part in it, is to approve and move ahead with the agreement with the representatives of the **TyelAkar**; and to strive as best as we can, towards the goals and outcomes they and now we seek to make real.” Admiral Vrooman looked around. “I will adapt a phrase from our history: we shall seek to make this, the beginning of a better end, than that otherwise predicted and foreseen.” He rose, and the room dissolved into a kaleidoscopic set of interpersonal interactions and expressions of emotions.

#

“Now, Lieutenant Colonel Fox, would you be so kind as to explain why I should neither arrest you nor order you shot,” General Derechenko said to the vulpine uplift.

“You still might, can, and could,” Lieutenant Colonel Richard Charles Fox answered warmly and genially. “How much and what kind of an explanation do you want?”

“At the minimum, enough to satisfy our superiors that supporting your unilateral seizure of the interspecies negotiation, was justifiable. Without depending upon the conclusion – which was the antithesis of ‘expectable’,” General Derechenko said.

“Fair enough.”

“I would personally like to know why you did so,” Derechenko added. “It would also help me form a basis to predict your future behavior. If your behavior is random, you see ... that would be ... ‘unfortunate’.”

“Are you sure you could stand the surprise were I to do so?”

Derechenko glared – and then snorted, twice, with laughter. “Point taken. Still – something would be nice, among friends.”

The vulpine nodded and put down the drink which his higher-ranked host had handed him after the door had closed behind them, isolating them from external surveillance. “All right. As a first step – have at least three independent groups, each of which must include a majority of pan-species

interpersonal semiotic analysts, evaluate the cues from the aliens' movements, postures, and above all else, subconscious facial, ear, hand, and tail motions, with an eye as to indicating which of them was the key actor."

Derechenko blinked, then nodded. "That I can do."

"Not you – get your least-liked aide to order this. Who should least know what answer you might be looking for, to avoid 'contamination'. In fact, order that now, please."

"Ah. So, then you can tell me the answer?" Derechenko did just that, then closed the memo channel again. "So?"

"When the introduction was finished – just at the very moment the true interaction was to start – I could tell who that person was. I could also read the layering of conflicts amongst the aliens, and it was all of deep, multi-layered, and fragmented. Then he spoke. Now, get a different set, plus the same original groups, to analyze the semiotics of both the aliens, and our team, on hearing what was first said of substance."

Another nod, another line of command, and the link closed again. "Let me guess – the situation, and your reading, both changed?"

"Completely so. Out of the chaos a single unifying line appeared – one which required a like response to come into being. That required – not suggested, General, required – my response exactly as and how I gave it." General Fox sipped at his drink again.

"Then why did you 'dicker' about the lesser terms? That will be the challenge," Derechenko stated.

"Because that was what the eetees needed, to complete their unification. Because it also served to keep quiet some on our side, who had the same need for appearance, as well as substance, of negotiation to be present. Because it gave everyone just enough time to realize not only that there was this hope – but just how fragile and delicate it was, and how any further efforts to squeeze advantage or seek gain, would shatter it or drive it away. On this you should include aural and emotive analytics on tones of voice and sub-vocalizations. Which I alone amongst the Alliance representatives, was competent to assess and act upon."

"The TruthTeller –"

"Had zero experience with any eetees beside the Auuri. I have met – had years of interpersonal interactions with – *Altha'ani* and *Shidran-kas*, both. Anything else?"

LTC Fox looked at his watcher, sometimes-guard, sometimes-ally, and entirely independent judge. "I recognized the speaker and the moment and above all else, the uniqueness of the potential so surprisingly offered. To realize it, I had to take charge – and to fail to do that, would have been all of criminally, ethically, and unbelievably stupid. So many lives – such horrors of loss and devastation – even should I be 'taken out and shot', that price would be worth paying a billion times over. So...I acted as I did."

"That easily?"

"'Expended', and 'for the good of the many', just about sums it all up. No, one even more important thought predominates: hope." LTC Fox looked at Derechenko. "I would like to see the recordings myself, in about three days' time. Because by then I will be so thoroughly chasing my own tail and memories, that the reassurance as to what actually happened, will be vital to my

continued sanity. And no less my comfort, than yours – or that of all of our superiors, who know what the alternatives had to have otherwise been.”

“That later viewing I can promise. It may be more than once – whether you are court-martialed for acting beyond your remit and powers, is beyond my control. Though I will testify on your behalf, should it come. You were right. How you came to be so, why you could do so, what we can learn to be able to do so ourselves, and in the future – those questions probably will remain unresolved and unresolvable,” General Derechenko said. “But that last occupant of Pandora’s chest has now flown free.” He shook his head and then downed all of his drink in one swift swallow. “Bozhemoi, kotorovo nyet; shto menya zdyelatch?” He looked again at the Uplift. “Just whom did you see, Richard?”

“In a deepest sense, Grigorii – I saw myself, in both past and future alike. We shared the goal of peace, and the hope of making it begin in our common time. Of healing a self-inflicted wound instead of creating out of the pain of that first, another such. God helped me, us, all of us – ‘Hier stehe ich, ich könnte nichts anderes machen’.”

“Amen,” Derechenko said; and a full minute later added softly, “Thank you.”

Aftermath

Istiru’s Grace, en route to the TyelAkar, *Shidra-Salach’s* cabin

“This one can barely believe what this one has accomplished. This one reads his own reports, and it seems almost as though this was a dream. This one...” Au Ir Po said, as he stared up at the cabin’s ceiling.

TyelAkar-Tyel Sin do Haran sighed. “Speak as an equal? After your performance with this ‘Tee Ess Ay’, you deserve it,” she said.

“But it still seems like a dream. I can recall what I did, but it seems strangely dreamlike. I read my report, my journal and it feels as though it was someone else who performed all these actions. Yet I remember everything, but I can only recall what I said, not what I was thinking,” Au Ir Po said.

“Can you recall what you were thinking since I renewed our vows?”

“Only as if in a dream. I can recall what I said, and how I felt, physically. Every breath felt like fire, and ... I can recall feeling anxious, fearful, and yet ... I cannot recall what my thoughts were. It is very disconcerting. And more than just a bit worrisome.”

“How do you feel now?” TyelAkar-Tyel Sin do Haran asked.

“Relaxed. As if a heavy weight had been lifted from my back,” Au Ir Po said. “Perhaps I just needed another day’s sleep to recover my wits. It has, after all, been a somewhat ... stressful ... last few nights.”

TyelAkar-Tyel Sin do Haran leaned back on the pillows and laughed. “That is the understatement of this octad²², and of many more.”

²² An octad is 64 (eight times eight) Han years, each of which is 667.2 Han days, for one octad equaling roughly 116.9 terrestrial years.

“Granted. But now there is the little matter of payment – my air tax, the cost of the transition drug, and...”

TyelAkar-Tyel Sin do Haran reached over and gently closed Au Ir Po's mouth. “If you really insist, you can pay the general fund out of your pay for this ‘little’ success of yours.”

“What? I thought that my ship-account was zero. What have I done to warrant...”

“Aside from setting us on a path to ending a war that has been draining both our Peoples for more than eight octads? Not to mention guaranteeing the safety of *our* Homeship? It will take time to transit to this pulsar system, but with the weapons this ‘Tee Ess Ay’ has mounted on the fourth planet, who could threaten us?”

“But I didn't see any demonstration of weaponry...”

“This ‘Tee Ess Ay’ is still somewhat naïve regarding cloaking technologies, for which I think we can be grateful. The power readings that *Sensors* got ... well ... I don't know where, or how, they were generating their power. Perhaps they can't shield the leakage at the levels that they generate. But their base generates enough power to outshine a supernova, even if only for a few small fractions of a *ral*²³. Power output well beyond what any Homeship – even the greatest of the Greatships – could generate. There isn't a ship in the Grand Fleet that could stand against such power. And then, there is the speed of their ships – and the drive that they use. A step function from three quarters the speed of light down to half light speed, to zero relative in what seemed like time-quanta?”

“Perhaps I have led the Ships into a more dangerous foe...”

“Hardly. They seemed as anxious for trade as any *Shidran-kas* and as averse to bloodshed. With a *hengocha* advising them on etiquette and common practices? I think they may be wonderful engineers and scientists, starved for art and beauty of all kinds. Did you sense any fear or anger from them?”

“No...but they may be good at concealing their emotions. I'm not a *mind-hunter* to probe others with ease,” Au Ir Po said. “But you're hiding something,” he said, and rolled over on the pillow to bring himself nose-to-nose with the female. “Have you been putting funds into my ship account?”

TyelAkar-Tyel Sin do Haran jerked back. “I would not insult you by doing such a ... thing ... *ishardri*. But I have contacted the Council...”

Au Ir Po's eyebrow whiskers wiggled. “Spending energy for a C+ transmission? How much did *that* cost the Collective...”

“Good news needs be reported quickly, so that preparations might be begun for relocation. The return information contained a bit of information that I was *intending* to tell you later. When I could find an appropriate time for the surprise. But since you worry about your ship-account...”

“I would prefer to not have this,” he held up his air tag, “turn black.”

“No danger of that, now. But since you insist on opening presents early...”

²³ A *ral* is one sixty-fourth of a *kir*, which is a sixty-fourth of a *san*, which is an eighth of a day. So a *ral* is roughly 2.65 seconds. (A Han day is roughly 24 hours 05 minutes.)

“Very well, female. You’ve had some entertainment value out of this,” Au Ir Po said, and began tickling the female under her rib cage.

“Oh...don’t *do* that if you want me to tell you...” she said, and began giggling as she curled up like a pillbug. **You’ve been awarded full position-pay of an aka-v’sho. Only that of a purser, perhaps, but it’s still a full ship-share on the TyelAkar. There are clans with collectively less than that,** she ‘cast.

Au Ir Po stopped his tickle-attack. “That is ... so I will have no trouble purchasing additional cubic?” he asked.

“You could purchase a large furnished mansion with many original art pieces on the edge of the entertainer’s district next to the government district in the *TyelAkar’s* core,” she said, as TyelAkar-Tyel Sin do Haran was able to draw in another few breaths.

“Just where is your on-ship abode?”

“Adjacent to Government House,” she said. “There’s nothing open nearer than the entertainer’s district when I checked.”

“You used C+ time to run through open listings?”

“No, I updated ship-records before we left.”

“Planning ahead?”

“You might say that. I spent some off time seeing if there was any cubic open near my quarters. None such, sadly. But there are some very nice open spaces in the entertainer’s district.”

“Aren’t you afraid that I might be distracted by a *hengoshin* or two?”

“They’ll be too afraid of me to press – and their ‘love’ *is* the kind that ‘lasts as long as your gold’. I think you prefer the real thing to the imitation, no matter how shiny the surface, nor how pretty the pelt or thick the brush.”

“Can’t even tease you effectively. You already know me too well.”

“Indeed, but we are wasting a bit of time, and there is some raw fish dishes awaiting our attentions in the defroster,” she said, grinning a grin that reached back until it seemed as though the top of her head would fall off.

“Indeed,” Au Ir Po said, and followed the female as she moved over to the mini-galley of her cabin.

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #7

George Phillies
phillies@4liberty.net

News

Since our last issue, we have had a horrible time with N3F InterNet operations. The website was destroyed by a hacker and is gradually being reconstructed. The Web Host backups apparently could not be used by the hosting service. We are now using more reliable backup processes. The emailing arrangement became irregular, so that some people received issues of our zines and others did not. We are looking at alternative solutions to this problem.

Comments:

Front Cover: A very clever use of water color, namely a photographically accurate (if film cameras work) image of an area where the laws of nature are distorted.

The Fox's Den: Thank you for your explanation of Shidran-Kas biology and mathematics. Bets of luck getting published via the agent-publisher route. My impression is that the doorways are narrow and not particularly open. The near-end of conventional paperback publishing is not going to be an assist.

Your tale, I Got Where I Wasn't Going: My, he arrives thirty years late in what sounds to be a serious dystopia, complete with uplifted sex-slave spies, radioactive air, and an ice age. The advance in technology appears to be remarkable. I confess I have never heard of a daytimer before, and infer from an internet search that is a complicated appointment notebook. Yes, the world has changed a great deal, in fair part for the worse. You cleverly drop a mention of the KGB only in Chapter 4.

Postscripts from The Phoenix Throne: Thank you for your account of Troika! Your list of bulky items was particularly amusing. McGill's Illuminaries was clever, even before the litigatory aspects were revealed.

Finnegan Tarrega sounds to be an interesting fellow. "Smithsonian Institution's Special Acquisitions Section" sounds like something that is involved I activities that might dismay some contemporary museums. The level of violence in archaeology is more than some people would expect. The tavern whose window Finnegan smashed would doubtless hope to be paid for it. Have fun with ice skating. I skated, but that more than a half-century ago.

Ronin Engineer: Lewis's *The Early Chinese Empires* sounds like another interesting book that I will never have time to read. From your description of Han dynasty recognition of foreigners, China has not changed a great deal since. Ah, filler worlds and their history, places that people might visit.

For a similar purpose I have used Third Millennium's *Astrogator's Handbook*, which is a 3D map of the stars within 50 LY or so of Earth. The document predates the modern space telescopes, notably Hipparchos, so the star list is incomplete. My use of the Handbook was my near-future novel *MinuteGirls*, in which many of the countries of Earth substantially do not speak to each other. The European union has spaceships that use warp gates, a typical gate connecting stars 50 or 100 light years apart, or perhaps stars in a parallel continuum. Most stars have warp gates, so a warp map is complex.

The Americans have a scheme for creating warp tunnels, tunnels being necessarily on planetary surfaces or underground in order to work. They are generated between two generators in contact and then stretched...but they snap if the stretch is more than 6 or 8 light years. The America Stellar Republic has thus grown slowly through the two intervening centuries between its formation and the date of the novel, but I had to populate the details of its growth. There was an extremely unpleasant war between the two powers, in recent times; they do not speak at all and do not know about each other's transportation in any detail. China got into a war with all of its neighbors at the same time and was heavily partitioned afterward.

Death Priest: A well-detailed description of a group of an ancient faith who have outlived – if that is the right word – the civilization that they served, but who still have worshipers and devotees. You give us interesting detail well beyond a count of hit points and spell points. At one rime, undead interacted poorly with clerics of other faiths. Is that an issue here? The attached image, Mayan or Aztecan to my limited eye, was a good end marker.

No Tears for a Princess

While the moon Tegel-La rose slowly into the western sky, they spoke of little things: the sights of Arburg, a shooting star, the advance of the fall weather. An owl hooting in the distance was their only company.

"Do your ribs still bother you?" asked Grandoon.

"Naw, not really. I mean, I still feel bruises. Don't worry. That couple-three street thugs didn't really hurt me. I was more wet, angry, and cold than anything else."

"You think they were cutpurses?"

"Well, sure. They were lucky, and I was careless. 'Course, if I wandered through towns -- ones where people know me -- in simple cloth, no helm or armor, I'd be dead again, ummh, I mean, well, half-dead again. You saw the dent in my helmet -- and I really appreciate your fixing it. But the Duke's a cheapskate. He just used road vultures, the sort who'd have their own accidents later, with no pointed questions asked. They just had a club and some half-decent swords. No armor. Those ... they didn't even use their capes to tangle my sword. Jerks!" She snorted derisively. "They were nice capes, too, black satin and gold lace lining."

Grandoon was suddenly more attentive. "Gold lace? On the inside?"

"Yeah, now that you ask. Hadn't thought about it. Inside. Even their tailors were dumb. You couldn't see it most of the time."

Grandoon pulled a scrap of parchment from one pocket. "Was this how the lace was worked?" he asked. Luminous ink flowed over the page, finally forming a series of interlocked spirals.

Elaine scowled. "Didn't look at it much. I'd other things to do, right then, and it was pretty rumbled." She paused in thought. Her memory, which readily stored even the most intricate of runes, matched Grandoon's parchment against half-glimpsed curliques of spun gold. "That's it. I'm sure. Is it some local bunch of punks?"

"That, my dear," Grandoon explained in his usual avuncular tone, "is how one recognizes an assassin of the Order of The Seven Deaths, while he is practicing his vocation. Should the question arise, I trust you will neglect to remember who told you this ill-known fact."

"Master assassins? For me? But why bother? Those guys cost a mint, not that they're worth it. I didn't think the Duke was that jealous. Don't worry. My lips are sealed. Those creeps hire out to Pyrrin. I've got one answer for them." She passed one finger across her throat.

"You have the most charming gift of understatement. As you left the three of them dead, your foe also owes their weregild, which doubtless will set someone -- the city's ratepayers, I fear -- back a tidy sum. The Duke wanted success, followed by a sure absence of consequential blackmail. The Order is reliable in the last respect."

"Reliable? Those clods were feeble! I can hold my breath longer than it took to stomp all three of them," said Elaine.

"Their blades are also set with the direst of poisons, more powerful than anything other than the distilled essence of manticore venom. Had you been scratched..." His voice trailed off when he remembered that she had taken not one but several deep slashes.

"Must've washed off in the river," she answered nonchalantly. "The cuts did sting more'n they should've."

"Yes, of course," answered Grandoon. A single scratch from an assassin's blade brought an elephant to its knees in a few moments. He recounted his protections, briefly afraid she was part of an elaborate plot to kill him. You, he thought to himself, you thought she was absurdly lucky at the gate. She looks like a not-quite-grown-up fifteen-year-old hauling her big brother's overweight sword and oversize bow. But she's more than that, in strange ways. Her protections against magecraft and poison are not unique, but how do they work? She's not wearing a single amulet. You made your investigations today. Everything you learned points to the truth of her story about the assassins.

Ancient D&D Campaign, continued

Our intrepid adventurers continue their escort duties. Oxen are slow, a couple of miles an hour. Oxen, to be maintained in good health, can do twelve miles a day, with a day of rest every sixth or so day. On

the fifth day, the travellers reach what should have been an inn, with fields of grain, a barn for horses, grazing fields for the oxen, and beds and baths for the travelers. The inn has burned to the ground. The granary is intact. Two men were trying to shore up the lower barn walls, clean-cut stone that looks to have been shoved in along a circular arc.

The line of carts are walked into a protective circle across the road. Master Trader Rijstaffel and Herman Engolph walk over to where the men are hard at work.

“Peace be unto you,” Rijstaffel says politely. “We had planned to stay here for a day and rest our oxen, but instead we are saddened by what we find.”

“Welcome to my disaster,” the older man said. “I am Barnabus Braumeister, innkeeper. Last night my Inn and barn were attacked. That being Fourday, I had only a few guests, most of whom woke when the alarm bell was sounded and came to my aid. We never saw the attackers. They used fire arrows on the roof. My staff lived in the cookhouse, which is intact, and I live above the barn, but for shelter I can offer you only the barn’s hayloft – except the barn is about to collapse.”

“We will want to purchase grain for our oxes and horses,” Rijstaffel said, “and enjoy use of the paved turnabout for our beast of burden. My teamsters have their contract, a day of rest for them, but this Gentleman and his companions may be able to help.”

“Indeed,” Herman said. “We would have to negotiate terms, but several of my people might be willing to assist, for pay or kind. In particular, our Priestess of the Corn Snake Goddess may be able to bless your fields. Several of our magicians may have useful spells.”

Vincent Goodheart examined the wall and recovered one of his books. “This spell,” he explained, “will straighten walls that are out of true. That is a lot of wall, so I will need to spend this evening and tomorrow casting the spell once and again, gradually bringing the wall back into being straight. Indeed, Bona Fortuna must have smiled on you, because that wall is so much askew that it looks ready to fall. It may fall before I can fix it. Fortunately, your floor joists don’t rest on it.”

Emmanuel Lorne stared at the smoldering rubble that had been an inn. “There is a standard spell for cleaning fireplaces. It transports the ashes and charred wood from the fireplace to someplace out-of-doors, leaving andirons, cookpots, and all else behind. I have to do this a small bite at a time, but I have a long day of spellcasting ahead of me. Those of you who know the oven cleaning spell can usefully do cleanup.”

Sandra and Brian considered what they might do.

“Guard the wagons,” Brian finally said. “That’s why we’re here. Especially tonight. Soon enough, Master Rijstaffel’s men and women will be less than sober, because they have tomorrow to recover. And we’re at a stop, so there’s time to check all the horses’ hooves, carefully, put the wagon into order...”

“All the good things that a Command Sergeant makes his men do...except we are both sergeants with no men. But I get to stay up all night. Whoever did that, they were bad people in the night. But if I wait for them, at the edge of the woodlot, I can make them dead people in the night. Surprise is a wonderful multiplier.

