

PRELUDE

It was a swell tree house. Kev and his friend Dar had worked on it all summer, using lumber and plastics from an abandoned farm down the hill. The treehouse had three levels, a rainproof roof, and a splendid ladder as well as a pulley for lifting things up and down. The boys had done it all without help from any grownups, and they were justly proud.

Kev had picked the tree, and it was a dandy: nearly fifty meters tall, with a sturdy trunk and leaves that were every color of the rainbow. Kev and Dar had built their treehouse ten meters up, in a crook where the main trunk divided into two. From his perch, Kev could see the entire valley, from his own house only a few hundred meters away to the towers of the spaceport nearly five kilometers distant.

The day was beautiful. The sun rode high in a blue sky barren of all clouds, and the scent of honeysuckle and drisberry filled the air. A slight breeze from the northwest stirred leaves and the tiny flag that Kev and Dar had posted on the top of their structure. No planet in the Galaxy, Kev thought happily, could be as beautiful as Amny.

Kev leaned back against the tree, took a sip of cold water from his canteen, and smiled. Tomorrow was his seventh birthday, by the ancient Human calendar— although in real years he was eleven and a half. Real years never mattered, somehow.

For his birthday, Kev's family had promised to take him and Dar on a real space voyage, to a planet called Credix where he could see a real zoo...not just holos on his terminal. It would be a day without school, and just the sort of adventure that was always happening to boys and girls in the books Kev viewed.

Immanuel, Kev's dog, was stretched out in the sun on the platform next to him; the dog's legs twitched a little and then he rolled over, and Kev laughed. "You're silly, you know?"

Immanuel's tail wagged once or twice at his master's voice, then stopped.

Kev closed his eyes, feeling the sun on his face and listening to the swish of leaves. It sounded like surf, or like a kind of music he had heard in his dreams.

The boy jerked suddenly alert, startling Immanuel. What had he heard? He hadn't been asleep, but just the same he felt he'd been dreaming. He had heard a scrap of music, something more beautiful and more substantial than all the songs and symphonies stored in his school's memory.

Experimentally, he closed his eyes and gingerly settled back against the tree. A second later he sat up, shaking his head.

The tree...the tree was singing to him.

Hush. said a million whispering leaves. *Listen.* said the rush of the wind. *Dream.* said the music of the tree....



PART ONE: Traveller

I.

I am but a sapling, yet already I have become proficient in the reading of the First Language, in the rustles and whispers of the Second Language, and even a bit in the vast soundless waves of the Inner Voice with its meanings from beyond the sky.

I am also skilled in relations with the other orders of life, although this world has circled its sun but a dozen times since I broke soil. You may find it strange to hear a Hlutr speak of relations with other orders— these are the Hlutr, you may say to yourselves, who stand so far above the others that they touch the clouds, who live so long that they watch mountains change, who talk among themselves in their two languages (for what can you know of the Inner Voice?) all oblivious to the world. How, you may ask, can they even be aware of others?

And your thoughts are partly right, Little Ones— but only partly. True, the Elders...those who are old even as the Hlutr count time...do not pay that much attention to others. True, they live so slowly that your lives are but a flicker, and to them you are less than goats are to a mountain. Yet you must not make mountains of us, Little Ones, for we are alive (even as are you) and we know the pains and beauties of living. We feel kin to all life.

Let me assure you that the Hlutr *do* care, tiny and ephemeral as you are. We know you and feel you and cherish you, although you may not think so; for truly, we do not speak with you and seldom acknowledge you. We are aware of the flying creatures who perch upon us, of the land beings who jump, walk and creep around us; of the grubs and many-legged crawlers who live on us and in us and within the ground beneath our roots. We appreciate, we feel for, we cherish all Little Ones— down to the tiny, primal bits

of pulsing, growing, mindless life within you and their dull feeling for the Inner Voice, their dull awareness of the great world about them.

I have been taught to be even more conscious of you, Littles, than are my brethren Hlutr. I have been taught by Elders and normal Hlutr alike, living so fast that I have fit many of your lifetimes into my scant dozen years. With each day I grow better with the First and Second Languages, the expressions of my people; with each day I become more attuned to the waves of the Inner Voice...not only that I might communicate with my brethren of far-off worlds, but also that I might talk with you, Little Ones.

Why, you may ask, have I been created this way, why have I been bred and trained into such a non-Hlutr type of Hlut? You may wonder what need the Elders have of a Hlut like me. I wonder too, my Littles. I have some idea. There are whispers in the wind, and pulses in the Inner Voice, that bear news across the galaxy and around the world to me. There is news from the Ancients of Nephestal, whose culture is almost as old as the Hlutr.

The Daamin, the Ancients, tell us that there is a new race ready to come forth and join the Scattered Worlds of the Galaxy. We will all have company soon, dear Little Ones, and I believe the Elders wish to be ready for these new ones.

There are strange stories about them, stories which I do not quite understand. The Daamin tell of these new ones, these Humans, and of their distant planet and their odd ways. We have learned of our stunted relatives the Redwoods of Terra; we have been told of Animals and Dolphins and some of the Humans' strange societal customs (some of them a little like the many-legged crawlers and some of the grubs). In their own way they have studied the Universal Song and learned some of its principles. Enough, at least, to harness some of the power of the First Cause. And they are coming, Little Ones; already their seeds flash outward from their world at speeds as fast as the Inner Voice can move, and soon they will be

here among us.

Little Ones, we must prepare for the Humans.



You are afraid of them, Little Ones. Their silver seed sits in the clearing, and it frightens you. Their odd alien smell hangs over the wood, and you are alarmed. They have come among you with boxes-that-make-noise, and you have run from them. And now you seek sanctuary among us.

Do not be afraid. The Hlutr will care for you. As we *have* cared for you, for your mothers and their mothers, back beyond the memory of the Eldest of us all. Ever have the Hlutr cared for all innocent Little Ones. Ever have we delighted in you. Ever.

Look with me, Littles, at these new creatures. Try to hear the Inner Voice as it sings in them. For truly they are alive, and they are children of the stars as are we all, Hlutr and Flyers and Grubs alike.

They move among us now, as you tremble and scurry into your burrows and caves, frightened by their noise and their odor and their strangeness. Only the Hlutr stand, unafraid.

Let me help you to know them, that you may not fear them. My brethren Hlutr speak to me, asking me to explain the Humans— let me explain to you as well. Those harsh sounds are like unto the Second Language, although clearly they lack the quiet soughing beauty of Hlutr speech. Listen to me, Little Ones, and you may grasp something of what they say. The smaller one speaks.

“It’s the trees, Karl. Listen— no wind, and yet they seem to be making noise at one another.”

“Talking trees. Right.”

“What else? Look at the color changes in those trunks. There’s some sort of pattern there, I’m sure of it. That’s communication on some primitive level.”

She feels wonder, Little Ones, the same wonder that all

feeling creatures experience when they contemplate the mystery and majesty of the Hlutr.

But the other...it sends discord in the Inner Voice. Listen:

"They're plants. How would they even sense the color changes?" He listens to his boxes; they seem to speak to him in some bizarre form of the First Language. "Ship's instruments misread. There're no ore concentrations here. Lousy site for a settlement. Let's go back."

"No, Karl. Look—the leaves are multicolored. Maybe each one absorbs a different shade. Or maybe the black ones are sensory apparatus. This needs more study."

"Two more worlds to check on, and you want to study trees."

"We can take a specimen back to Terra."

"Sure, you're going to bring back a fifty-meter tree. I can see Captain's face now."

"Look at this one—it can't be more than three meters tall. It would fit in a corner of the starboard cargo hold." (Surely you have noticed, Little Ones, that the Elders have not allowed me to grow to but a fraction of my potential.)

"Fight it out with Captain. I want lunch. Here, mark it on the map so you can find it again."

They wander off in the direction of their silver seed. Yes, I can see that you did not understand more than a little of what they said. I must confess that I understood all too little myself.

But the rustles in the wind convey meaning to me, meaning of the Elders' plan, and I am afraid that I understand far too much. Fear stirs in me, just a bit. I ask if there is no other way, and they remind me of the story of the Redwoods. We cannot allow that to happen to the Hlutr; for where would the other orders be without the Hlutr to protect and guide them?

Perhaps Humans acted with ignorance, with the Redwoods. We must see that it does not happen again. We must understand why it was allowed to happen in the first place. A Hlut must go with them, back to their world.

For the last time I listen to the wind of my home world; for the last time I feel the coolness of my home soil.

A Hlut must go to Terra.

Remember me, faithful Little Ones, when I am gone.

II.

Such a different world! And yet, in some ways, not so unfamiliar. *You* are here, my precious ones; true, you are not the Littles of the world I have learned to call Amny— but all Little Ones are the same for all their infinite diversity. Already there are flyers and crawlers about me, already I can feel some grubs tentatively testing the new-scattered dirt at my roots. Welcome, Little Ones, welcome.

It is good to feel fresh air, fresh soil, fresh light again. They have been kind to me, these Humans...and the voyage was not a long one. I lived slowly, more slowly than I have ever lived before, and it seemed no more than the merest flicker before we were on Terra.

I have shouted with the Second Language until my leaves hurt from quivering, and all the answer I have received is the meaningless murmur of wind, and the rhythmic whisper of waves on far-off shores. It is lonely— although we have these sounds on Amny, there is also the rustle of intelligent conversation from my brethren.

Here on Terra, though, all the plants are nonsapient. However much they may resemble Hlutr form, they lack the Hlutr mind. The Redwoods, perhaps, were intelligent (although they never communicated by Inner Voice with the rest of the Hlutr; perhaps they were deaf in that sense). Some form of Hlut, no matter how primitive, must have existed on Terra to guide the long march of animal evolution from Pylistroph seeds into customary channels— for the Humans are of the same biochemistry and general structure as so many other races in the Scattered Worlds. It saddens me that

none of these ur-Hlutr are left to perchance answer my calls.

No matter, though— there is enough else to keep me busy for a long time.

Those who watch me, for example. I have an honored place in the middle of a botanicalgarden and many Humans come to stand before me, looking at a tiny metal rectangle and gazing at me. I greet them with the First Language (which is not as much of a strain as the Second) and they watch. Some even respond with flickers of glee.

Terra has spun six times since I arrived here; and although the first five turns were spent in isolation to make sure I was rid of all Amny's Little Ones, the watchers came. I have learned much about those-who-watch.

Most are full-grown Humans (how strange to call "full-grown" creatures who cannot be three-seventieths the height of a mature Hlut!) making the unending noises they call speech, their minds filled with distortions of the Inner Voice concerned with time and rush and ever, ever with movement. With a few, there is curiosity and even a healthy appreciation of me. (My brethren are delighted to learn that Humans can be awed by the sight of a Hlut, but all too often my brethren think too highly of the Hlutr place in the Universal Song.) But none of these adult Humans, not one, is ever content. Their thoughts and feelings, when they can be read at all, are fastened upon something else. Always they have little regard for the Universal Song of which everything is a part— Humans, Hlutr, botanicalgarden, and Terra too. Always they have even less regard for the magic and beauty of themselves.

There are others, however, who come to look...and I find them much more pleasing. These are the Human seedlings, who are always in the care of the mature Humans (you need only think of the many-legged crawlers who protect their eggs and larvae). The seedlings make noise too— and their noise is more raucous and less soothing, even, than the speech of the adults. Despite that, my Little Ones, if you will

look at them with the eyes of the Inner Voice you will see that they are simpler than the adults. These children are more like you, Littles, the way they happily watch as the colors of the First Language race across my trunk and through my leaves. Sometimes I feel that I can talk to the Human children, as I can talk to you, my dears.

Some come who are upset—as you are often upset, when you are hungry or your young are threatened, or when your mate has died. For some of them, those who will listen, I can work a twist of the Inner Voice and they go away happier, more peaceful. I do not mind this work—indeed, when has a Hlut ever minded helping the Littles?

But I feel that there is more important work I should be doing. The Elders have not expressed themselves well in the eddies of the Inner Voice— and those eddies are hard to read across the parsecs, with all the interference of all the Hlutr on other worlds. I shall think hard, and consider deeply, and perhaps it will come to me. Following the orders of the Elders, I shall try to talk with the Humans— although I have been here six days, and have had little if any success in making them realize that I can speak. However, we must not expect Humans to be as fast as a Hlut would be; I shall give them time.

Meanwhile, I have those-who-watch, especially the children. And I have *you*, Little Ones.

III.

There are parades, there is joy and cheer all around. The Botanical Garden is hung with bright holos and flags and signs, and the children skip about shouting and laughing at my colors; I am shouting in the First Language to produce pretty patterns for them.

You must be careful, Little Ones, not to get hurt on this day of joy. The Humans are often forgetful of you, and you

are all too used to the careful attention of a Hlut. So scurry when you see the Humans coming, and watch their feet lest you are tromped on. Their children are the most careless. You must not think ill of them— for if you could but see the Inner Voice within them as I do, you would know that they are filled with joy and not malice. Their minds are small, though, and they can only pay attention to a few things at a time. And some of you are so little that you cannot take much of their joy.

Why, you may ask, are the Humans so exuberant? You have seen before parades and fairs and celebrations, but none in your experience match the reckless joy of this day. Gather around me, Little Ones, and I shall try to explain. Although I do not fully understand.

You see, Humans love one another with a powerful feeling. You may understand this, tiny crawlers, but the others may not be able to see it. And Humans have a strange desire to see themselves in many places in the Universal Song. The more places, the more Humans to love. (Yes, birds, you may rest upon my branches.)

Well, my Littles, this day we see the declaration of much love for many Humans in the Galaxy. This day, there has been the proclamation of an Empire. (Come, squirrels, and sit with me.) This day, starships will begin to sweep across the Scattered Worlds and unite all the colonies of Humanity. There will be much pain and much joy and ever so much glory. It will be a beautiful and tragic addition to the Universal Song. Yes, I know it is a difficult thing to explain. I must admit, now that you are all confused by my explanation, that we Hlutr do not grasp the Human drive for Empire any better than you do. We have received some conception of it from the Daamin, and even more from the sons of Metrin, who have a similar drive. And there have been many examples in the distant past, from sad Iaranor to grand Avethell and all her daughter worlds.

It must be a very animal thing, not known to plants. It is

but one of the mysteries about the Human race. They will lose themselves in this power-and-glory struggle, lose themselves to the most evident joy and the strongest emotions.

Why Humans should wish to lose themselves is another question entirely.

It has been almost sixty years, my Little Ones, since I have been on Terra. I have grown, as all Hlutr grow (either slow or fast as they wish)...can you believe that there was once a time when I was only as tall as a Human, I who now stand as tall as ten Humans one atop the other? I have seen many things: I have watched children grow and adults die, and I have seen new ones born. (They are truly delightful when they are born, so very vegetable, just like tiny seedlings pushing their heads into the light for the first time.) Still I do not understand them. I have been living very quickly, as quick or quicker than Humans themselves live, and I have been thinking very much.

I suffered, Littles, across Human light years with the rape of the ecologies of nearby Laxus and Leikeis and other worlds. I have watched thousands of red and beautiful sunsets, and have rejoiced with all the creatures at the stinging freshness of Terra's clean rain. I have sung with the Whales, greatest of my Little Ones, once I found the way to pick up their own Second Language from the world-seas.

Humans have not talked with me. My brethren on Amny and other worlds tell me that Humans ignore them as well. After a few regrettable murders, the Human colonists have left the Hlutr alone. Every once in a while someone wonders about our color changes (although to my knowledge, not one has ever suspected the existence of the whispers of the Second Language— mayhap because it sounds so much like the wind)...but they have never quite realized that the First Language *is* language.

That is why I am so happy today, Little Ones. I have great hopes for this Empire of theirs. I sense a new spirit in the

Inner Voice of these creatures; they are taking a good look at the Universal Song, and it is possible that they will begin to discern the place of the Hlutr in that Song.

Ah, here comes a child. No, my Little Ones, don't flee from him. Stay, and see how innocent he is. Mind, now, don't get stepped on.

Welcome, child. You children, sometimes, watch my colors with curiosity— perhaps you, lad, will grow up and retain your wonder at the pretty colors you watch so absorbedly, and will discover that the Hlutr actually talk.

Run along, now; my leaves quiver to the sound of your parents' voices, you must return to them. But...perhaps you will be back.

IV.

A terrible thing has happened, Little Ones, something which has shocked the Elders and the Hlutr of all the Galaxy.

Could I intercede for the Humans, I would. But I do not understand. Elders, Stars, Universal Song...*why?*

I of course never saw Credix, grand world that has now become one of the Provincial Capitals and a major military base for the Empire. Yet I have seen images of it still burning in the minds of those who visited. And I have sung the melodies of the Inner Voice with the ancient community of Hlutr who lived there.

Gone, gone. Not one Hlut remains on Credix. Few enough died directly from Human bombings— perhaps twenty times seventy. More Hlutr than that die naturally all over the Scattered Worlds each Terran year. But oh, twenty times seventy Hlutr in the middle of their lives, living fast or slow or in between, growing and sheltering— and all the Little Ones that dwelled with them. The backlash of the Inner Voice killed every other Hlut on the planet. Even on Amny, eight hundred parsecs distant, some of the frailer Hlutr died.

Why? you Little Ones ask. And why, ask my brethren from beyond the sky. Why?

Can I explain how important this Empire has become to these Humans of Terra? Can I explain how they have invested all their being into its realization, so much so that they are willing to deforest whole subcontinents to build spaceports? Stars and Music, how can I explain when I do not understand?

There are those of my brethren who wish me to take revenge. The way is clear...we Hlutr have taken it before. We alone of all the creatures in the Universal Song, we possess the ability to manufacture those helices of matter that are the very stuff and foundation of life.

I could...I could.

You, my Littles, could provide the basic materials upon which I could work. The Hlutr have guided evolution on seventy-times-itself-seventy-times worlds, large and small. We possess the control to make you over, Littles, into beings that would have the means to kill every Human on this world. A plague, one of my brothers suggests to me— your little pulsing bits could be converted into other little bits that would spell the end of Humanity.

I could do it. It would require my death— that death-detonation which is the ultimate meaning of the Hlutr race, that last gasp that so few of us have ever really undergone— to spread the synthesized substances far.

I could. I will not.

Listen to me, brethren. I plead for the Humans. They did not know what they did. It is my failing, for I have not yet been able to make them realize that we are sapient. Just as a Hlut does not hesitate to destroy a nonsapient plant that is in its way— so these Humans did not hesitate to destroy what they imagined to be nonsapient Hlutr on Credix.

Let me work harder, brethren, and let me make them see what we are. And then...then they will hurt us no more.

The Elders answer with a sigh that is both dirge and

decision. Until I can do a better job, until I can convince the Humans that we are sapient...they will be spared.

A terrible thing has happened, Little Ones. Now the sap of all those Hlutr, all the forests of Credix and all the dead Hlutr beyond...are my responsibility. Ever in the Universal Song will my failure be noted, and ever will I be linked with Credix in the tales that will follow.

Ever.

V.

Winter comes...as it has come over three-times-seventy-times since I have been here. I have watched the leaves of the trees with which I share the Imperial Botanical Garden turn color and fall many times, and I shall never grow tired of the sight. It is a joyful vision, which we do not have on Amny; for Amny has no winter, only eternal spring.

The Humans also like to watch the leaves. They cannot guess that within those colors is preserved a genetic memory of the Hlutr spores from which these trees' ancestors of millions of years ago sprang. For the yellow-red-orange pattern of the leaves is the same pattern seen on a Hlut deep in communion with the Inner Voice, listening contentedly to the ebb and flow of tides from brethren Hlutr and from life the Galaxy round. It is the sign of a Hlut experiencing the profound joy without which the Universal Song is toneless and without purpose.

These last few winters have been even more delightful for me. There are few of you about, with the snow gathering—and nowadays you tend to come near me less and less, for the Research Station's new building was put up less than five man-lengths from me, and many of you still fear to approach it.

I am left with the company of crawlers and grubs, and a few brave birds. You, birds, no longer nest in my upper branches— thirty man-lengths is a bit high for a nest— but I

cherish your homes in my lower branches. I have cared for your young, as much as I am able; for the Hlutr do love you, Little Ones. Yet you feel that I am more distant from you than I have been in the past.

True, I have not spoken with you much. I have been very busy.

I have been living faster than I have ever lived, save for the hectic days of my saplinghood on Amny. It is necessary, you see, to live quite fast to keep up with Doctor Rubashov and the others of the Research Station. It is important to me, Little Ones, and important to the Hlutr as a race, that Doctor Rubashov be given all the evidence he needs to prove the Hlutr sapient in Human terms.

I do the bidding of the Elders, in this and in all things. For this I was sent to Terra, for this I have stood in this Botanical Garden for Human centuries.

Now young Doctor Rubashov approaches, and I must concentrate all my energies upon the seedlings' talk which we have managed to improvise in the First Language. His apparatus is all set up; I greet him.

"Good day, Doctor. Are you understanding me?"

A televisior screen flashes color-patterns at me. Were he to shout, I could understand his speech— in my time I have become quite good at reading Human speech— but it is easier to use the First Language.

"I am reading you. Good morning. Are you ready for the day's experiments?"

"Certainly." To tell the truth, Littles, the prospect of another day of numbers and simple concepts, as if I were a seedling being taught by the Elders, is abhorrent. I don't mind living fast to talk with things, but I dislike doing it simply for numbers.

Before he starts the day's trials, Doctor Rubashov adjusts some of the leads which monitor my biochemical states. When his hand touches my trunk I have a sudden flash of Inner Voice clarity.