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Part One

The Colony

122 Years Ago



Space

As the vast spacecraft neared Kira, a single face peered out from a tiny window in its side.

“What’s it like?” Revo asked. “Is it beautiful? Can you see the colony?”

Chaypay didn’t answer; he was lost in awe at the sight of Kira, the lone moon of their home planet.

“Oh, please, tell me, Chaypay! What do you see?”

“It’s... it’s big. It’s... orange.”

“Can you see the colony?”

Chaypay hesitated. “No, it’s too small. I can’t see anything there.”

“Let me see! Let me see!”

“Not yet,” Siboot cautioned her. “Chaypay still has thirty seconds left. Let him have his turn.”

“Oooh...” Revo said in frustration, dancing nervously, like a child in desperate need of a bathroom.

“In training, we saw thousands of photographs of Kira, from every distance and angle, but this... this is the real thing. It’s so much *bigger* than I imagined!”

“Time’s up, Chaypay!” Siboot said. “Revo, it’s your turn now.”

Revo grabbed Chaypay’s shoulder and yanked him away; he floated backwards to the opposite wall, chuckling.

“Shap!” Revo cried. “Oh, shap! That’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen! Shap!”

Siboot and Chaypay exchanged smiles at Revo’s delight.

“It’s so big!” she said. “What are those brown wrinkles? Why can’t we see them from Lamina? I can’t see where the colony is. Where’s the colony supposed to be?” She lapsed into awestruck silence.

Siboot called time, and Revo pushed away from the window, looking serious. She twisted around to face Siboot as she floated away. “It’s not very green, is it?” she asked.

Beety took Revo’s place at the window. “Revo’s right,” she said after a moment. “It’s certainly a dry-looking place. I know they told us that there was plenty of underground water, but where does it come from, I wonder?”

Nobody answered.

“Not a cloud to be seen anywhere. A thin, dry atmosphere, just like they said.”

Again, silence from the others.

“The cratering is definitely shallow; that means that erosion from the wind is pretty effective.”

“Yes, Beety,” Siboot answered.

“Is my time up yet?” Beety asked Siboot.

“Just about.”

“OK, Siboot, go ahead.”

Siboot moved into place to look out the window.

“Do those Ripi eyes see anything we missed?” Chaypay asked.

“Yes,” Siboot said, so quietly that Chaypay had to twist his ears to hear. “I see the future of the Four Species. I see Jomkars and Ripis and Klasts and

Tayrans learning to live together in their struggle to survive in a harsh environment. There will never be a war on Kira—we'll need each other too badly.”

“OK, everybody, your time is up!” the sergeant called out. “Exit through the far hatch and go back to your cabin. The next group is coming in.”

Their “cabin” was really just a small tunnel with four strap-down bunks, one on each wall, and a central passageway to float down to access them. There were also some little stowage cases next to each bunk. The far end of the tunnel had some safety equipment; the near end was the hatch, just large enough for a Tayran to fit through. It was a tight fit; space may be infinite, but certainly not inside spaceships.

Each future colonist moved to their assigned spot and attached their safety cords, pulling them snug against their “seats”, which were really just shaped cushions set against the wall. Four different cushions for four different species. Siboot had the smallest set; Ripis were the smallest of the four species. Beety, as a Tayran, had the largest cushion. Revo’s had a special extension to accommodate her long Klast legs. Chaypay’s seat cushions were designed to fit the chunky Jomkar body.

Once strapped in, they all looked around at each other expectantly. Chaypay finally broke the silence: “Well?”

“We’re really doing this. We’re really going to live on Kira! I can’t believe it’s real!” Beety said.

“You bet your feathers we are!” Chaypay laughed. “What did you think we’ve been doing for the last year?”

“I know, I know...” Beety said. “But it always seemed so fantastic, so unreal. In my heart, I just couldn’t believe it until I finally saw Kira like that.”

“We’ve never really had time to let it sink in,” Revo said. “The training program kept us running all the time. We never had time to step back and see the big picture.”

“I think that was part of the Space Office’s training strategy,” Siboot said. “I think they wanted to immerse us in a completely different world, a world without all the animosities between our species. Look at us—we’re all idealistic young fools—”

“You? Young?” Revo interrupted. Everyone laughed. “I’m half your age! You’re probably the oldest colonist there is!”

“Well, yes, that’s true, but that just makes me an idealistic old fool! My point is, we’re all part of this wide-eyed experiment to prove that the Four Species can get along without fighting. That’s why we’re here.”

The other three nodded silently.

“That must be why they never let us leave the training camp. I haven’t been out in the real world for a year now. I really miss the milkshakes they made at the shop near my old school,” Revo said.

“The last time I actually saw my family was the day I left for training,” Beety said. “Ever since then, they allowed only phone calls. Did they really have to isolate us like that?”

Siboot knew the answer. “We are our new families. They need us to leave our old ties behind us. The old family ties, the old patriotisms—that’s what nearly killed us all. Look around you: this is your family, now.”

Eyes darted from one face to another.

“Dad, could I have a raise in my allowance?” Chaypay asked.

The First Day

Siboot was the last one to stagger into their tent and flop down on his sleeping bag. He lay there for a long moment before loudly calling “Kinst!”

“Kinst!” Revo echoed from her sleeping bag.

“Kinst!” Chaypay repeated.

“Indeed so!” Beety said.

“This can’t work. It’s a complete kinst-up. I thought they had planned this thing out,” Chaypay said.

“I was so excited when we landed. But we spent half the day waiting on the ship just to get off. What took them so long?” Revo said.

“Look, nobody has ever done anything like this before,” Siboot said. “Not anything remotely like this. It’s something completely new for every single person here. There was a lot of confusion due to language differences.”

“So why the kinst didn’t they bring us down at the beginning?” Chaypay asked.

“Most likely because that was on page 57 of their Procedure Manual,” Beety said. The laugh his quip evoked was more bitter than happy.

“I’m *sick* of Procedure Manuals! The different language versions disagree!” Chaypay said.

Once again it was Siboot who took charge. “Yes, this day was pure, unadulterated kinst. But look on the bright side: we’re still alive!” No one laughed. Undeterred, he continued. “We’ve got everything we need to build our colony. Don’t forget, the Great Garden wasn’t built in a day. We’re here. We have all our equipment. Tomorrow, we start building the colony. The four of us will play a crucial role. We’re the translators, but most of the problems today arose because we weren’t there to help sort out the confusion. Tomorrow, we’ll be on the spot, and things will run more smoothly. Let’s all get some sleep so we’ll be fresh in the morning.”

Chaypay nodded in agreement. Revo grunted assent. Beety was already asleep.

The Third Night

“Beety? How did it go for you this morning?”

“Not much happened. I wandered around and introduced myself to people, but they were too busy to say much. They all seemed nice enough, but I sure felt useless. I pitched in a few times, but sometimes they seemed almost resentful of my help.”

“Yes, I had the same problems on my shift,” Chaypay said. “Everybody is so busy. I had some luck at the cafeteria tent; people seemed willing to talk to me there, and I was able to introduce myself to a lot of people. They’re all very nice, but I could sense some reticence on the part of the Tayrans I ran into.”

“Duh!” Revo said. “The Tayrans act very nice when they can’t avoid interactions with other species, but they are definitely uncomfortable around others. I admire their determination to outgrow their background, but they have a long way to go.”

“I had some luck with them by asking technical questions wherever I could,” Siboot said. “I played the dumb rube who didn’t know anything; they’re obviously proud of their technical skills and become almost garrulous talking about them.”

“Calling Tayrans ‘garrulous’ is definitely going too far,” Chaypay said. The others chuckled.

“Your own species excepted, which species did you have the best interaction with?” Siboot asked.

Revo answered, “The Jomkars.” Beety agreed. Chaypay named the Ripis. “How about you?” Chaypay asked Siboot.

“I know you’ll find this odd, but I had best luck with the Tayrans. Maybe that’s only because of my little ruse. But once they got started, I almost couldn’t get them to stop talking.”

Revo looked up. “Oh, I had one problem with a Ripi, Siboot. When I approached her, she said ‘the bomb’s about to go off’ and ran away! What did she mean?”

Siboot smiled. “She had to go to the bathroom.”

Revo looked at the others. “Does anyone else feel that the Ripi colloquialisms are the oddest and most obscure?”

“Definitely,” Chaypay answered.

“For sure,” Beety agreed. “How about the phrase they use to describe a euphemism: ‘a cough for a fart’. I mean, really!”

“Now, hold on a minute!” Siboot said in mock irritation. “Ripi is a more metaphorical language than yours. Ripis are endlessly inventive with their language, always coining clever metaphors for everyday notions.”

“Yeah, right...” Revo said.

“Sure thing, Siboot,” Beety said.

“OK, OK.” Siboot smiled. “We’re reversing shift assignments tomorrow, so we can all meet all the colonists. Let’s get what sleep we can before the morning.”

A Typical Day

Siboot rose early and headed to the cafeteria tent. There he spied Gillespin, a Jomkar plumber, and his three colleagues. “What’s up for today, Gillespin?” he asked, as he hoisted himself up to sit on the table next to the quartet.

“We’re laying the line to the cafeteria today,” Gillespin said. “Should be easy; it’s a straight and level shot from the main pipe terminus.”

Siboot switched to Klast and addressed Morkan, the Klast plumber: “Do you think you’ll be needing my services today?”

“Naw,” Morkan replied. “This is simple stuff, and we all understand each other well enough to handle it without confusion. We’ll probably need you tomorrow, when we’ll be running a pipe around that rock formation east of the vegetable garden.”

“Can these guys keep up with you, Forseen?” Siboot asked in Tayran. Forseen was the strongest member of the quartet.

Forseen laughed and wrapped his arm around Taloot, his Ripi teammate. “This guy can squeeze into spaces I could never handle. That’s what makes us such a great team!”

Taloot smiled at the obvious sentiment, despite not knowing exactly what Forseen had said. Siboot grinned and slapped them both on the shoulder. To Taloot, he said, “Anything you guys need, just ask!”

He headed over to the counter. The Ripi server stepped up to help Siboot, but Siboot turned to the Klast server and requested a Klast scone instead. He preferred Ripi dishes, but he hadn’t come to Kira for the food. He asked the Tayran server for some tea; he had started to develop a taste for the strong stuff.

With scone and teacup in hand, he surveyed the tables; most of the people had broken into same-species groups. This was frowned upon during training, but the strictures had been relaxed somewhat on Kira. Spying an auspicious seating arrangement, he plopped his cup and scone down between a solitary Klast and a pair of Ripis.

“Morning!” he said to the surprised-looking Klast. “Forgive me, I can’t recall your name.”

The Klast took a few seconds to finish nibbling on his scone. “Sturwit. I’m with the dome assemblers.” He nodded his chin upward in a Klast gesture of greeting, which Siboot returned.

Turning to the Ripis, he interrupted their conversation to announce, “This here is Sturwit; he’s a dome assembler. What teams are you ladies with?”

The two Ripi young women were obviously a little put off by the interruption, but they appreciated the opening Siboot offered them.

“My name is Karkoot. I’m an admin assistant.”

“And I’m Kendra, one of the laundry team.”

They both nodded their chins upward to Sturwit. He responded with the traditional Ripi greeting, touching his fingertips to his chest. They replied in kind.

“Do you know when they’ll be erecting our dome?” Kendra asked. Pre-fab domes were being set up to house the various colony functions.

After Siboot translated, Sturwit replied, “We’re still working on the Admin dome. After that comes the cafeteria. I don’t know when we’ll get to the laundry dome.”

Kendra sighed when she heard Siboot’s translation. “Well, at least you won’t be roughing it for much longer,” she told Karkoot.

Sturwit had a question for Karkoot. “What does Governor Grad do all day? I never see him outside.”

“He spends half his day putting together reports for the Space Office and the other half arguing about getting new equipment, people, and supplies.”

The conversation continued slowly, as Siboot had to interpret for each side.

“But this was all planned out years in advance.” Sturwit said. “Remember all those training classes where they told us exactly what would happen on each day after we landed? I memorized a lot of that stuff, and we’re not following that plan at all.”

“Things have changed; I don’t know why. I don’t know if there is any plan at all, anymore.”

Shaking his head in disgust, Sturwit stood and bussed his dishes. Siboot rose and bade farewell to the two Ripis.

His next destination was the Tools & Equipment corral. All the outside workers converged here after breakfast to gather the tools they'd need for the day's work. This was generally a smooth process, but there were always a few snags.

He encountered exactly such a scene. A Ripi was talking loudly at a Tayran: "THIS...IS...A...RIPI...SHOVEL! YOU...ARE...NOT...A...RIPI! I...AM...A...RIPI! YOU...MUST...USE...A...TAYRAN...SHOVEL!"

Siboot touched him on the shoulder. "Hold, friend." Turning to the Tayran, he asked, "What's this guy bothering you about?"

"We're laying gravel in front of the new Admin building today. I have to scoop up the spillage and put it onto the new walkways. A Tayran shovel is for digging, but a Ripi shovel is better for scooping up loose gravel."

"Oh, yes, I see!" Siboot said. "I'll get him off your back." Siboot explained the situation to the Ripi, who backed off reluctantly. "Come on, make nice!" Siboot said. The Ripi, chastened, bowed to the Tayran. "That's my man!" Siboot clapped him on the shoulder. Turning back to the Tayran, he nodded in success.

Later that day, Siboot watched with fascination as a quartet laid the foundation for a dome. It was all done with gestures and single words from the different languages. A Tayran addressed a Jomkar by waving inward with one hand, pointing down with the other, and declaring the Klast word for "put"; the Jomkar positioned a brace where the Tayran indicated. The Jomkar then asked in Ripi, "More?" but the Tayran stomped hard on the brace with his boot and declared—in Jomkar—"mine".

Siboot smiled in satisfaction; this grand experiment was already starting to work.

Late in the day, a more serious problem arose: some plumbers wanted to lay a pipe in the same spot that a dome assembly crew wanted to pile the parts for a dome they were building. Whichever side lost the conflict would suffer a delay of four or five hours. Siboot listened to both sides but could see no easy solution, so he asked them to wait while he consulted Governor Grad.

The Governor made Siboot wait half an hour, then listened unsympathetically as Siboot outlined the problem. He wanted to sleep on it, but Siboot pressed him for an immediate decision.

"Very well, let the plumbers have their way!" Grad snapped.

Back at the worksite, the dome assembly quartet was irked, but the plumbers promised to work into the evening to ensure that the site would be clear for them first thing in the morning.

The Celebration

Siboot looked around the cafeteria nervously. Three of the four translators were spread out across the small stage, ready with their microphones. All the colonists except the Jomkars were wearing their headphones. After seven months, this was to be the first convocation of the entire colony. The cafeteria was the only structure capable of holding everybody. It was certainly an exhilarating sight: all two hundred and fifty-six colonists gathered in a single dome.

Governor Grad entered and strode up onto the stage. He held up his hand and the crowd hushed. As soon as he began speaking, the translators went to work, speaking quietly into their microphones.

“Today is the day we’ve been working towards for seven months now! Today, the construction of our colony is complete! Every dome is in place; all the infrastructure is operational. We all have comfortable places to sleep, we have all the power and water we need, and the our first crop is growing. Things haven’t always gone smoothly; we’re later than we planned...”

Somebody in the back shouted in Klast, “Yeah, by four months!”

“...but we have overcome some huge unanticipated problems and triumphed. I want to thank each and every one of you for the long hours you have labored, and the courage you have shown in coping with so many setbacks. You all—we all—have so much to be proud of.”

“At this very moment, they are launching celebrations on Lamina in honor of our achievement. We, too, will celebrate. All this time we have secretly kept in storage the ingredients for a great feast. The cafeteria staff has been working late each night preparing that feast for you. Tonight we feast, and tomorrow we rest. Enjoy!”

The cafeteria erupted. Klasts danced their three-step celebratory prance; Jomkars slapped their cheeks alternately with open mouths; Tayrans puffed out their chests; and Ripis tweeted their peculiar happy-sound.

Part Two

Siboot

119 Years Ago



Siboot's Dream

Siboot was dreaming, a soft, confused, languid dream, the kind of dream so wispy that it can't be remembered after waking up. All of a sudden, it changed. He was floating in a black void; some distance away was a cloud of tiny stars. They were all the same brightness, and together they seemed more like a cloud than stars. They were all moving about in an agitated fashion.

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

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

Siboot could sense that there was some connection between the voices and the colors; the color pattern was shimmering in some complex synchrony with the sound. The dream felt somehow immensely important—but he had no idea what it meant.

Governor Grad

“I don’t have complete information at this time. All I know is that I can’t get through to the Space Office or any of the governmental liaison offices.” The Governor paused to look over the colony, fully assembled here in the cafeteria, hanging on his every word. “I was able to get a patch into the telecomm net through a shortwave operator. Here’s what I learned from one person:

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

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

It was a slow process. Everyone had to state their question, which then had to be translated for everybody else. Then Governor Grad would give his answer, which again was translated. The colonists clutched their headphones, following every word.

“How many warheads were detonated? How much damage is there?”

“I don’t know. I can’t reach the Space Office, and their facilities had lots of backups, so I’m pretty sure that Gilanox was badly damaged. And I haven’t been able to reach any of the New Unity liaison space offices. That suggests that each of the four capitals took a hit. Of course, we would expect the capitals to be the first targets in any nuclear exchange, no matter how small.”

“Who started it?”

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

There was an outbreak among the Klasts. Several ran forward to scream at the Governor. Some Jomkars on the other side of the cafeteria jumped up and began shouting at the Klasts. People on each side raised their fists and made threatening gestures at the other. Several of the big Tayrans jumped to their feet in response.

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

“Whats going to happen to us?”

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

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

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

“What if a resupply ship never comes?”

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

One of the Jomkars jumped up and began shouting. The interpreter had trouble keeping up with his excited shouts. “The situation isn’t that bad? You can’t get through to anybody in charge, and you say the situation isn’t that bad? You say that all four capitals have been destroyed, and the situation *isn’t that bad*? You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about! We’re completely cut off!”

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

Now it was a Ripi's turn to shout. "The Space Office? What can they do for us? They've screwed up almost everything involved with this whole colony, and you want to rely on them for advice now? You can't even reach them! Screw the damn Space Office!"

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

"You Jomkar son-of-a-bitch!" One of the Klasts leapt out of his seat, ran towards the Governor, and began to pummel him with his fists.

Prignine, the Lieutenant-Governor and a Tayran, ran over and tore the Klast away from Grad, throwing him into the audience. At this, several more Klasts dashed forward; several of the Jomkars moved to block their path. A savage fistfight broke out on the stage.

Two Ripis ran onto the stage, shouting "Protect the Governor!" but Prignine didn't understand Ripi and brutally kicked them away. The entire Ripi section stood up and began shouting, at which point several Tayrans fell on them, kicking and beating.

The entire house erupted into a riot, and many people tried to escape the melee. Governor Grad remained on the stage, shouting uselessly for order and calm. A Jomkar dashed out and returned with a pole; a moment later, a Klast showed up with a spade.

Grad jumped down and threaded through the fights, trying to pull combatants apart. He was struck on the head by a wrench. He fell, quivering, and lay still. People streamed out of the cafeteria, shouting and fighting. They left behind them the crumpled bodies of Grad and eighteen others. The battle didn't end, it simply broke into smaller pieces and spread out over the colony.

Siboot was one of the colonists who ran at the start of the fight. He found himself cowering behind the radio dome with two other Ripis, a Jomkar, and a Klast. They all looked at each other in fear. Siboot reassured each one in their native languages. In the frightened gaps between watching for approaching combatants, they tried to plan. "What do we do now?" was about all they could manage to say. They stayed up all night, scampering from hiding place to hiding place, trying to avoid contact with anybody else.

But at dawn, Siboot decided they had hidden long enough. It was time to assert themselves. He stood up and announced, "I'm going to the main courtyard. Who's coming with me?" They all looked at each other and followed him.

They marched to the main courtyard as the sun was rising. On any other day, Prignine would have showed up at about this time to raise the flag of the New Unity. Today he was nowhere to be found. The ragtag group stood in a circle around the flagpole, calling out in all languages, "No more fighting!"

People began to filter out of their hiding places. They watched warily from the shadows, peering through windows and around corners at the little group. Then, singly or in groups of two or three, they crept out of their hiding places and into the ring. In ten minutes, Siboot had twenty people gathered. He organized them to shout the phrase, "No more fighting!" in their own language, each in sequence. More people joined the group. As they added their voices to the chorus, it gained in volume until it could be heard throughout the colony.

When Siboot decided that all who could come had come, he raised his hand for silence. "Friends, let us ponder our fate together."

The New Leader

“First, I suggest that we nominate somebody to lead the discussions. Not to rule the colony, just somebody to moderate the discussions and ensure everybody has their fair chance to speak. Would anybody like to offer their services for this task?” He asked in each of the four languages.

Silence. People looked around at each other. Obviously, an interpreter would be ideal for the task.

“Where’s Chaypay?” Siboot asked. Chaypay had the strongest voice.

“He’s dead,” somebody said. “I saw the body behind the cafeteria.”

Siboot staggered back. “Chaypay—dead?” He stared into space, mouth hanging open, then jerked back to life. “What about Revo?” he asked, frantic. “Has anybody seen Revo?”

“I’m here!” Revo shouted from the back of the crowd.

“Shap!” Siboot whistled. “Shap!” Then: “Isn’t there anybody willing to take the job?”

At last, a Klast spoke up: “You seem best for it, Siboot. You know all the languages, and everybody trusts you.”

After translating this, Siboot posed the question to the group. “Is that true? Do you all trust me to handle the job fairly?”

Nods and sounds of assenting rippled through the crowd. Siboot had served well, not merely as a interpreter, but also as a mediator in many of the disputes that had arisen over the last two years. His strict sense of fairness, and his obvious goodwill towards all, had earned both respect and affection from the colonists.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll do it, but this is only a temporary arrangement. We’ll need to elect a permanent leader.”

Somebody had run off early in Siboot’s speech, and they now returned with a ladder. “Climb up here so everybody can see and hear you!” Siboot scrambled up the ladder with his typical Ripi agility. He paused and stared silently at the crowd for a long moment. The crowd was patient; perhaps he was just gathering his thoughts.

“Friends! Metriki! Ovemunda! Terfinel!”

This is definitely going to be a slow business, saying everything four times, he thought to himself. *I must choose my words carefully.*

“We face a...” Kinst! He couldn’t remember the Klast word for ‘existential’. “...a crisis. We face starvation.”

The assembled Kirans stared in silence. By now, they knew the gravity of their predicament all too well.

“Our only hope for survival is our mutual goodwill.”

The colonists had all been chosen for their idealism and positive attitudes towards the other species. They gestured their approval, each in the manner of their own species. Klasts nodded upwards. Tayrans extended fists in front of their faces. Ripis rolled their heads. Jomkars slapped their cheeks with open mouths.

“Consider our situation carefully. We meet this evening in the cafeteria after dinner. Go, clean up the mess, and repair the damage.”

A Walk in the Garden

As the crowd dissolved into groups talking excitedly among themselves, Revo ran over to Siboot.

“Something very peculiar happened when I climbed up that ladder,” he said.

“You’re usually not tongue-tied like that. What was it?”

“All the people looked red.”

“What do you mean? You weren’t wearing sunglasses!” Ripis never did.

“No, it wasn’t the people themselves. It was... well, everything just seemed red.”

“What in the world are you talking about, Siboot? This makes no sense!”

“I know. I didn’t actually *see* red... I *felt* redness. It gets weirder: it wasn’t exactly redness—it was more like ‘anti-redness’.”

“Siboot, this is crazy. What are you talking about?”

“I had this profound sense of something coming from the crowd, something that felt like the opposite of red. I didn’t see any color, but I felt this intense feeling of... the opposite of red.”

“How can you feel a color?”

“How many times have you associated some feeling with some sensation? When you smell something just like your mom used to cook, doesn’t it bring back warm, cozy feelings?”

“Yes, but...”

“And don’t certain songs remind you of important moments in your life? Don’t some images evoke nostalgic feelings?”

“Yes, but that’s not the same thing. Those are all examples of a sensation triggering a memory. But here, you say something is triggering a sensation.”

“You’re right, you’re right. But there’s definitely something very strange going on here. The feeling I had was too powerful to just be some fluke.”

Democracy

The bodies had been buried and the blood of four different hues had been mopped up by the time everyone gathered for the evening meal. Siboot went from table to table.

“Hormgrim, it’s a huge relief to see you! Are you OK?”

“Stellee, that’s an ugly wound on your face. Have you seen Doctor Eilen?”

“Don’t be scared, Feltoff; we’ve got things under control, now.”

“Norcan, I’m so sorry about Trillin. I know you were dear friends.”

He scarfed down some bread while he threaded his way through the tables, keeping on with his upbeat banter. Once he had acknowledged every single Kiran, he took the stage. The room fell silent as he began to speak. He knew there was no time for formalities now.

“We have just one concern: survival. We must transform this colony from a political show to a self-sufficient society, and we must do it immediately.” Siboot looked around the room. “Governor Grad ran everything from the top down. We must run everything from the bottom up. You are the workers; you know what needs to be done. Do we all agree that our first priority must be to increase food production?”

The colonists all signaled assent, in their various ways.

“Let’s hear suggestions for luxuries that we can dispense with immediately.”

A Klast stood up and announced, “Air conditioning.”

“Agreed?” Siboot asked the crowd. There was a ripple of assenting noises and gestures in response.

“Let’s eat all of the refrigerated and frozen foods, then decommission that equipment.”

Again, the crowd agreed, except for one plaintive voice crying out in Klast, “Even the ice cream?” The Klasts all laughed, and Siboot had to translate the joke for the rest.

Karkoot, the Ripi administrative assistant, stood up to be recognized. “I think we can dispense with preparing all those reports for the Space Office.” Howls and hoots of endorsement echoed through the cafeteria.

The discussion continued for two hours, until Siboot announced that they had made enough decisions to keep everybody busy the next day. “Tomorrow night, we’ll take the next steps. Good night, all!”
The colony slept well that night. They had a future.

Blue

It was the fifth night after the war. Siboot called the crowd to order.

“We seem to have gotten the most serious issues under control, or at least they’re well on the way. Does anybody have any suggestions to make for tomorrow?”

There was silence. Nobody stood up.

Siboot gave them plenty of time. “So, everybody knows what they need to do tomorrow?”

One of the Tayrans stood. “There’s still one important problem that you haven’t addressed yet, Siboot. We have to elect a leader.”

“Ah... yes,” Siboot said. He had been avoiding this.

“Can we have an election without triggering an inter-species war?” he asked. “Can any of you vote for a member of another species?”

“Yes!” someone shouted in Jomkar. “You!”

Siboot ran both of his hands over his head. This was an extremely delicate moment. He suspected that he might well be the best person to lead the colony, but his legitimacy would always be questioned if he appeared to use his group moderator status to seize power. He had to make this a rigorous and proper selection process, one that nobody could challenge.

Marstic, a big, burly Jomkar carpenter, stood up and declared, “I nominate you for the job, Siboot.” Then he climbed up onto the stage alongside Siboot, put his hand on Siboot’s shoulder, and pointed at him with his other hand. The audience instantly understood his meaning, and the cafeteria erupted with whistles, cheek-popping, hoots, and huff-puffing.

Siboot was transfixed. The audience was blue! Not visibly blue, but the entire scene just *seemed* bluish to him. It was just like that negative-red he had experienced in the main square, five days earlier—only this time it was blue. It was definitely coming from the people, but not focused on any individuals. It was just a generalized blueness emanating from the crowd. He stared in wonder until Marstic slapped him on the shoulder, snapping him out of his reverie.

Siboot smiled humbly, bowed deeply, and turned back to the crowd. When the noise had quieted down, he raised his voice.

“Thank you. I shall do my best to help us all find our way. I beg for your support and criticism as I do this.” Then he abruptly turned and walked out, leaving the surprised audience to disperse on its own.

Revo chased after him. “What happened back there? Did you see red again?”

“No! This time, it was blue!”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know... but I’m convinced that it’s something extremely important. On the night of the war, I had a vivid dream. I saw complicated geometric patterns, swirling lines and shapes in red, blue, and green. It was so strange that I didn’t know what to think of it. But now I’m seeing those same colors in groups of people.”

“Have you seen any green?”

“No, nothing green yet, but I have a hunch that I will soon.”

“Have you had any other dreams like that?”

“No, only that one six days ago, on the night of the war.” He was silent for a moment. “I’m terrified at the idea of leading this colony. I’ve never led anything before. This is completely new territory for me.”

“Siboot, nuclear war and a colony marooned on Kira is completely new territory for everybody. We need somebody who has the absolute trust of all the colonists. We need you.”

“But I don’t have absolute trust in myself.”

“You can always count on me. I’ll be your sounding board. Bounce ideas off me; I’ll try to give you useful criticism.”

Siboot smiled. “Yes, you’ve always been my best critic.”

They silently wound their way through the paths of the settlement.

Strategy

“How much water do you think we can get out of the wells?” Siboot asked Froylick, the colony’s science expert.

“A lot more than we need,” Froylick answered. “Geological studies showed that Kira was once covered with oceans, but over millions of years water vapor slowly escaped the moon’s weak gravity into space, and the oceans dried up. But there’s still plenty of water locked underground, left over from those oceans, and much of it remains close to the surface. The major problem will be getting the energy to pump it up.”

Siboot turned to Traven, the electrician. “How is the power situation?”

“We’re doing great, for now,” she said. “We still have plenty of megaline, enough to keep the generators running for six months, at current power consumption. When that’s gone, though, we’ll have to rely on the solar array and the solid-state nuclear generator. Both of those will last for centuries, but they can’t power the entire colony. In the long run, we must reduce power consumption.”

Siboot scowled. They had already cut power expenditure to the bone. Any further cuts would provoke howls of protest.

“I’d like to make a suggestion.” This was Varak, the construction manager. “The language problems continue to cut into team efficiencies. We could all get more work done if we re-organized ourselves into species-specific teams. They would—”

“Out of the question!” Siboot said. “This colony has no future as four separate communities. Our only hope is to learn to work together as one.”

“But we’re tottering on the edge of survival. Mistakes are being made, mistakes that are costing us, mistakes that could be avoided if we weren’t handicapped by language difficulties. We can’t afford this political correctness!”

Siboot exploded. “Political correctness! Have you already forgotten the nuclear war that annihilated our people on Lamina? We are in this predicament precisely *because* of the Four Species’ failure to learn how to live together. We have always fought! We have always hated each other!

‘Stilts’, ‘apes’, ‘monkeys’, ‘goots’—that’s what we called each other. If we separate into four communities, how long do you think it will be before we start hearing those words again? We still haven’t been able to reach Lamina since that first day of the war. For all we know, there is nobody left—*nobody!*” He stabbed his finger at Varak as he spoke the word. “For all we know, we are the last survivors of our civilization. Everything”—he paused for effect—“*everything* hinges on our ability to forge a single people out of the Four Species. If we cannot learn to work together, we cannot hope to survive. *That* must be our highest priority!”

Varak looked down, humbled. Nobody had ever seen Siboot lose his temper. Nobody had ever heard him raise his voice. Everybody hung their heads in shame.

Everybody except Revo, who just sat there, grinning proudly.

More Colors

Siboot was helping a farm quartet sort out their plans to sow a new field when he overheard a ruckus nearby. Hurrying toward the sound, he rounded a corner to behold a screaming match between a Ripi and a Jomkar—not terribly effective, given that neither one understood the other’s language.

But Siboot stopped short before he reached them. They were lined with intense color—both red and anti-blue. He stared, open-mouthed, at the two. As before, the colors weren’t visual—they were in his mind, like the buzzing you “hear” in your mind in deepest silences, or the faint flashes you “see” in total darkness. But these colors were bright and clear, even though he knew that they weren’t truly part of the scene before him. They pulsed in layers and filaments surrounding the two antagonists.

Noticing him, the two stopped their argument, fell silent, and hung their heads. Enduring the long silence as Siboot contemplated his vision, which had now faded, they assumed he had been silently judging them. But when he snapped out of it to address the immediate situation, his words were quiet, nearly a whisper: “You are Kiran. You are not Jomkar, you are not Ripi. Incomprehension should not lead to anger.” They looked down.

“I’m sorry, Siboot,” the Jomkar said.

“Please forgive me,” the Ripi pleaded.

Beety had come running at the sound of the argument. Siboot touched each of the antagonists on the shoulder, then turned to Beety. “Sort it out for them.”

A week later, he had another revelation. He was in the warehouse dome when a Tayran bumped into a tall stack of crates and it toppled onto him. Just as he realized the imminent danger, an intense flash of anti-red burst around him. It lasted only a fraction of a second, but it was so intense that Siboot was surprised that he had never seen anything like it before.

Two months later, Siboot noticed a disagreement between two Jomkars. The first one said to the other, calmly but firmly: “I hold an advanced degree in electrical engineering; you are just a technician. You will do as I say!”

Siboot saw a flash of bright red from the engineer; a second later, the technician glowed anti-red as he said “Yes, sir.” The relationship was instantly clear to Siboot: red indicated dominance, assertiveness, or power; anti-red meant fear or subservience. Blue seemed to mean something like goodness, virtue, or friendliness, while anti-blue was associated with hatred or ill-will.

“But what about green?” Revo asked, when Siboot explained his theories to her. “Have you seen any examples of green?”

“I think I’ve seen faint tints of green sometimes, but it’s so weak that I can’t be certain what it means. I can’t find any pattern behind its appearance.”

“Maybe green isn’t real. Maybe it’s only red and blue.”

“No, Revo. I’ve had more dreams with all three colors. They’re not as intense as the first dream was, but they all have shapes of red, blue, and green in equal intensity. Green *must* mean something. I just don’t know what it is, yet.”

The Trial

Kira had never had anything like a proper justice system. There had been only one crime, during the first year of the colony: a Jomkar who attacked and injured a Ripi was bundled onto the next shuttle back to Lamina, to face trial there.

But that option was no longer available to them, and the problem came to the forefront when a Klast got into a fight with a Jomkar. When Siboot arrived at the scene, gasping for breath, the two combatants were still being restrained by others. Worse, Sapor was being held back by some of his fellow Klasts, and Timy was being held back by other Jomkars; the two groups glared at each other. The situation was a powder keg just begging for a spark.

Siboot was terrified. The scene was drenched in anti-blue; the air shimmered with anger. Neither fighter seemed seriously injured, but both were bleeding. He had to calm down this situation, and fast.

“Now, everybody, let’s not start another nuclear war here on Kira, OK?”

“That kinst attacked me!” Timy shouted.

“Shut up!” Siboot shouted back. “Both of you! Stay quiet. You’ll have your say when I’m ready for it. Got it?”

They hung their heads. Siboot still had moral authority on the colony, and the fact that he was so often soft-spoken made his few outbursts that more powerful.

“Now, we’re all going over to the cafeteria, and we’re going to gather as many people as we can to witness this affair. I want everybody to know that this is handled openly and fairly. Got it?”

The Klasts huff-puffed and the Jomkars nodded upwards.

“Now split up. Klasts, you go to the west door, and Jomkars go to the east door.”

Siboot sent out several bystanders to gather up an audience for the trial, then hurried to the cafeteria and cleared out any dining activities. The cooks came out of their kitchen and sat down in chairs facing the stage. When they arrived, Siboot placed the two sides well apart on either side of the stage.

Instead of standing, he had a chair placed on the stage, and sat down with as much judicial gravitas as he could muster.

When the crowd seemed large enough, Siboot announced, “I call these proceedings to order.”

Of course, he had no idea what the proceedings would be. He didn’t know anything about legal procedures or court customs. He was just going to wing it.

He decided to interview third parties first. “Who saw the fight?”

There was a pregnant pause, then one Tayran stood up. “I saw it.”

“Step up to the front so that everybody can see you and hear you. What happened?”

“I don’t know who started it. They were already fighting when I first saw them. They were both really going at it. I saw Timy bite Sapor, and Sapor kicked Timy.”

“Did you see how the fight started?”

“No, sir, I didn’t.”

“Thank you. Please sit down, now. Did anybody see how the fight started?”

Timy started to speak, but Siboot cut him off. “Not yet. You’ll have your turn, but first I want to hear independent witnesses.”

There was silence.

“Nobody saw how the fight started?”

One of the Jomkars spoke up. “I heard them yelling at each other before the fight.”

“Thank you. Did anybody see the start of the fight?”

Again, silence.

“Very well, let’s hear what the fighters have to say. Timy, tell me what happened.”

There was a rustle among the Klasts, but Siboot silenced them with a wave of his hand. Timy took a few steps forward.

“I was walking from the toolshed to the oat field when Sapor kicked me from behind. I didn’t do anything to cause it—he just kicked me for no reason! He kept on kicking me, so I defended myself. It was—”

Siboot cut him off. “Thank you, that’s enough for now.” He turned toward the Klasts. “Sapor, tell me what happened.”

“That kinst...” He stopped when Siboot raised a cautionary finger. “That... person messed up my hoe. I saw him go into the toolshed and I watched as he grabbed my hoe and deliberately bent it out of shape, so that I’d have to stoop to use it. I chased after him and asked him why he did that, and instead of answering, he attacked me!”

Siboot started; there was a distinctly green hue, a kind of aura, around Sapor. He stared for several long seconds, to confirm his impression. There was no question about it; Sapor definitely seemed greenish. Eagerly, he turned back to Timy.

“Timy, did you bend Sapor’s hoe?”

“Absolutely not! I went into the toolshed and I got my own hoe and I left.”

Siboot stared intently at him, and now he could see it: a definite “anti-green” tint surrounded him. Siboot became more interested in the green colors than the crime. Eagerly, he turned to Sapor. “How long was Timy in the toolshed?”

When Sapor answered, “At least two minutes”, Siboot sensed the green tinge once more. He asked Timy the same question. Timy replied that he was in the toolshed for just a few seconds, and again, Siboot could see the anti-green aura around him. Aha! Green said something about truth or honesty. But which color meant which trait? Did green mean “honest”, or “liar”?

He asked a few more questions, confirming that Sapor spoke with green and Timy spoke with anti-green. Then he had a flash of inspiration: he turned to Sapor and asked, “Was your work shift beginning or ending?” He already knew the answer, and when Sapor answered truthfully, Siboot saw the green around him. Turning to Timy, he asked the same question, and Timy, having no reason to lie, told the truth. This time he was wrapped in green, not anti-green!

That settled it: green was truth, or honesty, or sincerity; anti-green was falsehood or lying. A smile crossed Siboot’s face. He paused for a few seconds, to consider his options.

“Timy, I look into your heart and see that it is not honest.”

The crestfallen look on Timy’s face revealed to all that Siboot was right. A gasp of astonishment swept the cafeteria. And for just an instant, Siboot really could see into Timy’s heart. He could see the consternation and shame

that Timy felt at having been caught in an ugly lie. He could see the profound sense of guilt Timy felt. And he was inspired once more.

“I shall not punish you. Your shame at having lied to all your fellow Kirans is punishment enough. You shall spend the rest of your days with the shame of having lied to all your friends here.”

Siboot stood up and addressed the audience. “Let no one speak of this incident again. And let no one ever forget it.”

Revo

Revo came running up to Siboot one morning. “Siboot! I had a color dream!”

“What?!? You dreamed the colors? That’s amazing! I thought it was just me...”

“No, it’s happened to me now, too! I can’t believe it either, but last night I had a weird dream with colored lines and shapes, spinning and shimmering. They were all red, green, or blue; there were no other colors.”

“Was there anything else, besides the shapes and the three colors?” Siboot asked.

“No, but there was an endless number of them, and they were moving around in fantastic patterns. I’ve never had a dream like that before!”

“I had always thought that this was unique to me. Maybe I had a brain tumor, or something. But if it’s happening to you, then it’s something common to both of us. What do you think it could be?”

“Contagious insanity? A plague? Bad breath?”

“Do you know if anybody else has had any of these dreams?”

Revo shook her head. “No, but I haven’t asked anyone. Who knows; it could be spreading through the colony.”

“Have you seen any of the colors around people?”

“No, I just had the dream last night, but I’ll be looking out for them.”

“Good luck with that. And tell me everything you see or dream.”

Planning for the Future

“Things are going smoothly; everybody seems to know what they have to do. I think, therefore, that we should take some time to consider the long term. Our current arrangements can’t last forever; we need to think about what we’ll do when things start to wear out.”

It was boring repeating these words in each of the four languages, but Siboot had grown accustomed to the tedium. It made meetings much longer, but it also forced him to be clear and concise. Siboot glanced around the room. These were his best people, the ones he had settled on to run various parts of the colony’s operations. They numbered only five: Tarkle, the Jomkar in charge of the water system; Menso, a Tayran who handled the power systems; Farsim, the Klast running the entire agricultural operation; Kaik, a Ripi who handled maintenance of everything else; and Revo, Siboot’s right-hand woman, another Klast.

These five people oversaw everything that happened in the colony. They had their own deputies, but in a colony numbering less than three hundred, they did a lot of hands-on work themselves.

Menso spoke first. “My group is in pretty good shape. We’ll run out of fuel for the emergency generators, of course, but the solar cells will last for decades, if not centuries. The nuclear generator should last forever, but it doesn’t generate much power. It can handle running the water pump and a little more, but that’s all we need to survive. I’m not worried about either of these breaking down any time soon.”

“Good,” Siboot replied. “How about you, Tarkle?”

“I’m not so optimistic. We have just two wells, each with its own pump, and no storage capacity. If one of the pumps goes down, we can rely on the other well, but these pumps won’t last forever. We need to reduce their workload. We need to build a big cistern for water. The well pumps can pump into the cistern, and then we can use a second tier of low-pressure pumps to distribute the water.”

Siboot slowly rubbed his knees. “Kaik, can we do that?”

Kaik shook his head. “No, there’s nothing like those pumps anywhere else in the colony. I can’t see how we could manage to create them.”

“What about the pumps in the old air conditioning units?” Tarkle asked. “We won’t be needing them for anything else.”

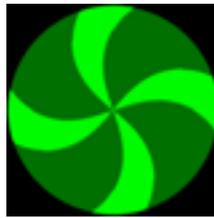
Kaik was adamant. “Those things just aren’t suited for water pumping. There’s no way we could adapt them for this use.”

Siboot stared hard at Kaik; he could see an anti-green aura all around him. Kaik was clearly not being honest. “What’s the specific problem with those pumps, Kaik?”

Kaik launched into a long technical discussion of the fittings on the air conditioner pumps. Siboot could see Kaik was hiding something; how could he get the truth out of him? He mulled over the problem as Kaik droned on.

Then Siboot heard somebody say “Anti-green”.

He looked up, startled, but nobody had interrupted Kaik. He could still see the anti-green aura around Kaik, but it was not the same as the voice he’d heard. Actually, it wasn’t a voice—it wasn’t even a sound that he had heard. It was both a sound and an image: a sound he heard only in his mind and an image that he saw only in his mind. It looked like this:



But where had this sensation come from? He glanced around and saw Revo staring hard at Kaik, with a look of stern disapproval on her face. He had another realization: Revo could see the anti-green aura! Not only that, but she was saying it in her mind, and somehow Siboot could hear her.

Revo noticed Siboot staring at her in wonder. Without consciously thinking it, he too silently expressed the notion of “anti-green”. Revo’s eyes shot wide open. She had heard him, too.

Funeral for a Civilization

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

“Good evening, my friends. Today marks the first anniversary of the nuclear war that destroyed our homelands. For a year we have watched and waited for some communication from Lamina, a signal, any sign at all that any people are left on the planet. We have heard absolutely nothing—no television transmissions, no radio transmissions, nothing. We have watched the surface closely for any signs of activity, but we have found none of the normal signs of civilization that we would expect to see.”

“This does not necessarily mean that everyone on Lamina is dead. Quite possibly, some small settlements of people exist, growing their own food. But there is no civilization left on Lamina. Of that we can be certain.”

“This is a painful thing to face. For the first few days, we clung to the vain hope that there might still be one more supply shuttle inbound. Then, we told ourselves that a shuttle would be launched within six months. For these last few months, we have been telling ourselves that they are trying to cope with the disruptions caused by the war, that as soon as they can, they will re-establish radio contact with us. A year has passed without any sign that they are even alive. The time has come for us to face the truth: our civilization is dead. If Fate has smiled on us, perhaps the Four Species still live on Lamina. But the civilization that nurtured us and launched this utopian project is gone forever. It is time for us to bury it and, with it, our false hopes.”

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

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

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

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

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

“For now, we must now turn to the matter of our future. Kira has become the fragile repository of all that was Laminan. Here, Tayrans, Jomkars, Klasts, and Ripis all continue to live. Look at one another—for all of our differences, we are all we have, now. The many achievements of Lamina are now our heritage to pass on, for we are the only ones who can pass it on. Our literature, our technology, our understanding of the universe, the wisdom of our philosophers, our music, all the things that elevate us and give meaning to our lives, we must preserve.

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

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

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

“Now I want you to close your eyes and relax your minds.” Siboot, Beety, and Revo closed their eyes and *thought* the blue/goodness aura as intensely as they could. The idea-image floated through the audience, prompting gasps, whistles, and squeals.

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

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

He waited for a long moment, staring into a sea of closed eyes. Then they began to pop open, and he looked into each pair of eyes hopefully. People stood up, intense with feeling, but unable to express it. They milled about, many looking at Siboot for guidance, but he offered none. They needed to find their own means of expression. There were a number of disjointed attempts to echo Siboot’s eeyal thoughts back at him.

After a few moments, Siboot again gestured for silence. “There are no surviving Ripis here. All the Tayrans are gone from this room. No Jomkars stand in our midst. Of Klasts, none remain. The only people I see here are Kirans. We are one people, with one will, one resolve—and our own language: eeyal. Our next great task is to learn and master this language.”

Another Boring Meeting

Kaik was droning on again. How many times had Siboot told him to be more concise? How many times had he gently suggested that Kaik should leave out unnecessary details? How many times had he pushed him to get to the point? Siboot had become resigned to it; Kaik needed to establish his importance by talking far too much. Kaik was a motormouth, that's all there was to it.

On one occasion, Siboot had grown so angry at Kaik's verbal assault that he rudely ordered Kaik to 'cut the crap'—and Kaik had responded by giving one-word answers to all subsequent questions. Nothing would ever make him change. Siboot had taken to considering other issues while Kaik spoke.

This time, however, Siboot had an idea for an entertaining diversion. He glanced at Revo sitting next to him, staring blankly at the wall. He concentrated his mind onto a single idea, a single image: *Revo*. He directed his gaze away from her and defocused his eyes, so that he saw nothing. *Revo! Revo! Revo!* He glanced back at her; she showed no sign of hearing him.

This time, Siboot packed emotion into the image. He brought forward his great respect for her, his trust in her and affection for her, and larded those feelings over the image he projected:



Revo! Revo! Revo!

Again he turned to glance at her; this time she was staring wide-eyed at him. Success! He smiled conspiratorially and winked. Surprise, surprise, she returned the favor: he could see-feel-hear her thinking:



Siboot! Siboot! Siboot!

Now it was her turn to wink at him.

Stargazing



“Anything new tonight, Hortz?” Fredegund asked.

“I don’t think so,” Hortz said without looking up from the telescope. “I haven’t finished my search, but it seems pretty much like normal. It’s hard. The features change with the lighting. When I first started this job, I spent almost every night discovering all sorts of things that weren’t really there.”

“You mean you were seeing mirages, or hallucinating?”

Hortz pulled away from the eyepiece and laughed. He looked at Fredegund, trying to make out her face, but Lamina’s surface was still burned into his retinas. He needed an excuse to rest his eyes for a few minutes, anyway.

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

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

“Where am I looking?”

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

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

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

“Got it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, that’s right. But the trick is, the needles always point upward. So when you look at a jupine sideways you see the needles sideways and they’re

bright green, but when you look down on one you see mostly the shadows between the needles, so it looks darker.”

“I see.” By Fredegund’s tone of voice, she was not as impressed by such trivia. “Have you ever seen any proof that people are still alive up there?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, you’re mistaken. The dam must have been destroyed in the war, because that reservoir’s been empty ever since. You’re probably looking at Montfelly Bay.”

“No, no. I remember the shape of Cholin Reservoir and Montfelly Bay on the maps, and this is definitely *not* Montfelly Bay. It looks smaller than Cholin Reservoir, but it’s in the right place relative to the coast.”

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

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

Words

“Why do you call it ‘eeyal,’ Siboot?” Revo asked one day.

“I really don’t know,” he said. “The word just came to me, the same way every other word comes. It just appears out of nowhere and it’s inside my mind.”

“Have any other words come to you?”

“I’ve had no problem finding words for people,” Siboot said. “It’s really quite easy. I just see the image for them as soon as I get a feel for them emotionally.”

Revo nodded. “I’ve been seeing images for people, too. It’s not as easy for me. I’ve only had images for a few people. But I’m starting to find more.”

“I’ve tried to make up some words, but it never works. I try to visualize something in my mind to make a word out of it, but nothing happens. When I do find a word, it just comes out of the blue.”

“Me, too,” she said. “But I usually get them from you.”

One day, Siboot mentioned Tarkle, the water manager, to Revo. As they had experienced many times before, the word-image for Tarkle appeared in both their minds. But this time, something else happened. Siboot sensed the anti-blue “ungood” aura linked to the Tarkle word-image. He hesitated for a moment, then said “Yes, Tarkle is a rather nasty person, isn’t he?”

Revo was taken aback. “You felt that?”

“I did.” Siboot rubbed his knees thoughtfully. “Let’s experiment with other people.” For the next hour they went through most of the colonists, sharing their their feelings about them—all in eeyal. And it all made sense.

The Walkie-Talkie

“Siboot? Are you there?”

“Go ahead, Revo, I can hear you loud and clear.”

“Good news: we’ve found water at one of the sites marked on the map.”

Revo had stumbled upon a cache of old Kiran geological maps that morning, hidden at the bottom of a box in the back of a storage room.

“Shap! You really hit the jackpot. How far away is it?”

“Looks like about three kilometers by the map, but the water is pretty close to the surface. These guys were only about ten feet down when they hit water.”

“Pipe we have; power we don’t. Not needing a pump means this could provide us with a lot more water for the fields. How much water do you think it can produce?”

“They’re still widening the hole to get a better look. They’re... YEEP! YEEP! YEEP!”

Revo was screaming at the top of her lungs, a scream of complete terror.

“YEPP! YEPP! YEPP! YEPP!”

“REVO!” Siboot shouted back at her. “What’s happening?”

“YEPP! YEPP! YEPP!” The screaming stopped, there were a few muffled noises, and then silence.

“REVO! REVO! Are you there? Revo? What’s happening?”

Silence.

“Revo?” Siboot asked quietly. “Revo? Anybody?”

Silence.

Siboot looked around his office in desperation. He tore open the door; the main office area was quiet, as the workers were all at lunch. He placed both hands on his head and rocked side to side, trying to think. What could he do? She was far away; he didn’t even know where she was. She had the only map showing the well-sites. He was completely helpless.

What had happened? Wild, terrible images raced through his mind. His imagination concocted a hundred potential disasters that could have provoked her desperate screams. What was happening out there?

“Stay calm, stay calm,” he said out loud. “You can’t help her by panicking. Make a plan.”

He paced frantically, trying to figure out something he could do. Even if he sent every colonist charging out from the settlement in a different direction, they still wouldn’t be likely to find Revo’s crew. There was only one thing he could do: sit and wait. Somebody had to have survived; they would come back for help.

It was less than ten minutes before the walkie-talkie crackled back to life. He had already cooked up four different rescue plans in that time.

“Siboot? Are you there?”

“SHAP! Revo? Are you OK?”

“Yes, we’re all fine here.”

“What the kinst happened to you?”

“I was standing on the edge of the well when it caved in. We were all half-buried in dirt and mud. A couple of the guys were completely buried, so we had to dig fast to pull them out, but everybody’s out now. Nobody’s hurt.”

“I want you to come back right now.”

“Seriously, Siboot, we’re all fine. We want to do some more digging to see how much water...”

“NO! I want you to start back here immediately. I want Dr. Eilen to check out every one of you. And I’m sending Menso and a team out to meet you. Call back in five minutes to give us your location. Out.”

Siboot’s heart was still racing. He paced back and forth, trying to calm down. Suddenly he froze in mid-pace: there was something strange inside him. A look of confusion, almost consternation, swept across his face as he tried to identify this alien sensation. It was like the feeling of anti-red, only it was much more intense, and... it seemed to originate from inside of him. His previous experiences had always involved sensing the aura in or around somebody else—but this was more like an aura crystallized inside himself. It felt like a lump inside his mind, a sphere, a *thing*... and of course, it was a purely mental phenomenon. He knew that there was no physical thing inside him, but it certainly felt like it. It was just like “seeing” an aura on somebody, only this was “feeling” one inside himself.

He stared at empty space, uncomprehending. He tried to grasp the nature of this thing, this entity that felt like a solidified aura. Somebody touched him on the shoulder and he jumped straight up.

“Revo! Shap! How did you get here so quickly?” Siboot didn’t know what feeling was more powerful: the joy of seeing Revo safe and sound, or the sense of awe and wonder he felt at this aura-thing inside him.

“What do you mean? We’ve been slogging through the dunes for three hours now. We got lost on the way back. I just walked in. Why didn’t you respond to my walkie-talkie calls?”

Siboot’s confusion deepened. He thought he had been contemplating this aura-thing for just a few moments. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Revo was right; he’d been standing there for hours.

“Revo, something important has happened.”

“Of course! We nearly died out there!”

“No, this is more important: I’ve discovered something about eeyal, but I don’t know what it means.”

“Shap! Tell me!”

Siboot explained what he had experienced. “What do you think it means?”

“Is it still inside you?”

“Yes, I can still feel it. It’s like a pure, concentrated, anti-red aura.”

“Fear?”

Siboot leapt up. “Yes, yes, that’s it! It’s the fear I felt when I heard you screaming! It... solidified.”

“But you’re not afraid now, are you?”

“No, not at all, but the fear at that moment was so intense that... it... crystallized into something solid. It’s still there, and it feels like something permanent, but it doesn’t affect me in any way. It’s like memorizing a time or a name: it’s like a permanent memory of intense fear. I can tap into it, or I can set it aside and forget about it, without losing it.”

“Let’s call it an ‘auragon’,” Revo said. He recognized the linguistic structure she was applying; it came from the Ripi language. Yes, that was the perfect name for it. Auragon.

“But what does it mean?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered.



Old Age

“I’m old, Revo. I don’t think I’ll last much longer.”

“Yeah, yeah. Siboot, you’re always complaining about how old you are, but you haven’t died yet, have you?”

Siboot shook his head. “I’m no longer making progress with eeyal. Remember how many words we used to discover? Nowadays, it seems that my brain is shriveled up and I can’t learn any new words.”

Revo patted his shoulder gently. “What does that matter? You’re still way ahead of everybody else. They’re just learning the simplest structures. They can barely say anything at all in eeyal.”

“That’s even worse,” he said. “I wanted everybody to learn eeyal, but progress has been so slow. I have failed to pass on my knowledge. This is my life’s work, and I have accomplished so little!”

“You have opened the door to a new and powerful world.”

“But why can’t I enter that world? Why can’t I get eeyal working properly?”

“Siboot, you have run farther than anybody else in this effort—much, much farther. Perhaps your legs just don’t have any running left in them.”

“So there is nothing left for me to do?” He looked up at the sky. “No more contributions for me to make?”

“Perhaps not,” Revo said. “And what would be so bad about that? You’ve already changed the world.”

Siboot snarled. “What is the purpose of life, if not to make contributions to the world? I want to leave the world a better place than I found it.”

“You already have.”

“But I am no longer doing so. That means one thing: my life is already over.”

Siboot's Last Sermon

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

“Much work remains, work that you must carry on. Although you can all understand a small amount of eeyal, there is so much more for us to discover. You must improve training in the language. Along with this comes the task of extending the language itself. It pains me to see that this, my last sermon, must be translated for all of you. I had hoped the day would come when we could all speak together in a single language. We have made a start; but you must finish it without me.

“You must also continue the exploration of the mental powers revealed by eeyal; they are geometric in nature. I am certain that further experience with eeyal will uncover additional faculties shared by all Kirans.

“Continue your transmissions to Lamina. It is difficult, I know, expending so much effort to talk to a home planet that may not be able to listen and will not respond. But remember: it is far easier for them to receive than to transmit. We know that they are alive.

“I have asked Revo to take my place as your leader. I have selected her not because of our friendship but because she is strongest in eeyal. She and I discovered eeyal together, and her understanding of its powers is greater than anyone else's—and the future of this colony relies on eeyal.

Last, remember this always: power destroys truth, truth is greater than virtue, and virtue conquers power. I don't know...”

At this point Siboot began to cough violently. Dr Eilen led him away. He never finished his sermon.

Siboot and the Universe

“Isn’t there anything you can do, Dr. Eilen?” Revo asked.

“Not any more. He’s not in a coma; he seems to be only sleeping. But I don’t want to disturb him. Look at his face; does he seem to be in any pain?”

“No, I suppose not. But that certainly is an odd expression for somebody who’s merely sleeping.”



Siboot walked slowly through the dunes, enjoying the contrast between the cool air on his face and the warm sand on his feet. Everybody back at the settlement was deep asleep, save for the few night workers, whom he had

slipped past easily. Out here, far from the settlement, the solitude was total. Lamina still lay below the horizon; only the stars illuminated the dunes.

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

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

“There’s nothing special about you,” the universe replied. “You are the product of all the random numbers that move the universe. You just happened to exist at the intersection of one peculiar combination of random numbers. You’re an accident.”

“But why me? Why now? Why here?”

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

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

“No, there’s nothing special about you. You’re a perfectly normal, average, everyday person. You just happened to stand at a rare confluence of events that distorted your perception of the universe in a particularly auspicious manner. It was no single event; there was no bolt from the blue. A combination of millions of minor events simply added up to push you in a particular direction. There’s no reason why the random movements of air currents couldn’t push a mote of dust all the way across a room, for example. It’s just unlikely to happen.”

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

“EVERYTHING is random chance—but it’s filtered through the lens of physical reality. The formation of life on Lamina was the result of chance—although not a particularly rare chance. Millions of other planets have living organisms. The rise of multicellular creatures, however—that was not so

likely. The development of intelligence was a wild quirk—it happens rarely in the universe. The rise of four different intelligent species at roughly the same time in a planet’s history, even a planet as large as Lamina—that was spectacular! The probability that anything like it will ever happen again, anywhere in the universe, is almost zero.”

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

“There are no flukes. There are only events.”

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

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

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

“It’s all in the numbers. Everyone is progressing according to physical, chemical, biological, cultural, and social processes that, as you know, will get them there in a few centuries. You just happened to enjoy the numbers lining up for you ahead of time. Throughout history, there have been people who saw things before others. Sometimes they see it so early that they simply cannot communicate this thing to their fellows. Sometimes their lead is just early enough they can be recognized as visionaries. Sometimes it’s only early enough for them to become known as inventors or creators. Sometimes, nobody at all gets it ahead of the population, and they all figure it out at the same time. It’s just a matter of chance and timing.”

“Why can’t I just tell them?”

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

There was a long silence.

“What should I do?”

No answer came. Siboot was determined to wait as long as it took.

In Siboot’s private room, Dr. Eilen took the old Ripi’s pulse. Then she turned to Revo and shook her head.

Part Three

Revo

98 Years Ago



Revo's Inaugural Sermon

Revo climbed the cafeteria stage with trepidation. Governor Grad had stood on this very spot when he was killed. This was the stage where Siboot had given his farewell address to the colonists. It smelled of death.

Yes, it had been used for many other things: general meetings of the colony, the odd trial, and video nights where some of the old movies were played for the entertainment of the colony. Everybody was encouraged to attend, because people picked up bits and pieces of other species' languages while watching the films. Besides, it had become a colony tradition for wiseacres to whisper false but hilarious translations of the dialogue. But now the projector was on its last legs. The little rubber belts were succumbing to age and use. Movies were frequently interrupted by the belts slipping off the wheels.

Revo reached the center of the stage and faced the assembled crowd. Two hundred and forty-four people: she now carried the responsibility for their lives. She was terrified. She glanced nervously at the three translators scattered around the stage. They stood waiting for her. One of them smiled in encouragement.

"Well, everybody, it looks like I'm in charge now. I'm not as good as Siboot. I don't feel worthy of this. I'm..." She swallowed the word 'scared' and replaced it with 'worried'. She froze. What should she say? Confident words to inspire optimism? Humble words to reassure the colonists of her good will? Dominating words to convince them she was indisputably in charge?

The delay stretched on, and Revo's panic grew with each passing second. She couldn't handle this, it was too much, she didn't deserve it! How could she make decisions for the whole colony when she couldn't even decide what to say to them? She wanted to run away, to bolt from the stage and run out into the empty desert, but she was too terrified to move. She wanted to burst into tears, but couldn't decide on doing that, either.

Then a word-image swam into her mind: Siboot.



She looked around desperately; was somebody trying to communicate with her? All she saw were faces staring at her, faces blaming her, faces silently indicting her for stupidity and incompetence. But the word-image grew stronger in her mind. Who was projecting Siboot's word-image to her?

She decided to take an impulsive action: she shouted "Siboot!" out loud. The staring faces were confused, not yet understanding, but she seized upon that word.

"Siboot was our leader. Siboot knew the way forward. Siboot was my dear friend. Siboot saved us all." Now, she was inspired. "I am not Siboot, but I will do everything in my power to follow in his footsteps. I swear to you, I will advance Siboot's vision. Siboot's spirit lives on in me. I am the new Siboot for Kira."

She stopped there; she had said what she needed to say. As she stepped down from the stage to the sound of hoots, whistles, huff-puffing, and cheek-slapping, her mind was flooded with an overpowering blue aura. Yes, she thought. *I did good.*

Artigul the Teacher

“With all due respect, Revo—sorry, Siboot II—I think this is a mistake. I cannot teach the children in four different languages at once. I need them separated into different groups so that I can address each group in its own language.”

“I’m not asking you abandon separate classes, Artigul. For most of their education, they need to learn the basics in their own languages. But there are two paramount educational objectives that the old system fails to address: First, they all need to learn how to work together despite the language barrier. Second, they all need to learn eeyal. A joint class in eeyal is the best way to accomplish that.”

“But I am not the one to teach them eeyal. I am old, and I never learned it well. These young kids seem to be born with it; most of them are better at eeyal than I am. I don’t have their respect.”

“You are our only teacher, Artigul. There is nobody else to whom I can turn for this task. Is it too much to ask you to add another skill to the long list of those you have mastered?”

“We had a saying back home: ‘to teach an old man a new language’. It means ‘to attempt the impossible’. The older you get, the harder it is to learn a new language. I have struggled with eeyal for years, and I can’t keep up with these kids.”

“How about this: what if you take on an apprentice? No matter what, we need to insure that the vast expertise you have as a teacher is not lost when you die. It will take years to impart your knowledge. Choose a good apprentice. Then, you can continue to teach your separate classes, while this apprentice leads the eeyal class.”

Artigul laughed with relief. “Yes, of course! That’s how to do it.”

“And whom are you inclined to choose to be your apprentice?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Sufupican. She’s my best student, she excels at everything, and I would hate to see her waste her talents working in the fields.”

“I like Sufupican; she’s definitely one of our brightest young people. But how solid is her grasp of eeyal?”

“Certainly better than mine, Siboot II. And she is already respected by the other students.”

“Isn’t she a little young to start teaching?”

“Not at all. She’ll be great at teaching eeyal, and as you said, I can still teach the other classes.”

“Do you think she can learn all four languages?”

“She has earned the top grade every year in all her language classes.”

“Very well. It seems that you have an ideal candidate in Sufupican. Proceed, and report back in a week with her initial performance.”

Sufupican the Apprentice

“*Me?* A teacher?” Sufupican’s eyes went wide.

“Indeed so, my dear. Siboot II has already approved your appointment.”

“But I’m only fourteen!”

“It won’t be long before you must begin work. Would you rather work in the fields?” Artigul winked at her.

“Of course not! But teaching is not a kid’s job. Teaching is for... for...”

“For old people?” Artigul asked. “I was just ten years older than you when I first began to teach. And that was when we could afford to spend years training to be teachers. Here on Kira, we don’t have that luxury. Besides, you’ll start off teaching just the class on eeyal. You can learn from me as I teach the other classes.”

“This is so wonderful! I have to tell my friends!... Oh, wait.” Her face fell. “I have to ask my parents first.”

“I’m quite certain your parents will be overjoyed at the opportunity. But, yes, get their permission. Courtesy demands it.”

The Watcher

Revo sat at her desk, going through page after page of reports. They illustrated, in stark detail, how the colony was running out of everything: clothing, pipes, wire, screws, shoes, buttons... the list was endless.

Their supply problems had begun almost immediately after the war. Bit by bit, piece by piece, the colony had expended almost everything. But the colonists had risen to the challenge with determination and cleverness. Clothing was patched, re-sewn, combined, reduced, and recycled in every possible way. The machine shop had worked miracles to replace worn-out parts. Every loose scrap of material was saved and eventually put to some other use. Nothing was ever thrown away. The landing craft had long since been stripped, and now its skeleton was an excellent source of materials for the machine shop.

Revo lifted a sheet of paipeel and scanned the numbers on their remaining stocks of storage bins. This situation, at least, was under control; no adjustments required. She rolled up the paipeel and twisted it tightly to erase it.

At least we won't be running out of paipeel any time soon, she thought. The stuff lasts forever. This sheet must have been used for hundreds of reports and it's still good. It may not shine as it did back in Siboot's day, but it's perfectly functional. We may run out of food, water, clothing, shelter, and energy, but we'll always be able to write reports about it as we fade away. She put the sheet in her outbox.

She spent several hours each day on this logistics work. When it became apparent that some commodity was running critically low, she'd put it on the agenda for discussion in next morning's meeting.

But today, she couldn't seem to concentrate. She scowled at the paipeels, trying to absorb their contents, but her mind was unable to focus. Something was distracting her.

She leaned back in her chair. What was it? Why couldn't she think? A moment's reflection revealed the source: she was immersed in a blue aura. It

was faint, too weak to be immediately noticeable, like the scent of blooming flowers wafting by on the breeze before they come into view.

Curious, she stood up and looked out through the window blinds. There she found the source: two young Klast lovers, ensconced in a nook between two domes, a place of relative privacy. They were cuddling and giggling together. He reached out and smoothed the feathers on the side of her head; she pulled her head back, smiling and enjoying the sensuality. She laughed playfully and tickled him just under the ear. He laughed, too. They snuggled their cheeks together, mouths open.

Twenty yards away, Revo closed her eyes, tilted her head, and recalled the feeling of passion.

The two moved closer together, their bodies pressing against each other. Revo abruptly turned away. Watching them was torture.

“You are the Siboot now,” she told herself. “You can never have that again.” She stared at the desk, piled high with reports.

“Kinst!”

Revo and Sufupican

“You sent for me, Siboot II?”

“Yes.” Revo smiled at the young girl. “Have a seat, Sufupican. It’s good to see you. How have things been at the school?”

“I’m... getting better, I think. Artigul doesn’t feel the need to spend as much time at the school; besides, he’s getting old and creaky.”

“Ah, yes, good old Artigul! I’ve told him several times that he can retire now and spend his time doing whatever he wants, but he insists that he can still be of some use at school. I hope he doesn’t bother you.”

“No, never. I appreciate his criticisms. He respects my way of teaching, but he always has some useful tips to offer.”

“Sufupican, I’ve asked you here because I want to discuss a new idea with you. I’m impressed with the progress you’ve been making as a teacher, and I am especially impressed with your skill in eeyal. I think we should—”

She was interrupted by a commotion just outside the door. A Tayran burst in without knocking. “There’s been an accident at the tool shed!”

Both Revo and Sufupican leapt up—then froze and turned to look at each other in astonishment.



“Did you say that?” Revo asked.

“I thought you did!” Sufupican said.

“It’s a new eeyal verb: ‘help’!”

“Is this how you make new words?”

“I think we found it together. The strength of our eeyal made it happen. Let’s go to the tool shed. Tonight, we can discuss what just happened here.”

That evening, Revo appeared at the door of the school as Sufupican was finishing up with some students. She dismissed them and rose to greet Revo.

“Siboot II! You honor me!”

“I’ve been thinking about what happened today. We did something remarkable: we discovered the first verb in eeyal. And we learned that two minds can do things that one mind cannot. We discovered that word together. Somehow, the joint effort of two minds thinking exactly the same thing brought a new word-image into being. This is a major breakthrough.”

“I’m so proud that I could help you.”

“We’re not done yet, Sufupican. We must continue this research. Now that we know how, we must use this process to identify new words.”

“But how can we do that?”

“Follow me.” They went to the cafeteria. There, Revo commanded the cafeteria manager: “I want you to make something special and delightful for each of us.”

Some time later, the manager appeared bearing two steaming hot dishes, one for Revo, one for Sufupican. Everybody in the cafeteria turned to stare at the culinary delights. The manager placed the dishes in front of them and left.

“Don’t touch the food. Just look at it. Think how delicious it looks. Think how much you’d like to eat it. Think about eating it. Savor the anticipation.”

Voila! The verb for *eat* appeared in both of their minds.



Sufupican stared in awe at Revo. Revo simply smiled. “Now, enjoy your dinner. You’ve certainly earned it.”

Siboot II rose from her seat and gave her meal to a Klast seated nearby. “Enjoy!” she said with a laugh.

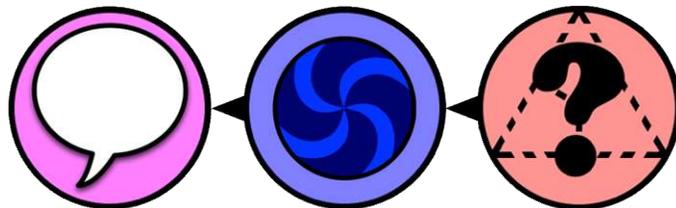
Shaleen's Sermon

Shaleen stood outside the radio shack, trying to stay in the thin sliver of shade next to the wall. The day was a scorcher; it would be steaming hot inside the shack. She felt sympathy for Fotrin, who was just finishing up his sermon inside.

He had been at it for thirty minutes; how he maintained his concentration in that oven, she couldn't understand. And he was a Tayran! At least she had the advantage of a smaller, more easily cooled body.

Fotrin's voice changed tone. He was ending his sermon with the standard request for anyone listening to reply on the same frequency. She didn't understand Tayran, but she knew the formula, and she could follow his meaning from the pauses. After three tries, he signed off.

He wasted no time opening the door and getting outside to the cooler air. She greeted him curtly in eeyal.



Talk was good?



Talk much good.

Shaleen entered the shack. It was hot and stuffy, but not as oven-like as she had feared. Her session would not be torture, just uncomfortable. The

equipment was all set up and running. She sat down at the microphone and checked her watch; she had a few minutes to kill. She organized her thoughts.

At precisely 1300, she flicked on the microphone. “Good day, fellow Jomkars on Lamina. This is Shaleen, your friend on Kira. I’m hoping that Fate has been good to you this week and that each of you has found something new within yourself.”

She started with the latest important news from the colony: the birth of a new Jomkar. Siboot had said that motherhood is more meaningful than species-hood, and Shaleen described the Kiran custom: the mothers from all species participated in the birth-celebration of every Kiran child.

“You know we can’t have many children here on Kira. There isn’t enough food for more than two hundred and eighty mouths, so each woman is allowed only two children in her lifetime. A birth on Kira doesn’t happen very often. We have learned the value of life here on Kira. If only we had all learned that lesson before the war.”

Her broadcast then turned to the topic of preparations for the upcoming Redberry Festival. She described how the berries were starting to come in this year, how they served as the only source of sweet food on Kira. And because the colonists had no way to keep the berries, they would eat the whole harvest in one great, silly orgy of redberry guzzling, wearing red and telling stupid redberry jokes.

“We had a bad accident this week. Thrilken, the dearest, sweetest old Ripi, was injured when some crates in the warehouse fell on him. Dear old Thrilken. He’s badly hurt and everybody is pulling for him. I hope you’ll think of him tonight.”

Her talk turned to gossip and the latest social events in the colony. At last, her time was drawing to a close.

“As always, I wish that you could talk back to me. I have so many questions to ask you! You know the procedure: if you do have anything to say, say it now.”

She flipped the microphone switch from TALK to LISTEN. She leaned back in her chair and eeyaled:



Do not talk.

She knew that Salmin was outside the shack getting ready for his sermon. It sounded like he was talking to somebody else, and the noise was distracting her. She grumbled to herself. A fellow broadcaster, of all people, should appreciate and respect the rules mandating silence around the radio shack. Kinst him, anyway.

Then, she sensed that something was wrong. The white noise that always came from the speaker when she left it on LISTEN sounded different this time. There was a faint modulation to it. She leaned forward, trying to concentrate. Salmin was still talking loudly. She screamed out loud in Jomkar, “Shut up! Shut up!”

She tried to listen carefully, and then she heard it clearly: a voice talking over the noise. It was badly broken up, but she could tell that it was speaking in Jomkar. She couldn’t make out enough to make sense of it, but first she heard the word “Kira”, then “Lamina.” When she heard her name pronounced, a thin cry, almost of pain, escaped her lips.



Hurry!

Salmin called out in eeyal. He wanted her to hurry up. She looked away from the radio speaker, frantic. She jumped at the door, tore it open, grabbed Salmin by the shoulders and began screaming in Jomkar, “They’re here! They’re talking to me!” Salmin and his friends backed away from her, taken aback by her outburst. One of them ran to find a interpreter or somebody who could help.

Shaleen went to the door of the shack and screamed in the general direction of the village. “Lamina! They’re alive! They’re talking back to me!”

Revo was at the warehouse, handling a dispute over responsibilities, when they told her that Shaleen had gone crazy. Her first thought was for Shaleen’s well-being, but when somebody mentioned that she was at the radio shack, an intimation, a possibility, a hope arose inside her. She started walking quickly towards the radio shack. What was Shaleen doing? She was giving her sermon. *Oh, Siboot*, Revo thought. Was she finished with her sermon? Yes, there was Salmin standing outside, waiting to begin his own sermon. Revo broke into a run.

She pushed through the crowd at the door and elbowed her way into the shack. Shaleen was seated at the microphone, sniffing and wiping away tears as she spoke. “Where have you been? How are you? How many people are left? We thought you were all dead.”

Sufupican's Dream

It had been a long, vexing day; the students had been particularly obnoxious, and one of the parents came by to complain. Sufupican was tired and looking forward to a good night's sleep. She threw herself onto the bed and fell asleep immediately. Soon enough, an aura-dream came; she always relished these dreams.

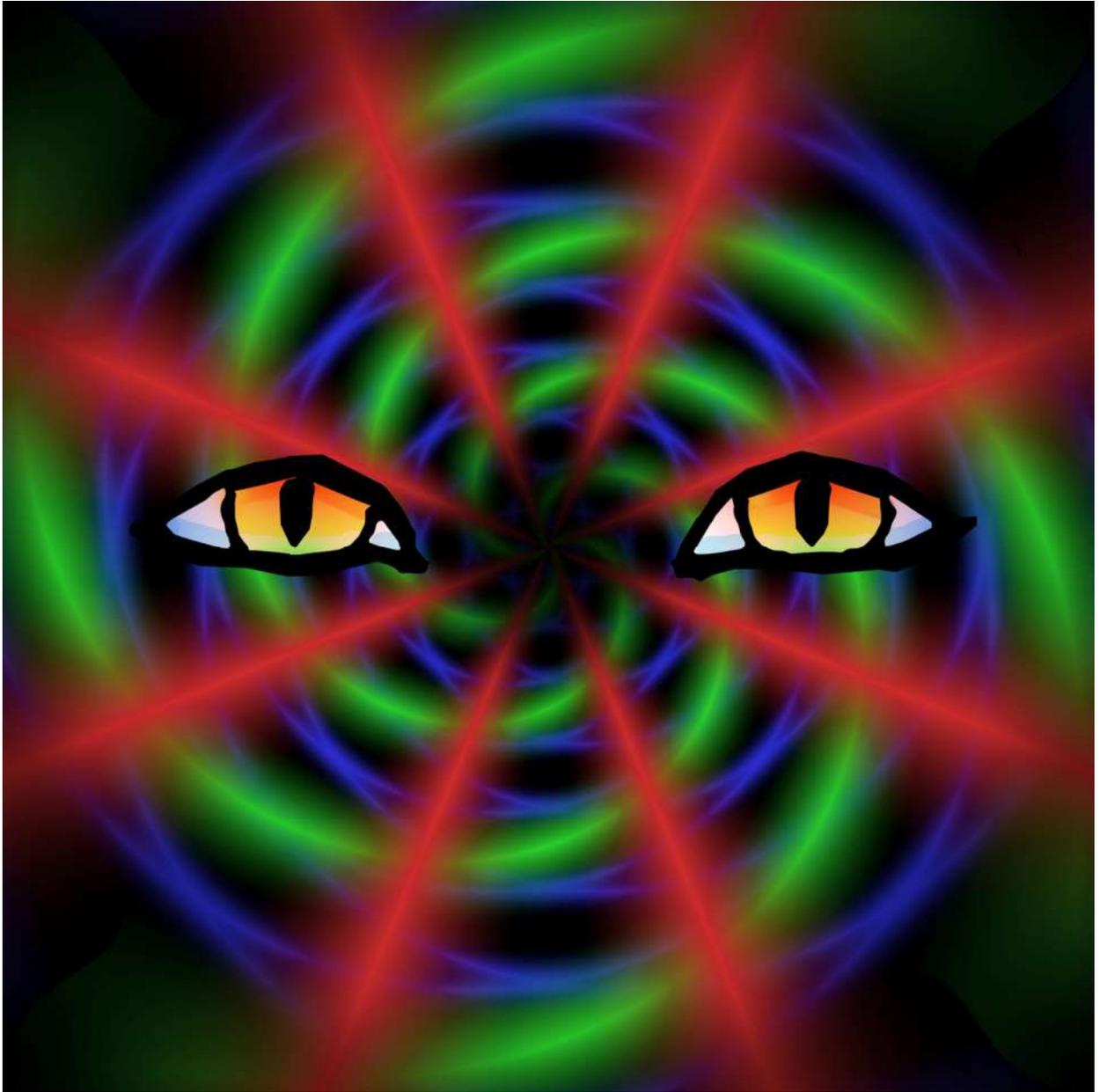
She was flying through a black void full of colored lines and shapes, each red, green, or blue. She could see that her path was not straight but gently curving in various directions. It was as if she were going somewhere.

This was pleasant; she felt as if she were soaring effortlessly. The little colored shapes would first appear as tiny dots far off in the distance, growing steadily as she approached, sometimes becoming quite large if her path carried her close by.

One of the shapes seemed different as she approached it; it was an odd shape. Idly curious, she stared at it as she drew closer, wondering how it was different than the others. It seemed more like a dumbbell, not a curving line. With some alarm, she realized that her path would not bypass this object, but would in fact collide with it. The approach was very rapid, so fast that she didn't recognize what the shape was until she was stopped directly in front of it. It was a pair of eyes, staring directly at her!

Sufupican fell out of her bed, sweating and panting. Her heart was pounding. What the kinst was that?

On the other side of the compound, Sonyun, one of the cooks, lay quivering on the floor next to his bed, wide awake and equally shocked.



Revo's Choice

Sufupican was just finishing her classroom tidying-up at the end of the day when Revo appeared at her door.

“Ah, Siboot II, you honor me! I’m sorry, I have had no new ideas for eeyal verbs.”

“I came to discuss something else today, Sufupican.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I’m going to die, some day, and before I can do that, I must prepare the way for a new Siboot to take my place.”

“But you’re in perfect health! You won’t die any time soon.”

“I don’t expect I will, either, but I must still lay the groundwork for that inevitable day. Siboot was the obvious choice to lead us after the war, and he chose me to succeed him. I think it’s time for me to start thinking about my own replacement. This is a politically difficult decision.”

“Why? You need merely indicate your successor, and the matter will be settled. Everybody, on Kira and on Lamina both, respects your judgment.”

Revo shook her head. “No, Sufupican. The old species-prejudice still exists on Lamina. There, they still squabble and fight like children. We may not hear any whispers of resentment, but I am certain they exist. We cannot afford to react to a problem after it has arisen—we must act to prevent any ugly rumors.”

“Are things really that bad? I see very little of that here on Kira.”

“Our culture here was founded in a deliberate attempt to overcome species-prejudice. Siboot drove that point home at every turn. I have carried on his efforts, but even so, we still see occasional outbursts of the old hatreds. Back on Lamina, things are much worse.”

“What do you want of me?”

“I want you to succeed me when the time comes.”

“*What?* Siboot II, that’s impossible! I can’t possibly fill your shoes. I’m not ready. I’m not a leader. I don’t...”

“That’s why I’m approaching you now. You have much to learn.”

“But will the people on Lamina accept me?”

“Governor Grad was Jomkar; Siboot was Ripi; I am Klast; you are Tayran. It is obvious that the time has come for Tayrans to have a Siboot of their own. Politically, you are the best choice. More importantly, you are the best eeyal-speaker among us.”

“My talents pale beside yours.”

“You don’t have to be better than me, just better than everybody else—and you are.”

“But I don’t feel worthy.”

“Neither did I. Neither did Siboot. But somebody must do the job, and I believe that you are the one best suited for the task. For now, continue teaching at the school. But you must select a teacher to replace you and begin to train them. As that person takes over your simplest responsibilities, you will spend more time with me, learning how to do my job.”

Sufupican bowed in acknowledgement.

Siboot the Arbitrator

“Well, Sampul, what international crises down on Lamina do we have to fix today?”

“Just two today, Siboot II.”

“Thank the Siboot! Have they possibly started to learn how to behave like adults?”

“Not likely, ma’am. You’ll find these two disputes especially irksome.”

“OK, let’s crack the whip. What’s the first?”

“Some Tayran and Ripi fishermen got themselves into a brawl in the open sea.”

“What’s the body count?”

“Three Ripis, zero Tayrans.”

“No surprise there. You’d think the Ripis would at least have the sense to avoid fights with Tayrans.”

“You’d think that, and I’d think that, but obviously it has never dawned on the Ripis.”

“Let me guess: there’s no evidence other than their own stories. It’s pure he-said, she-said.”

“You got it. Another one you’ll have to split down the middle.”

“Great. What’s the second dispute?”

“Some Klast merchants in Arking were murdered by highway robbers. The Klasts are demanding that the Jomkars provide compensation, but the Jomkars are saying that the robbers were Klasts, and so it’s purely a Klast matter. They’ve arrested some Klasts, who insist that they’re just merchants like the others.”

“Holy Siboot, this is going to be a nasty one!”

“Indeed. The Jomkars are obviously lying, but if you side with the Klasts, they’ll accuse you of favoritism.”

“How can I unsnarl this mess? I can see why they all nuked each other.”

“I honestly don’t see an easy solution to this one, Siboot II.”

“I suppose that I’ll have to bury it for now. I’ll pronounce an abeyance of judgment until I get full reports from independent Ripi and Tayran

investigators. That will take a few months. Perhaps by the time I have the full reports, tempers will have cooled enough that I can present them with a milquetoast judgment that both sides will be able to live with.”

“Very good, Siboot II. They’re waiting for us in the radio shack. I’ll handle the preliminaries; you can come over in ten minutes.”

“Thank you, Sampul. Don’t you wish that you could be the Siboot and wield such powers of inspiration?”

“No, thank you, ma’am! I do NOT want your job!” Sampul left, grinning.

Dream Prank

Harpu soared through Dreamspace, free as a lark. He had taught himself how to control his motion; he could veer left or right, up or down. He had also learned to avoid those dumb-bell shaped objects; a few encounters with those huge eyes had given him a healthy fear. He didn't know what they were, but encountering one always gave him a creepy feeling and always ended the dream and his sleep for the rest of the night.

But when he saw another object ahead and below, moving almost parallel to his path, he was inspired to follow it. He maneuvered himself to its level, steadily closing the distance between them, until he was directly behind it. Sure enough, it was another pair of eyes, but it was moving in the slow, sweeping arcs that Harpu remembered from his first experiences in Dreamspace. He sensed that this was a newcomer to Dreamspace.

This knowledge inspired Harpu to have some fun with those eyes. It was probably some young kid. He swung way over the right, then turned and raced as fast as he could across the kid's path, passing directly in front of him at full speed. For the next few minutes he pestered the newcomer as a blackbird might chase at an eagle, zipping all around, pecking at him from all sides. The fun ended when the eyes disappeared; apparently Harpu had driven the kid right out of Dreamspace. He felt a surge of triumph.

The next day at lunch, all the children were talking about a 'Dreamspace monster' that had attacked a little Ripi girl. She was so terrified by the experience that she couldn't come to school. Harpu didn't reveal himself as the monster, but he took some perverse pride in knowing that they were talking about him.

That night, Harpu had difficulty getting to sleep, he was so excited to repeat his appearance as "the Dreamspace monster". When he finally did enter Dreamspace, he jetted around, looking for trouble. Eventually, he sighted a likely victim, breezing along slowly. He sped upward towards his target like a hawk diving on a pigeon. But he came to a screeching halt in front of a huge pair of eyes that seemed to come out of nowhere, blocking

his path. The eyes stared ominously at him, and he was thrown out of Dreamspace, wide awake.

He lay in bed, shivering. He couldn't get those eyes out of his mind. They had seemed to be looking inside him. There was something familiar about those eyes, something scary.

The next morning he had trouble getting out of bed. Traveling in Dreamspace was always mentally exhausting. When he got to school, he was uneasy and nervous. As he entered the school room, Sufupican turned and stared pointedly at him for a few long seconds—and that was when Harpu recognized the eyes that had intercepted him the night before.

Revo's Last Sermon

“Salutations, my children on Lamina. The time has come for me to prepare you for the future. My health has been declining lately and it is now apparent that I shall be dying soon. This should not be a cause for concern; death is an integral part of life and must be perceived with the same serenity that we should all bring to our lives.

“I have selected Sufupican to succeed me. She is our teacher here on Kira, but she has been my closest confidant for years now. Her talents in eeyal are extraordinary, well beyond those of any other Kiran. Siboot made it clear that the future of our civilization lies with eeyal, and that we should have as our Siboot a person blessed with great skill in eeyal. Sufupican is such a person; therefore, she is my designated successor.

“Some of you are wondering, I am sure, about Sufupican's species. To those people, I say: shame on you! Species-prejudice was the ruination of our civilization, and we must never permit it to intrude into our minds. Sufupican's species has nothing to do with her worthiness to become Siboot III. However, you will find out soon enough anyway, so I tell you now that Sufupican is Tayran.

“This is the last time I shall speak to you. I implore you, follow a path towards the unity of the Four Species. Never tolerate species-prejudice! Look beyond the petty details that divide you and see the important facts that unite you. And never let the horrible lessons of the Nuclear Death be forgotten.”

Revo's Death

"Please don't grieve so; I'm fine."

"No, you're not, you're dying!"

"Sufupican, death is not the end of life, it is the completion of life. How many times have I told you that?"

"But I'm not ready for you to die! Not yet! I'm not ready to take over!"

"You are better prepared than I was when Siboot died. Look at me: I have lived a long and fruitful life; now I am old and feeble. Who would not rejoice to live as long and happy a life as I? I walked with Siboot; I shared his thoughts; I felt his wisdom. I transmitted his ideals to all Kira and Lamina. What more could anybody ask for?"

"But... I'll miss you so much. Everybody will miss you so much."

"Yes, just as I, too, missed Siboot when he died. But I learned to embrace his vision, and so I was suffused with his spirit, and I no longer missed him. You must do the same with me. Come, sit here beside me. Close your eyes. Let us wrap ourselves in a warm blanket of eeyal-auras."

Sufupican complied, and Revo's auras enveloped her. They were so intense! Her power was the reddest, brightest red she had ever felt; her truth was green beyond any green; the blue of her goodness poured ecstatically into her. Surrendering herself to the intensity of her auras, she drifted in reverie, basking in Revo's strength.

A hand touched her shoulder, and Sufupican started awake.

"It's been hours; why didn't you come out and tell us?"

"Tell you what?" Sufupican turned to look at Revo. She lay peaceful, without breathing. She grasped Revo's hand; it was cold. "How... What..." She stood.

Revo was right. Sufupican didn't miss her, now.

Part Four

Sufupican

68 Years Ago



Sufupican's Inaugural Sermon

"It's all set up. They tell me every radio on the planet is tuned to this frequency."

"Very good, Sertgrid."

"When you're ready, just flip that switch and speak into the microphone. I can help if you have any problems."

Sufupican settled into the chair, eyeing the microphone and the radio's battery of electronic knobs and dials. She had always harbored a secret desire to learn about these mysterious devices, but she never had the chance. This was a hell of a way to get the opportunity.

There was no reason to procrastinate any longer, not with a billion Laminans waiting to hear her voice. She leaned forward, slammed on the "Transmit" switch, and began her sermon in Tayran:

"Salutations to all Laminans. I am Siboot III, previously known as Sufupican."

She repeated the statement in each of the other three languages, then continued. Each time, she rotated the language she used first, to scrupulously avoid giving any impression of species-favoritism.

"I convey my deepest regrets that I cannot yet live up to Siboot's noble ideal and address you all in eeyal. Someday, that will be possible, but we are not there yet.

"From this day forward, I will think of myself not as a Tayran, not even as a Kiran, but as the Siboot of all Kirans and all Laminans. You may submit your disputes to me in full confidence that I will adjudicate them with absolute objectivity and concern for the welfare of all Laminans.

"I conclude this sermon by looking backwards. We have lost Revo, a great Siboot and a true leader of all Laminans. We all grieve for our loss. I hope that you will also pray for me, that I may prove a worthy successor to that great one.

"I give you tranquility."

She flipped the switch off, leaned far back in the chair, and heaved a great sigh. *I sure hope I didn't screw that up*, she thought.

The Crisis

“Kinst!” Sufupican said. “Kinst, kinst, kinst!”

“Now, now, Dear Siboot III, your predecessor never used language like that,” Nika said.

“Very well, Nika, you’re right. I’ll be careful. But for here and now...” She raised her eyes to the ceiling and clenched her fists. “KINST!!!”

“Dear Siboot III, you have a diplomatic crisis to resolve. Cursing won’t help.”

“And how can I resolve it when they challenge my position as Siboot? They won’t even listen to me!”

“I don’t know, dear Siboot III. Only you can solve this.”

Evening was falling. She had spent the entire day in frantic exchanges with representatives of the various factions on Lamina. The Klasts were angry that the new Siboot wasn’t a Klast. The Ripis were angry that she wasn’t a Ripi. And the Jomkars—the Jomkars were beyond angry; they were sure that it was some sort of conspiracy against them. And the Tayrans were making matters worse by gloating that now *they* would run roughshod over everybody else. At various times during the day she had been called a usurper, a fraud, a liar, a charlatan, and worse.

They were so fractious that they didn’t even have just one representative for each species. They were all ready to start nuking each other. Thankfully, they didn’t have any working nuclear weapons. But they could still shed a lot of blood with the weapons that they did have.

In despair, Sufupican trudged out into the desert night. She wandered across hardpan, rocky hills, and low sand dunes, hands clasped behind her back. “Oh, Siboot!” she cried. “What can I do?”

But no answer came. At last, overcome with exhaustion and despair, she stumbled back to her dome and collapsed into a deep sleep.

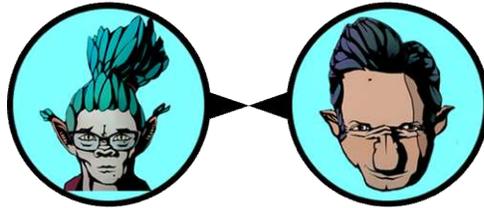
She was in Dreamspace, darting to and fro. It was as if she were in a crazy vehicle, spinning out of control, jerking from one place to another. It was

just as exhausting as when she was awake. “Why don’t I wake from this horrible dream?” she thought. She tried to wake up, but she was helpless.

After an endless stretch of time, her spinning slowed to a halt. She was motionless in Dreamspace. And there, in front of her, was a pair of eyes. *How terribly rude of you to interrupt my Dreamtime!* she thought, but she did not communicate it to the other person.

Then she looked again: these eyes were strange. They weren’t of any person she knew. They were Ripi eyes, she was pretty sure, but they weren’t as clear as eyes in Dreamspace usually appear. They were slightly translucent. And they stared at her with complete tranquility, blinking occasionally. *Who are you?* she thought. Of course, you can’t talk in Dreamspace, so she just waited for those eyes to go away.

But then, she felt eeyal entering her mind. This wasn’t the usual eeyal that you had to pay attention to, to listen carefully to understand. No, this eeyal came into her mind in thunderclaps:



What the kinst? She had never seen eeyal like this before. Yes, she recognized her own symbol at the beginning of the sentence. But she had never seen that Ripi symbol before; it was a Ripi she had never known. And what in the world did those two connectors mean? Connectors always meant something like “does to, moderates, controls”. But how could she control the Ripi while the Ripi controlled her? It made no sense. Even so, another message was already blasting into her mind:

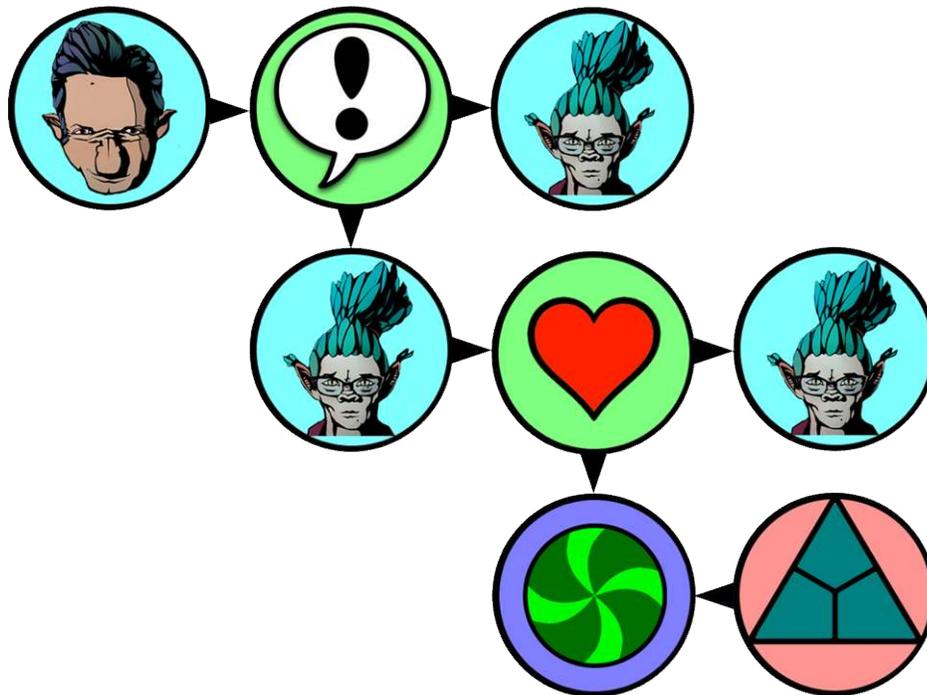


Her mind was writhing in confusion: what could this possibly mean? She controlled him, he controlled her, and then again, only backwards?

And then a dusty fragment of memory came to her that resolved all her confusion. It was the little display on the far wall of the cafeteria, containing some of Siboot's things. She remembered looking at his identification card and the photograph on it. That photograph—it was the same person as in the icon-symbol.

She was talking to Siboot! And he was saying *Sufupican is Siboot, and Siboot is Sufupican.*

Her mind shivered at the realization. But then came the next eeyal:



Like an avalanche, it swept over Sufupican, burying her in its weight. At first she was too awestruck to even contemplate its meaning; this was eeyal on a breathtaking scale. She had never seen anything of this complexity, and many of the symbols were alien to her. But the moment was of such import that she knew she must somehow figure out its meaning. Siboot was saying something to her. The exclamation point meant something. It was in a green verb circle—it must mean “imperative” or “command”.

Siboot was commanding her to do something. What?

She was to do something to herself. The heart-verb; what could that mean? Love? But she knew that the green spiral meant something about truth or honesty. And the reddish symbol—she already knew that it meant “most” (or sometimes just “three”).

Heart - honest - most; what did it mean? She felt frustrated and stupid. Siboot was commanding her to do something; it was obviously of vast importance. But what was it he wanted her to do? *Sufupican heart Sufupican honest most*. In her desperation, she wanted to cry and run away.

Siboot’s eyes approached closer, and she shrank back in fear. The eyes were calm and clear; they simply stared at her. Then, she understood. Siboot was commanding her to feel absolute trust in herself. “Trust yourself!” That was his meaning.

Sufupican fell out of Dreamspace and returned to normal sleep. It was the most pleasant sleep she had known in weeks; it was warm and cozy; she wanted it to last forever.

A hand shook her awake. She felt resentment, even anger, at being taken from this beautiful sleep. It was Nika.

“What’s wrong? Why are you waking me up at this hour?”

“It’s already 9:00 in the morning; we were so worried about you that I decided to enter your dome and see what was wrong.”

“I had the most wonderful dream, Nika!”

“That’s nice, but you have a crisis to fix. They’re going to start shooting at each other if you don’t do something soon.”

Sufupican stood up. “Hand me my tunic.” Nika helped her get dressed.

“What are you going to do about the crisis?” she asked.

In a quiet, calm voice, Sufupican said, “There is no crisis. Send the news to Lamina: I will address them at 10:00 and put an end to this nonsense.”

Nika stared at her in bewilderment for a moment, then hurried out. Sufupican sat down and stared at the wall. “Calm, calm, calm,” she told herself.

As 10:00 approached, Sufupican went to the radio dome. Kirans were clustered around it, obviously frightened. She made no eye contact as she approached; she simply smiled gently as she walked. Inside the radio dome, she sat down and donned the headphones without even acknowledging the technician. Then she sat in silence until exactly 10:00, when she took the microphone in her hand, flipped on the “Transmit” switch, and began to speak. Her voice was quiet, pleasant, and self-assured.

“I am Siboot III. I am not Sufupican; I am Siboot in a new form. I am not a Tayran; I am a Kiran. You are not Tayrans, Klasts, Ripis, or Jomkars; you are Laminans. Return now to the noble task of building our new planetary civilization. I send to you my tranquility.”

She flipped the Transmit switch to “Off”, removed the headphones, stood up, and walked to the door. She opened it and faced the crowd. Their worried faces were all tinged in the anti-red of fear. She smiled at them gently. “It is over,” she said. “Go back to work.”

Lariltoff's Discovery

Lariltoff crawled to the next tega plant in the furrow. There were two small weeds growing there beside it; he popped them out without disturbing the tega. He saw the tiny irrigation pipe had shifted a few centimeters, and adjusted it to discharge at the plant's base. Then on to the next tega plant.

"I *hate* tega work!" he muttered. It was banal, it was hot, and it scratched his hands. He continued working. His workload was based on the number of furrows cleared, not a defined time period, so there was no benefit to slacking off. "Why do we have to work like this? They talk about 'learning and earning your place', but it's a crock. They just want to keep us busy."

He crawled to the next plant. "It's not like this work has to be done. All they need to do is give these plants a little more water, and this busywork wouldn't be necessary. But no, the adults are too stupid to figure that out. Or maybe they just like to keep us busy.

"This is such a waste of my talents. I shouldn't be slaving away in the tega-field, I should be improving my eeyal. I'm already better at it than most adults, and I'm only fourteen. I could do lots of things better than this. But they have to waste me on this stupid tega work."

Lariltoff really hated working in the tega-field.

He noticed Troko walking down the furrow, heading towards him carrying a hoe. His mood brightened. Troko was the sweetest Klast girl, kind and generous.

As she neared, she eeyaled to him: *Troko greet Lariltoff good most.*

He almost giggled in delight, so he looked down at the tega plant as he eeyaled back. *Lariltoff greet Troko good most.*

But instead, Troko heard *Lariltoff greet tega good most.*

She stopped and stared at him quizzically; his eeyal was doubly confusing. First, of course, calling a tega-plant "excellent" was just plain weird. But, more important, she had never experienced the word-image *tega* before. In fact, she had never experienced *any* word-image referring to an object. Word-images were only about people, actions, auras, or magnitudes.

There were no word-images for physical objects. But here was Lariltoff, using a word-image for tega. Even stranger, Troko understood the word instantly.

She stared at Lariltoff strangely, then responded *Tega???*

Lariltoff was just as surprised as Troko had been. Why, yes, he had said “tega”, but he hadn’t meant to. In fact, he couldn’t even think why he had said it, except that he was looking at a tega plant just as he eeyaled to Troko.

He stood up and eeyaled *Lariltoff go for help with Troko*.

They walked back to the field house, looking for a interpreter. At the pipe head, they found one, and Lariltoff explained what had happened.

“What does this new word-image feel like?” the interpreter asked.

Lariltoff eeyaled the new word, and the interpreter understood it immediately. This was indeed curious. It was also important. The interpreter bade both teens follow him and they set out for Siboot III’s office.

There, he explained the situation to Siboot III. She listened with great curiosity and some skepticism; for a young field worker to discover a new word-image was extremely rare, and for one to discover a whole new class of words, well, that was preposterous.

“Show me this new word,” she said. Lariltoff did so.

No doubt about it, this was a new class of word-image. It felt like a material object, and it was specific to the tega-plant.

“Troko, can you make this word?” Siboot III asked. Troko produced a weak, uncertain version of the image, but its identity was still unmistakable.

She turned to the interpreter. “How about you?” He too produced a version of the new word-image.

“Allow me,” Siboot III said, and she eeyaled the tega word-image. All three of the visitors nodded their heads; she could do it, too. This kind of word obviously fit easily into the language. Now that they knew what the words felt like, Siboot III knew it would be easy to find other kinds of word-images describing material objects.

“You have performed a great service for Kira, Lariltoff!” Siboot III said.

His face shone with pride, and he looked at Siboot III in anticipation. *So you’ll promote me out of the fields?* he thought. *I’ve demonstrated my power with eeyal, and now you’re going to reward me!*

“Why don’t you two kids take the rest of the day off,” Siboot III said.

That was Lariltoff’s greatest contribution to Kiran society. For the rest of his life, he never accomplished anything of note.

The Demons of Dreamspace

Sufupican sat on the edge of her bed, hands clasped, staring into the darkness. It was time. Tonight, she would dive deeper into Dreamspace than ever before.

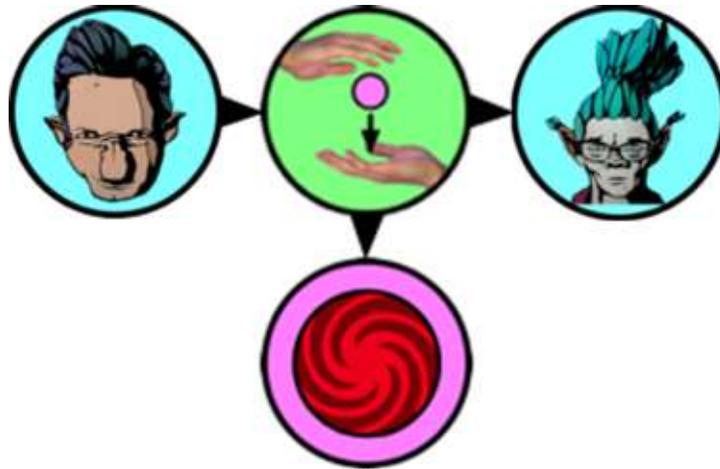
She carefully laid on the bed. She drew the blanket over her body and neatened it as if she were preparing her body for her own funeral. She laid her arms straight at her sides, above the blanket, and closed her eyes. She evoked all her auras in deepest meditation.

She sailed through Dreamspace with grace and elegance, enjoying herself. But there was work to do: she concentrated and began to accelerate, leaving behind all the colored shapes as she moved into a darker region. She could sense her own motion only by the rushing by of the little twinkles that pervaded all of Dreamspace.

She kept gaining speed until the little twinkles were faint streaks; she had never done anything like this before. There didn't seem to be anything out here other than the streaking twinkles. People didn't come out this far for the same reason that they never traveled far from their village on Kira: there simply wasn't anything to see.

Now she was slowing down. The streaks shortened into dashes, then into individual twinkles. Odd. She hadn't decided to slow down. Then, in the distance, she saw a pair of eyes dead ahead. She realized that somehow those eyes were controlling her motion. She came to a complete stop directly in front of them. With a joyous start, she recognized Siboot.

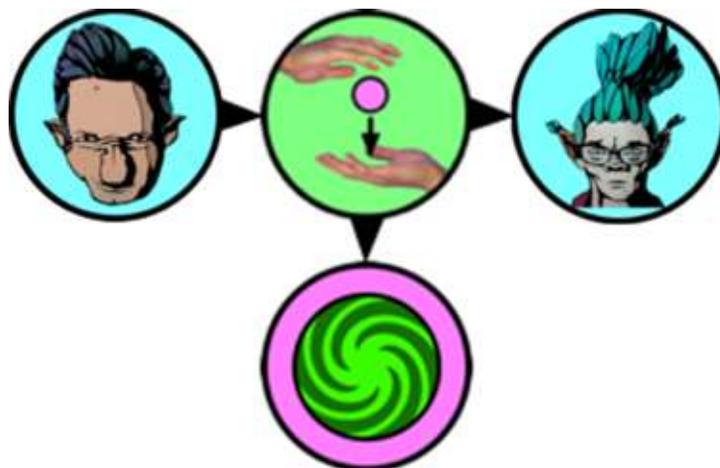
He wasted no time communicating:

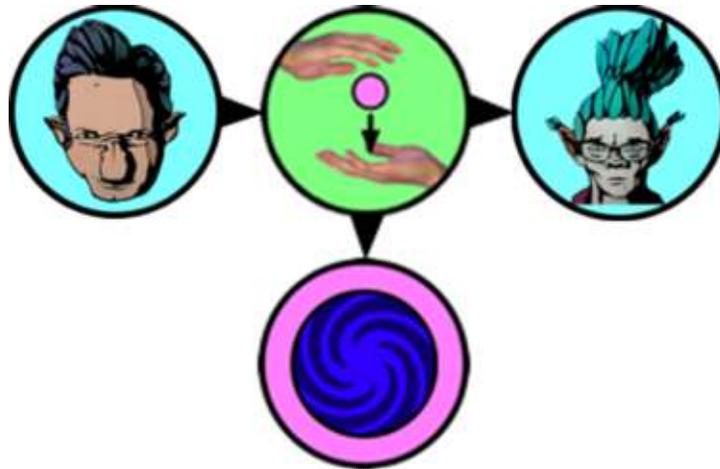


Again with the strange eeyal! This was easier, though. The verb seemed easy enough to figure out: he was giving her something. That something was a red aura, or something like that. But auras weren't things, they were sensations. Aha! She realized that he was giving her an auragon. She'd heard about them from Siboot II, and there had actually been a few cases of people accumulating some in years past, but she herself had never seen one.

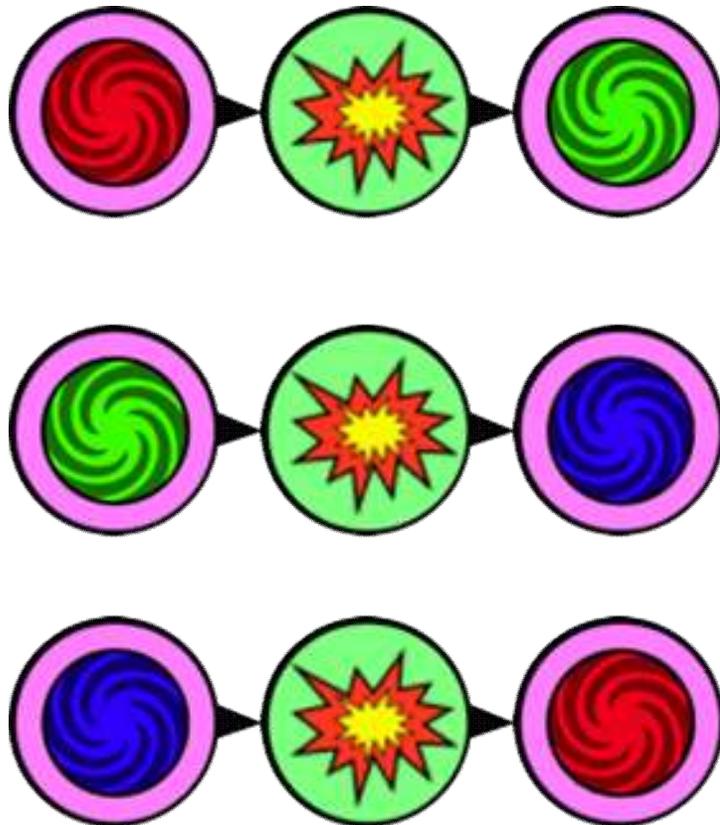
With a start, she felt it appear inside her mind. It felt like a lump, a lump of redness, of power-stuff. It was an uncanny feeling; the closest experience she could think of was when she was about to burp and felt the bubble rising in her chest. But this bubble was inside her mind. A bubble of red-power.

Siboot wasn't done. Two more eeyal-ideas came in rapid succession:





Siboot gave her two more auragons: one for truth, one for goodness.
But why is he giving me these auragons? What are they for?
As if in answer, Siboot offered three statements:



Another new verb! Sufupican was growing used to these challenges. In real life, new eeyal words came slowly, and Kirans discovered only one or

two per year. But with Siboot, she was having new words thrown at her in an avalanche. This one seemed especially odd; she searched her memory for what it reminded her of.

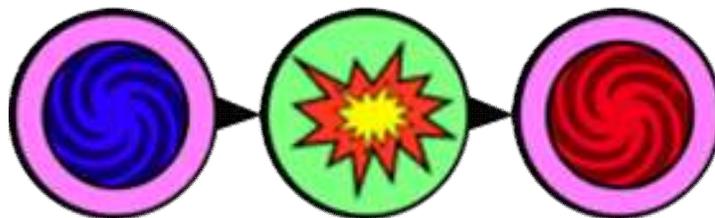
Ah, yes, it was an old Tayran symbol for victory. The red auragon is victorious over the green auragon; the green one is victorious over the blue one; and the blue one is victorious over the red one. Power defeats truth, truth overcomes virtue, and virtue conquers power. Wasn't that something that Siboot once said? It was certainly a strange notion. And why was he telling her this?

The images dissolved from her mind; she was still floating in front of Siboot's eyes. One eye winked at her, and she could see that the eyes were smiling. Then they faded away. She resumed her motion through Dreamspace, accelerating to even greater speeds than before. Now all she could see was a blur as she flew through Dreamspace at an impossible speed.

Wham! She came to a dead stop in one jarring instant. She looked around; there were no eyes, nothing but the ever-present twinkles. Why had she stopped? What was happening?

The twinkles in one direction began to disappear. It was like a black cloud consumed them, spreading, devouring more and more of them. She watched closely in alarm. The black cloud—or whatever it was—had faint red shapes running through it. The shapes twisted and moved and revealed the inner motions of the cloud.

It was expanding, and she realized that it was also moving toward her. Her alarm became panic: it was obviously coming to get her! As it neared, the shapes grew brighter and stronger, tracing the outlines of a claw-like hand reaching toward her. She frantically tried to escape, but she was powerless to move. The red shapes became fiercely bright, blindingly bright. She felt like screaming, but instead felt eeyal inside of her:



Yes! That was why Siboot had intercepted her, he was arming her against this red demon-cloud! She reached inside her mind and invoked the blue auragon, then wrapped herself in it like a protective cloak. Dreamspace exploded in sparks and shooting stars.

She jerked back, but when she opened her eyes, everything was normal. The little twinkles were all back where they should be; the demon-cloud was gone. She still had all three of her auragons. All was peaceful.

The Judgment of Siboot III

Sufupican awoke with a sigh. She never looked forward to another day in anticipation. Her life was a continuous barrage of selfish parties seeking her approval to gain some advantage for themselves. No matter how judicious her decisions, no matter how carefully she presented them, it seemed one of the parties always went away angry. *People are so small-minded*, she thought, as she glumly drank her morning tea.

Being the Siboot was a thankless job. As Siboot III, she was expected to set an example of modesty and self-denial that no one seemed to follow. The only payment she received for her labors were the meals provided in her home, so that she might have a little time alone to gather her thoughts. Only her sense of dedication to Siboot's ideals inspired her to continue the daily slog. She was making a greater contribution to the future as the Siboot than she could ever make otherwise. And the only purpose of living in this god-awful place was to shape the future.

Bracing herself for the day, Sufupican headed for the Administration dome. As always, Nika met her at the entrance. "Good morning, Siboot III!"

"You're looking especially chipper today, Nika. Anything special?"

"No ma'am, just feeling good today."

Sufupican stopped and looked closely at Nika's face. "Oh. You and Futlo have such a good marriage!"

Nika blushed and quickly changed the subject. "The field manager failed to turn in his daily reports last night, and the water manager says that the irrigation water went over budget yesterday. It looks like somebody screwed up and they're trying to cover it up."

"Why can't they just admit it when they make a mistake? I'm going to put them in front of a firing squad."

"Perhaps you should consider the possibility." Nika winked.

Sufupican laughed. "Ah, Nika, I don't know how I could handle things without you!"

By this time they had reached her office. “What’s on the agenda today, dear?” she queried, noting an enormous length of strings hanging from Nika’s kipoo.

Nika raised the loose end out from her belt and rolled the strings between her fingers in sequence, using its the knots and beads to refresh her memory. “We’ve got an argument between Nemit and Sarang over an accident in the warehouse. Nemit blames Sarang for the accident and wants her to apologize to the team.”

“Great. Isn’t Sarang that young Jomkar girl?”

“Yes, ma’am, she’s inexperienced. She might well have caused the accident, but the fault might lie more with her trainer than with her.”

“We’ll just have to interrogate them to figure this out. What’s next?”

“Thawn and Molk are at it again. This time Molk is complaining that Thawn rumbles in his sleep so loudly that the noise penetrates the wall and Molk can’t sleep.”

“That’s it! I’ve had it with those two. I’m separating them! Have both of them swap their dome with somebody else. Make sure that both of them get a worse dome, so that the people who have to move into their domes perceive it as a step up. Find these new assignments before I meet with them; I’ll hear them out, then pronounce judgment immediately.”

“Got it.” Nika double-checked the next string on her kipoo. “On a more serious note, we have an 3:00 appointment to hear a fishing dispute between the Klasts and the Tayrans on Lamina. You may recall their previous dispute over the...” She paused as she re-read the beads closely. “...the Strimo islands, lying between them. Those islands are just rocks, and so you internationalized them. Now they’re fighting over the demarcation line separating their respective fishing zones.”

“Wise Siboot! Can’t these people solve even the simplest problems among themselves?!? This is a trivial problem! I’ll chastise both sides for their failure to learn the lessons of the Nuclear Death.”

“Dear Siboot III,” Nika intoned, using the most formal and respectful title, “Perhaps you should review the history of this dispute. It dates back centuries. The Klast Paramian Empire first established control of the entire Esfort Sea more than five hundred years ago. When it fell, King Sisi of the Tayrans drove the Klast navy from the sea, establishing Tayran sovereignty over the area, which they held for three hundred and twenty years. But in

the Great War, the Tayrans and the Klasts fought a series of big naval battles in the area of the Strimo islands, which the Klasts won decisively. Hence, both sides have historic claims to sovereignty.”

“So basically, we’re going to hear two completely different versions of history today.”

“That’s about right, ma’am.”

“Great. Could you bring me all the history books dealing with this? I’ll read over them before the conference. I suppose I’ll have more trouble getting each side to shut up so the other can speak!”

Meeting in the Desert

One night, Sufupican went to meet Neef the school teacher after his classes had ended.

“Siboot III!” he cried. “You honor me!”

“How are the eeyal classes coming?” Sufupican asked.

“The students continue to improve. I’m having a hard time keeping up with them.”

“I have noticed that the interpreters always seem to be pretty good at eeyal as well as multiple languages. Can you confirm that?”

“Oh, yes, there is a solid correlation between ability in languages and ability in eeyal. It’s just another language; if you’re good in spoken languages, you’ll also be good in eeyal.”

“Would you go so far as to say that the students who become interpreters are also the best eeyal-speakers?”

“Well, yes, I think that’s a true statement...”

“Good. I have something to discuss with you, something of great consequence. Come, walk with me.”

She led Neef out into the desert, where they could converse in absolute privacy. Still, she occasionally glanced about before she spoke.

“What I am about to tell you is a secret of the utmost importance. I want you to swear on the memory of Siboot that you will never reveal any of this information to anybody, except under the following circumstances. Swear it!”

Neef was taken aback by the seriousness of her demand, and thrilled that she would confer such a great honor upon him. “Yes, dear Siboot III, I shall never reveal this information to anybody except as you specify.”

“Good. I have been exploring deep into Dreamspace, into places that others cannot go. Deep Dreamspace is a dangerous place. Once, I nearly died there. However, I also met Siboot there.”

“But, you are Siboot!”

“No, Neef, the *original* Siboot. He lives on in Dreamspace.”

“He... what?” Neef staggered backwards, and sat down on a nearby rock.
“The original Siboot?!”

“Yes, Neef,” Sufupican said, so gently that he had no doubt she spoke the truth. “He gave me instructions on how to organize the succession after I die.”

Neef sat speechless, with his jaw hanging open.

“The four interpreters will be the candidates for the succession. Henceforth, they will be known as ‘acolytes’, to indicate their special place in our society. They, and only they, must be present when I die. Siboot has given me a total of sixteen auragons. As I die, I shall distribute these auragons among the four interpreters. Each shall receive four auragons, at least one of each color.

“That night, the contestants will enter Dreamspace, and each contestant will seek out one other contestant to attack. When two contestants meet, they will each deploy one of their auragons. The auragons will meet and clash. If two auragons of the same kind are used, they will both be destroyed. But if they differ, only one shall be destroyed, according to this rule: *Power defeats truth, truth overcomes virtue, and virtue conquers power.*

“There will be four dream combats each night, and at least four auragons will be destroyed each night. The next night, they shall repeat these combats, continuing until only one candidate with any auragons remains. That candidate will become Siboot IV.”

“You will be the Judge of the Campaign. It is your task to explain the rules of succession to the acolytes and to ensure that the campaign is conducted with propriety. When you retire, you will pass on this knowledge to your successor as school teacher.”

“Yes, dear Siboot III.”

“And you have even more important responsibility: you must tell Siboot IV how to find Siboot in Dreamspace.”

“Yes?”

“Tell Siboot IV this: ‘Go deep, beyond the curves, to where there are only twinkles.’ Use these exact words. Memorize them.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do you have any questions?”

“Yes, just one: how will the candidates know how to deploy their auragons?”

“They will know once they’re in Dreamspace with the auragons. Now go home.”

Neef headed back towards the village, alive with excitement. He was to play a crucial role in the selection of the next Siboot! He wanted to shout it out to the whole world—but of course, he couldn’t tell a soul.

When he reached a high point on the terrain, he turned to look back at Siboot III, but she was already gone.

Sufupican's Dream

Sufupican glided around Dreamspace, hoping that Siboot might appear to her. After much fruitless searching, she stopped and changed her strategy. She let go of all her tensions and relaxed. “Calm, calm, calm,” she told herself.

Dreamspace began to brighten. All around her, sheets of color were growing larger and brighter. They completely enveloped her; she felt as if a million colored spotlights were being trained on her. She repeated her mantra. “Calm, calm, calm.”

Then she felt Siboot coming. She saw his eyes in the distance, slowly closing the gap between them. But this time, the eyes didn't stop at a comfortable distance in front of her; instead, they just kept getting closer and closer, until she felt herself being drawn inside them.

She could feel him in her bones. His presence permeated her, elated her, enclosed her. It grew in intensity, brighter, louder, shriller, harder, softer—she was engulfed in a tidal wave of intense emotion. Then came an overwhelming flood of goodness, and truth, and power. She lost herself in it.

The next morning, Nika discovered Sufupican's body on the bed, her eyes open, with a beatific smile on her face.

Part Five

Feslym

32 Years Ago



Dream Combat

Feslym stood at the porch to his dome, waiting. The image of the setting sun burned into his retinas. Nightfall was here; it was time to make a decision. This was almost certain to be the final night of dream combat. Thid had only a red auragon left; he was certain about that because Menk had told him, and he knew Menk was telling the truth. Feslym's last remaining auragon was green; if he engaged Thid in dream combat, he would lose.

On the other hand, he thought that Menk held a blue auragon. That meant that he should attack Menk: his green auragon would defeat Menk's blue auragon as surely as truth overwhelms goodness. That would eliminate Menk from the contest. But what if he was wrong? His information on Menk was sparse and uncertain. If Menk in fact possessed one of the other auragons, Feslym would be knocked out of contention.

He suspected that Arram's auragon was blue, but he wouldn't dare risk everything on that suspicion. Kinst! If only he had been more aggressive in his conversations with the others that day!

There would be a maximum of four battles in the coming night. First, any combatant pairs using the same auras would simultaneously eliminate one another. Then the battles with different auras would take place. If more than one acolyte emerged from dream combat unscathed, or if all four acolytes were eliminated, the combat would continue the next night, but if exactly one acolyte made it through the night without losing their last auragon, that acolyte would become Kira's new Siboot.

The sun had set now. The stars were already coming out. Feslym walked inside and sat down on the floor mat. He meditated, gathering his strength. Then he slowly lay down on his back, with his arms laying at his sides, palms up. He closed his eyes and sent his mind to sleep. Soon he felt the fire within him glow and erupt into flame. He was ready.

His spirit soared through Dreamspace. He caught the feeling of Menk, and flew in that direction. Soon he saw Menk's eyes, heading directly for him. Feslym readied himself for combat. He wrapped his green auragon around himself. He saw Menk's eyes, huge in front of him, bathed in the blue

color of his auragon. Feslym had guessed correctly! Feslym's green auragon enveloped Menk's blue and drained it of its light. Menk's eyes blinked out of Dreamspace.

Feslym reached out and felt around Dreamspace. There were no other acolytes. The other two must have destroyed each other that night.

Feslym awoke, lying face down several feet from the mat. Dried blood was caked around his nostrils. As he struggled to his feet, he felt the aching in his joints that told him he had spent another night thrashing wildly in his aura-sleep. Why had nobody attacked him, other than Menk? Maybe it was because nobody knew anything about his last remaining aura. Perhaps his caution the previous day had kept others in the dark.

A cluster of people was waiting outside his door, and more came to join the growing crowd. The little glimmering shapes might not be able to participate in dream combat at night, but they certainly knew its outcome. The other three acolytes elbowed their way to the front, to stand on the porch next to Feslym. One by one, each declared Feslym's new position.

Thus Feslym became Siboot IV.

Feslym's Daughter

One of Feslym's first acts after becoming Siboot IV was to take a wife. The duties of an acolyte are too great to tolerate the distractions of a family. The problems of choosing a mate on Kira were simplified by the small population. With nearly two hundred and seventy souls on Feslym's accession, divided among four species, there were only about thirty females of each species. Only three or four at a time might be available for marriage. Romance got short shrift under such conditions.

After his victory in the campaign, Feslym had three female Klasts from whom to choose. There was little question as to their own willingness to marry him; the Siboot's spouse enjoyed some minor privileges that were, in the harsh environment of Kira, luxuries. When Feslym offered his hand to Nafimko, she accepted without hesitation.

Exactly one year and two months later, Camiggdo was born. Although the birth had no political significance, it was nevertheless greeted with delight by Kirans and Laminans alike. It was generally believed that mental powers were in some way founded in genes, and so Camiggdo was held in special regard. Moreover, there lingered in all Laminans some fondness for the ceremony and splendor of royalty, and a royal birth had been a matter of great importance in the middle histories of all species save the Jomkars.

The significance of Camiggdo's birth was elevated by the fact that she was the first child born to a sitting Siboot. Siboot II had been infertile and Siboot III's husband had died shortly after she became Siboot. Camiggdo's birth was thus a matter of great significance to Kirans and Laminans alike; she symbolized the normalization of Kiran life. It capped the unification of the Four Species with a symbolism that was powerful to all Laminans.

Feslym found fatherhood more consuming than being Siboot. Klast family loyalties have always been very powerful; Feslym had difficulty honoring the requirement that Siboots must see above their own species and think only of the good of the Four Species. To be sure, Feslym had no problem being fair-minded when it came to resolving the disputes of other Klasts, but when it came to Nafimko and Camiggdo, Feslym lost his

objectivity. The Kirans did not resent Feslym for this single advantage he took of his office. To himself, he took no favors; he always participated in any necessary physical labor, no matter how difficult or demeaning. They could forgive him this minor vanity.

And so Camiggdo grew up the darling of Kiran society, the Little Princess loved by all. Old mothers made her special clothing; the farmers brought her the first fruits of the season; the machinists made her toys out of useless scrap. She greeted each gift with a delight that warmed the heart of each donor.

School was Camiggdo's first harsh encounter with the realities of Kira. Although the teacher was very affectionate, she was only one child among many, not the center of attention. Camiggdo rebelled, and it caused Feslym much pain and many years trying to bring her to accept to her place as a Kiran citizen. Even then, her acceptance was grudging; in her heart she remained convinced of her superiority over other Kirans.

No one was surprised when Camiggdo became the Klast acolyte. It seemed only natural.

Sirk The Til



One of the greatest contributions the Tayrans made to Laminan culture was the domestication of the Til. These little animals, weighing about five kilograms, were originally hunters in the Tayran scrub lands. Ancient Tayrans domesticated them to control the flocks of birds that threatened the crops. Smart and sociable, Tils quickly became house pets in Tayran farmhouses. Many of the earliest trading contacts with the Tayrans involved these endearing creatures, and soon they were being bred all over Lamina.

Some of the first Kiran colonists brought their Tils with them. The calamity that cut Kira off from support forced Siboot to take draconian measures to ensure the survival of the colony, but Tils would not be sacrificed. Siboot knew his power was not as great as that of the Tils. He devised a formula to ensure the Tils' place in Kiran society.

Just as the total population of Kira would be held to an absolute maximum of two hundred and eighty souls, the Til population would be held to fifty animals. Since the average lifespan of a Til was ten years and the average Laminan lifetime was fifty years, Siboot's system ensured that each Kiran should own one Til during his lifetime. And since the average family had four members, most Kirans could expect to have a Til around most of their lives. Everyone applauded his solution.

This basic system governing the Til population on Kira functioned well. When a Til named Fester gave birth to a litter of four Tilkies, they had already been assigned to their new homes. Four weeks later, Skordokott, a six-year old Tayran, brought home his Til. He named him Sirk.

Skordokott and his Tilkie were instant friends. Sirk was an especially smart animal. He quickly learned a variety of chase and hide games. He and Skordokott would spend hours stalking each other. Skordokott would creep about, pausing to listen for any movement; Sirk would sneak up behind him and attack his leg with mock ferocity. As they grew up they would go on walks together with the Til ensconced in Skordokott's backpack, taking in all the places they had visited. Skordokott would talk to Sirk, telling him his secrets, and Sirk would listen with rapt attention. Skordokott always spent at least an hour each evening playing gently with his little friend.

Skordokott's parents were amazed by his behavior. Not even the gruff Tayrans are immune to the charms of the Tils, but such effusive emotion was totally out of character for a Tayran. There was only one other Tayran child at the time, a little girl, and she was so insulted by Skordokott's unseemly

doting on his Til that she refused to play with him. Deeply hurt, Skordokott retreated even further into his friendship with Sirk.

His mother wanted to intervene. She feared he wasn't growing up like a Tayran, that there was something wrong with him, to be so quiet and gentle. Little Tayrans, both boys and girls, are hellions, but Skordokott seemed to have no interest in running, screaming, and fighting with the other children.

But his father demurred. He saw wisdom in Skordokott's behavior. "It is true, he is not growing up as a Tayran. He is growing up as a Kiran. Is that not something we ought to appreciate?" His mother had no answer. Skordokott was allowed to follow his own path with Sirk.

In Skordokott's thirteenth year, Sirk met with an accident. Sirk often went out on adventures during the day while Skordokott was at school, but when Skordokott came home that afternoon, the Til never came to greet him. Skordokott was worried; Sirk was never late their afternoon greeting. He began to search for Sirk, but he found nothing and had to be ordered to bed late that night.

The next day was wasted; he worried through his schoolwork, waiting anxiously to escape and resume his search. At last the time came and Skordokott raced home. As he neared his house, his heart leapt when he saw Sirk's form waiting for him where he always was. But his joy turned to fear when he saw Sirk's mouth wide open, the pink tongue sticking out as if he were panting.

He reached out to touch Sirk and realized that there was something terribly wrong with the way the mouth hung open. The lower jaw was broken and hung loosely by the gums and tongue-tissue, all badly swollen. Skordokott nearly fainted. He gently picked up Sirk and carried him to Yelfim's house. Yelfim was the doctor. He would fix Sirk.

Yelfim took one look at Sirk and sent word for Skordokott's parents to come immediately. He sent another messenger to find Forago to translate. What he had to say was too important to rely on eeyal.

He then began a careful examination of the little Til. It took less than two minutes for the frantic parents to show up at the doctor's house, and another minute to calm them down and reassure them that Skordokott was fine. Then, with the parents holding the child's hands, and Forago translating, Yelfim told them his conclusions. "The damage to Sirk's jaw is too much to

repair. The infection that has already set in will only grow worse, and it will kill Sirk within a week.”

Skordokott’s eyes went wide. “But you’re the doctor! You can save him!”

“I’m sorry, little one. The infection is too deep. The damage is too great. I cannot.”

Skordokott looked in desperation at his mother then his father. They were both near tears, but their expressions confirmed the doctor’s words.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?”

Skordokott’s mother knelt in front of him and looked him in the eye with a mixture of sternness and love. “Yes, Skordokott, there is, but Sirk is your Til and you must make the decision. We can do nothing and let him die a slow and painful death, or we can put him out of his misery now.”

At first, Skordokott did not grasp the meaning of her words. “We can fix his misery now?” he asked hopefully.

His mother hesitated, looked at her husband, and then said, very slowly, “Yes, Skordokott, we can fix his misery now, the only way that we can. We must do now what is already inevitable.. We must do without pain what nature will do with pain.”

Skordokott’s eyes widened in horror. “You want to KILL Sirk?!?!”

By now, the translation had caught up with Yelfim, and he intervened. “I’ll dispose of the animal. You take this poor fellow home and make up some story to soften his grief. Tell him I’m taking the Til to a happy place that only Tils can go to.”

His parents explained this to Skordokott. One parent took each of his hands and they led him away, but Skordokott knew that he would never see Sirk again. He screamed and raged against his parents, against the doctor, against the whole world. And he forever lost his gentleness.

Koopie

Koopie was the son of the Ripis Promtilla and Lit. Beyond their regular duties, they served as the archivists for the colony. The job of archivist had become almost hereditary since his grandfather Jo had organized the task soon after Siboot's death. Somebody had to do something to preserve all the books, movies, and papers scattered throughout the homes of the colonists.

At first, it had been primarily a matter of gathering and cataloging all of the material, but Jo had largely completed that work. His successors were saddled with preserving the meaning of all these works. The archivist position evolved from librarian to a kind of Minister of Culture. In a colony of two hundred and eighty souls struggling for survival, there was little time for art, and no room for artists. The colony's sole concession to the artistic imperative was to preserve its memory.

Promtilla and Lit pursued their duties energetically, pushing literature onto tired laborers too polite to refuse it, organizing Sunday afternoon concerts of recorded music that few attended. They never gave up hope of repairing the movie projector; it had been a big draw for the first two decades after the war. Kirans had marveled at the images of life on Lamina, at the lush green foliage that seemed to be everywhere on that blessed planet. But it seemed futile; the tiny rubber belts had long since decayed, and there was simply no substitute on Kira.

The music machines still worked, but nobody cared. The language of music was lost on the unfamiliar ear. The sweet serenades and glorious thundering of classical Laminan composition were random noises to the ears of Kirans who had not been brought up in the Laminan tradition of great and powerful music. This was the cruelest sorrow to Promtilla and Lit, for they took special pride in this one pursuit in which Ripis had dominated Laminan culture. But little Koopie was raised in an environment humming with music.

He heard all the great composers. His parents' collection was spotty, but they did have most of the important works of Laminan music. To their delight, they instilled in him an inner musical sense and an avid love of

music. As he matured, Koopie faced the dilemma so familiar to all music-loving Ripis: the desire to play a more direct part in the music. Their tinny, bleating voices had never known song, so they turned to their instruments and poured their hearts out into strings, winds, and percussions.

Koopie's quandary was even more profound than the one that had driven other Ripis in times past to such dizzying heights of composition and instrumentation. There was not a single functioning musical instrument on all of Kira. His soul soared and danced with music that could find no outlet.

But Koopie was a Kiran as well as a Ripi, and he enjoyed the sturdy self-reliance that Kira had inculcated in all her children. He found his own way to participate in the music: a kind of dance.

Ripis had never been dancers. Their short legs and thick bodies made their attempts to follow the music ludicrous. The best dancers on Lamina had always been Klasts, sometimes Tayrans. Not knowing this, Koopie was undeterred. He abandoned his clumsy feet and looked to his elegant hands. Ripi hands, so quick and expressive, were the ideal outlet for his musical urge. He would sing with his hands.

It was frustrating at first. All he could do was shake his hands in rough approximation of the beat. He felt foolish: his clumsy flailing bore little resemblance to the beauty of the music he heard. But he kept at it, with the same determination that had made Ripis such great musicians. He learned to see the music as a visual structure. He knew no music theory, of course. If he had, he might never have invented his unique approach to music. He simply traced the visual structure of the music with his hands.

He kept his little hobby a secret. There wasn't much point in sharing it—nobody would understand it if he showed them. Besides, nobody ever asked him. But he kept practicing and improving. He learned to make his hands quaver, lilt, and throb. He developed fundamental movements to cover every quality of Laminan instruments. Staccato stabs for strings, puffs for horns, precise finger-thrusts for the articulations of the various keyboards.

More importantly, he found the emotional expressiveness he had longed for. When the music turned a graceful twist, his hand pirouetted in perfect harmony. A gay dancing trill sent his hand prancing through space. When the solo voice of the violin soared in sad tremolo, his hand followed with soaring, trembling fingers. And when the orchestra thundered back, his hands rippled with strength.

He did not master his art until he was a young man, studying languages by day—he was in training to become the Ripi acolyte—and practicing his passion at night. Koopie mastered eeyal with an nonchalance that infuriated his classmates. What they struggled with, he didn't care about, yet he learned with ease.

After both his parents had died, Koopie took over their job as archivist and continued to pursue his passion. In the early evening hours, he would latch his door, shutter the windows, and lose himself in the angelic strains of the great composers. Their agonies and raptures, their merriments and wonder, their ecstasies; all found form in Koopie's fingers. He came to know these long-dead ancestors in his very bones, to feel their voices in his muscles. Koopie was at one with his heritage.

And nobody ever knew.

Koopie and Skordokott

“Koopie, what do you think you’re doing?”

Koopie woke up from his daydream. His face betrayed a flash of panic, quickly replaced by a more relaxed expression. “I’m sorry, sir. I was just thinking.”

“Koopie, you are such a heartache. Blessed with so much talent, and yet so distant and incurious. You are the finest Ripi speaker of eeyal, but you seem to care for neither the honor nor the responsibility.”

“I’m sorry, Mortle. You’re right, but I just can’t seem to care very much for it. I didn’t choose this great honor for myself, and I wish that I could transfer the burden to someone who appreciates it more. Besides,” he said, breaking into a grin. “I have so little time and so much hell to raise.”

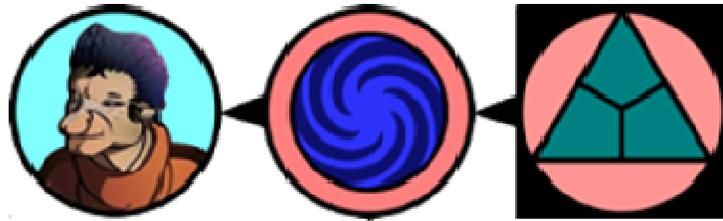
Mortle laughed. It was always hard to remain angry with Koopie. “Go home, Koopie. Try to practice the words I showed you today.”

“I will, sir,” Koopie said with a wink.

He went straight from his instructor’s dome to the cafeteria. This late in the afternoon, there would be only a few snacks set out, but he would probably see some of the other young people. Kiran society recognized their greater need to socialize and required of them only a partial work shift in their late adolescence. Most would be gathered at the cafeteria in search of an afternoon snack and some fun.

Jopin was already there. She was a fat little Jomkar who helped out in the records office, and so had a shorter distance to walk to reach the cafeteria when the 3:00 horn blew. *Greetings most good, Koopie! News?* Despite her clumsy eeyal, her bounciness and laughter came right through with the images. Koopie laughed to himself.

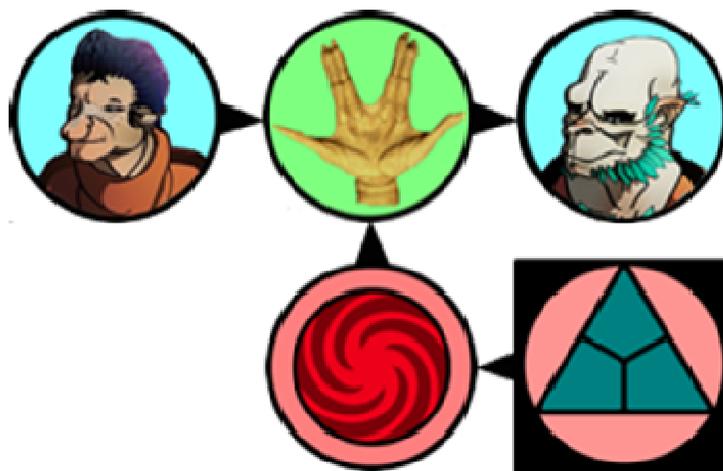
Jopin is most good! He expanded the point with an exaggerated gesture of himself sweeping an imaginary Ripi girl off her feet and smothering her with kisses. Jopin laughed and blushed with a coy wave of her hand.



Koopie is least good!

The image shot through both their minds with frightening penetration. They both instantly stopped playing and wheeled around, searching for the source of the accusation. Koopie suspected from the texture and feel of the image, and sure enough, there in the doorway stood Skordokott. He was tall and powerful, a Tayran young adult, still sweating from his work guiding an irrigator. His head radiated a strong red aura of dominance and power.

Koopie had no desire to argue with Skordokott. Perhaps he was just in a bad mood.



Koopie greet Skordokott powerful negative-much.

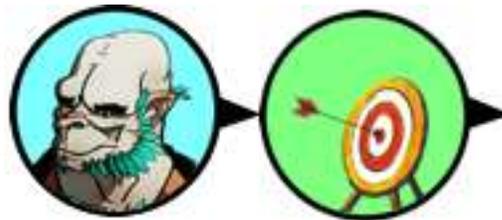
Skordokott was not placated by Koopie's submissive gesture. He grew angrier at this lazy, laughing fool.



Skordokott express anger Koopie.

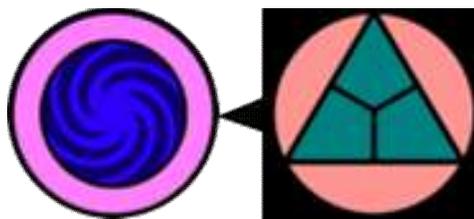
By this time a number of other people had entered the cafeteria. Few could follow the conversation, but they all could tell that it was an altercation. Koopie was uncomfortable with the unpleasantness of it; he didn't like to fight. He paused, smiled at Skordokott, and walked away. Jopin chased after him: *Jopin beg Koopie that Koopie not go!*

Koopie just smiled at her and winked. She followed him. Mealtime in the cafeteria was always an intimidating experience. Old Tekula the Tayran ran the place with a hard eye and a sharp tongue. Although few could understand her words, all feared her anger. She made certain that everybody cleaned their plate, bussed their tray, and observed her idea of decorum. Skordokott, like other Tayrans, had little objection to her dictatorial style. He saw the cafeteria as Tekula's territory, and she had the right to run it any way she saw fit. He waited his turn, and when it came, he pointed to some leafy vegetables and started to eeyal:



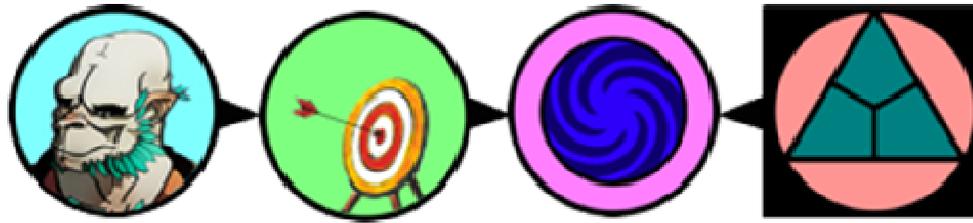
Skordokott want...

But just as he began, another image appeared:



...good-thing negative most.

One of the first lessons in eeyal that every Kiran child learns is to “get off the air” if somebody else is eeyaling, and so Skordokott instinctively aborted his statement after saying “wants”. But Tekula heard this:



Skordokott was surprised to see Tekula staring at him coldly. He blinked innocently, wondering if he had said something wrong. People nearby edged away from him. He looked around, growing more confused. Tekula wiped her hands on her apron and disappeared into the kitchen, then emerged a few seconds later with a pail of old, spoiled food.

Tekula give Skordokott good-stuff negative.

She dumped the contents of the pail onto his head.

Skordokott didn't see Koopie and Jopin peeking over the nearest window, laughing uproariously. And he never figured out why Tekula got so mad at him.

Camiggdo and the Redberries

Redberry Festival was just four days away. The first redberries had already come in, and were set aside in the kitchen to wait until the main crop had ripened. Everybody was looking forward to the Festival; as the only sweet edibles on Kira, redberries were eagerly anticipated.

Camiggdo was particularly enthusiastic about the festival. Last year, she found that she had quite the sweet tooth, and gobbled down just about every redberry concoction that was cooked up. Each of the Four Species had their own gustatory preferences, and a stupendous redberry cuisine had developed over the decades, mixing redberries with just about everything else that grew on Kira in a crazy kaleidoscope of tastes.

And there was a special excitement this year. Ginga-fruit trees had been on Kira from the beginning of the colony, but they had never borne fruit. Ten years ago, Tarnos, who had dedicated himself to learning the ancient arts of tree-raising, had learned from fellow Jomkars back in Arking how to raise ginga-fruit properly. At long last, his babies had begun to bear fruit, and every cook had devised a new dish to take advantage of this tantalizing new comestible. No colonist alive today had any idea how ginga-fruit tasted, but chefs on the home world had given them a rough idea.

Camiggdo knew the cooks were already trying out their new recipes, and she was desperate to taste their new inventions. She resolved to act.

In the darkest hour of the night, she crept into the kitchen, feeling her way past boxes, touching counters and pots. It was pitch dark, but she didn't dare turn on a light, so she closed her eyes and navigated by touch and smell. She knew that the new redberry dishes had to be somewhere close.

Her right hand brushed against something soft and textured; she felt it more deliberately. It was some kind of baked coating. Gently, gingerly, her fingers traced the outline of the item. It was a pie! And a slice had been taken out of it! This was her ideal target. She reached for it with both hands—and her left hand smashed into something hard and metallic. A cacophony of clanging rang out as pots banged against each other and a spoon clattered on the floor.

Camiggdo panicked; she turned and felt her way as fast as she could towards the exit, hoping and praying that she could escape before somebody came to see what the noise was about. But in her haste, her long legs crashed into several boxes, slowing her down and making even more noise. She reached the door, pulled it open, and clambered outside.

Lamina sat above the horizon, so the settlement was bathed in bright light. If she stayed in the shadows, she would make it home safely. Gently, quietly closing the door, she turned towards home—and ran straight into hands that grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. An angry voice shouted imprecations in Tayran. It took her a second to recognize the voice: it was mean old Tekula!

“Stop! Stop!” Camiggdo said softly in Tayran. If Tekula would stop raising such a ruckus, she might still escape this jam with minimal harm.

Tekula stopped shaking her and pushed her out into the light, turning her so that she could see the face of her prisoner.

“What were you doing in the kitchen?”

Camiggdo thought frantically, and quickly hatched a scheme. She knelt down before Tekula and began to cry. “I haven’t had anything to eat today. I was busy working all day long; they never gave me a chance to eat!”

She knew Tekula was a hardened old bitch, not likely to let Camiggdo off easily, but she responded with a simple “I see.” She’d taken the bait!

I’ve hooked her, Camiggdo thought. Now all I have to do is reel her in.

“I thought that I could get through the night on an empty stomach, but I’ve spent the last few hours wide awake, and I have nothing to eat in my dome because I always eat in the cafeteria,” she said. “Because I like the food you make,” she added. A little flattery might help. She paused again to sob weakly. “I’m so hungry, I just can’t help myself. I have a big work schedule tomorrow, and I feel so weak.”

It worked! Tekula was a vicious old lady, but Camiggdo had found the chink in her armor; she took pride in feeding everybody. “Come with me,” she said. She entered the kitchen, turned on the light, and produced a hunk of tega-plant for Camiggdo.

Just what I didn’t want, Camiggdo thought, some slimy old tega. Great.

But she again fell to her knees, clutching the tega plant as if it were a lost lover, crying and thanking Tekula for helping her. Tekula even patted her on the head, then said, “Go now.”

Camiggdo rose and turned to scurry away. Ten meters off, she turned to face Tekula. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

Then she started off briskly for home. *I suppose that I pulled that one off pretty well, she thought to herself. Still, I didn’t get any redberry pie. And this—this stinking tega!* She hurled it angrily into the field nearby. *I’ll just have to be more careful next time.*

The Three-Ball Game

Siboot IV climbed up onto the makeshift platform and waited for the rumble of the crowd to fade. How large the crowd seemed—and yet how small! Here, the entire population of Kira was assembled, and to see two hundred and seventy-one inhabitants in a single crowd was a stirring sight on a moon that seldom saw more than twenty people in one place. On the other hand, he reflected somberly, this was the whole population, his people in their entirety, clustered together in this little knot. Not much of an empire.

He raised his arms and closed his eyes in concentration. Then he called out in eeyal, as strongly as he could:



Play ball! Play ball!

The crowd roared back. *Play ball! Play ball!* It was an exhilarating sensation, all two hundred and seventy-one souls imaging the words together. The power of the cry swept up everybody, and the cry became a chant. Over and over they signaled *Play ball!* until at last the chant died out with the exhaustion of the crowd. They looked around at each other, proud of their unity, and a little awed by its power.

The teams took the field. A level patch of sandy ground had been set aside for the big game. A gang with big sticks had plowed shallow trenches to mark off the playing field, an equilateral triangle fifty meters on a side. In each corner they had etched a semicircular goal area five meters in radius. Onto this field trotted the twelve contestants: one male member of each species for each of three teams. The Kirans did not see any contradiction between the equally deliberate catholicity by species and segregation by sex;

in all species save the Klasts, the male was usually the larger, stronger, and more athletic.

Skordokott was captain of the Red team. He had always been one of the best Tayran players in anybody's memory. Indeed, in last year's game, Siboot IV had gently admonished him to play less recklessly, lest he injure himself. Skordokott had bowed in respect and obedience, but his heart had swelled with pride that the intensity of his playing had been noticed.

Soom captained the Blue team. Koopie was on the Blue team, too, but Ripis were never captains in the Big Game; they had a special role to play. Koopie was a little old to still play three-ball, but the statistics of reproduction had fluctuated after he was born and all the Ripi children for five years after him were females, so he was pressed into service once again.

The teams moved to their respective corners and huddled together for a last consultation. Referees took their positions behind each goal and in the very center of the triangle. Then each corner-referee gave a colored ball to his team. The ball was placed on the corner of the triangle. The center referee held up his arm and dropped it; the game began!

Skordokott wasted no time. He snatched up his ball and loped toward the center of the triangle, pointing wildly at positions he wanted his teammates to take and barking orders in eeyal. The other teams were fanning out from their corners, looking for defensive needs and offensive opportunities. The Tayran members of the Blue and Green teams rushed out to meet Skordokott's threat. The prime rule of the Big Game is that no person may touch any person of another species—they can only touch the flag that all players wear on their belts can be touched. Only another member of the same species is allowed to physically stop the ball-carrier.

Genubi, a Jomkar well-known for his clever leadership in the Big Game, was captain of the Green team. He was also Zubenelgenubi's brother, and so she stood on the sideline nearby, shouting her encouragements. Another rule of the Big Game was that only players and referees could use eeyal during the game; onlookers were required to use their native languages.

Skordokott charged the Green goal, and Genubi dashed to intercept. *I'm not scared of Tayrans*, Genubi thought. *They're big, but I can almost always get their flags.* Skordokott tried to bull past Genubi, but he stood his ground. If Skordokott touched Genubi, the referee would whistle him down. Realizing that Genubi was not intimidated by his size, Skordokott broke off

and twisted to the side, which gave Genubi an easy opportunity to snatch his flag as he went by. A second later Genubi held Skordokott's flag aloft and the referee's whistle blew. Skordokott surrendered his ball to Genubi. He kicked the ball towards the Red goal, laughing and shouting in Jomkar, "Here's more fun for you, Skordokott!"

By this time, the Red team had also lost their ball, and it too was being frantically kicked and chased all over the field. The Big Game was barely a minute in and it had already achieved its characteristic state of total anarchy. Players dashed around madly, chasing any of the three loose balls.

Skordokott gained control of the Red ball only twenty meters from the Green goal, but his kick shot was blocked and the ball bounced halfway back to the Red goal. Genubi tried a number of clever tricks, but the chaotic situation foiled his every scheme. At one point, Heen, the Klast on the Red team, leapt high into the air to intercept a ball flying overhead, snagged it, and easily loped over the Green goal to score a point for the Red team.

"You'd better get ready, Koopie," Genubi said. "You could get your chance any minute now."

"I know," Koopie said. "I'm watching for it."

Genubi glanced back. Koopie's tone of voice had been decidedly unenthusiastic, Genubi grinned. As he turned back to watch the action, he took a ball right in the face. The sidelines burst into laughter. Genubi blushed and rubbed his nose, reminding himself to keep his eye on the ball. *But there are three balls, and I have only two eyes, he thought. Oh well.*

Koopie's chance came just two minutes later. The Green team launched a raid on the Red goal, and Genubi got ahold of the Green ball. He didn't waste a second. "Let's go, Koopie!" The Greens realized the threat, broke off their own raid, and started running back to assist their defense, but Genubi and Koopie were already closing in on the Green goal. There were no Green players in any position to stop them from setting up a Ripi-play. The crowd started screaming madly. Siboot IV stood up. Skordokott's team and all the other players on the field stopped in their tracks and turned to watch.

With his longer legs, Genubi moved much more quickly than Koopie, and reached his position several seconds earlier. He knelt down on one knee, facing the goal from about three meters away, leaned forward, and held the ball up over his head. The Klast defender, not knowing which kind of attack

Genubi would use, halted directly in front of Genubi and tried to prepare for anything. Koopie lengthened his stride, then shouted a wild war-cry:

“Yaaaaa!” He bounded up Genubi's back and seized the ball. Genubi simultaneously pushed up from his kneeling position, propelling Koopie on a higher trajectory. Koopie tucked himself into a ball as he soared upwards. The Green goalie leapt as high as he could, arms stretching to catch the flying Ripi.

“Yaaaaa!” Koopie sailed over the outstretched fingers of the goalie and crashed with a bone-wrenching *Whump!* over the Green goal line.

The crowd's response is left as an exercise for the reader.

Zubengelgenubi and Skordokott

Zubengelgenubi's gift for eeyal had marked her for acolyte training at an early age. She raced with ease through the eeyal instruction given to all Kiran children.

She caused a minor sensation when, at the age of eight, she innocently engaged in some red-pranks that left the entire community scratching their heads. Recriminations were starting to fly when the mental vandal was discovered to be a naive child. Her parents gently reproached her, reminding her of the responsibility of mind-power, and she never repeated the pranks.

Norgentan, the current Jomkar acolyte, knew from that day that Zubengelgenubi possessed the mental acuity to become Siboot V, if she had the opportunity. He took her under his wing and provided her with additional training. When she came of age, Norgentan retired, naming her as acolyte. He also assigned her to the position of pump-house technician. In that remote facility, she would be isolated from other Jomkars. In the manner of all overzealous teachers, Norgentan did not want his student's attentions divided. He wanted to ensure that the passion that drives all Jomkars would be focused exclusively on the development of her aura ability.

The current pump house technician was one Skordokott. Most Kirans thought of pump house duty as a sort of punishment, a period of exile from the community to be endured, not enjoyed. But Skordokott relished the solitude. He never felt much need to socialize. It would take a week to train Zubi, and then he would return to civilization.

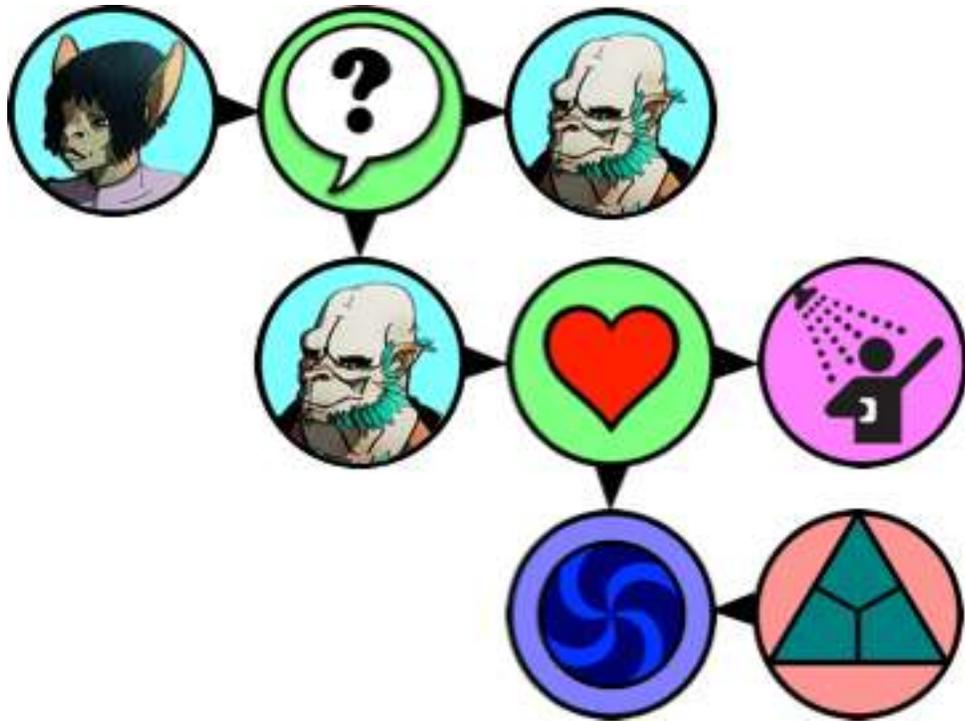
His plan was foiled by the aging equipment at the pump house. Within a few days of her arrival, a check valve, encrusted with mineral deposits, refused to snap shut under back pressure, and the pressure tank bled out through it. This was no great surprise; the plumbing was more than a century old. Previous generations had mastered the art of repairing the mineral-encrusted plumbing. But this demanded immediate remedy. They first notified the colony of a water emergency, initiating a water-preserving regime across the colony. Then they shut down the system, disassembled and cleaned every part, and put it all back together.

Zubi had failed to tighten the cutoff valve stem properly, and when they repressurized the system and Skordokott opened the valve, it blew clean out of the housing and sailed thirty meters up into the air.

Skordokott was lucky not to be injured. He stood over the valve, trying to hold the water in with his hands, an attempt made ridiculous by the one hundred and fifty pounds of pressure in the water, yet made necessary by the priceless value of water. He screamed at the top of his lungs, "Cut the pump! Cut the pump!" but Zubi, on the other side of the housing, heard nothing but the rush of water.

She came around the corner to behold Skordokott the centerpiece of a mighty fountain, water spraying out between his fingers. In the crisis, Zubi was overwhelmed by laughter and fell rolling to the sand, despite Skordokott's furious shouting.

After finding her feet, she staggered, still bent over with laughter, to the main power box. She threw the switch and the geyser around Skordokott receded. He stood up, examining his tingling hands for damage, but there was none. He walked slowly to Zubi, who now kneeled at the power box, still giggling. She fell silent as he approached. He reached her, then paused, struggling for words. Should he chew her out for her irresponsibility? Cut her some slack on account of her inexperience? She looked up at him and inquired with feigned innocence:

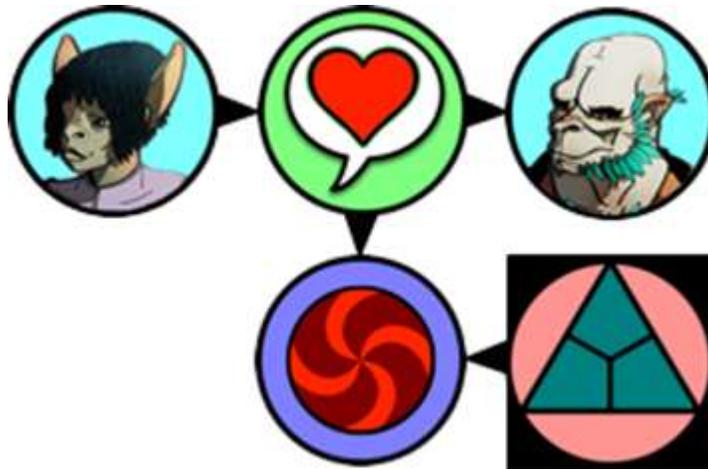


Zubenelgenubi ask Skordokott if Skordokott feel shower good-most?

This was too much for Skordokott. He stared down at her for a few seconds, struggling with his fury; then he abruptly turned around and walked away. Zubi chased after him:



Zubi express-feeling Skordokott good-most.



Zubi express-feeling Skordokott powerful negative-most.



Zubi beg Skordokott express-feeling Zubi good-most.

He stopped and looked at her bright face, now lined with concern over the wrong she had done. He paused again.



Skordokott...



Skordokott...

He couldn't find the words to say how he felt. It was rotten to laugh at him like that, but he knew she meant no harm, and her eeyal shimmered with both her intense energy and her genuine regret. He couldn't feel anger at her for laughing, even if it was at his expense.



Skordokott...

He imaged, with great intensity of feeling, in total seriousness, the only thing he could think of that wasn't angry:



Skordokott... wet.

Zubi stared at him, unbelieving, for a second, then fell back down on the sand laughing. He watched her, telling himself that he had actually intended it as a joke.

But they had no time to waste. The water system was still out of commission. Zubi found the valve head, and Skordokott repaired the valve. After four hours, they had the system running, and an hour later they rescinded the water emergency.

The next week went smoothly. They monitored the performance of all the components of the water system, trying to identify problems before they could become failures. Although the installation wasn't very big, the age and importance of the equipment warranted constant checking of all its components.

Zubi soon settled into the routine of pump-house life. She slept in her bedroll under the kitchen table. Skordokott, as host, made all the meals; Zubi, as guest, did all the cleaning. There wasn't much opportunity to talk. Although they were both translators, as acolytes, they were expected to rely solely on eeyal, except in emergencies.

They did talk in eeyal as much as they could. They each enjoyed conversing with an accomplished speaker of that difficult language. The conversation tended to drift in directions that suited the constraints of eeyal rather than the interests of the two speakers, but it was fun nonetheless to chat about the little things in life. Most eeyal conversations with normal people were bland, functional, short exchanges, punctuated by gestures and scribbled drawings in the sand. It was exciting to carry on real conversations with a member of another species, even hobbled conversations. It was especially exhilarating to share thoughts and feelings with a person whom you had always seen through a dim window of incomprehension, to find that such a completely different creature shared the same thoughts and feelings.

Towards the end of the week, as Skordokott was preparing to turn the job over to Zubi and go home, a new problem arose: the pressurizing pump was losing pressure. Skordokott knew that he couldn't turn over the job to a neophyte in such a dangerous situation. He called Siboot IV and informed him of the problem and of his intention to remain at the pump-house for the next week or two to handle the repairs.

Zubi and Skordokott plotted their strategy together. The repair of the main pressurizing pump would be an intricate operation. While it was shut

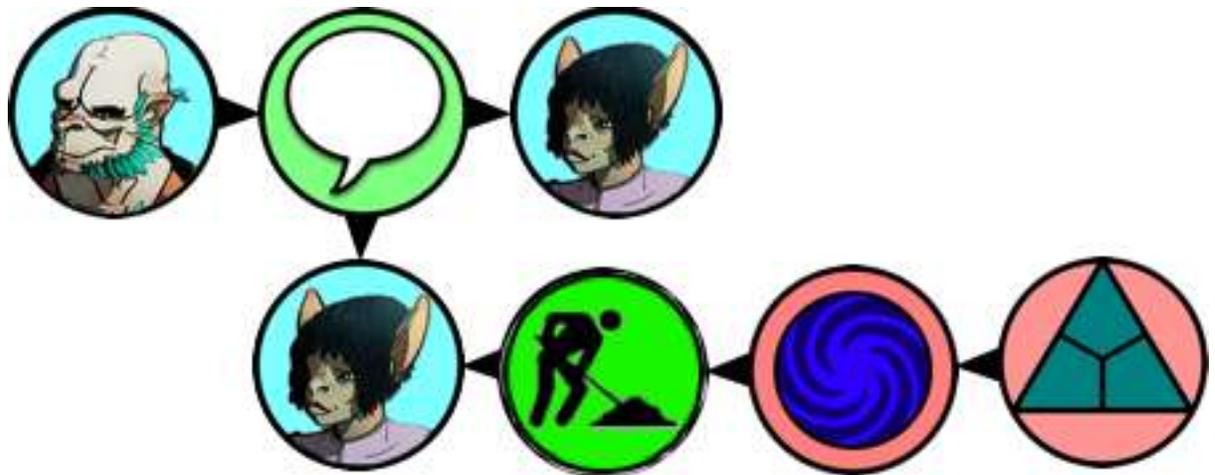
down, they would only have the small secondary pressurizing pump to supply water to the entire community. The water-wise Kirans could easily handle a short-term water emergency, but their crops would not be so tolerant. If they disassembled the main pump and found some intractable problem, it could spell disaster for the community. It was an immense responsibility for two young people to bear, but they were the acolytes, their generation's best and brightest, and Kirans were trained from childhood to take responsibility.

Carefully, they analyzed the data and considered the possibilities: worn impellers, scale inside the housing, clogged valves, even low voltage to the motor. They ran tests developed generations earlier to visualize conditions inside the pump. They ruled out some possibilities. They argued their interpretations of the results. Skordokott had experience and maturity; Zubi had energy, intuition, and powerful analytic skills. Together, they created a checklist of possibilities and their responses to each. They had the machine shop build a new impeller in case the existing one was damaged. They rehearsed the sequence of steps they would take, challenging each other at every point. They advised the agricultural director to irrigate more heavily in the days before they shut down the pump, just in case they failed.

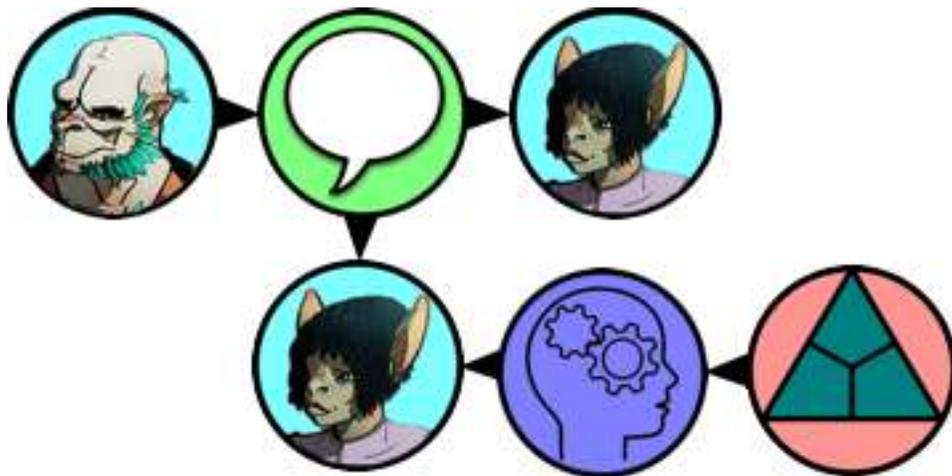
They were prepared. Their tools were ready. Plans and diagrams hung on the walls above the work spaces. They shut down and moved the pump in an hour and twenty-three minutes. Then came the tricky task of disassembling a pump that had been in continuous operation for a hundred and twenty years.

In the end, the problem turned out to be a bent impeller blade. They made careful notes of the condition of the pump's interior for the log book, then reassembled it, slowly and carefully.

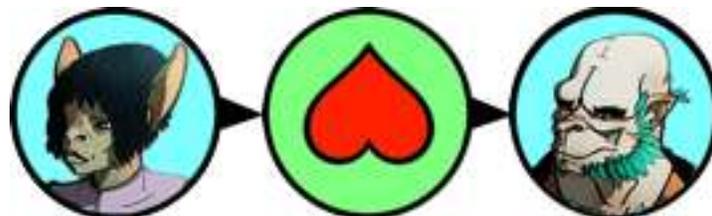
They stole a few hours sleep that night, then resumed work before dawn the next morning. Reassembly continued until late into the second evening. Just before midnight, they called in the recision of the water emergency. Exhausted, but too euphoric to sleep, the two sat down at the kitchen table to celebrate.



Skordokott tells Zubi (that) Zubi work well-most.



Skordokott tells Zubi (that) Zubi smart-most.



Zubi thanks Skordokott.



Zubi feels toward Skordokott like-most.

They sat, sipping their drinks and expressing their admiration for each other, until they had exhausted the clumsy limits of eeyal. Then they sat, slouched over, clutching their cups, staring off into space.

Skordokott again felt frustrated not to be able to express himself adequately in eeyal. The language was still so primitive! In the last two weeks he had developed feelings for Zubi that no words could express. She was so bright and lively, so full of energy and joy, brimming over with fun and happiness.

Why would they banish such a wonderful person to this place? Normally, pump-house duty was reserved for antisocial clods like himself, but Zubi was the antithesis of that. It was a violation of fairness and decency to send someone who radiated such joy into the solitude of the pump-house. Skordokott was a loner to start with; he could stand isolation better than most. But it was a crime to send Zubi here. He felt sad for her and angry that she had been sent to take his place. How could he tell her all that?

He looked straight into her eyes. She returned his gaze. He struggled with his eeyal, trying to form the images.



Skordokott...



Skordokott...

The intensity of his feelings frustrated his efforts. He reached deep inside himself, still staring straight into her eyes and then he found it: the image he sought. It was a new image, one that nobody had ever used before.



Skordokott love Zubi.

She understood the meaning instantly and found the same image within herself: *Zubi love Skordokott*. Her image shone with immediate clarity and absolute honesty. Stunned, they both pulled back in their chairs.

Zubi wondered to herself, *What is this? How can I love a Taryan? We're so different! Siboot said Kirans are all supposed to love each other, but this is different. I have never felt a love like this, not even for another Jomkar.*

She looked at him, recalling the camaraderie and closeness of the last two weeks. She realized that she loved him because, despite his outward appearances, he was truly good-hearted, honest, and gentle. As an acolyte, she had more in common with him than with any other Jomkar on Kira. He shared the mental strain, the responsibility, the frightening nights of aura dreams that hurl you awake sweating and shivering. On her second night at the pump-house, she had suffered a bad one and woke up crying. In her state of elevated aura sensitivity, she had felt his aura reach out to soothe and comfort her.

Why shouldn't she love him?

But where could it lead? Where was the boundary between love and passion, and how could she stay on the near side of that border? The love she felt was too strong to be repressed, yet too alien to be expressed. Would

she take him in her arms and—no—the very thought of it was repugnant. It would always be love under a low ceiling, always constrained by physical reality.

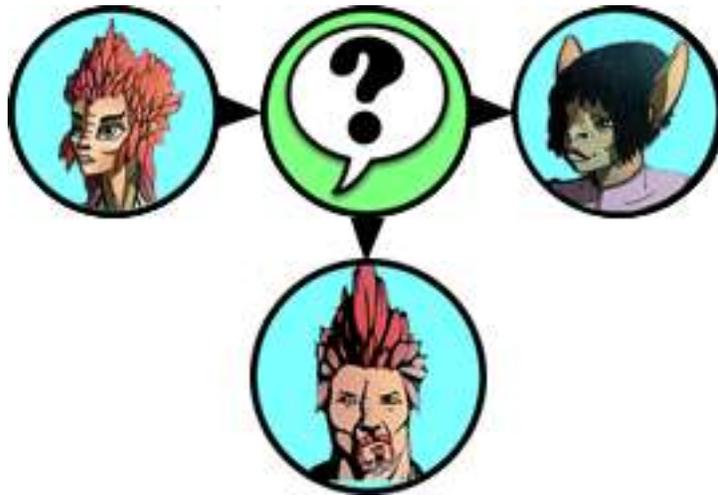
She glanced up at him in fear and their eyes locked. With a start, she realized that the thoughts in her mind were not hers alone; they were just as much Skordokott's. For a few seconds, their minds had joined and shared the same thoughts, almost synchronized. He realized it at the same time. Skordokott reached out his hand toward Zubi; she timidly reached out to touch it. When their fingers touched, they both jerked back at the feeling of alien skin, like an electric shock, in horror and revulsion. Skordokott stood up, alarmed and frightened. Zubi stood too, then backed away from him. She reached the door, turned, and ran out into the warm desert night.

She did not return that night, nor the next morning. Skordokott packed up his things and prepared to return to the colony. His work at the pump-house was done; Zubi was trained; it was time for him to return.

He waited by the door of the pump-house. Eventually, Zubi appeared on the crest of the rise and stood there, watching him. He slung his bag over his back and started up the ancient path leading back to the colony. He paused at the curve and looked back. Zubi had moved down from the rise to the pump-house and now stood by the doorway. He raised his hand in salute and goodbye. She raised hers. They stood that way for a minute. Then he turned and trudged back to the colony.

Illness

Camiggdo knocked at the door, but it was ajar. She knew that she should simply enter without bothering Nafimko. She quietly pushed the door open and slipped inside. The outer room was empty, but she had hardly taken two steps before Zubenelgenubi emerged from the bedroom.



Camiggdo ask Zubenelgenubi what's new (about) Siboot IV?

Zubenelgenubi broke the rules and spoke in Jomkar. “It looks bad. The doctor seems helpless. The infection has moved into his lungs. He’s having problems breathing. The old man doesn’t seem to have much fight left in him.”

Camiggdo pursed her lips and shook her head. This was bad news. “It looks as if we shall be initiating the campaign soon. I do not relish the idea.”

Camiggdo shrugged. The two had never been friends. Zubenelgenubi had never trusted Camiggdo; she thought her deceitful and manipulative. Camiggdo’s reply was dismissive: “It’s what we’ve been training for all these years.” Then she pushed past Zubenelgenubi into her father’s room.

Nafimko and the doctor stood by the bed, where Siboot IV lay motionless. With some effort, he looked up. A weak smile creased his old lips. “Ah, Camiggdo! How’s my little princess? It is so taxing using eeyal, and

translation is always so slow and—” he cast a reassuring glance at Dr. Gan— “indirect. It’s good to be able to talk to you directly in Klast. So, tell me. Are you preparing yourself for the campaign?”

“Father, it is unseemly for us to raise the subject of a campaign. I am hoping very much that you will beat this illness.”

“Oh, pish posh! Any idiot can see that I am going to die; it’s just a matter of when. You should be preparing yourself for what happens after. Oh, how I wish I could be around to see how it goes. With the big supply of auragons we have now, dream combat should be much more interesting than it was in my day.” He paused. “Do you suppose that I could announce my death in advance, so that I could watch the campaign?”

“Don’t be morbid, Father. Remember, the campaign cannot start until after the funeral. Do you want to watch your funeral, too?”

“That would be a good one, yes! I could even give the eulogy.” He chuckled, then began coughing violently. The doctor bent to fuss over him while Nafimko cast a reproachful eye at Camiggdo. It took several minutes to calm his coughing. Nafimko ordered Camiggdo out, but Feslym insisted to have the last word.

“Camiggdo, you know that I could never favor any candidate in the campaign, not even you. But I want to emphasize this to you: I want you to fight hard and well. I remember how agonizing it was to carry on the dream combat, and I am sure that it will be worse this time, what with all the auragons you youngsters carry about.” He paused to steady his breathing.

“Under no circumstances are you to drop out of the competition. The credibility of the Siboot is at stake. If any acolyte drops out, the stature and legitimacy of the Siboot will be compromised in the eyes of many Laminans. And one other thing...” He paused again, to cough weakly.

“Whoever wins, you must enthusiastically support. I want your promise that the winner of the competition will have your full, vocal, energetic support. That you will go on the radio to Lamina and tell all the Jomkars, if you lose, that the new Siboot is the rightful and proper Siboot, who deserves their absolute support.” He coughed again. “Promise!” He wheezed hoarsely.

Camiggdo vowed that she would honor his request, both in letter and in spirit. His last words to her were, “Good, the others have promised as well.” Then he lay back to rest. Camiggdo hurried to leave before Nafimko could throw her out.

This time, Camiggdo was the exiting party and Koopie was the one entering. Koopie felt deep sympathy for Camiggdo; she had been there when Koopie's father died. Koopie paused to ask, "How are you doing? Is there anything I can do?"

For just an instant, Koopie saw through her facade; she seemed about to let her anguish bring her to tears. But she quickly gathered herself up and closed the door.

"It is a difficult time, yes. I think I can handle it. Thank you, Koopie." And with that, she left.

There was already a knot of people waiting outside; the deathwatch had begun. Camiggdo went home. There was nothing to do now but meditate in preparation for the campaign. She would be summoned when the time came.

The Judge of the Campaign

Zubenelgenubi decided to drop by the cafeteria to grab a quick meal before heading home to contemplate the upcoming campaign. Flanell the teacher was waiting for her at the door of the cafeteria. By tradition, the most senior teacher on Kira is named the Judge of the Campaign, a sort of referee whose job it is to insure that the campaign is carried out fairly and with proper decorum. The Judge is also to act as an interim Siboot, although he or she is expected to defer all important issues until they can be decided by the new and rightfully chosen Siboot.

Flanell was a quiet person, prim and proper, and a pedant, always testing the acolytes with the finest points of eeyal. It seems the universal goal of grammarians to impose upon their topics, no matter how simple, an imposing array of rules and structures bereft of any significance.

So it was with Flanell and eeyal, a clean and simple language that slowly evolved through the trials and errors of its speakers. There was little grammar to speak of; the structure of the language arose naturally from the usages of the people, and it was still very much in flux. This lack of grammar, a relief to students, was a challenge to Flanell, and she set to work imposing one herself. After some years of effort, she had devised a truly awesome system that made no sense whatsoever. Surely it would have won her some sort of academic prize, had there been academic societies on Kira to award it. As it was, her work was neglected by the ignorant boors who would rather use eeyal than understand its internal structure.

This did not discourage Flanell. There were always the acolytes, supposedly the keepers of the flame of eeyal, the finest speakers of eeyal, and as a teacher she had significant influence over who would be selected to become an acolyte. Thus a generation of acolytes learned the Grammar of Eeyal according to Flanell, memorizing a huge list of rules and their inevitable exceptions. The tortures did not end with one's accession to acolyte status; no, Flanell prowled the streets and public places looking for acolytes, and when she caught one, she required her victim to pass her impromptu grammar test.

Zubi had to remind herself to be polite and respectful, but she was in no mood for Flanell's pedantries. She was lucky this time: the question Flanell asked was easy and she let Zubi go with a short five-minute lecture on how to conjugate irregular verbs in eeyal, if there were any irregular verbs or conjugations in eeyal.

She headed over to the serving tables and assembled her meal, then threaded her way through the chairs and sitting-stands to Koopie's table.

"Howya doing there, champ?" he asked.

"Just OK, Koopie. Old Flanell caught me at the door and grilled me. I got through OK."

"Yeah, she's set up a trap there. She's smart—figures that we'll all come to dinner tonight to get a good meal before we start to prepare for the campaign. So far she's caught everyone except Skordokott."

"Look, I gotta go now. Have to go visit Siboot IV before I turn in for the night. You take care, and don't let any ferocious grammarians catch you."

"Right, Koopie."

"One other thing: good luck in the campaign."

Zubi looked up at Koopie. His normal jaunty expression was gone; for once, Koopie was not making a joke. Zubi smiled back at him and put her hand on his Ripi shoulder. "Good luck to you, Koopie."

Eyes

Now



Eyes. Five pairs of eyes. Four pairs focused down at the prone form on the bed. One pair looking up, focused on nothing. No sound, save that of slow, labored breathing. The lips strain to form a word, but none emerges. Four pairs of eyes strain to make out the word incipient on those lips, but none appears. The lone pair of eyes moves over each of the others, searching. The eyelids lower. The mist over the once-bright eyes thickens. The breathing falters. The eyelids fall shut.

You stand in shocked silence for perhaps a minute. Then your duty prods you to act. You crack open the door behind you, and a figure appears in the light. “Tell them,” you say softly. “It is over.”

You cover your eyes as you let the door close. It is over. Siboot IV is dead. All these years, he gave us hope. And now it's over.

A wail erupts in the outer chamber, a wail that is taken up by waiting voices in the yard. Within seconds, that wail will echo through space to the home planet of Lamina, where billions will pause in their labors and contemplate their loss. The four discordant species of Lamina will find brief unity in their sadness. After that, the fragile union of Lamina will again be put to the test.

The room is enveloped in blinding light. You shut your eyes tightly, but the light remains, this time inside of you. It's pure red, then green, then blue, then alternating rapidly between the three, in a crazy disordered sequence. Then it is gone. You open your eyes in amazement to find the other acolytes blinking similarly. What has happened?

Flanell, the Judge of the Campaign, enters the room. "Siboot IV explained this plan to me yesterday. He has bestowed upon each of you six auragons of different types; you will use these in dream combat. Each night, you will enter Dreamspace and attack one of your fellow acolytes with an auragon. As Siboot taught us, power defeats truth, truth overcomes virtue, and virtue conquers power. Two auragons of the same aura destroy each other. Use your auragons accordingly. The one acolyte who still holds at least one auragon when all the others have been eliminated will become the new Siboot."

Even as one era ends, another begins. As you look up from the floor, you can see the three pairs of eyes looking at each other, sizing one another up. Eyes dart from face to face, each with subtle messages of threat and support, demand and reply. Already, the scramble is on; tonight, the dream-combat will begin. One of these four acolytes—only one—will be chosen to replace Feslym as the Fifth Siboot. Each candidate from a different species, each one duty-bound to earn that place for themselves. Who will win that position?