

A Voice in Every Wind

I have a copy of the Fifth Forbidden Book.

My friend Treyl was very anxious to see it; he did not realize that my people used books. So I led and Treyl followed with his strange ungainly waddle, away from the clevth and northward into the hills. This was in the time of the wet spring winds, when the rimmith bloom for their brief lives and the sun passes the Seam of Heaven in a shower of sparks. The clevth was upwind, and every gust brought the awareness of my people preparing for the time of breeding: young females ready to mate and drop their eggs in the shallows, half-year-olds anxious to pick up the beginnings of their coats, adolescents ready for a last taste of the ancestral waters before entering their final forms. The night was alive with sensation, alive in a way that made Treyl and the Fifth Forbidden Book so much more exciting.

With Treyl watching I carefully took the Book from its wrapping — cured membranes of the large jarief fish — and cradled it in my three forward hands. My copy of the Fifth Forbidden Book is a heavy thing, with leaves made from pressed plantfibers and separated by more membranes. As I held it, my hands detected its ancient holiness, and I caught a wisp of the long-ago scribe who had lovingly transferred the words of the original Book to this copy. I opened the Book to its first leaf, raised it to my face and caressed it with my antennae. Just as he had deposited them so long ago, I felt the thoughts of Ep-Naph the Great Warrior, thoughts that he had left to be preserved by the brotherhood for those of his descendants who could comprehend them.

Treyl leaned forward, looking naked without a coat of star-shaped pled by their hundreds, looking ready to fall over as he balanced on an amazing two limbs while reaching for me with the only other two he possessed. When I first met Treyl, I closed my mind against the onslaught of pain that had to emanate from one so crippled — only later I learned that his

people are naturally malformed.

His backpack spoke: a combination of the soundless speech of my people, and the noisy chitters and clicks of the secret tongue of the brotherhood. "May I see it, Dleef?"

"It is old and fragile, my friend Treyl. Please take care as you would handling a newborn."

He left me holding the Book, removed an antenna from his backpack and brushed it lightly over the surface of the leaf. "Amazing. That chemical traces could be so exact. That your sensory apparatus can pick them up. That they convey so much information."

"The Book is old," I told him, "and was but a copy to begin with. Many passages have faded and are hard to read."

"My backpack can read them all. Possibly it can duplicate the chemicals and make those passages easier to read. Would you like me to do that?"

I regarded him well, this odd small creature from nowhere. The rest of the clevth bore him the usual disregard for a stranger who does not smell right; why did I trust him? Was it that other thing, which made me a part of the brotherhood and brought me the emnity of my people? Whatever, I knew that I *did* trust Treyl, trusted him with something in me that went beyond his smell and his strangeness. "The clevth leaves with morning, and although I do not wish to go south right now I shall accompany them. You may work your maglcs on the Book until daylight."

"Until daylight." He pressed one of his hands against mine, gently, to avoid hurting himself on my pled coat. And through the interstices and the living bodies of my pled seeped a measure of his alien feel, and once again I wondered about him.

About myself.

Treyl read, and the night deepened. The winds bore taste of my sleeping clevth, and of oh so much more: bands of hunting jrrill on far-off plains, the scent of other clevths, and

always the life-bearing fragrance of the sea.

The first of the great moons rose presently, its tiny half-disc swimming amid the glittery fish that live on the Seam of Heaven. Every night there is a gap in the Seam, a gap that slowly works its way from east to west — the brotherhood says it has been there since Ep-Naph died and shattered the world as it was. More is told of this in the Second Forbidden Book, which I have never seen.

Treyl says that the gap is the shadow of the world. The rest of my people do not think about it. Nor, most of the time, do I.

But there are times, times when a feeling comes that is at once different and familiar: when one looks at something one has known all her life, like the Gap or a rimmith blossom, like the summer winds or the tiny bodies and shells of one's own pled — and one begins to muse, to wonder.

It comes and it goes, this feeling, and even the brotherhood (the creator of speech) has no word for it. None is needed, for without the feeling there are no words; there is merely the language of the air and the land and the water, there is only the unknowing twitch of antennae, there is only snorting and growling and baying at the moons.

The night deepened, and in me that feeling ebbed.

The moon.

The taste of the clevth, and the far-off smell of hunting jril.

The night winds caressed me, and I knew their messages without knowing, dozed without knowing I slept, awakened without awareness of what it means to wake. Most of my people live always this way, never tasting for a moment the terror and the joy of that feeling which the brotherhood does not name.

Treyl read.

When morning came, the Seam of Heaven announced the sun's arrival half a limb early, becoming a red arch across half the sky. And the winds told me that the clevth was

awake, awake and ready to set out for the sea. Gone was all trace of my resolve to remain, to go north — now I responded by turning for the clevth and the sea.

Treyll wrapped the Fifth Forbidden Book, reverently, and without considering, I took it from his hands and tucked it under my pled coat in front, where the pled shells have grown and not anchored themselves to my thorax plate. I think Treyll's backpack spoke to me in the language of the brotherhood, but all I could hear was the voice of the winds, all I could do was answer them.

His backpack's long antenna touched me smelling of question, and I reassured him that all was right, that we were to join the clevth on its march south, that I knew of his presence and I approved.

Clevth.

Clevth is not a place, although place is important and the very soil of the clevth carries a part of its life and its memories. Clevth is people, yet people may leave and enter the clevth without altering its quality. Clevth is the animals that serve us and live with us, it is the houses in which we dwell and the spaces through which we move. Clevth is people, and it is much more: It is the smells, the feelings, the tastes of one's home. Clevth is a process, something always growing, always changing and never complete. The trace of all of us is in the clevth, and each adds to its structure.

For all that my clevth distrusts me and would at times have me gone, it is *my* clevth and it is what stands between me and...and something which I cannot name, but which I fear beyond terror.

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That morning, with the sun mounting Heaven's Seam like a bead on a string, my clevth set out. Makers, farmers, herders; carriers, runners, shamans — all fell into their place, with their tools and their herds, with their burdens and

rattles, with all the lesser beasts that accompany the clevth. And around them all, protecting, were the warriors. We are strong, and fast, and we have our own armor beneath our pled coats. And the greatest mystery of all, the brotherhood is made up only of warriors. The blood of Ep-Naph is ours, the heritage of Ep-Naph is ours, and if clevth exists at all it is because we defend it.

I stepped into my place, all about me the heady smells and tastes of the clevth on the move. Treyl walked hesitantly behind me, sandwiched between two young warriors who had only taken their forms last year.

That long march I spent much time pitying Treyl for his loneliness. At least when my spells struck I had Treyl to talk with, and I could hope to meet another of the brotherhood in my state, and I could dream that I would be normal once again. But Treyl had no normality, and he had no one to talk with but the voices from his backpack. So lonesome was the man, I imagined, that he believed those voices to come from the sky and to be talking to him alone. I felt then that they were nothing more than the random voices that one smells in the high cold winds atop the mountains, or in the currents of rivers that wash strange clevths.

For time and for time my clevth has moved south along the way, until the very rocks bear the smell of our passage. We merely follow, knowing that we will reach the breeding grounds before the females reach heat, the babies dry out, and the adolescents grow so large as to burst their skins.

Three days upon the march we came faces-to-faces and antennaeto-antennae with another clevth. This was in the rocky lowlands near the great river that bears the city Cora like an overripe fruit. Here the winds were strong from the left, blowing from out of the east with the scent of the sea.

The dance began. In meeting of clevths, always the dance is the master. We merely take our assigned positions, and allow the winds of the dance to move us.

The first movment belonged to us, the warriors. In the

front lines we examined one another. The other clevth was mostly warriors; they had left all their other forms, but a few runners and shamans, at home. And they reeked of hostility.

Next movement belonged to the shamans. They took the front rank, and now messages flew back and forth with every gust and every touch: You do not belong here. Get out of our way. Go further and we will kill you. We will wipe you out to pass. The air grew absolutely thick with threats and counter-threats. The animals in our clevth set up fierce noises in response, and all other awareness faded beneath the overwhelming odor of hate.

This is the way of the dance.

And now the third movement began, the shamans retiring in good order as we warriors advanced. One last threat charged the air as before a summer storm — and then it broke. Without knowing what I did, I leaped. Another warrior tried to seize me, I danced backward, and he advanced with spears in his hands.

At once my stomach turned, and I was in my strange state. I saw Treyll behind me, fumbling at his backpack, and I felt the pressure of the Fifth Forbidden Book against my thorax plate.

And I remembered. The Fifth Forbidden Book is made up of Ep-Naph's words and thoughts about battles and military matters, about things that are the concern of warriors.

The wind gusted strong from the east. And now that I could remember — now that I could plan for the future — I recalled what Ep-Naph said: the upwind army usually wins.

Is there any reason, I asked myself, that we should always remain slaves of the dance? That we cannot act on our own? The clevth would never follow me — but it would follow the scent of success.

Now to succeed.

"Treyll. Help me. Get my clevth upwind of the others. There is no use being gentle, or trying to explain — just push them." For such a strange being, Treyll was stronger

than he looked. He could shove an adult with little trouble. "Leave the warriors alone. Get the clevth upwind, and they will adjust their fighting naturally."

I ducked a foreign warrior's spear-cast. Easy to talk of moving my army upwind, difficult to do. For once the dance is joined and the lust of battle is upon a warrior, she has little else to do but fight, and go on fighting, until all the enemy are gone and their smell eradicated from the battlefield.

—That is why it works, Ep-Naph!! How clever you are, ancestor of mine. When the enemy-smell from my clevth drifts down among the others, they will become confused and may even battle one another. And we will win, though we have only half the warriors.

"Listen to me, my clevth!" With the language of my people, the language that is without words, I called to them. "Follow me, and the others will fall." Kevva, one of the young new warriors, was next to me. I touched her with two hands and let them carry the message — that the others would fall if we could move upwind and confuse them.

As the revelation had struck within my own self, I saw Kevva's eyes twitch with the realization of it. And Kevva moved to the left, going on to touch others around her.

Great Ep-Naph, not only did I have the power to speak with the brotherhood, to realize what the words of Ep-Naph meant...but I had the power to make others see as well.

For a moment I could feel the dance altering, and it was almost as if I held the dance between my hands, the way a maker holds a lump of clay he is molding.

Treyl was doing admirably, by the simple process of carrying youngsters and letting their distress-calls bring their elders. And Kevva and I in no time had a band of converted warriors following us. The direction of the dance itself was changing. The wind mounted, and I waded into the fighting, surrendering to the power of the dance.

By the time the sun had moved another limb up in the sky, we had won. The other clevth retreated, and cast forth

the smell of defeat that calmed us and made us unable to follow. We re-grouped, then continued south.

I sought out Treyl, my elation swirling away with eddies of wind and dripping onto the rocks. "Treyl, did you see what happened? Did you see? It worked. My plan worked."

"I'm proud of you, Dleef. Yes, it worked. How did you manage to convince the others to go along with you? Your people are not much for original ideas, you know."

"I do not understand. Can your magic antenna tell us?"

Treyl whipped out the antenna, ran it over my body. He snorted as we walked. "A lot of unidentified enzymes being produced by your body, my friend." He paused, took out another, stiffer antenna, and stabbed it deeply into the body of one of the fallen warriors. The clevth marched on, ignoring him.

"Chance is going to have to analyze these data before he can come up with a hypothesis." Chance is the name Treyl gives to what he believes to be a large being like himself far up in the sky beyond the Seam of Heaven. To me, this sounded awfully like the nonsense of the shamans, and I supposed Treyl to be a kind of shaman himself.

"Then, we will let him."

Treyl plunged his stiff antenna into many other bodies, then brushed the battlefield in several places with other antennae. By this time the clevth was many steps away, and the two of us had to move very quickly to catch up.

We marched, Treyl muttered to his sky-voices, and I wondered at my new power.

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Sea.

It makes itself known a day's march away. The power of the sea draws a clevth the way sweetfruit draws springflies. Our stretch of the sea is a sandy cove with gentle shallows which are strewn with reefs of pled. The sea smells and tastes

like the naked blood that a warrior sheds for his clevth; it is soothing on the skin like nothing else.

Joy swept outward in crestless waves, as little ones and adults alike plunged into the surf. We warriors stood back, watching and ready to move, until the lazy taste of relaxation came to us off the seabreeze, and we knew the clevth was safe. Then we splashed into the water. Within my coat and touching my flesh, I could feel the tiny pled rejoicing to be among their own kind.

Around me the maelstrom of breeding time began. It would be many days before it was all over, before the eggs were laid and cemented to their parents' coats, before the younglings emerged with the first of many pled clinging to them and starting to build the star-shaped shells that would eventually become a fine protective coat. For days and days they would lie thus, encased in a cocoon of pled shells, while inside a miraculous transformation built. Where adolescents had entered, out would come warriors, farmers, makers, and the other forms.

While breeding went on, I suddenly had one of my spells. Why should we have such ecstasy only when the sun felt like it? Why not take home some of these breeding waters in jars, and use them for the clevth? It was an idea that made me tremble, an idea that could almost have come from Treyl and his alieness.

Reminded, I looked for Treyl — found him sitting on the sand idly dragging his fingers to make patterns. Always it is hard to guess what Treyl is feeling, for the scents he gives off are odd and cryptic. Yet now I thought my friend was melancholy, and I reluctantly pulled myself from the water and crawled up the beach to sit next to him.

“Do your voices from the sky not speak with you?” I asked.

“They have nothing to say.” He sighed, and my antennae twitched. Can it be that the scent of loneliness is the same for all people?

The sun was hot and dry, and all at once I thought that I must get into the water or I would parch right there. I left Treyl, and with the first gulp of breeding-water I forgot him, and spent the rest of my time wallowing with the others.

Days and days and days passed. Eggs stiffened and dried, until they could survive outside water. Younglings proudly showed off the marks where pled had attached to their skins. And then the breeding water took on a sharp acrid taste, and we all watched the hatching of adolescents into their new forms.

Treyl counted for me — thirty-two adolescents had entered cocoons. As I drew back from the water, I had a spell, and was able to keep track of the forms that emerged. Eight warriors, seven farmers, six makers and six herders, three carriers, and two runners. Treyl cocked his head, then his backpack spoke, translating his sounds into words.

“Running just along planetary averages,” he said. I had the feeling he was talking to his sky-voices rather than to me. “Warriors are up twenty percent, while makers, farmers, and herders are down.”

He didn’t need to tell me this. The last few breeding cycles, the clevth has had more warriors than it needs. And not just our clevth, but every one we knew. The brotherhood says the problem includes even Metla and the Gelk lands.

“Why, Treyl? Why are more warriors being made?”

Treyl noticed me. “We’re not sure. Something has upset the chemical balance of your clevths. A new enzyme is stirring around, changing the distribution of forms. We haven’t been able to locate the center of its effect. At first it seemed to be Tar-Ve, then we followed the trail northward. Your clevth was a stop along the way.”

Dripping, the new adults scuttled onto sand and presented themselves before our three shamans. The shamans twitched and touched, flicked antennae over the new ones. And the odor of dissatisfaction grew. Finally, inspection complete, the shamans turned to the clevth. All of us were massed on the

beach, over three hundred adults with all the assorted dependents of the clevth. All waiting for judgement.

Our shamans seem to have a ritual dance for every occasion, and this was no exception. They jumped and flapped their limbs, moving through the clevth and touching everyone they could. Others joined the dance, and as a shaman passed upwind I sniffed a reproduction of my own scent. The dance began to circle about me, and in my hearts I felt dread. Treyll stood next to me, but the rest of the clevth withdrew to weave a pattern of accusation.

Yes, accusation. I heard Treyll's backpack whispering into his ears; I do not know how much of the display it understood. To me the meaning was clear. Too many warriors had formed, the shamans said. And I, Dleef the Mad, was held responsible. Shamans must blame something — for early snowfall that kills our crops, for awful sulphurous smells that waft in from the east and leave half the clevth disabled, for the formation of too many warriors at breeding time....

Now the scent of warriors entered the dance, that attack-scent which sooner or later is always mixed with the smell of death.

My death.

"Am I reading this aright?" Treyll asked.

I signalled assent. "My clevth wishes me dead."

"Because of me?"

"Because of what I am. Because I know the language of the brotherhood. Because I know you. Because they think my presence is causing more warriors to form."

"It *is*."

For a second I took my eyes off the clevth's dance of death. "You too, Treyll?"

Before he could answer, the dance broke and the nearest warriors rushed me. At their head was Kevva, lunging with claws extended and reeking of more murderous hate than a whole pack of hunting jrill.

A warrior is strong and fast. Each of us spends much time each day sharpening natural ridges in our pled coats, so that our arms are like knives, our back ridges like scrapers, the tips of our feet like spear heads. Kevva came at me now, as the others came behind her, brandishing those natural weapons with deadly skill.

One does not deliberate, one does not think — when attacked, one defends, defends to the limit of her ability. Kevva met my own sharp forearms; although I was braced with four legs her impact was jarring, and I felt my pled protesting and digging further into my skin with all their might. Kevva pulled back, pled coat over her chest cracked.

I drew my spear and lunged. The fracture in her coat was weak and it broke — I thrust with all my might as Kevva's blood splashed over me and over the ground. Then Kevva fell, my spear buried deep in her chest. In the blood that had touched me — as well as in her eyes — I thought I read her too-late cry for forgiveness, and I knew that a member of the brotherhood had passed, her heritage unknown even to herself.

I had killed...

Had killed Kevva.

Treyl saved me, for as I stumbled back with Kevva's blood still flowing off my coat, he dropped into a crouch and brought up still another of his strange antennae. From this one darted a line of light like fire, and where it touched, warriors withdrew. Pain and burned flesh filled the air, and their scents echoed around the still-spinning dance. Injury, injury would feed the dance and feed the rage of the warriors.

"Treyl, we must go."

"Follow me, then." His fire-antenna opened a path through the dance, and I scuttled after Treyl as he ran. He held the clevth at bay, and as we raced away I bade last farewell to the familiar tastes and odors of my clevth.

Now Treyl was all I had.