



Eetoo

by Robby Charters
© 2007 by the author

www.RobbyCharters.co.uk

ISBN: 978-1-4610-4804-6

Think: Ben Hur of Science Fiction. Eetoo, a shepherd from an obscure planet, was the one prophesied to seek the truth from the birthplace of humanity. He has help from fellow humans as well as non humans. Some species would rather see humanity extinct, and for good reason. The ancient Nephteshi Empire showed how evil humanity can be. The paradox keeps Eetoo searching for answers, taking him to first century Earth.

\$3.99 USD in [Kindle Format](#)
or [all other e-book formats](#) (Smashwords Edition)

\$14.95 USD in [Print Version](#)

www.RobbyCharters.co.uk

Synopsis

Part One: The Shepherd

Eetoo, a primitive shepherd boy living on the planet Klodi-Famta, realises his mission in life: to search for the golden tablets of Sim Thep that will complete his tribe's knowledge of the truth. They are located on the forgotten Planet of Red Earth, the birthplace of humanity.

Heptosh, travelling from the planet Tok, is on a reconnaissance mission to find out what happened to the Klodi civilisation which had become silent twelve years earlier. His ship breaks down.

Heptosh and Eetoo meet. Adventure ensues. Their chief danger: the bionics. They were once human, but on transformation they lost their souls, and they seek to seduce other humans into becoming bionic.

Part Two: The Pupil

Eetoo goes to live on the planet Tok with Heptosh as his guardian. Eetoo, a primitive, has a lot to learn about cosmopolitan interstellar life before he can go on his search

of the golden tablets.

Part of Eetoo's education includes travelling to corners of the universe where no one knew humans existed -- let alone intelligent life.

Eetoo makes new friends. There are non-humans, as well as fellow humans. He meets Tsaphar, a beautiful girl about his age. They fall in love, but there are obstacles.

Of the non-humans, Neuryzh the Utz is a lover of life in all forms, and has profound wisdom in how to enhance it. He becomes a mentor to Eetoo. Blazz the Groki would rather see humanity exterminated. His kind have experienced the dark side of human nature in the days of the ancient Nephteshi Interstellar Empire. Sparked by pointed comments by Blazz, Eetoo begins to ponder the dilemma of humanity.

All the while, Heptosh, with Eetoo and others, must fight the bionic menace, as well as the various other manifestations of human greed and ambition.

No one can remember the location of the planet Nephtesh, the first planet to be colonised by humans when they left the planet of Red Earth. However, the only way Eetoo can reach Red Earth is from Nephtesh.

Part Three: The Adventurer

Eetoo and Tsaphar arrive at the planet of Red Earth and find a land of paradox. It's the age of the Roman Empire, and the Holy Temple still stands in the city of Jerusalem, where the adventurers must go to search for the Golden Tablets.

Their experience vividly illustrates the dilemma of humanity as they encounter stark contrasts in living conditions, observe the various and exotic sects, experience the heroism of saints and sages, and the treachery of villains. They also meet the one whom many hope in as the Messiah of Israel. Evil is black indeed, but the good shine as lights.

The parts of the narrative set on the Planet of Red Earth (our earth, actually), are influenced by recent studies of first century history in light of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Pseudopigrapha, Rabbinical sources, as well as readings of Shalom Asch's *The Nazarene*.

The author's limited knowledge of Quantum Mechanics influenced some of the technologies referred to throughout the narrative.

There is a glossary at the end of the book.

There are four narrative points of view:

Eetoo -- narrated in first person present tense, but preceded by a short description in omniscient present tense prose, displayed in italics

Heptosh -- narrated in third person past tense

Neuryzh the Utz -- narrated in first person past tense

Tsaphar -- narrated in third person past tense

Scenes from the latter three always open with the name of the narrative point of view in a heavy font.

Excerpt (part 1):

Part 1 -- The Shepherd

1

Nights are dark as there's no moon on Klodi-Famta -- the shepherd boy sits under a tree on the edge of a small grove surrounded by grass plains, a day's journey from any human dwelling. His sheep, one by one, go off to sleep. His young eyes scan the sky.

This is the third time I've seen a light moving about in the sky.

The first time, Uncle Zhue Paw told me it was only a shooting star. I thought it went too slow for that, but I figured maybe he was right and it was my mind playing tricks on me. Then I saw it again a week ago -- definitely too slow.

Now I'm positive it wasn't. Shooting stars don't stop and go back the way they came. But they'd probably say I was lying. They already say that knowing how to read the ancient writing makes my head too cloudy.

Oh well, it's not bothering the sheep anyway. And they're probably right. Lights in the sky don't do anything to people anyway, especially this far from the village, so telling them would only make more trouble for me.

I might tell Venerable Too Dha, though. He's different from the others. He takes me seriously, probably because he can read, and knows it isn't bad for you. Uncle Zhue Paw would only scold me for being so dreamy from too much reading.

Anyway, I'd better get to sleep. It'll be a long walk back to the village tomorrow. The sheep have settled down anyway.

There's that light again, and now it's coming from that direction. Wouldn't it be something if that were a ship -- like what our fathers arrived on?

* * *

Heptosh scanned the surface once more, this time at an altitude from which he could make out individual features. The all-around viewer, aided by the infra-red sensor, showed the nocturnal landscape. The grassland, the few clumps of forest here and there, looked dryer than Heptosh's home planet, but well suited to keeping sheep. His activity shouldn't raise any undue alarm from the inhabitants on this side of the mountain divide. They'd mistake him for a shooting star.

Here and there, he could pick out a shepherd minding his sheep, or a caravan camped out for the night -- harmless, but it wouldn't be good to interrupt their peaceful existence by suddenly appearing to them out of the sky.

It was those on the other side that worried him. They were a more advanced civilisation -- or, at least they used to be.

If they were as they used to be, they'd present no problem. The Klodi and the Toki human populations had enjoyed many happy interactions.

Then, they reported some sort of struggle. The Klodi had sent out a warning not to enter their solar system until they had got their problem

sorted out. They also said something about seven transport shiploads of refugees. It wasn't clear exactly what the trouble was, but the refugees would explain it. So the sector council issued a restriction, and waited. Then they went silent. No refugees ever appeared. That all happened twelve years ago, as humans still counted time.

Now, the restriction had expired -- still, the silence, so Heptosh was on a scouting mission.

So far, he determined that on the Famtizhi half of the planet, civilisation carried on as it always had. Heptosh had spend the last several weeks making observations of life on the ground -- nothing to worry about here.

But, over the divide? He had detected no satellite surveillance, no reconnaissance ships -- the Klodi hadn't been in the habit of maintaining such a close watch, but who was in control now?

Whoever it was, at least hadn't begun to guard the airspace. Perhaps that was good.

But perhaps it meant bionics. Bionics would follow the habits of their human hosts, and therefore maintain the same level of surveillance.

There were no signs of bionics on this side of the divide. He would cross over and examine the ground on the Klodi side -- carefully.

A mountainous isthmus separated the Famtizhi land mass from the Klodi continent. Nestled in a valley in that isthmus, was the city of Klodi, where he would find the space port. The mountains were quite impassable for land travel, except for a tunnel through a mountain from the Famtizhi area into the city, which was only approachable from the rest of Klodiland via the subterranean portion of the city. The same mountain range lined the North coast of the Famtizhi land mass, surrounded the city, and then went along the South coast of Klodiland. Therefore, access by sea was also all but impossible.

Heptosh began flying at a low level across Famtizhi territory towards the mountain range. His intention was to creep over in stealth mode below the range of their scanners.

The line of cliffs topping the mountain range loomed ahead of him, running in a straight line as far as his eyes could see. A millennia of erosion had rendered them more natural looking, otherwise, the straightness of the formation was the hallmark of its human design. Everything on these artificial planets, the mountain ranges, the coastlines, even the caves under the ground, were done in straight lines.

His ship hovered in a cleft that had been eroded between two giant stones forming the mountain range, providing him a vantage point. From there, he looked.

2

A fence encloses the mouth of the deep canyon. Inside, there is grass, a few rocks, and a winding stream. The sound of a waterfall echoes from deep inside. The shepherd boy leads his sheep within, replaces the bar across the opening, and retires to the abandoned shelters and market stalls that stand without. Tired from the morning's walk, he sits and takes out the last of his bread.

They say Fa-tzi-zhi, used to trade here with the Klodi. It must have been exciting with so many people about selling things. I would have been two years old when it all stopped, so I don't remember any of it.

The sheep will be safe here until I come back with more food. I won't stay in the village very long. I never do. Ever since Ni Gwah got sucked down the whirlpool, Venerable Too Dha is the only close friend I have.

I'll visit him, and tell him about the lights in the sky.

I wonder if it was the lights last night that prompted that dream?

It was the same dream I've had before. I'm with someone in a dark cave, holding a light. We find these golden plates that were buried in the wall. The first time I dreamed it was when Paw and Maw were still alive, and Venerable Too Dha hadn't started teaching me to read yet. I must have been six years old. After that I started reading the writings, and I read where it says there are golden tablets hidden somewhere that will complete our knowledge, and it will be someone's job to fetch them. Later, I had the dream again, when I knew it was about those golden tablets. After I told Venerable Too Dha the dream, he got all quiet. He still mentions it sometimes. I'm sure he doesn't take it seriously,

I'll ask Venerable Too Dha to let me read the tablets again. I've read them so many times already, I wish there were more to read -- maybe if someone found the golden ones.

* * *

Heptosh wasn't sure who introduced Bionic Replication to his native planet of Nefzed. He was only old enough at the time to know it was the in-thing for the rich and leisurely. Several renowned playwrights, minstrels and storytellers had taken an implant. So had a few senators' wives and other setters of the latest fashions.

They placed it under the skin either in the forehead or in the wrist. It was a chip containing microscopic bionic self-reproducing cells, programmed to replace their neighbouring cells until the whole limb, and eventually, one's whole body became bionic. When the process was complete, there was the bionic humanoid, perfect in every way, with super strength, super intelligence (so they said), absorbing all its energy from sunlight, thus not needing organic food to keep it alive. In fact, with proper maintenance, it would go on living forever.

For all the advantages that were publicised, there appeared a sinister downside.

Heptosh's father, a university professor named Dr. Nashtep, was one of the first to have major doubts regarding the process. Heptosh had accompanied his father as a pupil and remembered the discussions they had. One of his friends, a doctor, while closely observing the human psyche during the last stages of the transformation, noted what he thought were indicators of the death of the human personality that originally animated the body. Others of their friends, including other professors, doctors, art and literary critics, had also noticed disturbing changes in the personality before and after. They became convinced that the human soul did not survive a complete bionic transformation. The bionic humanoid was no more than an artificial intelligence storing the memory that used to belong to the soul.

What was left was a good representation of a human personality, enough to fool many. Playwrights and storytellers continued producing stories, sometimes more furiously than ever. However, as time went by, and the demand grew for new types of plots or literary styles, only non-bionic human artists were able to adapt. Bionics couldn't keep up with new trends.

Only certain ones noticed this. The masses only continued following the works of their favourites as long as they were popular. The fact that they were bionic only seemed to enhance their image. They never wondered, as the critics did, why they went from liking an old artist to a newly bionic one. If anything, society put that much more pressure on the more creative to accept a bionic implant. Refusal, in some cases, put artists on a black list.

Those who had undergone a complete transformation, the Total Bionics, insisted that everything was fine. They voiced strong opinions that they were the better for it, and did their utmost to influence yet more people to become host to a bionic cell. As their numbers grew, the dissenting voices became more and more marginalised. The Total Bionics continued to gain political clout, and before long, there was discussion about making a bionic implant mandatory for all citizens of Nefzed.

Because of the increasingly frequent food shortages, the idea of a body that didn't require food, gained all the more appeal. The working classes and the unemployed masses rallied for the legislation, which would mean they would get their implant for free. Farmers weren't as enthusiastic -- it would mean less demand for farm products -- but even they began to accept it as inevitable.

Dr. Nashtep and his circle of professionals formed the core of the dissenting party. They spoke out as loudly as they could, but there were backlashes. Mr. Takanen, a social commentator who had become a close friend, made a final impassioned plea that was heard planet-wide. Then he was soundly discredited, caricatured as a crackpot, and banished from the media. Heptosh, himself, vividly remembered the taunts by former playmates, the ostracism, the betrayals by ones he loved; and at the same time, the fear for the future -- his own and of humanity. Would he finally be forced to take an implant? Would his soul die at such a young age? Would this mean the extinction of the human race?

At first, it looked as though all the dissidents could do now was to ponder this question and wait for it to happen, or perhaps go into hiding. A limited number were exploring other avenues.

One of these included space travel. At first, that sounded like a pipe dream. Even though most of the population was aware that space travel existed, it wasn't an option that most thought likely. They knew that humanity wasn't birthed on Nefzed. Humans had to come from somewhere, and this presupposed space travel.

Dr. Nashtep was the expert in history, so he knew that space travel was a reality, only to be rediscovered. Once in Nefzed's history, a major portion of the population had to be shifted to a new planet. That was a long time ago, in the days of the ancient Nephteshi Interstellar Empire. Then, they had the capacity to build mini planets out of black holes. But that technology disappeared with the collapse of the great

empire. Their only legacy: hundreds of artificial planets scattered throughout the galaxy, all populated to capacity. No one was building new planets any more.

But perhaps an empty planet wasn't necessary -- there weren't really that many dissidents. Where were any friendly planets out there that could take just a few more? They began to look at the options. Dr. Nashtep's brother-in-law Nagasha, an engineer, spearheaded in this operation.

They had to be discreet, as some of the powers-that-be were opposed to anyone seeking to leave. However, some of them were able to obtain the information that was available.

Another of their number, Mr. Vashkanen, had been a bureaucrat in the planetary government, and had opted to take retirement before his refusal to take an implant became an issue. Though bureaucrats and academics had always been at odds, it was his concern about bionic replication that brought him into their circle. Having once been high up in the government, he knew things that historians, like Dr. Nashtep, didn't. One of these was the fact that since the collapse of the Nephteshi empire, interplanetary travel throughout the galaxy was now regulated by the sector councils -- councils representing species other than human.

The council for their part of the galaxy, the Ziern Sector, was primarily composed of Groki, a species that did everything in their power to discourage human space travel. They had an extensive knowledge of history, and some had even lived long enough to personally remember the Nephteshi empire -- that it had been a thorn in the side of all non-human species. The more they learned of the Ziern sector council, the more it became obvious that the Groki were supportive of mandatory bionic implants for humans. Other planets in the sector were in the same position as they.

This had never been a concern for most Nefzedis, as no one but government people had ever thought it necessary to do any space travel. The government, knowing the perils, had always suppressed any ideas that would lead to people venturing to try it. Mr. Vashkanen knew all about that, and in his career days, was party to it.

But this was a new day, with new dangers. Now, with Mr. Vashkanen's help, Nagasha's people were able to find some unused ships powered by logical relocators, the records of which had long faded from the inventory books of the planet's bureaucrats. These kinds of ships could simply relocate somewhere outside of the sector without being detected. They also gained access to a galactic map, which showed other sectors of the galaxy. Nagasha with a crew of four went off in search of a friendly planet. Though they travelled hundreds of light years, they kept in touch via twin particle communicators.

Tok, though administered by non-humans, offered the best prospect. The governors of that planet were a non-Groki species that tended to show sympathy toward humans. There was already a human community living there quite happily, an Akkadi speaking tribe. The governors, when they heard of the Nefzedi plight, extended them an invitation to relocate a portion of their human population there. Other planets in that sector were also found, with their help, and they sent

giant ships to help with the move.

The exodus went on discreetly and took the bionic population by surprise. All non-bionic humans who wished to move, gathered in a predetermined location. They communicated their coordinates to the Toki ships that were waiting in the upper atmosphere. They landed in stealth mode, brought them all on board and sped them across the galaxy to their new home.

That was a long time ago, when Heptosh was young. Most of the elders, including his father, Dr. Nashtep, his Uncle Nagasha and others were dead. Only Mr. Takanen was left of that group, having lived to an extraordinarily old age. Heptosh, himself, wasn't a young man any more, though he remembered all of this as though it were yesterday.

Now, the original home planet of the Nefzedi was wholly inhabited by Total Bionics. No humans were left. Nefzedi humans were all living in the Noofrishi sector of the Galaxy. Their Toki hosts allowed them to administer their own affairs and they had relative freedom of travel within the sector in which they lived.

Now, perched in the cleft of the cliff overlooking Klodi City, he wondered. Did the same fate befall Klodi-land?

3

Simple dwellings the same colour as the yellow brown earth from which they're made. Further on, yellow brown paths, lined by more yellow brown huts, slope up the side of the mountain range, also yellow brown, except where interrupted by patches of green. Nearer by, small children run, their naked skin matching the yellow brown earth, both through dirtiness and natural colour. Their elders finish their chores, chat and enjoy the evening. As for the smells...

I can smell stew cooking behind Tee Maw's house. I hope someone has enough food left from their family meal for me. Uncle Zhue Paw usually has some but he always makes me wait until everyone else has eaten. Venerable Too Dha usually eats by himself, so he might have something.

Oh, no! Here comes that brat, Nyu.

He shouts, 'Hoi! Eetoo!'

'Aren't you supposed to be studying?' I say.

'Hah! I'm of age already! I can do whatever I want!'

'Of age! You're not thirteen yet!'

'Of course I am!' he snaps back.

'I'm thirteen,' I emphasise to get it into his *thick head*. 'I've just had my manhood ceremony two months ago. You're at least a year younger than me!'

'Count the cycles around the sun! I'm thirteen!'

'Yeah! Thirteen cycles around *this* star!'

'What other stars do you expect to go around!' He says it as though I were the stupid one!

'Didn't they teach you or what? Our fathers came from a different place: different star, different planet!'

'Hah! I think we've always been on this one!'

He's so obstinate! 'And you expect to be the next Keeper of the Writings?' I ask. 'You haven't even read them!'

'It sure won't be you! You're just an orphan boy!'

'At least I'm keeping up my family reputation of being a sheep owning family. What are you doing?'

'My Paw's got the biggest flock, and he has the respect of the whole village.'

He's got a point. I'd better not say anything stupid. 'Well, Ni Gwah should have been it. He was better than both you or your Paw!'

'Hah! The gods obviously didn't think so!'

He's off in the other direction, muttering something extremely disrespectful about Ni Gwah.

That's another thing. The writings, which he thinks he's going to keep say we must worship only one god. He still talks about the other gods like the shaman of Tu-tu-ah does.

A lot of people have got fires going. Mo Paw, the traditional wrestling instructor is still at work making clay bricks. I think he's going to build an extension to his house. I hope he leaves enough room for his wrestling gym. Ni Gwah used to be good at that too -- always beat me in wrestling.

There's Wee Ta, still working away on her weaving loom.

I'll need a new tunic soon. I hope this one won't start showing my nakedness before shearing season. Now that I'm a man, no one gives me any slack. I have to come up with raw wool before anyone will make me a tunic. I might have to start going naked on days I'm far enough from the village, so my tunic won't wear out so fast.

Cousin Zhue is so shameless, he does that even when he's near the village, in plain sight of everyone. He also eats most of the food at home so there'll probably not be enough for a decent meal for me. Uncle Zhue Paw never restrains him like he does me.

Venerable Too Dha's all right though. He treats me like a family member, even better than Uncle Zhue Paw. I think I'll go straight to his house.

There's Doo Bweh, the baker. He sees me coming. I know exactly what he'll say:

'Remember! You owe me wool!' -- yep.

'I'll remember,' I say on cue.

'Good. Then come by in the morning for another dozen.' He's got the routine down. I don't even have to put in an order.

I pass by a few more houses and there's Venerable Too Dha, sitting on a bench outside his door.

'Good day, Eetoo,' he says.

'Good day to you, Venerable Too Dha.'

'Come, sit down and rest. How are the sheep?'

'They are well. I left them in the canyon behind the old market.'

'You won't leave them there many days, I hope.'

'No. I just came back for more bread.'

'You still have credit with Doo Bweh, the baker, I trust.'

'Yes. I'll owe him three bags of wool, come shearing season.'

'You have grown to be a responsible young man, Eetoo. Your father would be proud of you.'

'You flatter me, Venerable Too Dha.'

We sit quietly for a while. He seems to be thinking about something.

I think too, but about things Nyu just said.

'Nyu seems to think he's going to be chosen to be the keeper of the writings when you die.'

'Yes,' he says, 'That seems to be the will of the village. But I'm afraid I won't live long enough to teach him at the rate he's learning.'

'He only knows the pictographs, and even then he says them in Fa-tzi-zhi instead of the holy language.'

'Hah! I remember you and Ni Gwah; I caught you two spelling out Fa-tzi-zhi words using the Nephteshi phonetic letters.'

'Yeah! You almost gave us a hiding!'

'At least it showed you had mastered the language.' Has he got softer in his old age? 'Ni Gwah was very good at it.'

'Yeah,' I agree. 'Ni Gwah should have been the next keeper of the writings. At least he worshipped only the creator god. Nyu still talks about the lesser gods.'

'Yes. It's a losing battle. Many of them, including Nyu Paw and Doo Bweh Paw, went off to attend the spirit celebrations in Tu-tu-ah a few days ago. At least they haven't tried to install a shaman here as well.'

He looks sad. After a pause, he says, 'I tried to persuade the council at the last meeting, to make you the keeper -- that you were ready even now -- but Nyu Paw seems to wield influence, and he wants his son to be. Perhaps, unless I live to be very old, you can teach him what he needs.'

'He's such a brat, he'll never listen to me.'

'Perhaps he'll grow wiser with age...' He's back to thinking again. '...and, maybe it's better this way.'

'Why?'

'I've been thinking a lot about that dream you had. I've had dreams of my own.'

What does that have to do with it?

'You have a more important job,' he says. 'I've been wanting to tell you, I haven't known how, and I fear time may be short.'

'What, Venerable?' He looks healthy enough.

'Do you remember what is written in the fifth tablet?'

'About the seven laws?' I return.

'About how Venerable Noka passed on his legacy to his three sons.'

'Yes. He gave his eldest son the golden tablets, but to his second son, he wrote it down on tablets of stone, and to his youngest, he wrote it on animal hide. What we have are copies of the tablets of stone. The original stone tablets were neglected by the Nephteshi guardians, so Imhotep, the prophet-ruler, obtained them and added them to the great library at Memphis.'

'Do you remember what else?' he prods.

'Yes. Some day, one from among the descendent of the second son must go to read the golden tablets belonging to the eldest son so that our knowledge of the Way will be complete.'

'I believe the time is near when the descendent of the second son must make his journey. That descendent is you. I am very sure of that.'

I can hardly talk. I whisper, 'Me?'

'Make your heart strong, Eetoo. I would not say it if I didn't believe it were so. I've thought so for a long time now.'

'But --'

'At first, I dismissed it as an idle thought,' he explains. 'I tried to forget it, but with time, it only began coming back stronger and stronger. I discussed it with Venerables Zti Paw of Sho-ta-le and Meh Zha of Nyu Pee River Village. They all feel the time is near, and believe that my instincts are right. So, now, I must tell you.'

I can't think of what to say.

'Rest here tonight. Read the fifth tablet one more time. You must tune your mind to the truth. I feel as though your journey may begin soon. Perhaps even tomorrow when you leave here.'

'But, where must I go to find the golden tablets?' I ask.

'That, I don't know. There is much that I don't understand. That is why I have delayed telling you, but tell you, I must. I've been troubled about it in my sleep for a year now -- visions in the night. All I know is, the tablets are not on this planet. They are near the birthplace of humanity. Our people haven't travelled in the ships for hundreds of years. They haven't been seen since before you were born.'

'I saw a ship last night -- or it was a light in the sky. I know it wasn't a shooting star. And then I had the dream again.'

'There you are, then,' he sounds more sure than ever. 'The hand of the most high is already at work. You are the one. And don't worry about your debt to Doo Bweh. If I don't see you again, I will repay it.'

We have a meal of bread with a stew that Ae Maw brought by.

I read the tablet.

* * *

Heptosh had observed as much as he could from his perch in the cliffs surrounding the city. He had use his magnifiers to get a closer look. He saw no signs of life apart from a few herds of cattle. Perhaps some wrecked vehicles, and -- bones? He didn't dare speculate. He still couldn't bring himself to descend to ground level, at least not within sight of the space port built into the mountains opposite.

Perhaps with the information he had gleaned so far, the sector council would see fit to send a larger investigation team.

He used the linear propulsion motor to bring his ship into orbit before engaging the logical relocater. The one had to be completely shut down before it was safe to use the other.

The first step was to simulate linear motion. That involved the reverse beam transmitter sending a series of commands at very high speed, each inducing relocation by half a hydrogen atom's width, thus, pushing other matter out of the way instead of trying to occupy the same location. Two atoms occupying the same space at the same time can lead to atomic fusion, at worst.

It also insured that the relocater was working properly. Not everyone bothered to do that, but *Heptosh* believed in playing it safe. Only one person he knew of had relocated himself to a totally unknown part of the universe. By a miracle, he had managed to find his way back with a faulty relocater and a good geographical knowledge of space.

Heptosh set the relocater to simulated forward motion, and engaged.

Nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine times out of a thousand it worked just fine. But this was that one time out of a thousand that it didn't. The planet below him, instead of growing steadily smaller, was jumping from one size to another.

He flicked the relocater off. Using linear propulsion, he began moving back to Klodi-Famta.

What to do?

If he travelled back to Tok using linear propulsion, it would take a couple of centuries to get there. To him it would only seem like a couple of months travelling close to the speed of light, but it would be far too late to make use of the data he had gathered on the Klodi.

The non-human species had other means of travelling beyond the speed of light, but the only technology known to humans was logical relocation, using the hyperspace coordinates to re-plot the location of each atom within a given range.

So, Heptosh's logical relocater wasn't working properly. He'd have to land and try to get it fixed.

Was it something he could fix himself? Where would he get help? Half of the planet was primitive. The other half -- what? Heptosh still didn't know. Did he dare land there and find out?

He was moving at a linear speed that would get him there in half a day. He had time to think.

4

The shepherd returns. The sheep sense relief. He sits on an ancient seller's slab and ponders ...

So, they say I'm the one who's supposed to find the golden tablets. Venerable Too Dha talks like I have to go right away! How does he think I'm going to do that? It's not on this planet, and I can't even go everywhere here, much less anywhere else!

I'm hungry. I'll have a piece of bread with some goat's milk cheese. Tomorrow I'll take the sheep to the grass field near where I've planted some gourds. There, I can pick some cucumbers and squash to eat with my bread.

I should start a small herd of goats so I can make my own cheese. I wonder if I'll have enough wool left after shearing season to buy one or two?

Hold on! What's bothering the sheep?

They see something, but whatever it is is behind those huts. I'll go check.

I leave my food on the stone table and walk about the huts near the fence.

Oh holy! It's a man -- dressed all funny! And I've never seen anyone with hair like that -- it's grey, but it's in really tiny ringlets, and his skin is real dark -- almost black! Did the Klodis look like that?

He sees me. I'm sure glad I didn't take off my tunic!

He walks up to me and he's saying something.

'*Shelta pakh khalti*'

Huh?

He's saying it again, more slowly.

'Shel-ta pakh khal-ti'

Part of that sounds -- but no! The Klodi didn't speak Nephteshi.
That's a holy language!

'Shel-ta pakh khal-ti -- khati Heptosh'

Khati Heptosh -- That is Nephteshi! It means 'my name is Heptosh'.
Oh the gods! How can he be speaking Nepteshi?

He's saying it all again, this time using his hands to point and all that sort of thing.

Ni Gwah and I used to say things in Nepteshi when we didn't want other people to know what we were talking about.

'Kha ti Eetoo,' I say.

I think I know what else he was saying: 'Can you help me?'

It doesn't sound exactly like Nephteshi, but close enough.

'Nosh ta, Eetoo,' he says. That means, 'Hello, Eetoo.'

I ask him if he is a Klodi.

He says, 'No, I'm a Nefzedi, living on Tok.' He says it slowly, so I can understand him. I have no idea what those places are, though.

He talks faster than me, but he's got his sounds all wrong. That's why I didn't understand him at first.

'I need help with my ship,' he says. 'Does anyone near here know how to fix a ship?'

'No ships come here,' I say. 'I never see a ship.'

I don't know if I have my tenses right or not. He understands me, though.

'Come,' he says.

I follow him. We walk past the edge of the canyon, around the protrusion and into the smaller canyon next to it.

That must be a ship. It's a big round thing, like a covered dish, but with legs. If he didn't say it was a ship, I would have thought it was a giant's dish for cooking people in.

How does he get the lid off?

I stand there looking at it.

* * *

Heptosh looked again at the shepherd boy standing with his mouth open. Obviously he'd never seen a ship before. He looked as primitive as they come -- the home-spun tunic that he could almost see through, no shoes, straight rusty brown hair that might have been cut some months ago by placing a bowl on his head, his question if he were a Klodi, probably never met anyone outside his tribe. Did Heptosh really expect any help from him?

But the boy spoke Nephteshi! That was truly amazing.

Heptosh probably would never have discovered that had he not been so desperate. Maybe there was hope.

'Have you never seen a ship like this?' he asked.

'Have not,' said the boy.

'Do you know who has seen one?'

The boy only shook his head.

Heptosh hadn't expected him to say yes, but he didn't know anything else he could ask. But maybe...

'Do you know the way to the land of the Klodi?'

'Yes.' The boy pointed back towards the abandoned village.

'Can you take me there?'

The boy stared at him for a moment with his greenish eyes, and then said, 'Come.'

Heptosh followed him back to the village, and then towards the rail fence.

'Many years ago, the Klodi come here, they buy, they sell. Fa-tzi-zhi come to trade. They stop. Now, nothing.'

'What happened to the Klodi?' asked Heptosh.

'They stop coming.'

'Why?'

The boy shrugged, 'They stop.'

The boy, Eetoo, lifted the rail that served as a gate. The sheep stood at a safe distance, obviously wary of Heptosh.

A winding stream flowed from inside the canyon, out past the village where a stone bridge crossed it. The path Eetoo took crossed one of the bends. He simply began wading in.

'Wait,' called Heptosh.

Eetoo stopped while Heptosh took off his shoes. The water came up to the boy's knees.

Carrying his shoes, Heptosh followed. Perhaps he'd try to follow as best he could barefoot.

Some of the sheep followed at a distance, though on the other side of the stream.

The boy's feet were obviously well calloused from years of trampling the countryside unshod. After they crossed another stream, Heptosh had to put his shoes back on. The ground was becoming more uneven, and the stream was now bubbling over the jagged rocks.

Soon they could see the end of the canyon and the waterfall that fed the stream.

The boy pointed to a road built against the cliff. Now, Heptosh could see it went all the way along the cliff to the village, probably leading to the stone bridge.

All this stumbling over rocks and wading the streams when a road went all the way!

Heptosh looked in disbelief, but the boy looked oblivious to the irony.

They climbed a few rocks up the face of the cliff until they met the road. It took so much climbing it would have almost been worthwhile going back to the stone bridge.

The path continued to climb until it brought them behind the waterfall. There, they found a cave.

It was dark inside. They'd need a light. It was also getting late in the day.

'How far is it to the other end?'

The boy shrugged. 'Three furlongs.'

Not far, but Heptosh preferred to make a fresh start in the morning.

'I'll come back tomorrow. Let's go back. Can we take this road all the way to the village?'

Eetoo saw no problem.

They went back that way.

*The two return by way of the bridge. They part ways at the market.
The shepherd returns to the seller's slab. He muses...*

What will the stranger want next?

I still didn't eat my lunch, and it's evening already. My bag is still on the stone bench.

The stranger's gone back to his ship thing. He's probably got food there.

I should have offered him some of mine. He is a stranger, and we should show hospitality.

But he's gone now. I finish my food.

I wonder if that's the same ship I've been seeing?

It's still light. I walk over to where the ship is. I don't see the man. I sit on a rock and look at it.

I've never seen anything like it. Where did the man go? He must be inside, but I don't see any way to get in.

Is this the kind of ship that goes to the stars? Maybe our ancestors came on them.

It's getting dark. I get up and walk back to the market. I put my stuff into one of the huts and roll out my rug. I hang up my tunic to air out, take my blanket and settle down.

I can't sleep. There's so much happening.

I'm still thinking about Venerable Too Dha's strange words. I have to go to find the golden plates. He doesn't have any idea how, nor do I. Our people haven't travelled on the ships for hundreds of years. Ships haven't been seen here for a long time.

But today, I've seen a ship. I met the man that keeps the ship. I showed him to the cave.

Perhaps I can go on his ship to the stars, and then I can find the golden tablets.

He seems a nice man. I'm sure he'll take me. I'll ask him in the morning as he goes to Klodiland.

He even speaks the holy language for every day conversation! He's probably one of the gods.

* * *

Heptosh flicked on his viewer. The whole upper dome of his ship turned transparent, revealing that it was morning .

The first thing he noticed was the shepherd boy sitting on a nearby rock, gazing at the ship. To the boy, the ship would have looked no different than before, as it was a one way viewer.

Interesting young chap. Knows Nephteshi, though not very fluently.

Heptosh hadn't heard that the Famtizhi understood Nephteshi. The Klodi only used Nephteshi as the language of interstellar communication.

Wonder what he wants now?

The look on the boy's face gave no hint. He didn't look as though he were in any hurry. Maybe it was idle curiosity.

Heptosh decided to have his breakfast before emerging. He reached into one of the compartments and got one large corn wafer and a jar of honey. That would do for breakfast.

Corn wafers were ideal for interplanetary trips. Some were made with various fillings, such as meat or vegetable, or perhaps something

sweet. For breakfast, Heptosh preferred a plain one with honey.

The boy just sat, perfectly still.

I wonder if I couldn't use a helper for this excursion? Though Heptosh. The boy looked as though he'd be no trouble. He seemed to have the time for it.

Heptosh had no idea what he'd find on the other side of the divide besides the landscape he had seen from the cliff. He wasn't as young as he used to be. Perhaps it would be a good idea to have a companion. Could the boy fight?

He downed the last of his wafer, licked some honey from his fingers, and reached for his flask of *coourzt* beverage.

Usually, three or four swigs of it did him for the morning, but today, he lingered over it. He wanted to think a while longer over what he had to do.

The *coourzt* berry was native to one of the Blilkin planets, but had been introduced to most of the populations in the sector -- both human and non. The Nefzedi traditionally drank wine or fresh juice on their own planet, but since settling in Tok, they readily adopted the *coourzt* beverage as their favourite. Wine was okay for digestion, or getting drunk, but *coourzt* could be taken more often and in larger quantities without the side effects. They brewed it in a manner similar to wine, often with various herbs blended in, but it was more of a stimulant. A few swigs in the morning made the eyes brighter and made one feel better prepared to face the day. It was also good for adjusting to different day and night schedules by helping one stay awake when one needed to.

Heptosh nursed his *coourzt* and deliberated.

He knew that much of what was to be found in the Klodi area was underground. The surface had shown him nothing.

Normally there would be at least a few people on the surface. The fact that he saw none, should mean something. So should the fact that the shepherd boy had never met a Klodi, nor, apparently, knew what one looked like. They were not a black-skinned race, like the Nefzedi. He said the Klodi used to trade at this market, but had long stopped.

So, what was he to expect? Was it safe to venture underground?

What choice did he have? He'd have to live here for the rest of his life, or until someone got curious as to why he didn't return and came looking for him. That could be a lifetime. This wasn't a high priority mission, or they would have issued him a twin particle communicator. The Human Affairs department of the sector council, administrated by humans, wasn't known for its efficiency.

He began to gather various items and put them in a carry bag: a metzig torch, some corn wafers, a water flask, his *coourzt* flask, a spare loin cloth and toga, bedding, and a few items for personal hygiene. He already had his utility belt strapped on, which had his distance viewer, night goggles, balm, knife and a small dart-gun. Then he twisted the release handle and pushed the door open.

The boy lurched to his feet in surprise, then stood there, indecisively.

'Can you go with me through the tunnel?' Heptosh asked in as simple Nephteshi as he could.

'I can,' said Eetoo.

'Good. Let's go then. I might need your help.'

Eetoo followed.

Heptosh insisted on going by way of the stone bridge. Eetoo had no objection.

Though Eetoo had tended to walk either in front or directly behind Heptosh, here he began walking beside him. He looked as though he were wanting to say something. He made several attempts, but seemed to give up before he started

'Yes?' said Heptosh, finally. 'What do you want to tell me?'

Eetoo pointed in the direction of the other canyon. 'Boat?'

'Yes?'

'Go to sky? To heaven?'

'I -- er -- travel to the heavens, yes.'

'Planet have golden tablets, where?'

'What again?'

'Er -- ' then without warning, the simple shepherd boy launched into a spiel in a literary form of ancient Nephteshi: "*Noka was the father of three sons, and after the waters subsided, he wrote for them, the words of this account: for his first son, Sim-Hep, he wrote it on golden tablets; for his second, Kham-Hep, he wrote in on stone; and for his youngest, Yap-Phet, he wrote it on an animal hide. The account, according to all three, is complete, but in none of them is it whole. One among the sons of Kham shall one day journey to the sons of Sim and receive from his sons the writings from the tablet of gold. One from among the sons of Sim will one day journey to the sons of Yap Phet, and give to him the message of the golden tablet.*"

Heptosh listened in amazement. Obviously, the boy had been taught Nephteshi as a means to read ancient manuscripts in the possession of his tribe. The names sounded familiar. They were associated with a legendary account of a planet that was engulfed in water.

Eetoo went back to his broken Nephteshi: 'I -- son of Kham-Hep. I must travel find golden tablets of Sim-Hep.'

Heptosh noticed he was looking at him, as though hoping for an answer.

'Who told you that?' asked Heptosh.

'Er -- ancient -- er -- old man Too Dha. He keeper of the tablets. He have dream say I go.'

'How do you plan to go?'

'Er -- ' suddenly Eetoo looked perplexed, as though he were surprised that Heptosh didn't already know. 'Er -- you Nephteshi speak -- you god?'

'Oh dear! No! I'm certainly not a god!'

'But -- Nephteshi -- holy tongue! Men not speak to men!'

So, Nephteshi was a holy language to his tribe, for reading their holy writings. The fact the Heptosh spoke it made him a god!

'Nephteshi is spoken by many peoples,' corrected Heptosh. 'On my planet, we speak Nephteshi to people of other nationalities and other planets. On the planet of Nephtesh, they have no other language to speak. They must speak Nephteshi.'

'You not god? But you have boat.'

'My "boat" is broken. I must fix, repair, mend. If I were a god, I could snap my finger and make it better. I cannot. That's why I must

go to land of Klodi.'

'You carry me to planet of Nephtesh?'

'I don't know where the planet is. I only heard it was the centre of a vast empire once. And, my ship is broken.'

'Can help me find?'

The boy looked as though he'd break into tears if Heptosh refused.

'I'll tell you what. You help me find parts for my ship. I'll think about helping you look for the planet, Nephtesh. But what about your father and mother? What would they say?'

'Father and mother died. Only Uncle Zhue Paw, and old man Too Dha. I am man now. I can go.'

Suddenly Eetoo was no longer the shy timid shepherd boy of earlier. He was someone with a mission.

By now, they had reached the waterfall. Between the falling stream and the cliff face, the road ended at the cave.

Eetoo looked doubtful.

'You've been in before, haven't you?'

'Yes. Sheep run away, go in. I go in after. It night. I have fire.'

'Did you find your sheep?'

'No. I go and go, I hear sheep ahead, sheep afraid of light and go on. I think road must stop, but go on. I want to go back, I afraid, but I hear sheep. Then I see star light. Sheep gone. I wait for morning, but then, no fire. Also, no sheep. I see Klodiland. I afraid to go but I know I must not stay. Fa-tzi-zhi people must not stay. I go in dark -- afraid.'

'I have a light here.' Heptosh brought out his metzig torch. He lit it. Eetoo looked at it in amazement. It lit the cave walls like broad daylight.

'Ah! Not afraid now!'

They stepped into the tunnel.

'But -- Klodiland dangerous for Fa-tzi-zhi people.'

'If you are to go in search of the golden tablets, you will certainly pass through places more dangerous than Klodiland.'

They walked on and on. It was a straight rectangular passage with no features aside from bare rock, and straight vertical seams every few yards. Now and then, the passage made a slight angle. This prevented any light from showing from either entrance, so it was impossible to see how much further they had to go.

'How much further?' asked Heptosh.

'Three furlongs.'

'Oh -- er, but didn't you say it was three furlongs all the way through?'

'Yes. Three furlongs.'

'I'm sure we've already been three furlongs. How much further?'

'Three furlongs.'

'Then that should be six furlongs.'

'Huh?'

By the time Heptosh saw daylight showing around the corner, he estimated that they had been seven.

He shook his head.

The valley stretches before them -- an ancient city, overgrown. The mountains that line the city, appear like giant bricks place atop one another. On top of those, again, the same giant blocks that form the familiar peaks of the straight mountain ranges.

This is just the way I saw it before. Still don't see any people. It must be okay. The Nephteshi man said it is. I can't believe I'm going to go to the stars and find the golden tablets.

The man is taking out something from his belt, putting it up to his eye, and looking into it. He points it here and there. Maybe it shows him things.

He's looking at the mountain on the other side of the valley. It looks as though it were made of giant bricks. There's a wide hole on the side facing us that looks awfully big -- a lot bigger than this hole we're in. A tree could easily stand up inside, and it looks as wide as the mouth of the Nyu Pee river.

Now, he's looking at the big square thing in middle of the valley, that looks like a giant's house, made of the same giant bricks. I also see normal sized houses here and there. Some are pretty big. There's a road that leads from there, and a fork off to the mountain across from us. There's lots of trees in between, and more houses.

Now, he's trying to see where this path leads -- the one we're standing on.

'Let's go,' he says.

So we start walking.

Wide enough for two to walk abreast, the path clings to the side of the rock, curving around the what contours there are on the otherwise straight range. Further on, it doubles back. After about three stretches, they reach ground level.

It's been a long walk. We're at the bottom of the mountain now, and there's a road that goes off straight ahead. It looks like solid rock. There's ivy growing on it in some places, and big cracks in others where plants are growing through.

There's a herd of cows up ahead going from one side of the road to another. Some are stopping in the middle to eat the plants growing up through the cracks.

There's got to be someone about. Why would cows be wandering about like this by themselves? Further off I see some horses, also loose by themselves.

There's a house, but it looks half fallen down.

The man's looking about too. It looks as though he's as surprised as me at not seeing anyone.

'Let's go in here,' he says.

It has an upper floor. We go to the big gate at the bottom. There's a board missing. He looks in.

He tries to open it, but it's locked.

Then, he steps back a bit and gives it a hard kick. The door gives way.

We go in. It's one big room downstairs.

The back door is open. We could have gone in that way.

There's a big thing in the middle. It has a couple of chairs built in, and some handles and some sort of other funny things in the front, some things with letters and crystal surfaces.

'A (something or other)!' he says. 'I didn't think they were so (something or other)!'

'Huh?' I say.

'Have you seen one of these before?'

'No,' I say.

'It's an (something or other).' He says it again.

Looking at me, he says it again. This time I catch it.

'An air scooter?'

'Yes. It's been a long time since anyone's used it.'

In another corner, there's a wooden cart, but part of it is rotted. There's also some feeding troughs. I'm sure they had horses once, but they escaped out the back door.

The man looks at the ladder leading up to a door in the ceiling. He tries the ladder to make sure it's safe. Then he starts climbing.

I follow him.

I've never seen so many cobwebs. The dust is as thick as my finger in some places. I'm sure no one's been here in years. The room has chairs and tables. There are some things lying about. He takes a stick and pulls the cobwebs off, and dusts off some of the things. Some things, he puts into his bag. One looks like a light, like the one he already has. He's trying it out, and shining it on the rest of the room.

He picks up a small flat box and opens it. There's no room to put anything. It's just solid silvery stuff. There's a stick attached to the lid, and he takes that and pushes it into the silvery stuff. He waits for something to happen, but it doesn't. Then, he turns off the shiny thing, opens it up and sticks the end into the back end of the box. Suddenly the stuff starts moving, and little bits of it stick up. I see they're all little tiny pins all stuck together. He pushes some down to make letters, and other ones pop up, so he can read it. I can tell they're pictographic letters in Nephteshi. It must be magic.

He turns about and sees me.

'This is a (something-or-other).'

'Huh?'

'A computer.'

He shuts the lid and puts it in his bag.

'I'll read it later. It may tell us a lot.'

He opens a door to another room, but suddenly he shuts it again. He looks at me, looking a bit pale.

'You'd better stay out here, Eetoo.'

He goes in.

What does he see?

I go to the door and open it a bit and peep in.

There's a bed. It's hard to see what's there because of the cobwebs.

Oh! The gods! It's someone's bones -- two people's! They're lying side by side on the bed.

My friend looks about and sees me. He tells me to go ahead and come in.

He probably thought I'd be spooked.

He's pulling the cobwebs off with a stick.

The bones are a bit funny though. Some of it's not completely rotted. One arm still looks it's still together, but it doesn't look like a real arm. The man looks at me and says, 'Have you seen this before?' He's pointing to the arm.

I shake my head.

'It's (something-or-other).'

'It's -- what?'

'Bionic. It's not real skin and flesh. It's human flesh that started to turn into machinery. This is what I feared had happened. This also happened on my own planet, and many families there also killed themselves when they knew what they had done.'

Humans turning into machinery?

'Let's go,' he says.

We go down the ladder again.

Now, he's looking at the big contraption downstairs. He opens the gates on both sides of the room so we can see it better.

He turns some handles on it, and pushes on something, and waits. Nothing happens. Now he's looking about the room. There's stuff all over the place. He picks up this and that. It looks as though he's found what he's looking for. It's a small box. He brings it to the thing, gets down and opens a little door. He takes out a box that looks like the one he found, and puts the other one in. He tries turning the handles again. Something seems to be doing what he wanted. At least he's happy about that. Then, he opens something else and does something to another part of the contraption.

Then, he dusts off the seat in front, and sits on it. He pulls a handle, and suddenly there's a noise, sort of like a waterfall. Then, the whole contraption lifts up into the air, about one hand's breadth high.

'Get on,' he says.

I don't know about this. It flies!

'It's okay. It won't hurt you.'

I get in the seat behind him -- very carefully. The thing starts to tip when I step on it, as though it were a boat.

I'm sitting down. It's a nice chair.

Suddenly we're going out the gate and back onto the road.

Wow! We're going fast! Is it safe to go this fast? He said it would be okay.

We're going past more houses. Some cows run to get out of our way.

I'm starting to enjoy this!

* * *

Heptosh kept his apprehensions to himself. The boy had no idea of the danger that might lurk behind any corner.

Up ahead were the remains of another air scooter. Bones were scattered about.

This time, there were whole bodies that looked bionic. One lacked a head, and another had a hole in its chest. The cavity looked burnt about the edges. One of them looked as though its head had been burned off.

Heptosh stopped the scooter, dismounted and walked over to the bionics.

What could have caused this much damage to bionic bodies?

He stepped to the wreckage. The bones looked as though they had been undisturbed throughout the 12 year restriction. They were completely dry, lacked any smell, one of the hands was bionic.

Wait. What was the other one holding?

It looked like a voltage shooter.

He stooped to pick it up. It was a hand held tool that would draw the voltage from whatever power cell was attached, and send a lightening bolt to whatever you aimed it at. It could set fire to sticks, or jump start a machine, or -- with a power cell this size -- kill a bionic.

Clever!

How much voltage was there left after 12 years?

Heptosh aimed it at the wrecked vehicle. Just enough to produce a visible bolt and make a black spot on the surface. Then it died.

It also made Eetoo jump out of his skin.

'Good weapon,' Heptosh said. 'We just need to find another power cell.'

The boy looked at him blankly.

Heptosh pointed to the bionics. 'Have you ever seen people that looked like that?'

'No.'

Strange. Apparently no survivors. Perhaps they did a thorough job of exterminating them. But some should have survived, either bionic or human.

He wouldn't take any chances. He searched the wreckage for any spare power cell. There were none. He put the shooter into his bag and they got onto the scooter once again.

'What people them?' asked Eetoo.

'They used to be normal people,' began Heptosh. 'They took an implant -- er -- a very small machine thing that can use what's in the body to make more of itself. It reads the DNA and...'

Eetoo looked blank.

'Well -- it just makes more of itself until the whole body becomes bionic. But the soul is dead.'

'Dead?'

'Just a machine man without a soul.'

Eetoo looked at the dead bionic once more with a look of dread.

Heptosh started the scooter and they moved on.

They passed more houses in various states of disrepair -- more wrecked vehicles -- bones and bionic remains -- Heptosh searched a few of the sites for power cells and other supplies. Another computer or two would give a fuller account of what happened -- a tragic story, by the looks of it.

Robbing the dead wasn't Heptosh's idea of a good time, but if it would avenge their death --

One power cell seemed to have half a charge left -- probably enough to disable three bionics if he set the voltage only moderately high. His bag was weighing him down. If they had to do much walking, maybe Eetoo could carry some of the items into his shepherd bag.

He took a turn that he judged would take him to the pyramid. There should be an entry to the underground infrastructure. All the human-

made planets had a similar architectural design, even if their facial geography varied.

Though they saw more wreckages and signs of battle, they stayed on course until they came to the foot of the pyramid. Then, they circled it until they found the entrance.

On the side of the pyramid facing the space port he saw a lake -- rectangular shaped, but it didn't have a proper shore. Some dead trees were sticking out of the water.

There wasn't supposed to be a lake here, thought Heptosh.

A road led to the open gate through what appeared to be a park with stone tables in the shade of some big trees. They stopped for lunch before proceeding. Eetoo appeared to enjoy the corn wafer with spinach and chicken filling.

They entered the pyramid via a downward ramp wide enough for land vehicles. From there, if Heptosh knew internal planetary infrastructure, there would be a road straight to the space port.

He and Eetoo mounted the scooter, Heptosh lit the lamps and they descended the ramp.

He turned to the left, the direction of the space port, but suddenly found himself facing a rock wall.

He turned to move along the wall to look for a door, but he found none, only rubble and broken rock.

He moved away from the wall, put the lamps on high power to get a better look. What he saw took his breath away.

The giant slab that formed the roof over the passage had fallen in, blocking off the way to the space port. The two ends of the fallen slab looked as though they had been blasted so as to make it fit precisely into the entrance.

That explained the rectangular lake up on the surface. The ground had sunken in and filled up with rain water.

There were other ways of getting in. Heptosh dimmed the lights, and started down the other corridor.

Several furlongs onward he came to one of the smaller doors into the central area. It was shut, and there were stone beams placed into the aperture, wedging the door in closed position. It was, in effect, locked from outside.

What about the entrance further down?

They sped on to that. Same story. Were all the entry points to the central area blocked off?

Suddenly Heptosh knew. He also conjectured that if he were to go to the surface, he'd find all skylights and vent holes likewise sealed. Probably the entire population of bionics were trapped inside the central area. Without sunlight, their primary energy source, they would eventually go comatose.

It was a good-news-bad-news situation. They probably didn't have to worry about the bionics, but the only way to the space port now was through the mountain range -- a long way. The scooter wouldn't be able to navigate the whole route.

What about approaching the space port from the surface?

If he were a lot younger, he could have tried scaling the face of the great wall to reach the space ship entrance. Eetoo could do it, maybe, but how would he get Heptosh up?

They'd have to go the long way. If they rationed wisely, the food would probably last.

'Come Eetoo. We have a long way to go,' he said.

7

Sunlight filtering from openings high above illuminate stalactites and stalagmites, that time has glazed over the human-hewn cave walls. The sound of running water echoes through the caverns. The two trudge on -- on foot...

This trip is really taking a long time. I'm sure the sheep will have scoured the ground bare by now.

We stopped twice to eat. His crispy bread is nice, but I think I'll go back to my normal bread with cheese next meal. I'll offer him some.

We're walking now. The 'scooter' thing won't fit through all these places we have to go. We've crossed one underground stream.

At least we don't need the torches on all the time, there's just enough light coming through from up there.

I can hear water up ahead. Probably another stream we have to cross. There's also more light coming from that way.

Hold on! I smell something cooking! There's a bit of smoke in the air. Heptosh smells it too.

'Fish?' he says.

Everyone we've found so far is dead. Who could be cooking fish?

We're up to the stream now. There's the mouth of a cave where the stream goes out, and there I see a fire. Someone's sitting beside it -- a kid, he's got no clothes on.

He's looking at us, like he's scared.

Hold on! I know him! Ni Gwah? It couldn't be! He's dead!

He's standing up. It is him! He's turning to run away.

'Ni Gwah! Stop! It's me, Eetoo!'

He stops, and turns about.

'Eetoo?'

'Ni Gwah! How did you get here? We all thought you were dead!'

'I think I am dead! How did you get here? Did you die?'

'You look alive to me.'

'But this is the place of the dead. Everywhere I go I only see people's bones!'

'No. It's Klodiland. All the Klodi's died or something. Some of them started to turn into funny machine things, and they all killed each other.'

'Who's this man?'

'That's Heptosh. He's going to take me to the Planet of Nephtesh to find the golden tablets...'

'Huh?'

'..and he speaks Nephteshi. Try talking to him.'

Heptosh just stands there looking at us. I think he doesn't have any idea what we're talking about.

I tell him, 'This is my friend, Ni Gwah. He go down a -- er -- water go around and round -- not come up again. We not find him. We think

he dead, but I find him here.'

'A whirlpool?' says Heptosh. 'Ask him where he came down.'

Ni Gwah understands him. 'There,' he says. He points upstream. 'Water come down -- er ...' then he says to me in Fa-tzi-zhi, 'a long slide, I thought I was sliding into hell. Then I landed in the stream and I followed it until I came here.' Then he says in Nephteshi, 'Water go whoosh!' He makes a motion with his hand.

Heptosh looks like he knows. 'So,' he says, 'The head of this stream is in the Famtizhi area. You must be a very good swimmer to survive being sucked into a whirlpool.'

'Yes,' I say. 'He very good.'

'How long have you lived here now?'

'I don't know,' Ni Gwah says.

'One year,' I say.

'It's been year?' he asks me in Fa-tzi-zhi.

Next, he takes us to the mouth of the cave. There are his fishes cooking on the open fire. He turns one of them over.

Outside, I see we're on top of a waterfall. Down there, there's a pool, and a stream that goes on through a canyon. I guess it must lead into the flat lands, but we see only steep cliffs from here. There's a vegetable garden next to the pool.

'Did you plant that?' says Heptosh.

'I find herbs and plant garden,' he answers him. Then to me, in Fa-tzi-zhi, he says, 'I found all sorts of vegetables growing wild near dead people's houses. I take them and plant them here, so I never have to go off and look at people's bones and stuff.'

I can see beans, cabbages, a few gourds, and carrots.

Then, he says, 'Come!'

He jumps off the edge into the pool below.

The water looks good. We've been walking a long way. I throw off my tunic, put it beside the fire, and jump in myself. Heptosh walks down the path on the edge of the cliff. He watches us for a while, swimming and splashing. Then, he carefully takes off his clothes and gets in.

He has a lot more to take off than me. There's a cloth he wraps about his shoulders, and then a leather belt with pockets and lots of stuff stuck in it, and then a cloth that he wears about his waist, and then his shoes. Even then he's not totally naked. He's still got something wrapped about his waste and strung between his legs, but I guess he doesn't mind getting that wet.

We have a good time in the water.

Heptosh says we'd better spend the night here. Ni Gwah spears some more fish with his stick, and cooks them for us. He's also made a blowgun, and he says he catches rabbit and squirrel sometimes.

* * *

Heptosh looked about as much as he could in the morning light. The mountains blocked any view and it would be a long walk to the mouth of the canyon -- Ni Gwah said it was three furlongs. He was beginning to suspect that Famtizhi people could only count up to three. He decided that the best thing would be to continue through the underground passages.

The new boy, Ni Gwah, could come with them. They would get

him home where his parents and relatives would certainly be happy. Ni Gwah could probably use some clothes. He'd obviously been sucked down the whirlpool while swimming naked in the stream, and hadn't seen any clothes since, except those draped about dead bodies.

Heptosh fetched his extra toga from his carry bag and helped Ni Gwah put it on. He didn't look bad in it, though it wasn't the sort of thing he was used to wearing.

Then, they were off. This time, their food supply included some cooked fish and various vegetables from Ni Gwah's garden plot.

Later, they lunched on some of Eetoo's bread and cheese, and some cabbage and cucumber. The cheese tasted rather nice, Heptosh thought.

By evening, they had entered an area with wider passages. The scooter could have been useful here. They finished Ni Gwah's fish with some of Eetoo's bread, and settled down for the night.

They drifted off to sleep.

8

Heptosh was abruptly awakened by a kick to his ribs. There were people walking about, holding weapons. He heard a scuffle next to him, and looked just in time to see a human figure grabbing a toga, while Ni Gwah escaped its folds, running off in the direction they had come.

The human figures -- three of them, Heptosh counted -- forced Heptosh and Eetoo to their feet and they walked down the corridor in the opposite direction from the way Ni Gwah escaped.

There was a conveyance waiting for them. As soon as they were seated and flying down the wide corridor, Heptosh tried to catch a glimpse of their captors by what light was available.

It was too dark. He could only see that there were three of them, plus himself and Eetoo.

Good luck, Ni Gwah, He thought.

Soon, they came to a more well lit area.

These were *bionics*.

They came to a stop, and the bionics escorted the two off the conveyance, up a narrow corridor, and into an office.

There, they met a stout gentleman dressed in his human clothes, but with bionic skin. Most bionics Heptosh had known hadn't bothered with clothes after their transformation.

He said something to the escorts, and they bowed and left the room.

'Don't be alarmed, gentlemen. I have a glitch in my programming that prevents me from pretending to be a self conscious living human. Please sit down. Welcome to Klodiland. My name is Shan. That is, my late human host was known as Shan, the son of Khong.'

Heptosh sat down in one of the chairs. Eetoo followed his example. Shan also sat down.

This was unlike any bionic Heptosh had ever heard of.

'You are confused, no doubt,' Shan went on. 'Before we succumbed to the final stages of bionic transformation, the human Shan gave himself a bio-media upload. Are you aware of that process?'

Heptosh was aware. It was the only known process of uploading information to the human brain. But it had a downside: anything input into the mind in this way became extremely vivid, like a phobia, or an obsession. It would be easier to jump off a cliff in ignorance of the law of gravity than to unlearn something thus uploaded to the brain, so unless great care is taken in the selection of information, an upload could lead to compulsive behaviour or a neurosis.

'Because the upload so vividly imprinted the actual facts onto my brain, that Shan had carefully selected, it overrode the programming that was built into the bionic chip. Whereas most bionics are programmed to portray themselves as intelligent living beings, my understanding of the true state is the same as that of my human host before the transformation.'

'So you actually found a creative use for bio-media upload!' commented Heptosh.

'Indeed. Oh! I'm sorry for being such a bad host. I haven't even asked you your names!'

'Ah, yes,' began Heptosh. 'I'm Heptosh, this is my young companion, Eetoo. I'm afraid Eetoo hasn't been able to follow all you've said.'

'Yes. From the Famtizhi area, I see. Their tribal culture is probably their best protection from bionic take-over.'

'How so?'

'Bionics are incapable of cultural adaptation,' explained Shan, 'and therefore would be unable to relate to their values in a way that would persuade them to accept a bionic implant.'

'You seem to understand it quite well,' said Heptosh.

'I was programmed by the bio-media upload to learn as much as I can about bionics, and to pass that information on to humans as soon as the opportunity presents itself, as it has just now. Besides that, I've been doing my original job of maintaining the internal infrastructure of this planet until such time as humans arrive to relieve me. Is that your purpose in coming?'

'I'm only on a fact finding trip' replied Heptosh. 'I'm sure something could be arranged later on, when the sector council has had a chance to review all these facts. My biggest problem right now is getting off this planet. My relocater engine isn't functioning properly.'

'Then take my ship. I have no use for it.'

'You're a life saver!' exclaimed Heptosh.

Heptosh told him about Ni Gwah.

'I was told there was another human. I'll send him on his way to the Famtizhi area as soon as my bots find him. I do wish I had something to offer you by way of refreshment. We bionics only consume sunlight.'

'Oh, don't worry about us. We brought plenty of food for ourselves.'

'So,' Shan went on, 'What did you learn of our situation from the refugees?'

'The -- refugees?'

'Yes. We sent seven large transport ships, filled to over-capacity with those not yet infected by a bionic chip, including many orphaned children.'

'Ah -- they did say something about ships of refugees, but no such

ships have been seen.'

'Oh!' There was a pause, as the the bionic displayed a remarkable show of uncertainty.

Heptosh spoke: 'But, please tell me about the state of the subterranean city. It appears that the entire city centre has been sealed off.'

'Ah! That was a part of our strategy. All bodies not implanted with the bionic chip, including all the children, were to be evacuated. The rest would stay to prevent the bionic army from gaining access to the Famtizhi area, and wreaking havoc there as they had done here. I was to have seen them off, as the others made the last stand. Our sources told us that they would seek entry to the capitol city via the subterranean portion of the city. They sprung a trap for them, by setting explosives to go off in strategic places that would trap them inside. They could have dug their way out, if they had the time, but, deprived of sunlight, their only source of energy, they couldn't last long enough. The surviving, but infected humans did a mop-up operation, eliminating all the bionics that did find their way into the city, and then went, each to their home, to end their own lives.'

'So, all the bionics are eliminated from the planet -- except for these?'

'There are yet a few bionic communities still functional in the Klodi area, but not in large enough numbers to do anything. There are a few isolated human communities as well. Some are well armed and prepared to resist any bionics that approach their villages. Others are so far away they don't know anything of what's happened.'

'I must pay posthumous compliments to your host, Shan, in succeeding to form you into a safe bionic.'

'I'm not one hundred percent safe, I'm afraid. From studying myself, and the others (as Shan programmed me to do), I have been able to discover that there is a control circuit in each of us bionics. By targeting that circuit, I'm able to control the others -- but only when they're close by. Furthermore, I am only able to access a peripheral command level. There is a deeper command level which I have not been able to probe neither in them nor myself. I don't know who holds the command key to that level, but whenever such a person shows up on this planet, he or she will have complete control over me, even to the point of overriding Shan's bio-media upload.'

'Now, that brings me to the bit I'm now concerned about,' the bionic Shan continued. 'I'm also not sure if, whoever it is, hasn't already tried to access my circuits on a couple of occasions.'

'How so?'

'I have absolutely no memory of the departure of the refugee ships. There is a gap in my memory lasting from a few hours before launch time to about an hour after. It's a bit on and off at the beginning and end, as though I was going in and out of consciousness. I only know from my fellow bionics that the launch took place, and that I had a part in it. Now, you say he refugees never arrived. That concerns me.'

It concerned Heptosh too.

Shan gave Heptosh yet another computer, containing all of his research into the dynamics of bionic replication and their workings.

Shan's ship was similar to Heptosh's. It sat not far from the office in

the space port. Heptosh and Eetoo said their goodbye, and boarded.

Heptosh drove Shan's ship over the mountain range and landed it near his own.

Eetoo had proven helpful, so Heptosh decided to take him along. His property included enough grassland to accommodate a few sheep, so he told Eetoo to herd some into his old ship. Then Eetoo boarded Shan's with Heptosh, along with a few sheep that wouldn't fit in the other craft.

Heptosh expanded the radius of the reverse beam transmitter to include his old ship, and began to simulate linear movement. Once he reached a safe distance, he relocated both ships to the Toki system, and again began to simulate linear movement for their approach to Tok.

\$0.99 USD in [Kindle Format](#)
or [all other e-book formats](#) (Smashwords Edition)

\$14.95 USD in [Print Version](#)

www.RobbyCharters.co.uk