

Another Look at My Past

A novel by

Wayne McKinstry

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Chapter 1

“All rise”.

Frank Mills was caught off guard. He normally did not go to gatherings where you had to stand up to show respect for someone. Quickly and he hoped unobtrusively he uncrossed his legs and got to his feet.

They all stood there. And waited.

After a moment professor Edgar Lively strolled into the auditorium and unhurriedly made his way to the podium. When you are the Grand Old Man of the University of Altgeld Historical Research, people can just stand up until you are ready to let them sit down.

For a long moment Professor Lively just looked at the group assembled. Then he began to speak. “I am looking at a very distinguished group of historians, as well as those from technical and security. Please, be seated. “ Having said that, he was ready to let them sit down.

“Each of you is here because he or she is the very cream of the cream. I know it is a cliché, but it an honor just to be here.”

Frank Mills felt a rush of pride. At twenty-two, praise from an older man still affected him. It made him feel proud in spite of the fact that he would not be here if he were not the great grandson of Captain McKinstry. **The** Captain McKinstry, as if there was any other. Captain McKinstry had led Altgeld back into space, and had also led the war against the pirate fleet when they had appeared at the edge of the Altgeld solar system. You could easily fill a book with just that story.

“Yo!” Shouted Timmy. “Do they have whiskey where we’re going?”

Everybody turned to look at Timmy Thatchenson. It was quite easy to pick Timmy Thatcher out of the crowd. Where everyone else was wearing muted browns and tans, Timmy was wearing a pink striped shirt and floral print pants. Where all the other men had short hair, Timmy’s hair hung in long greasy curls. Where everyone else seemed reasonably centered, Timmy had a wild crazy look in his eyes.

“Timmy, would you just shut **up!**!” Shouted Dick Burlington. “Let the grownups talk.”

“That’s what she said. Wo hoo!” Was Timmy’s reply. Timmy was immune to most forms of social pressure.

Frank Mills turned to Nelson Jones. He had known Nelson for as long as he could remember, and now they were side by side in this venture. “How did that maniac get in this elite group?”

Nelson leaned close to Frank. “**Because** the man has a powerful mind and can analyze facts and spot relevant cross associations while the rest of us are trying to sharpen our pencil. They say he has an IQ of”

“Five thousand two hundred and eighty.” finished Frank for his old friend. Yes, I’ve heard all that stuff too.”

Nelson started to reply that five thousand two hundred and eighty was the number of feet in a mile, but then Professor Lively was saying;

“Yes, they certainly do have whiskey where you are going. Whiskey raw, uncured, with some other things in it more likely than not. A lot of the time it has quite a bit of ether. Drink some of that and they could take out your appendix and you wouldn’t mind at all.”

That got a laugh from everyone. Including, Frank noticed, Timmy Thatchenson. Old professor Lively had handled the situation quite well. Now that he had control again, he plunged right back into his speech.

“Yes, it is an honor to be chosen for time travel, but you had better not just rest on your laurels. This will not be a vacation. A lot of things about the Heroic Period we really have no idea. In particular we are not sure what peoples’ attitudes were about quite a number of things. I very seriously recommend that you always be

slow to speak and give yourself time to size up the situation.”

Horace Wilson nodded his head in silent approval. Yes, things would go much better if everyone would just be quiet. Never mind Timmy Thatchenson; he was hopeless. But you would think Frank and Horace could manage not to sit there and whisper like a couple of chipmunks on too much coffee.

“You each of you need to understand that this journey to the past is not a guided tour. We are hoping to increase our knowledge of a time period for which there are very few surviving records. We are depending on you in this regard.

“Most of you are looking for a topic for your doctoral dissertation. What you find in the past will give you unprecedented original material that will shape the course of historical research for years to come. This will be a huge start for your career.”

Frank smiled to himself. Yes, he had to be thinking of his career path. Where you are a student there are all sorts of little trips and travel-while-you-study opportunities. Soon he would have to be a full-fledged card-carrying adult, and settle down and be responsible and everything. This foray into Altgeld's past would be a last adventure, as well give his career as a Historian a huge jump-start. Old Aunt Shirley had been saying that Frank was now in the twenty-first grade, and that if he had any more degrees he would have a fever. Well, this would make him a famous Historian, and tenure at the University of Altgeld would be only a formality.

Chapter 2

“Navigator, what can you tell me?” Captain Samuels turned a very direct gaze towards Wayne Hubert, the ship’s Navigator. Captain Samuels had a very direct gaze.

“I am running a third degree retrorelational analysis of the transspatiional references. It won’t be done for a while.”

The navigator wished Captain Samuels would just go away and leave him alone.

“Is that going to tell us where we are?”

The Navigator did not reply nor did he attempt eye contact. Most of the crew would have been terrified to disrespect the Captain like that, but navigator Wayne Hubert did not see that it would make all that much difference.

Jack Hutchings watched this exchange without offering any contribution of his own. As First Mate of The Fair Winds he was on paper immediately under Captain Samuels. In actuality Captain Samuels was as far above him as God was above a rancid earthworm.

Jack saw that the Captain had finished his one-way conversation with the navigator. Now he had a chance to encourage the beleaguered Navigator.

“Wayne, I just want you to know that when life support on The Fair Winds starts to give out, I am going to kill you myself. Maybe with you dead, I can live a little longer. But of course if you actually find a habitable planet or get us back on our intended course, then I will let you live.”

“You people act like I got The Fair Winds lost on purpose.” Whined the navigator. “You should be giving me emotional support in a time like this.”

“Why are you having a meeting without notifying me? I demand free, unfettered access to any and all ship’s meetings.” Mike Paulson, passenger and de facto pain in the neck, had not mastered the art of small talk.

“Mike, you have no more rights than anyone else on this happy ship.” The First Mate took the trouble to answer mainly because it would keep Mike from talking for just a minute.

“The free press has an inalienable right to any and all information on this ship. Don’t make me show my press pass!! And I just might mention you in my blog.”

A slow smile came over First Mate Hutching’s face. “The complete and unvarnished truth is, The Fair Winds is a cultural survey ship on its way to do a preliminary cultural survey on the twin worlds of Calder and Grant. The passengers are mainly academic types in anthropology and neo-classical sociology. You were included to record the natives’ reactions to this survey.

“Or rather, we **were** on our way to the twin worlds of Calder and Grant. Until our distinguished” Hutchings rolled the word “distinguished” off his tongue like a choice morsel “navigator miscalculated a hyperspace jump and landed us in the middle of nowhere. He at that point could have simply performed the exact obverse of the jump just completed and we would have been back where we were. But no, he decided to just go on from the middle of nowhere. When that did not come out right, he tried another jump without checking his calculations. Now we are so lost that we aren't even sure how lost we are. We are out of contact with the rest of the known universe, *including* your precious blog.”

“Mommy, why are people yelling at each other? You told me that wasn't nice.” Three year old Eldon Smythe was a good boy, and he firmly believed other people other people should have to be good too. He and his mother had walked by the open door to the bridge of The Fair Winds when this discussion was doing

on.

“Honey don't worry about the silly grownups. You just be a good boy.” Samantha Smythe was not about to discuss the dire plight of The Fair Winds with her little son. She and her husband Woodford had signed on to this venture to enhance their credentials in xeno-crossbiometric analysis, not to die in deep space. After 15 months there was talk of just opening all the hatches and Getting It Over With. Samantha privately wondered if the crew had plans to jettison the passengers and use all the life support for themselves.

“Honey, I'm home.” Woodford Smythe stepped into their small but austere living quarters.

“Daddy, you stink.” Little Eldon had been taught to tell the truth, so he always said exactly what he thought.

“Daddy had to take care of Molly and Jack. You don't want our horses to go hungry, do you?” Woodford absolutely detested caring for the two Belgian horses in the hold of The Fair Winds. The only reason they were included was that there had been some money left in the budget. Belgian horses are gigantic creatures, originally bred to carry knights into battle. In more recent times they were used to pull heavy loads in situations where it is not feasible to use machinery.

“Daddy, can I ride them?” Eldon was already learning the art of turning a conversation to his advantage.

Woodford suppressed a shudder. This morning Molly had tried to pin him against the fence in her pen. She could have squished him like a bug. You have to be smarter than the horse, because you for sure aren't bigger or quicker.

The Smythe family started to get ready for dinner. The food on the Fair Winds was pretty good, since everyone agreed that the oxygen would give out first. Talk turned to trivial things. Little Eldon was pretty cute, and that kept the conversation going.

Chapter 3

The Distinguished Professor Lively continued to speak. And speak and speak. Frank Mills listened attentively. Sitting straight in the chair, eyes directed toward the speaker, he **dared** anybody to prove he was not listening. In actuality, all this talk about the past was turning his thoughts to his own past, when he first started learning the history of his native planet Altgeld. Back to that day at school..

“Children, when did The Fair Winds land on Altgeld?” Miss Vaught looked at the class, wondering which of the children would know the answer.

“The first day.” Little Johnny raised his hand and immediately blurted out the answer.

Miss Vaught was pleased. “Yes, Johnny, that is right. The day The Fair Winds landed on Altgeld is called day one of year one.”

Johnny Johnson said nothing. He had no idea that was really the answer, he was just trying to get a laugh from everyone. Getting something right was a new experience for him. Too much of this could ruin his reputation.

Miss Vaught turned her attention back to the class. Some of these kids you had to watch every second. “And how many people were there on The Fair Winds?”

Nelson Jones raised his hand. He waited until Miss Vaught nodded at him even though he was really eager to tell the answer. “Four hundred and ninety-two.”

Miss Vaught went on the offensive. Turning to Frank she asked “Frank, how many of these are you descended from?” When Miss Vaught turned her baleful eye on you, you had better sit up straight and pay attention and have the right answer.

But Frank did know the answer. Sitting up as straight as he could he proudly announced “All of them.” Yes, it was documented, Frank Mills was descended from all four hundred and ninety-two persons who walked off The Fair Winds on that day. As were his mother and father and brother and sister. Actually 98.4 percent of the people on Altgeld were descended from all the Four Hundred And Ninety-Two. Visitors from off-world often commented that a lot of people kind of looked alike.

Miss Vaught resumed her lecture voice. It was getting up into the afternoon, and you had to assert yourself to keep these kids under control. “The Fair Winds set out in search of academic freedom. They endured many perils before coming to the planet where we now live. After they arrived they immediately set about making the planet fit for them and their children to live on...”

Everybody laughed at something Professor Lively said. Frank laughed too, because it was expected. He did not actually hear the joke, but it did not much matter. You listen politely and laugh when you are supposed to. Soon they would be hearing some real information, probably in the next meeting.

Chapter 4

“I tell you I am going to strangle those horses myself. Do you have any idea how much they *breathe*?”

Woodford Smythe regarded Mike Paulson silently. Oxygen was becoming an emotional topic. Normally you could just ignore Mike's self-serving hysterics. This was not normally. Woodford had observed that Mike was about a week and a half ahead of the rest of the ship's company in terms of getting all worked up about something. And you could not really accuse Mike of stirring up dissent because all of them really were on a ship lost in deep space with life support failing.

“Go ahead and strangle the horses. They are huge Belgian horses and both your limp pale hands would not fit around one of their necks. Besides that they are both mean as hell, especially Molly. They will kill you dead and then there will be a little more life support for me.”

How best to bug Mike? Woodford knew just what to do. “We had a meeting a while back about the horses. First of all, no one was sure how we could kill them with the equipment on board. Computers don't kill very many things that size. But the biggest issue was what to do with the bodies. Two dead things that size would contaminate the air in this ship horribly, so the bodies would have to be disposed of immediately. Vent them out into space, obviously. The only airlock big enough to put them in is on the main hatch, which is on the starboard side. And by venting them out that hatch, we would lose all the oxygen in the airlock, since the pump for that airlock has quit working. We did the arithmetic, and we save a lot of oxygen by just leaving them down there breathing in and out.”

Mike was suddenly alert. “When was this meeting? I was not notified. I demand a complete and through explanation.”

Woodford grinned his biggest grin. “Mike that was when you were in the brig. I think it was for ... just being yourself.”

Mike decided to switch from furious to friendly. “Woody, buddy, I heard that the crew has a plan to open every hatch in The Fair Winds to space and Be Done With It. I even heard there is a special override programmed into the computer that only the Captain knows anything about. He enters this code and whom, we're all dead.

Woodson looked at Mike for another long second. He hated being called “Woody” and he sure was not Mike Paulson's buddy. But then he did speak.

“What I wonder is if the crew has some kind of plan to get rid of us passengers and then use the life support for themselves. In times like this a lot of people look out for number one and nobody else.”

Mike's eyes bugged out a little as he absorbed this entirely plausible scenario. “When that happens we have to all stand together, shoulder to shoulder, nose to the grindstone, power to the people.”

Mike turned to go. “I need to start organizing the passengers. It isn't right for one group to take all the oxygen for themselves. There are more passengers than crew, I know that. If we strike first, we can get rid of the crew and run the ship ourselves. You spread the word too, Woody buddy.”

Eldon Smythe quietly played with his toys. It seemed like wherever he went, it was kind of stinky. To get his mind off that, he had asked his Mommy to tell him about the twin worlds of Calder and Grant. He always enjoyed hearing about their destination. But Mommy had taken him to his room and told him to play with his toys. So here he sat playing with his toys.

“Woah!!” Senior Navigator Wayne Hubert immediately regretted his outburst. He had already been told he would be the first person to die on *The Fair Winds*. But since he was also the only Navigator, Wayne hoped that he would not be the very first to die.

Ok, take the time to clean your glasses and look at it again. Yes, it was a yellow star, the type that *could* have a livable planet.

Captain Samuels strode over to the Navigator's station. “Anything to report, Navigator.” Captain Samuels was afraid to be hopeful so he did not use a question mark.

“Yellow sun. Two points off the port beam. A hundred light years, very approximately.” That was Navigator talk for “Left of the ship, a long ways away.”

“Do you see any planets?” This time Captain Samuels could not keep the question out of his voice. Captain Samuels had four days to live, just like everyone else. He had once watched this documentary about the last week of a man on death row. The poor wretch had spent the whole week staring at the clock.

“Too far away to tell, sir. For that we need to be no more than 10 light years away.”

“Helm, come about and make your course two points off the port beam.” The captain saw that the helmsman was already changing course without waiting for orders. He decided not to make an issue of it.

Chapter 5

“Frank!! Over here!”

Frank stopped and looked across the street. There waving at him was his cousin Louise McCune. He waved back feebly and started across the street. He was careful to look both ways so that his time travel adventure would not be short circuited by an accident in the present. Unfortunately there was no traffic in either direction, so he soon joined Louise on her side of the street.

“Frank! What have you been doing? I haven't seen you in ages.”

Frank groped for a good way to answer. He did not think it would be a good idea to tell Louise about time travel.

“I've been busy.”

“I was talking to your mother just the other day. She said you had joined some kind of thing.”

No telling what kind of story Louise had gotten from his mother. “This is an exclusive, by invitation only, group. There were only a few places available.”

Frank wondered why he did not want to tell Louise about time travel. Maybe she would not believe him and think he was crazy like old Uncle Wayne. Frank wondered how much he really believed it. Better not ponder **that** too long. And Louise was talking again.

“Your Mom said it was some kind of research, or maybe you were going to be looking for something.”

It did not help that he had lied to his mother and now he was not real sure what he had said. “We are going to be prospecting for Californium in the third asteroid belt. They wanted to keep it kind of quiet so the competition would not get there first.”

As far as Frank knew Californium was a radioactive element with few practical uses. At least the third asteroid belt was at the very edge of the Altgeld solar system, so that would explain a long absence.

“I hope it's not dangerous.” Bless her heart, she was concerned for him. “And it seems so different from what you had been doing with historical research in the Heroic Period.”

“Oh, I'm not just a Historian. I have many far reaching interests.”

Frank looked around for a way to divert the conversation. He was rewarded with seeing Betsy Neuman coming down the sidewalk.

“Look Louise! There is Betsy Neuman, my academic adviser.”

Betsy spotted the pair. “Frank! I did not expect to see you downtown. And who is this pretty girl you're talking to?”

“This isn't a girl, it's my cousin.”

Hopefully Louise knew what he meant. “Betsy helped me get into advanced historical regression analysis when everybody else was telling me to just take philosophy instead. She really helped me out of that tight spot.”

The two women started chatting about purple widgets or clothes or some kind of girl thing. After a couple of minutes Frank excused himself and made his way to the bank. He needed to fill out an account stasis form, which was standard practice for anyone going off-world. He was not exactly going off-world, but that was as much of the truth as he was prepared to tell.

Chapter 6

“Captain Samuels, we are at 10 light years from the star. You said to wake you the minute we got to that point. Sir.”

“I’ll be right there, Navigator.”

Navigator Hubert switched off the intercom. Captain Samuels was always crisp and businesslike no matter what time of ship's day or night it was.

First Mate Hutchings casually strolled over to the Navigator's station. “That man will come in here at practically a run, bright eyed and bushy tailed. Never mind that it's the middle of ship's night. I don't think he ever sleeps.”

The disgraced Navigator was not inclined to reply. He was saved from having to say anything when in hustled Captain Samuels, all business.

“Navigator, commence mid-range scanning. Helm, come about and turn our beam to the yellow star. Ahead, dead slow.”

A starship is a little like a submarine in that to examine its surroundings most effectively, it needs to slow down or stop. A submarine makes noise as it travels through the water, and any extra noise hinders the sonar operator. In the same way, a starship creases the structure of the space-time continuum as it folds space in its dimensional translator. You can imagine how that messes up the scanners!

The Navigator obediently switched on the mid-range scanners. Navigator, Captain and First Mate watched as the mid-range scanners plotted out their findings.

“Yellow star, stable.”

Captain Samuels was in no mood for small talk. “We knew that from the long range scanners. What else do you see?”

That was a very rhetorical question since all three men were standing there looking at the mid-range scanner display. Nonetheless, the Navigator decided to reply.

“Extensive asteroid belt at the edge of the system.”

“Asteroid belt. I feel better already. We don't need no stinkn' class M planets when we have an asteroid belt.” The First Mate was a little on edge.

“Multiple gas giants, a few comets.” The Navigator thought it best to summarize a bit.

“Request more power for the mid-range scanners.”

Captain Samuels did not deign to reply, but he reached past the Navigator and turned the Power knob all the way to the right.

“Scan is at one AU from the star”. An AU is the distance of the Earth from the sun. An Earth none of them would ever see again. A sun whose warmth they would never again feel on their faces. Yes, the Navigator was being careful not to say everything that came to mind.

“Showing ...” The Navigator suddenly fell silent. There on the display were cold hard facts:

Planet Class : M

Distance from star: .998472 AU

Atmosphere: Oxygen/Nitrogen/Carbon Dioxide/Xenon/Crypton.

Nobody wanted to say anything, for fear they would wake up and they would be that much closer to dead. Finally Captain Samuels went into action.

“Helm, plot a course for that planet.” By now everyone knew that a Class M planet had been sighted. Class M as in oxygen atmosphere and maybe we won't suffocate after all. The helmsman turned The Fair Winds in the intended direction without asking for any kind of clarification.

“Full speed ahead.”

“Approaching orbital range, Captain.” The Navigator read dutifully from the display they were all watching.

“Helm, hold your course.” ordered Captain Samuels with what he hoped was his usual clipped efficiency. He had checked the life support countdown - the real one - just before leaving his cabin a few minutes ago. He had an almost overpowering urge to look at it again.

The First Mate spoke up. “There is some kind of structure on the surface. It almost looks like a castle.”

No one took the trouble to answer. In a moment the First Mate opened his mouth again. “In universities in Illinois there are castle-like buildings, all named after a former governor named Altgeld. I went to Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, and there was an Altgeld building there.”

Finally the Captain and Navigator both turned to look at the First Mate. The man had such a compelling idiocy that they were both drawn from their vital work just to look at him.

“Maybe we could name this planet Altgeld, after the castle.” So it was that the dim-witted First Mate named the planet that was to be their home.

“Navigator, do you see any big open areas?”

“Uh, yes, Captain, right there.” The Navigator painted the area with the targeting laser.

“Put it down, right in the middle of the big open area.”

The university-educated First Mate spoke up. “Captain, it is standard protocol to orbit the planet and do a complete forty-nine point analysis. Then we have to follow with a Jefferson-Dugenstrader sweep for intelligent life so we do not violate the Prime Directive.”

“I said put this ship down! If you don't, I'll kill you before I kill the Navigator! Then I'll just land it myself.” Captain Samuels had reached the end of his patience.

So down came the Fair Winds. It takes a while to bring down a starship onto a planet with an atmosphere. Captain Samuels understood this, and he did not try to hurry this part at all. At last The Fair Winds was hovering about a hundred yards above what appeared to be a grassy meadow.

“Down there, right in the middle. Slow and steady.”

The Fair Winds touched the soil of Altgeld. After a few seconds the gravitational repulsors cut off and the full weight of the ship rested on the planet.

Nothing in particular happened. Nothing can be a very good thing to happen.

Captain Samuels walked to his command chair. Standing by the left arm, he pressed a button and said “Commence protocol Zebulon Omega. Cascade. Stat.”

Whoom! The main hatch flung itself open. Whoom! The secondary hatch, located near the stern, also opened with explosive force.

Next to open was the auxiliary secondary hatch, which was at the very nose of The Fair Winds. Then internal doorways started to open of their own accord. It was a huge article of faith in a starship that interior doorways were to be kept sealed when not actually in use. But now they were opening all by themselves. Last to open were the reinforced doors opening onto the bridge. In a moment the bridge crew felt a breeze. They were breathing the air of Altgeld for the first time.

Captain Samuels strode from the bridge of The Fair Winds. What is most significant is that he did **not** say, "You have the conn, Mister Hutchings". There was no longer a conn for anyone to have. The Fair Winds would never lift from the planet Altgeld.

Captain Samuels went directly to the main hatch. He looked out the open hatch at the green, slightly rolling landscape. He did not step onto the green meadow below because he had forgotten to program extending the ramp. A suicide program of opening the ship to the vacuum of space does not need to extend the ramp. As it happened, the same program was useful for opening the ship to the clean air of Altgeld.

The Captain sensed a presence behind him. He turned, and there was Mike Paulson. Mike began without preamble. "Tell me Captain, was that the same program you were going to use to give everyone a quick death?"

Captain Samuels did not answer directly. He took off his personal chronometer and found the secret display. The secret display that showed how much life support was really left. He showed it to Mike and said "I decided we needed to start breathing the local air right away."

Mike looked at the readout:

Life support left: 2 hours 56 minutes.

Chapter 7

“Hello. My name is Betsy Neuman and I want to welcome all of you to the temporal-displacement intermediate focal point.”

Nelson nudged his old friend Frank. “What did she just say?”

“Welcome to the time travel center.” shouted Timmy.

“It would not have hurt her to just say that,” muttered Nelson.

“That's what she said! Woo-ho!!” That was Timmy's answer to a lot of things.

“Quiet both of you.” said Frank as softly as he could. With that he tried to turn his attention to the speaker.

“And now I present to you the genius who discovered the principles underlying time travel. Let's have a big round of applause for Jesse Plowshare.”

Jesse Plowshare came to the podium. He was probably young, but he moved almost as slowly as old Professor Lively. He stepped behind the podium but it came up to his eyebrows. After a second he just stood beside it.

“When you transmorgify the underpinnings of the space-time continuum, you get vectors of tempostational energy in the places where there are usually temporal constants. This is why if you want to change the past it just causes a paradox with null effectiveness.”

The time travelers were all young men. They were either still in school or not out of school for very long. They were used to sitting through all kinds of lectures they did not really understand or care about. So they settled in for another boring lesson.

Frank was vaguely aware of something going on at the back of the room. Suddenly Jesse's microphone quit working. Then Betsy rushed to the front, all apologetic. “Jesse, I'm *really* sorry our sound system just quit like that. No, don't ruin your voice by trying to talk without a mike. Thanks, thank you so much.”

Once Jesse had left the stage, she continued. “I'll just try to make myself heard without a sound system. There are some basic things that you have to agree to if you want to participate in this program. Timmy, do be quiet.

“First of all, time travel must remain a closely guarded secret. There could be all sorts of problems if everyone knew about this. If you quit the program and try to tell the world about time travel, we'll just say you are crazy. The pressure of graduate work finally got to you. Or you always did have a screw loose, even as a kid.

“Once you return we will allow you to use certain information from your travels in your doctoral dissertations. The time travel aspect will be downplayed until the public has had time to become accustomed to the idea.”

Frank Mills absorbed this information. It was good that he had lied to his mother and his cousin Louise and whoever else. But this still would be the adventure of a lifetime. That was how he was first approached for time travel, 'the adventure of a lifetime'. Some who had been initially approached for time travel were later deemed unsuitable. Those were sent on a really nice ski trip, and they were blissfully unaware that they had missed a chance to go back in time.

Frank realized that he was not a kid any more. The time for big adventures and summer camps was about over. He would do this one extraordinary journey before he had to Settle Down and Be Responsible.

Speaking of which, Ms. Neuman was still speaking.

“Another thing is that you simply must **not** change the past.

“I think Jesse was saying that it would not matter, since then you in our present time would no longer know that whatever it was “needed fixed”. At least we think that is what he was saying, to the extent we ever understand anything he says.

“But we don't really **know** what might happen if you interfere with some historical turning point. If for instance you assassinate General Armstrong or if you change the Battle of Overall, it could have far-reaching implications. If you have any questions about this aspect, do come see me afterwards.”

Frank leaned close to his friend Nelson. “Come see me so we can toss you out of the program.”

“The next thing is that you are not to ever step out of character. This is ..”

“Hey! Who are you to say how I am to react with people I meet in the past?” This was good old Dick Burlington. He was the type of man who was not happy unless he was unhappy.

At first Betsy just looked down at Dick the way she might look at someone who just does not get it. This mixture of pity and horror was the same thing she had used on Frank when he had asked if he could take only the courses that were interesting to him. After a moment she spoke.

“*Mister Burlington*, this is something for your own protection. The people in the past do not know about time travel. People in the present can't be trusted with that knowledge either, you will remember. The people you encounter in the Heroic Age are ill-educated and they will have little patience for things they do not understand. If you start saying 'I am from the future.' they just might decide you are a pathizer.

The whole group giggled nervously at the obscenity. Nelson turned to Frank. “Remember that day at school? Johnny yelled *that* out on the playground. Nobody knew what it meant.”

“Including Johnny, I think. I don't think Miss Vaught ever found out about it. The whole school would have been in trouble.” Frank remembered, all right.

Betsy Neuman was struggling to regain control of the meeting. “I think you are big boys now. And if profanity bothers you, you had better not venture into the past. The people of this time were very rough and ready. They lived close to the edge at best, and they had no time for niceties. Furthermore, we are not sure how many could even read and write. If a person cannot read, he gets his information from things he hears people say. If you stand out from the crowd or seem somehow odd, it could go hard with you.

“Now the next point. If you die back there in the past, you are dead. Permanently and forever, glory glory halleluiah, amen. No difference than if something happened to you in the present.”

Dick Burlington was on his feet again. “That can't be right. If someone gets killed, we can just go back right before it happens and stop it from happening. What do you say?” With the last statement, he looked to the rest of the time travelers for support.

Betsy fixed him with a glare that would freeze flowing lava. “NO! Any attempt to do that would set off a dual-causality feedback loop which could destroy anyone and everyone associated with time travel.”

Betsy held her microphone in front of one of the huge speakers on the stage. A loud surge of feedback had everybody covering their ears. “In the same way that feedback from a microphone just keeps growing, any attempt to do a rescue would create cascading catastrophic consequences.

We cannot and we will not perform any rescues.”

“Especially if it's you, Dick.” That was from Timmy and it got a big laugh.

Frank realized that the sound system was working now. When did that happen?

Betsy decided it was time to close the meeting. “That's all for now. Pick up your individual packets and start learning your cover story. Boot camp starts tomorrow.”

Chapter 8

“Line up!! Be quiet!! You, did you memorize your cover story? Speak up!!”

Horace Wilson was not sure how to react. In front of him was Tracy Stevens. Normally Tracy was a cute little archivist at the University of Altgeld. Today she was dressed in olive green and was doing her best to get in Horace's face.

“Yes, ma'm I have.” Said Horace in his unassuming way. I have read the whole thing.” Horace was quiet and unassuming by nature and today was no exception.

“What is she doing? I mean in her own mind.” asked Frank of his lifelong friend Nelson.

Nelson kept his voice low. “Remember, they are trying to make this like basic training in the Altgeld Defense Forces. That is the reason for the olive green outfits. That is why Tracy was trying to stick her pert little nose in Horace's face.”

She was short and Horace was tall, so it was not working as well as it did in the movies. Fighting the urge to jump up so she could look him in the eye, she grabbed the papers from his hand.

“Now, Mister 'I have read my cover story', let's see how good you do. Where are you from?”

“I am from a little place called Elm Branch, as is Frank here. My Dad runs a general store there, and my Aunt Cora is the postmaster.” Said Horace in him slow and deliberate way. He was a slow and deliberate man.

“Alright, country boy, where exactly is this Elm Branch? You had better know, don't you think?”

Horace Wilson dropped out of character just a fraction. “Elm Branch is nearly a third of the way around Altgeld from the frontier where you are going to insert us. I can just say it is up in Superior Altgeld.”

Tracy was looking for a way to get Horace rattled, but she was not finding it. “And what will you do when some country bumpkin says 'Hey, I'm from Superior Altgeld and I shore never heard tell of no place like that.'?”

Horace now dropped all the way out of character. “Tracy, there *is* a place called Elm Branch. *Is* meaning right now and I am from there. There is objective documentation that it was already settled in late Heroic times, right after The Turmoil. What is more, family tradition tells me that Elm Branch was settled from the time of the Dispersal, when people were first spreading out from Landington. That would be *early* Heroic times. So in late Heroic times there *was* an Elm Branch, up in Superior Altgeld.”

Tracy now realized that she was not going to get Horace flustered any more than she was going to stop Timmy from laughing at her. He was lying on the ground in hysterics, unable to do anything more than point at poor Tracy.

Time to try something else. “Ok, all you blowflies, gather round. We are going to have a quick lesson in Altgeld history. For that we have none other than Professor Edgar Lively, the Grand Old Man of Altgeld historical studies.”

Professor Edgar Lively slowly shuffled to the front of the group. Since the time travelers were already sitting on the ground, no one made them stand up. Professor Lively looked around for a moment and then he began to speak.

“This is a refresher course in Altgeld history, for those of you who were busy looking at the girls the first time you had this.”

Everyone laughed dutifully. Then Dick Burlington spoke up. "I demand to know what a blowfly is. It is an infringement of ...Oof!"

Dick had not intended to say *Oof*, but when Timmy elbows you hard in the ribs, *Oof* is what you say.

Professor Lively used this opportunity to resume his lecture. "Altgeld history is divided into two basic eras - Heroic and Modern. The Heroic era starts when the Fair Winds first touched the surface of Altgeld. This includes the exploration and settlement and the long conflict with the hssswwx.

"The Heroic era ends when the last hssswwx died, in the Beaucoup Valley. The Modern era extends to the present time.

"There are gaps in the history of Altgeld. Towards the end of the Heroic era there are few written records. The standard answer for this is that humanity was having a hard time of it. Food was in short supply, and the war against the hssswwx was stalled. And we know sometime in the late Heroic era there was a climactic battle which assured human supremacy. This battle is now called The Battle of Overall. Where and when exactly it occurred, this is a matter for debate. We are sending you back to a time when The Battle of Overall may have occurred. In spite of what *some* of you think, this trip back in time has a serious purpose, to answer questions about our past.

"I should get back to what we do know for sure. When The Fair Winds touched down on our planet, it was by definition... day one, year one."

Frank and Nelson stole a glance at each other, and smiled. Yes, they remembered that time in school when Johnny had accidentally blurted out the right answer about day one, year one. This put Frank in a mood to remember his first lessons about Altgeld history. Yes, good old Miss Vaught ...

"Our ancestors disembarked from the Fair Winds with the hope of making a better life for themselves and their children. They had little to work with. Horses made the difference between success and failure. All horses on Altgeld are descended from Jack and Molly."

Miss Vaught was telling them what every child on Altgeld was taught about their origins. Frank was probably about 8 or 9 terrestrial years at the time. This was too young to be interested in girls, so he was paying attention.

"At first the hssswwx were friendly. They were going to share the planet with our ancestors. But then the hssswwx turned mean and ungrateful. All attempts at negotiation failed, and there was a war which lasted for many years. Finally humanity won the war, and now this planet is ours.

Frank thought of something, and he raised his hand. "Miss Vaught, what did the hssswwx look like?"

"Frank, that is a good question. Nobody really knows. There are no photographs of them. There are a few drawings which people made back then. We do know that they had six limbs. We have two arms and two legs. The hssswwx had either two arms and four legs or four arms and two legs. The front two limbs were always used as arms. The middle two limbs could be used as either arms or legs. The back limbs were always used for legs, either by themselves or with the middle two. When using four limbs for legs, a hssswwx could run about as fast as a horse."

Something brought Frank back to the present, where he was listening to Professor Lively. Professor Lively was telling a really funny story about two Historians getting in a fight.

"Johnstone said 'The Battle Of Overall was a definite event which occurred at a particular time'. (Johnstone held the majority view among historians.) Smythington said 'Don't be such a traditionalist. The Battle ff Overall is a term for the gradual ascendancy of humankind over the hssswwx. It was very gradual, and the people living at a particular time did not see any kind of turning point.' (Smythington was a Revisionist.

Revisionists do not accept the commonly held views and they **really** do not like Professor Lively.)

“Johnstone said 'You must have got your Ph.D from a community college.' Smythington said 'You are just plain ugly.' It took the rest of the Coordination Committee to keep them apart. To this day there is a court order that they have to keep at least 640 yards apart.

“What you need to remember is that there is no clear history of the late Heroic Era. While you have spent a lot of time learning our commonly accepted history, it may not really be like that. When you find out something was actually a different way, don't try to say 'Old Man Lively said it happened this way.'

Preparing for time travel is more than listening to me. Now you will learn how to pass for a farm boy.”

Chapter 9

“Helm, extend the main hatch ramp.”

Captain Samuels waited for the ramp to extend. And waited.

“Bridge, respond. Is anyone there?”

“This is the *Navigator*. I am the only one on the bridge.” barked the disgraced Navigator.

“Very well. Extend the main hatch ramp.” replied Captain Samuels crisply. Discipline was indeed breaking down.

“You said that you were going to make me walk the plank.” was the Navigator's petulant reply.

Captain Samuels needed to set his feet on the planetary surface. He did not have time to go back in and deal with this. So Captain Samuels gave this reply:

“If you extend the main hatch ramp I'll walk down it and it'll be me walking the plank.” Yes, Captain Samuels was getting soft in his old age.

After a moment the ramp did extend. Captain Samuels strode down the ramp and walked down onto the soft springy turf. It felt like a flowerbed with fresh mulch, very easy in the feet. The starship captain wondered how much different it would be leading people who were spread out on a planet.

The gently rolling plain could almost have passed for a golf course. The vegetation was no more than half an inch high. There were some small conical trees scattered about. Captain Samuels thought of Christmas trees, and he laughed out loud at the thought. When he was a boy growing up on a small farm, his father would take them out in the woods every December, and they would cut a small pine tree to use for their Christmas tree.

“Captain, the air recyclers are shutting down.” The Captain's com intruded on his thoughts.

“Open the inner hatch so the outside air can blow in. Then gather your personal effects and meet me at the bottom on the main ramp.”

Some of the crew would have to be dragged out into the fresh air and sunshine. Or maybe they could just stay in the dead ship. Captain Samuels would have to make some harsh choices about what resources if any the ship-stayers could have.

Best to turn his gaze outward. Could it be that they had a completely empty world in which they could play golf and decorate Christmas trees? In the distance were some kind of larger creatures running along in a group. Now they were gone. Time to deal with them later.

“Bridge crew, assemble at the main hatch. Make sure and wear sturdy shoes.” First he would take his inner circle on a little walkabout. This time they would stay close to the ship. What to do after that - well, it just depended.

“First Speaker, we desire communication, most urgently.”

First Speaker stirred his segmented body in such a way as to suggest irritation. First Speaker was supposed to be the one who spoke first. But these things seldom worked the way that the hatchlings were taught they should.

“And what has you so excited that both your tongues are moving at once?”

“First Speaker, something has come from the sky. We do not know what it is.”

So those who desired communication most urgently wished to play the game 24 questions. First Speaker would have to play a hatchling game to discover what had happened. Best to get started.

“This thing which came from the sky - is it bigger than I am?” First Speaker fixed both his primary eyes on Fifth One, who seemed to speak for the group.

Fifth One was a little shaken by this direct gaze, but she did manage to answer “Yes, First Speaker, it is bigger than you are.”

“Very well, is it bigger than all of us put together?” First Speaker let his primary and secondary eyes roam over the whole group, which consisted of Fifth One, Speaker for the Lesser Ones, and Seventeenth One.

This time Seventeenth One spoke. “Yes, First Speaker, it is bigger than all of us put together. It is as big as the great meeting-place and light reflects off it and it makes strange noises which we do not understand.”

First Speaker thought of a time earlier in his life when he was One Who Says Things to Hatchlings. Those half-grown hatchlings would tell you the most impossible things in the hopes that you would believe it, if only for a moment. But this did not seem to be that type of thing. And if it was, he would see to it that this group would spend many cycles in the waste-pits.

“Is this place far? Can we get there quickly if we run on four legs?”

“Yes, First Speaker it is near. It is on the big flat place.”

“Fifth One, show us the way.” First Speaker knew perfectly well the location of the big flat place. But there was symbolic value in making Fifth One lead the way.

The little group set out, all of them running on four legs. If the distance was short or if there was no hurry, they might run on two legs. But this time they ran on four legs and soon they were near the big flat place.

“There is an opening in the side. I think something has come out of it.” Fifth One was not at all happy about this.

First Speaker indicated that they were to approach no closer. Indeed here was something strange.

Captain Samuels paused to survey the landscape. He had led this little group most of the way around The Fair Winds in this very preliminary survey, to begin to claim this planet for their own. It would have been more impressive if they were not bunched together like a bunch of baby ducks, each one trying to hide behind the others. Navigator Wayne Hubert was staying very close to First Mate Jack Hutchings. First Mate Jack Hutchings kept trying to act sick so that Doctor Harney, the ship's surgeon, would send him back aboard the Fair Winds. And so on.

“What's that? Over there.” Woodford Smythe pointed to a place a ways past the main ramp, which had been extended from the main hatch.

Captain Samuels looked over there. More golf course. No wait, there were some things moving, things that had not been there before. There were four of them. They were long and wormy looking, and Captain Samuels was pretty sure they had more than four limbs. It seemed that they carried themselves with purpose.

He knew. All of a sudden Captain Samuels **knew** that these were sentient beings, the inhabitants of this planet that they had just named Altgeld. He and the ones with him would have to put one foot in front of the other and walk over to these creatures and make contact.

“Look sharp everyone; we're going to have a First Contact.”

First Mate Jack Hutchings spoke up. “Remember, we had a class on First Contact back at Southern Illinois University. We have the film in the ship’s library. We should go back in the ship and study it to be sure we do this right.”

“Mister Hutchings, our new friends did not take that class. None of that matters. Follow me everyone.”

“Look! A bunch of them! They have only two legs and two arms!!”

That reminded First Speaker of a bad joke told by half-grown hatchlings. Which reminded him of why he was no longer One Who Says Things to Hatchlings. But now they had to deal with this. First Speaker saw that those with too few limbs were coming their way. The one in front was moving rapidly, with the others coming behind in a group.

“Move slow and easy, everybody. We are going to walk over and meet them.”

First Speaker and those with him began to move towards the strange looking creatures. Even though they were moving slowly, they all walked on four feet. For moving slowly, they might have chosen a more upright stance, walking on only their back two legs. But by walking on four feet, they were in a better position to run away really quick. If it came to that.

Captain Samuels could see that these beings with two arms and four legs were moving towards them. He had no doubt that these were sentient creatures. But then Captain Samuels was a straight-ahead guy, who had few doubts about anything.

How to convey that the humans came in peace, did not want any trouble? The basic problem was that there was no common frame of reference. These natives had not grown up in the same neighborhood as Captain Samuels, had not heard the same jokes. Maybe if he approached these wormy creatures with empty hands and arms open, that would look friendly and harmless.

First Speaker and those who had brought him the news came to a halt. Captain Samuels took one more step and then he stopped too.

Captain Samuels decided it was time to spread his arms wide, with empty hands facing towards - whatever they were. His pistol would stay in the holster unless things went really bad.

First Speaker watched Captain Samuels with both primary eyes, all three secondary eyes and all six tertiary eyes. Now this *thing* with not enough legs was standing there like he wanted a hug. Maybe later. But First Speaker did know that some kind of response would be expected of him. Maybe he would do the same thing. So First Speaker raised his body so that the first and second pairs of limbs were free and he spread four arms wide.

Captain Samuels decided he needed to say something. “Greetings. I am Captain Samuels and I and my crew represent the United Conglomeration of Planets. We come in peace and we look forward to a long and profitable relationship.”

There was silence. Captain Samuels fervently hoped that the words he had spoken were not vile curses in these creatures’ language. His Mother had taught him that he should talk some and then be quiet and let other people talk. For all intents and purposes, these long wormy beings *were* people.

The silence stretched on. There was no wind and if there was any wildlife it was being very quiet. Suddenly there was a childish voice.

“Hi Daddy.”

Everyone turned their eyes toward The Fair Winds. Whether they had two eyes or a lot more than two eyes, they all turned their eyes toward The Fair Winds.

It was three year old Eldon Smythe. He was in his mother's arms, and she standing with a group of people in the open main hatch. He was grinning ear to ear and was waving at his Father, who was standing in the group clustered behind Captain Samuels. Little Eldon Smythe had absolutely no idea that this was one of the very few true First Contact events in the history in the human race. He was just glad to see his Daddy!

First Speaker opened his primary vocal orifice. The sound he made sounded - at least to human ears- sibilant and hissing.

Jack Hutchings spoke up. *His* voice was whiny and grating. “They just said something. I think he's trying to say who they are. It sounded like he was saying 'hssswx'. So it was that the First Mate named both the planet and the original inhabitants.

Chapter 10

“Look alive, farm boys. Today you learn how to milk a cow.” Tracy Stephens was quite cheerful about the whole thing.

“You will arrive in a time when ninety-four percent of the population lived on farms. That is really the only plausible cover story you can have. How many of you know where milk comes from?”

“The store.” muttered Timmy, not all that softly.

Tracy ignored Timmy's comment. The wild look in his eye did put people off. “Frank, you step up. Look at these animals here. Which one is the cow?”

Frank Mills stepped up in front of the other time-travel cadets. There in a line were a horse, a brown cow with curly horns, and two chickens. And at the end of the line was pert little Tracy, waiting for Frank to point out the cow. Frank's gaze lingered on Tracy a little too long. She was pert and cute, very easy to look at a little too long. She noticed him noticing her, and spoke right up.

“No, Frank, *I* am not the cow. The cow is the little brown animal with curly horns. Timmy, shut *up*. Now, Frank you get that three-legged stool, sit down beside the cow, and learn to milk her.”

Frank sat down on the three-legged stool. He thought the primitive looking stool would be rickety, but it sat firmly on the ground. He grasped the part of the cow that gave the milk. He squeezed. Nothing came out.

Frank **had** read his notes for this class. What could be wrong? He did not see any way that Tracy could be conspiring with the cow to make him look bad. He did not want to appeal to Tracy for help so he looked at his fellow time-travel cadets, who were lined up looking at him.

Timmy spoke up. “Grab the cow's teat and start squeezing at the top. Then squeeze down the middle and then the end. That forces the milk out.”

Frank was desperate enough to try Timmy's suggestion. It worked. The milk started coming into the pail. How did Timmy know this? It was not in the book, and Timmy was a city boy.

Everybody was pleased with Frank's success, and they broke into applause. That startled the cow, and she took off at a run. Frank was knocked off the little three-legged stool and the milk was spilled. Tracy was left to go chasing after the cow so the rest of the class could have a turn milking her.

Tracy was not the only instructor. Not by any means.

Timmy looked at his instructor. “What do you mean, your name is Paw?”

The instructor was unaffected by Timmy's skepticism. “The men and boys you will meet in the past were taught how to plow by their fathers. 'Paw', in other words. They will be talking about how mean and cruel Paw' was when he taught them to guide a plow and other common farm tasks.”

Timmy was still slightly nonplussed. “Ok, but what does that have to do with this silly name of yours?”

“You have to be able to talk about how harsh and cruel your Paw was. You have to do it from your heart, without sounding like you are making it up. So I am going to be harsh cruel and sadistic while teaching you to guide this one horse plow.” With that, Paw planted his foot in Timmy's backside, propelling him toward the one horse walking plow. It was waiting for Timmy, complete with one horse.

Timmy was confident that he could lie without any help. But it was easier by far to go along with the program.

“Stand behind the plow. Put the reins around your waist. Not too tight! Put your hands there. Now you're ready.”

There Timmy stood, holding onto a one horse walking plow. The horse was standing in front of the plow. Now they needed to go.

Paw waited a moment, then asked “Timmy, what do you say?”

Timmy brightened. Long ago, someone had tried to teach him manners. He remembered some of this. “Please.” said Timmy hopefully.

“**No!!** The horse does not go when you say please. You say gittey-up!! Then the horse will go.”

“Gittey-up!!” Timmy said as firmly as he could. The horse started to move, pulling the plow behind him.

“Plow straight!! Look behind you, see how crooked you are going!! Find a tree at the end of the field and aim for that!!” Paw was a wealth of wisdom on this topic.

Timmy ventured a question. “How good do I need to be at this? We are going to be fighting, not farming.”

Paw was unperturbed. “You never know what you will be called on to do. Best that you are prepared.”

Timmy continued to guide the horse and plow across the field. Yes, it did help to pick a landmark some distance away. You could steer the horse right or left by pulling a little on the reins. But how this really would help him in the past he could not see at all.

Worst off all were the conditioning drills. Frank actually looked forward to milking cows and shoeing horses and such because it gave him a break from the conditioning drills.

“Are you sure this is the type of conditioning we need?” Dick Burlington was skeptical.

“Yes pretty boy, this is exactly what you need.” The instructor gave his best squinty-eyed stare to the group. “We know what we are doing here.”

Frank spoke up. “I had an uncle who was in the Altgeld Defense Forces. Old Uncle Wayne talked quite a bit about it. His basic training was a lot of running and shooting his rifle. There was not really anything like this.”

This instructor waited a long moment. That is a simple way to get people anxious. Then he spoke.

“You boys are wondering why we made a huge field of mud and now you have to walk around in it all day long. By the way tomorrow you will be doing this carrying big pails of water and hay bales. You are learning how to walk in mud. You kind of hunch over and move your feet slowly. You learn not to go anywhere on a whim, because it takes so much effort, and after a while that colors your mental outlook.

“In the Heroic Age, there was a lot of mud. The farms were nothing but mud every time it rained. But the work had to go on. People on the farm learned to walk in mud. Even when they were on dry ground they still kind of walked like they were going through mud, with a stooped posture and plodding step. This is what we are teaching you. The real country boys in the Heroic Age would spot an impostor immediately just by the way he walked.

“We think most of the intellectuals and thinkers were from the cities, such cities as there were. If they think you are from the city they might think worse things of you. You don't want that.”

Chapter 11

Captain Samuels and First Speaker were conferring. At least Captain Samuels certainly hoped they were conferring. Lacking a common language, they were drawing pictures in the dirt with a stick. First Captain Samuels drew a large object that hopefully conveyed the idea of The Fair Winds. Then he drew stick figures with two arms and two legs.

At that point he handed the stick to First Speaker. They only had one stick, so they had to share. First Speaker drew stick figures with six appendages. Some were going about on two legs and had four arms they could use. Others were walking on four legs and had two arms. The middle pair could be either arms or legs, and that was puzzling to the humans.

The stick came back to Captain Samuels. It would be harder now. And what exactly *did* he want to say to these beings? Diplomacy is the art of talking while not saying very much. Since he lacked the means to convey any kind of complex concept, he would stay with basics. Captain Samuels drew more human stick figures. Some of them were further away from the blob that represented The Fair Winds. This was supposed to convey that the humans were going to spread over the planet. Now how could he draw a farm?

“Steady as it goes. Easy. Careful now, we have to get the horses off the ship.” Mike Paulson was a mass of unresolved anxiety.

“The horses are fine. It's you that is afraid to go down the ramp.” Woodford Smythe was in no mood to play therapist. His job these days was to handle the horses, and that is what he was going to do.

“I am **not** afraid to go down the ramp. I just want to be sure everything is going to be okay.”

“I'm bringing them down. Try to stay out of the way.”

Jack and Molly were led down the main ramp. Horses are used to being led here and there. The ramp was plenty wide for both of them, and the tri-cedesium composite material gave good footing.

Seventeenth One was restless. “I should be attempting to initiate a cross-species interpersonal dialog. But when I approach any of them, they walk away.”

“They probably are leaving it to their leader to talk to First Speaker. You could learn from that.” Fifth One was giving no sympathy.

The horses reached the bottom of the ramp. Woodford was not sure what to do next, so he left them standing there. Nobody was sure what to do next.

Seventeenth One saw an opportunity. “I will approach those two there. They are just standing there, so maybe they desire communication.”

Fifth One was skeptical. “Are sure about that? I see differences between these two and all the others.”

“These two have four legs like all the rest of the strangers. They might even be the masters, since they are just standing there not working. The rest of them are working pretty hard, but not these individuals.”

Seventeenth One approached these two individuals on her two rearmost legs, with her primary optical

receptors focused at a spot two cljyybb in front of her, to show respect. “I am Seventeenth One and I bring you greetings in the name of all the ones who do the things that others do not do.”

Jack and Molly stood there. Molly made a horsey sound and shook her mane. Jack wondered if he was going to get to eat some of the green stuff that was growing some distance away.

“In the name of those who would increase the greater zxxccvbb, I respectfully request communication. We will together tell things to all those who are to hear them.”

Seventeenth One thought it was going well. Several of the ones that always went about on two legs were standing nearby, watching this historic event. One was even extending a sub-appendage in the direction of Seventeenth One. This sign of respect made Seventeenth One very proud indeed.

Captain Samuels was also pleased. He had communicated some things to his counterpart. After drawing a lot of people, he had sketched houses, and people in them. The other leader had taken the stick and drawn more of his kind, further away from the humans and their ship. So they lived out in the open and did not use buildings.

They had taken a brief break, during which Captain Samuels sent word to get everyone back to work. He noticed that his new friend did something similar, sending a messenger to the one who seemed fascinated with the horses. Jack and Molly were once again standing by themselves.

The day was drawing to a close. What more should he, could he convey? Fantasy baseball was out of the question. Yes, he knew what to say. Captain Samuels took the stick and drew big heavy lines through The Fair Winds. They were here to stay, and the ship was not a part of their new life.

First Speaker was not happy. He kept getting the feeling that these visitors were not going to leave. It was customary that when tribes from far away met, each group would bring out some trade goods. It did not take a lot of shared language to point, meaning trade that for that. Usually items of no great value were exchanged, but it could be the basis for more meaningful relations.

Not so these creatures. Anything his tribe offered, they ignored. And they certainly did not offer anything of their own, either. Seventeenth One had not helped, trying to communicate with a couple of their pets.

Uh oh. The leader of the visitors just marked out the symbol for the *thing* (First Speaker had no word for a starship) that had brought them here. They were here for good!

Three weeks later

The crew of the Fair Winds had erected a cluster of prefab semi-permanent structures. They were all in a line of sight from the main ramp. Captain Samuels was reminded of a whiny child who did not want to leave his mommy. The Fair Winds actually did not offer much security these days. The environmental system was dead, and it got hot in the ship during the day. Personal effects and equipment that could be moved by hand were already in the prefab semi-permanent structures. They were looking for ways to salvage larger items, but it had reached a point of diminishing returns. Most of them would not enter the ship again.

“Captain Samuels, will you play with me?” came the childish voice. Bless his heart, it was little Eldon Smythe. Captain Samuels wondered what this seemed like to him. The adults were evenly divided between ‘I know we will be rescued’, and ‘I’m gonna *die* in this horrible place.’ Little Eldon just wanted to play ball.

So the Captain rolled the ball to him a few times. Soon Eldon was fascinated by some pebbles. A three-year-old has a limited attention span.

Here came First Mate Jack Hutchings. Captain Samuels did not mind him so much these days. Things were the way they were going to be, regardless of whether you liked it or not. You might as well like it.

“Mister Hutchings, have you thought of a name for our new town? You are the one who gives names to things in this our new place.”

Hutchings scowled. He realized that this honor of naming things was more of an insult than an honor. But it did give him a chance to leave his mark.

“I think it should be called Landington. It is the town in the place where we landed.”

Captain Samuels nodded. The name would do. Now here came First Speaker and his crew. They had achieved a lot in terms of being able to communicate. It had gone slow at first. The breakthrough came when Captain Samuels kicked the linguist off the team and had put him to digging ditches. Now each species could speak certain words and be understood by the other.

The previous day they had agreed to the basics of a treaty. They had parted company, agreeing to meet again the next day. If both parties said the same things as the day before, there was an agreement.

First Speaker was flanked by a kind of honor guard. They were carrying long spears, held at an angle. That was fine, Captain Samuels's honor guard had assault rifles slung over their shoulders. The Fair Winds had contained four assault rifles, and they were on display today.

First Speaker stepped slightly away from his group. “Greetings, Captain. We come here today to agree to an agreement, as we agreed the day before today. “

The human leader was relieved to hear 'agree'. The four assault rifles had twenty-seven rounds between them all. He was sure First Speaker had more spears than that. Now it was his turn to speak.

“We agree to agree with the hssswwx, and to respect their grasslands. Humans will live in Landington.” The Captain waved his hand in the general direction of Landington and The Fair Winds. “Our spears will not harm the hssswwx, and if we can help the hssswwx, we will do so.”

First Speaker was not happy. The only reason he was here at all was that it is better to have friends than enemies. He *thought* that Captain was agreeing that he and his kind would stay in the area of the big flat place. That would leave everything else to those with six limbs.

“We agree that we will not harm Captain and his hatchlings. They will live in the big flat place, and we will live in the big spaces away from the big flat place. In everything we sympathize with Captain and his hatchlings.” First Speaker struggled with “Sympathize”, but it was recognizable.

It was Captain Samuels's turn to speak, for one last time.

“In all things we sympathize with our friends, the hssswwx.”

The treaty was done. Now the former crew of The Fair Winds could make Altgeld their new home.

Chapter 12

“Hold that sword out in front of you. With one hand, Mills. Next you'll be bringing your grandmother here to help you.”

Frank Mills struggled to keep the sword level in front of him. The weight suit he was wearing made it worse. The canvas outfit had looked harmless at first. Then they started putting little weights in the pockets all over it. Every day they added some more. The same thing was used to train people to work in high-gravity environments.

“Sheath your swords. Now pick up one of those rocks and take it over there.” Tracy was very good at thinking of things for them to do.

“Oh, did I say put the rocks there? Tee hee. I meant to say put them over there.”

Frank was amazed. A couple of weeks ago, he could not have done any of this. By keeping their demands just short of impossible, they had gotten him into pretty good shape.

“Fall in. That's fall in, Jones, not fall over. Sit down, take a load off.”

Frank and his old friend Nelson Jones were glad to sit down. Here came old Edgar Lively, bless him. He was moving really slow, and that was just fine, since it gave them more time to rest.

“How's everyone doing today?”

“Fine” said everyone in unison. Frank was so tired his head was about to fall off, but he was just fine for Professor Lively.

“I came out today to tell you some things to watch for once you are in the past. It may not be as you expected. Who can tell me, when was the Battle of Overall?”

Every hand shot up. Miss Vaught would have been proud of them. Frank was selected to answer.

“Year 221, day 16, running through day 18, at the end of the day.”

“Oh really. And who told you this?” asked Professor Lively.

“Uhhh, Miss Vaught. I think.” Frank had a sudden fear that Miss Vaught had taken her paddle out of her desk and was coming to get him.

“Yes I'm sure she did.” said Professor Lively in a much more kindly manner. “That is part of the standard historical doctrine taught to schoolchildren all over Altgeld.

“There is a kind of consensus among educators as to what to teach our children. But the reality is that we have no hard evidence as to when the Battle of Overall occurred. Circumstantial evidence leads us to believe that it occurred somewhere around the time that Mr. Mills recited.”

Professor Lively had the habit of calling students Mr. or Miss or whatever you were. The first time it happened, Frank had looked around for his father. His father was Mr. Mills, was he not?

“Some reputable historians think the Battle of Overall was twenty or thirty years before the commonly accepted date. Others argue that it was not a single battle, but the gradual attrition of the hssswwx by the human forces.”

Dick Burlington could take no more. Jumping to his feet, he shouted: “This is outrageous!! You stand there and tell us what we learned in school may not be right. What **is** the truth? I demand to know!!”

Professor Lively was not in the least shaken by Dick's outburst. If Professor Lively had ever been shaken, it

was long before any of them had been born.

“Yes, it is outrageous that we are uncertain about key elements of our history. And when you return, I will demand answers of **you!**” With that, Professor Lively pointed his old bony finger at Dick.

After a moment he softened it by pointing his old bony finger at all of them. “Do find out what you can about the Battle of Overall. Other things to watch for:

“What was the morale of the Altgeld forces? Good, bad, or what?

“Were any of the cattle the kind that are born without horns? What color cattle did you see?

“Was there any evidence of contact with the rest of the galaxy? Yes I know, the Outside Contact happened in year 292, 71 years after Overall. And now it is year 507, and we are very much part of the galactic culture. But was there any kind of contact with the rest of the galaxy during the late Heroic Period?

“That's enough things to watch for. Upon your return, there will be an extensive debriefing. We will want to know everything about your journey to our past.”

Chapter 13

Landington, year 20

Captain Samuels walked down the main street of Landington. It was the only proper street, although Landington was a good-sized settlement these days.

“Captain Samuels!!”

The former starship captain turned to see who had hailed him. “Little Eldon Smythe!” He exclaimed.

Captain Samuels shook his head at himself. Little Eldon Smythe was 20 Altgeld years plus the three earth years he had attained before leaving The Fair Winds. An Altgeld year was 1.4926 earth years. Call it 1.5 to 1, and Little Eldon Smythe was 33 standard years old. But he would always be Little Eldon Smythe to Captain Samuels.

“Captain Samuels, there are some men here to see you. This is George, and this is Sam.”

Captain Samuels kept a straight face. He knew everyone in Landington, and he did not know these two. That could mean only one thing. They were from out of town.

“Pleased to meet you George, Sam.” Captain Samuels shook hands with George and Sam.

And he stood there looking at them. A lesser man might have been all friendly and chatty, asking if they wanted some coffee. Captain Samuels just looked at them with his direct gaze.

“We came here from Lodebar to get some good steel from the ship.” It was George who spoke up.

Captain Samuels felt a small satisfaction. He had made them tell where they were from, without him having to ask. That was enough.

“Of course. Article Two specifies that any descendant of the ship's company of the Fair Winds can with reasonable need have a portion of the ship.” An unwritten corollary to Article Two was that you had to ask Captain Samuels first. And Captain Samuels was cordial enough about it.

“Eldon, go with these men and help them out. And take the transversal biaxeliator to get the hull plates off.”

Eldon turned to comply, but first he said: “The transversal biaxeliator broke late last year. Broke clean in two. I kept meaning to tell you.”

Captain Samuels was taken aback by this statement. “How have you been getting the hull plates off?”

“If you hit them hard enough with a big hammer they come off.”

The same time, 100 miles away.

“One Who Speaks Before Others Speak, I most earnestly seek communication in the very near future.” Forty Seventh One waited for an answer.

“So talk! Is that very near future enough for you?”

Forty Seventh One shuffled his rearmost feet as a sign of being offended. “First Speaker would not have spoken so.”

“You will not speak that name in my presence again. That one did not act as he should have, and the consequences have made maximum ungood for all of us with six limbs.”

Forty Seventh One saw how this communication could be channeled to his ends. “One Who Speaks Before Others Speak, it is this very matter about which I have desired communication. We hsswwx need to come

together and...”

“Do not *call* us that! That is a name given us by a human who did not understand our language.”

Forty Seventh One was unrepentant. “It has come to such a place, that we are what the humans say we are. I seek to change this.”

One Who Speaks Before Others Speak was curious, but decided not to show it too much. “And what plan do you have?”

“I have spoken to many others. I have my ancestral hunting spear; These others also have their ancestral hunting spears. Others are finding wood, and are fashioning new spears. We will come together and run on four legs to where the humans have gathered. There we shall fight them, as in the epics of old.”

One Who Speaks Before Others Speak cast both primary optical receptors to the ground in his uncertainty. “We have spoken eternal sympathy with the humans.”

“This has led us to maximum ungood. You have communicated this yourself.”

One Who Speaks Before Others Speak had one more thing to say. “Now you are Forty Seventh One. When you lead many, will you seek a higher place?”

“I have the place that I have. It is enough if we can rid our planet of those with only four limbs”

“Then all four of your hearts beat truly, as in the tales of old.”

A short time later, on the road outside of Landington

George and Sam rode side by side in a large wagon filled with hull metal from The Fair Winds. Four horses pulled the wagon at a slow but steady pace.

Sam had an observation. “We got a big wagon full of hull metal.”

“They just better give us hull metal. That belongs to us from Lodebar just as much as to them that live in Landington.” George spoke from a deep bitterness, the kind that will listen to no reason or moderation.

“What do you mean? Samuels was friendly enough. And the little twit was a big help. He wanted to keep loading metal on the wagon even after it was full.”

George seemed to not have heard. “Them in Landington have their farms all nice and safe, while we have to deal with the hssswwx and get the land fit for planting. Them in Landington think they are so much better than us clods that is in Lodebar. Captain Samuels signed this big treaty with the hssswwx and then they sat back and drank brandy and smoked big cigars. We living on the outskirts have to deal with the hssswwx and their filthy stinking ways.”

Sam struggled to think of something to say, as a way of contributing to the conversation. “I did hear one boy say, Those men have a big wagon.” Sam was not going to argue with George, but he was not going to help him rant either.

“Tom!! Plant those tomato plants! And quit looking down the road with your mouth hanging open!” The woman's voice carried some distance.

Sam and George turned to look. In a plot next to the road was a young man. In his hand was a young tomato plant, and yes, he was looking down the road with his mouth hanging open.

Sam and George were riding on a slow-moving wagon, and they would have plenty of opportunity for conversation with this tomato planter while they rolled past the tomato patch.

“What's your name, boy?”

“Tom.”

“Reckon we knew that.” remarked George softly.

“Tom, are you planting those tomatoes or not?” Now the men could tell that the unseen woman was in a small cottage next to the tomato plot.

“Yes I am.” Tom jammed a young tomato plant unceremoniously into the ground. Sam wondered if it would survive such rough treatment.

Tom looked at the large wagon filled with hull plate. The road was rough and rutted, and the space-steel clanked continuously.

“Whatch'a gonna do with that?” Asked Tom. “You shore do got a lot of it.”

George decided to talk a little. “There's a new forge in Lodebar. It can heat hot enough to work this metal from the ship. We're going to make swords and spears.”

“I done heard that Edmund Nail is gathering men together. They're going to fight the hssswwx and take back what's ours.” Tom did have some sources of information.

“That's *General* Nail to you, boy.” George was not much for pleasant conversation.

Now Tom was interested for sure. He had seen something in school that told him a general was a man who led a great group of men into battle. “Can I join up?”

“He wants men, not boys. It will be hard, real hard and some of them won't be coming back. You better stay here and plant those tomatoes.”

The conversation might have continued, but Tom's mother came out of the house and supervised him much more closely. George and Sam continued to Lodebar with their load of high-grade scrap metal.

Lodebar, a week later.

“Fall in, men. My name is Sergeant McKinstry, and my job is to turn you into fighting men. You there boy, when I say fall in, it means go stand in line with the others.”

Tom was relieved to know what they meant by fall in. He had been there an hour and a half, and falling *down* did not seem like a good idea. He quickly found a place in line with the other country bumpkins.

“You will be trained to fight with swords and spears. Yes I know I know, *back when* they had assault rifle s that could shoot bullets faster than you can spit watermelon seeds. We still have some of those, but what we don't have is a way to make gunpowder. What little we can make goes for the cannons.

“To make gunpowder we need Potassium Nitrate, Charcoal, and Sulfur. Charcoal is made from wood, but the other items are in short supply. If any of you knows a good place to get Potassium Nitrate and Sulfur step forward and tell us, big and loud.”

Tom stayed where he was and kept his mouth shut. He did not know anything that Sergeant McKinstry wanted to hear. But he was big and strong and dumb, and that had to be good for something.

“You will start with spears. Sam, give each of these men a spear.”

Tom recognized Sam as the less grouchy of the two men on the wagon. Sam was carrying a huge armload of poles each of which was about seven feet long.

The soldier next to Tom spoke up. “Them ain't spears!! Them's just big old sticks!!”

Sergeant McKinstry was filled with gladness, and joy overflowed his heart. He had a *really* good chance to

yell at somebody and that was his favorite thing in the whole world. He put his hands behind his back and deliberately walked over to the soldier who had expressed an opinion.

“What's your name, boy?”

“Peter.”

“Well, *Peter*, in the Greater Altgeld Defense Force, you have to earn what you get. First you get a big old stick to practice with. You show us that you can hold onto it and not drop it. Keep the business end pointed at what we tell you to point it at. Then if we decide we like you, you will get a spear with a steel point on it.”

Sergeant McKinstry turned away as if he was finished. Then he turned on his heel and addressed the whole group.

“What if General Nail found out that our recruits wanted everything just handed to them, without having to work for it?” General Nail was in the camp, but you never saw him walking around. That made him an excellent boogeyman. “What would he *think*?”

About the same time, General Nail's tent

“What do you think, sir?” General Nail's orderly had just handed him the daily reports.

“These people are idiots.” observed General Nail morosely. “And that goes double for you.”

“Sir.” replied the orderly automatically.

“What did you see on your way over here?” The orderly was General Nail's eyes and ears around the camp.

“They have started relocating the gunpowder plant.”

“They were going to put it right next to the blast furnace. One spark from the metalworking crew trying to work that space-steel, and the whole camp would have been gone. We could just tell the hssswx, You can have it all back.”

General Nail found the report from the blast furnace. He had a feeling that steel, not gunpowder, would be the key to victory. They had produced 42 spear heads this morning. Plus three swords of an experimental design. Good thing he had ordered the sergeants to tell the recruits that they had to earn the right to have an actual spear or sword. That space-steel was very high quality, but it was devilishly hard to work.

That same day, some distance away.

Forty Seventh One surveyed those who had come out to fight the human invaders. There were 122 of them, of all ages and genders.

“Are you ready to fight?” Forty Seventh One said with a shout. Some things were universal, like to motivate others you talk really loud.

“Yes! We will fight for our home and for the places where our eggs hatch!” The 122 shouted back at him.

Forty Seventh One had another question. “Are you ready to bleed and die? Are you ready to see your purple blood run onto the ground?”

The 122 shouted again, but not nearly as loud. Some of them were silent.

Forty Seventh One spoke yet again. “No! We will free our land by making the *humans* bleed and die. It will be *their* red blood on the ground.” Forty Seventh One had heard this idea as a quote from a great human leader. No need to tell them that.

“You must do as I say above all. There will be times when you feel in all four hearts that you should keep fighting. You may be smiting the newcomers, and they are fleeing from your spear. But if I say to come away and go somewhere else, that is what you must do.”

Forty Seventh One leveled his spear at the first fighter in the line. “Do you agree that you will obey my words?”

Six Hundred and Seventh one hesitated for just an instant then she said, “I will obey your words.”

The next one answered instantly “I will obey your words.” And now that the rest of the 122 saw what was expected, they gave the same response.

Forty Seventh One could do no more. He wondered how the leaders of long ago felt, as in the traditional ballads.

“Run with me. We will go to where the land is poisoned, where those live that came from the sky.”

Lodebar, the next morning

“General Nail.”

“**What!!**” General Nail had been drinking the night before, and he was in no mood to suffer fools.

“The hssswwx are moving.”

“You see them all over the place. They are always moving.”

“The scout reports a group of well over a hundred, moving in two rows. There is one in front by himself.”

This was it. General Nail was no longer drunk. “Assemble all the regiments. Officers who have horses are to mount up as soon as they can. See that my horse is saddled.”

“What about Sergeant McKinstry's bunch? They are still the biggest bunch of greenhorns you would ever want to see.”

“They come too. Put Sergeant McKinstry in charge of them. If they aren't ready he will have nobody to blame but himself. By the end of the day they won't be greenhorns any more.”

A day later

Tom marched. And marched and marched some more.

“We were supposed to be riding horses. How many horses have you seen?” This was from Peter, who had many opinions.

“They talked about each man bringing a horse, and forming the mounted Greater Altgeld Defense Force. My Dad had one horse and he had me. He said I could go but the horse had to stay.” Tom understood why he was on foot, even if he did not like it.

They turned a corner in the road, and a small house came into view. Sergeant McKinstry saw an opportunity to further instruct his command. “Look, there is a pioneer farm. These people are expanding the area that is fit for humans. Let's give them a great big hoo-rah!!”

They came alongside a field of - What was it? It was corn, the poorest, scruffiest corn Tom had ever seen. Even the weeds seemed shriveled and discouraged.

“What is the matter here?” Tom wondered aloud. “It looks like the land has been poisoned.”

“Yes, this land will hardly grow anything. How nice of you to notice.”

Tom turned to see who had spoken. It was a man on a large brown horse. The horse was loaded with some kind of equipment and he led another brown horse, also loaded with whatever it was.

“Let me guess. You come from the Beaucoup Valley, is that right?”

“Yes *sir*.” It was hard to go wrong with an answer like that.

“That's Senior Environmental Engineer to you, boy. This is the only actual scientific discipline still preserved from The Fair Winds.”

Then the man switched back to chatty. “The conflict between Terrestrial and Altgeld life is first and foremost at the microbial level. The reason this land will hardly grow crops is that there are still a lot of the native microbes. In the soil of the Beaucoup Valley, there are only Terrestrial microbes. That is because it was settled by the first wave of settlers, and we have been able to displace all the native life.

“We are most exceedingly fortunate that our microbial life forms are more robust than the native Altgeld life forms. The Terrestrial microbes are slightly smaller, and their cell walls are thicker. This means that when Terrestrial microbes are present in a certain minimum quantity, they will displace the native Altgeld microflora and microfauna.”

The man on the brown horse must have seen that Tom was not following very well, so he switched to an analogy. “If you want to set a field on fire, you do not try to burn the whole thing at once. You find a corner with lots of dry grass and hold your match to a little piece of that. Once you get a little part burning, it can spread to other parts from there. My job is to start the Terrestrial microbes in places where they can spread like wildfire.”

The man showed every sign of continuing, but a rectangular box hanging from his belt let out a squawking sound. It kind of sounded like somebody was saying something. Without saying another word, the Senior Environmental Engineer spurred his horse and was gone.

Tom stood there with his mouth hanging open. The man had a radio!! You had to be very important to have a radio. Tom was realizing that there were things here which you never saw on the farm.

Peter maneuvered in the line of marching men until he was next to Tom. “What was he saying to you?” He demanded.

“It was kind of hard to tell.”

“Does it have anything to do with us?”

“I'm going to stay away from him. He will be needing lots of help with all that stuff.”

There was not much more to say after that. The Greater Altgeld Defense Force moved further away from human territory. Tom saw that the landscape in front of him looked more and more alien.

About midday, no place in particular

Forty Seventh One looked over the barren landscape. In a loose circle around him were 120 of *The 122*. Somewhere on the long run from their training grounds they had started calling themselves that.

Sixty Eleventh One approached. Her primary optical receptors were downcast in respect, but somehow she was not all that respectful.

“We wait for no purpose.”

“You saw me send out One Who Sees Far and Runs On All Six Legs. They are to see where humans are and return to us here.”

“You could have told them to come to us at a place further toward the land of the humans. This way much time is lost.”

Forty Seventh One was sorry that he had not sent some of his volunteers away the very first day. Sixty Eleventh One must have stayed in the egg too long. “Five days ago I sent you out to look for water. You were to meet the rest of us in the place where three rocks are together. It turned out that there are many places where three rocks are together. I thought we would not find you. Now my rule is that those who go to

look meet the rest of us at the place where they left us.”

Sixty eleventh one moved away without further communication. Forty Seventh One looked at the others in the circle. He saw that One Who Hears Much was desiring communication. “Do you desire communication, One Who Hears Much?”

“When I was much younger I was in this same place. I know this is the same place, but now it is very different. Then there were many large plants, as well as other plants of different sizes. Now the only plants are these small ones, and there are not that many of them.”

Forty Seventh One hated that he must say these next words. But no, *The 122* needed to hear this. He raised his voice to that all could hear.

“There *was* a time when there were many plants in this place. Now there are few. You will remember that half a day ago we saw many large plants that have died. I heard some of you speak of it. This is because humans poison the land. Simply because they are here, the plants die and the land becomes useless to us.

“We will fight the humans, but we must be careful. If you slay a human in single combat, you are not to eat him. Yes I *know*, it is that way in the tales from long ago. But if you eat a human, you will die, and the inside of you will die first. I have seen such cases and it is not a good thing to see.”

“Someone is coming.”

“Who is it, One Who Sees Far or Runs On All Six Legs?”

“They have four limbs. I know not what types of names these humans have.”

Forty Seventh one looked at the approaching group of humans. There were five of them and they carried no weapons. The one in front carried a pole with a piece of white cloth attached to it. Forty Seventh One knew that meant that they wished to communicate without fighting.

“I will communicate with these humans. I will communicate with them and no one else will. Is that clear?”

Forty Seventh One turned away without waiting for any type of answer. He had learned that gave a message all by itself.

Forty Seventh One trotted out to meet the five humans. He carried his spear but kept it pointed up. “You desire communication.” he said in the language of the humans.

The one with the long stick made reply. “We have come to visit our friends the hssswwx. We all of us sympathize with you the hssswwx.”

Forty Seventh One had been told that when the humans ceased making sounds, then he could communicate to them.

“It warms all four of my hearts to hear that you sympathize with us.”

Forty Seventh One was not sure if humans could understand sarcasm or not. Best to keep it simple.

“You come acting as if you desire peace. What real thing do you bring to us?” Forty Seventh One did not feel like trying to be nice.

“We above all desire friendship and harmony. We come...”

This time Forty Seventh One did not wait for the human to cease making sounds. “When you first came it was spoken that the humans would live in the big flat place and in the place which you call the Beaucoup Valley. You are in these places and many others besides. How far are we from the big flat place as you stand here before me?”

“We will bring your words to the other humans. We will give them understanding of the words spoken this

day.”

“If you do bring my words to the human leaders, they will not receive them. Humans breed like an addle-brained *svvvhhym*, and you need more and more space. You who claim to want peace are few, and you have no voice. Furthermore, your fellow humans have an ugly name for you who call the hssswx friends.”

The human with the white cloth was taken aback by Forty Seventh One's knowledge of human affairs. “Friend, what name is this?”

“Pathizers. You who sympathize with us are called pathizers.”

The same time, another place

Tom was marching hour after hour. It is called marching when you walk around with a bunch of other soldiers. His mind turned to things that were none of his business.

“Sergeant McKinstry, why aren't you carrying a spear like the rest of us? And what's that big old thing hanging from your belt?”

“It's called a sword, you country bumpkin. An officer carries a sword, made from native Altgeld steel. They made me a Third Lieutenant, which means I'm an officer.”

“A real man would have a seven foot spear with a space-steel head.” Said Peter, but not too loud.

Peter need not have bothered talking quietly, Sergeant McKinstry was totally unflappable. “It is the duty of an officer to lead the men by example”, he said happily. “Every minute of every day I have to show you sad cases how it is done.”

“There's one! Up there at the top of the hill!” Shouted Peter.

Tom turned in time to see something disappear over a hilltop. Word spread quickly. Soon everyone was double-timing it, without any orders.

“Slow down, you big lugs.” Shouted Sergeant McKinstry. “We will all go together.” At the front, Tom could see General Nail shouting at the Captains to keep the columns at a steady pace.

A few minutes later

“Runs On All Six Legs - tell what you saw, and quickly.” Forty Seventh One made no attempt to maintain social niceties.

“There was a group of humans, armed and moving with purpose.”

“How many?”

“Two hundred at least.”

“Are there any riding on the four legged creatures that serve the humans?”

“A few. Most walk on two legs.”

“What direction are they heading?”

“They are heading this way. Soon you will see them yourself.”

Not long afterwards

Tom and Peter and the rest of them had slowed to a fast walk. Tom realized that it might be good to save some of his strength, but he was still excited. This was the reason he had left his mother's tomato patch, to do something big for Altgeld.

They came around the base of a hill, and there was a gradual slope which seemed to crest maybe half a mile

away. But about a hundred yards away there was a group of men on horseback. Except that the horses were long and squirmy looking and the riders were all the way in front rather than in the middle of the horse.

“That's them!!” Bawled Sergeant McKinstry. “Remember what I taught you!!”

Tom realized that he had never actually seen a hssswwx. All his life it had been “If you aren't good, the hssswwx will get you.” Or “If you mess up those tomato plants the hssswwx will eat you up.” Tom had never been all that good, but this was still the first time he had actually seen a hssswwx. Maybe it had actually come true after all.

Forty Seventh One and *The 122* came to an abrupt stop. It seemed a long way to where the humans were.

“Do they cut off the other two limbs as soon as they are hatched?”

“Do not say stupid things!!” Answered Forty Seventh One in a roar. “We are here to cut off some more of their limbs and their heads besides.”

That got them moving. *The 122* advanced at a brisk trot, ancestral hunting spears held in front of them.

General Nail realized that the enemy had a huge advantage in maneuverability. His best advantage was to stand firm and make them come to him.

“Bugler sound stand ground.”

Now **that** was stupid. Altgeld had no buglers and as far as General Nail knew, no bugles. No matter, his seconds were screaming at the colonels to have the columns stand ground.

General Nail spurred his horse, moving himself behind the men bracing for the enemy. His mind kept turning back to the question of buglers. As a child he had seen some old movie where a general gave orders to the bugler. General Custer, that was the general. Ok, best not to think about **that** anymore.

Tom, Peter and the rest of their column were standing shoulder to shoulder with their spears pointing out at an angle. Sergeant McKinstry was screaming at the top of his lungs, not making any sense at all. The hssswwx were coming fast. The other columns were also standing ground with spears at an angle.

As the natives approached the human line, the men gave a great shout. Tom had no idea he could hate that much. The hssswwx crashed into the human line with a loud thump. There was a chaotic tangle of spears as both sides discovered that they were too close to engage with long spears. Things spread out a little.

Tom saw a hssswwx spear coming at him and dodged a trifle late. The spear head grazed his shoulder and drew a thin red line. Tom aimed his spear and jabbed hard at the hssswwx. It felt tough and rubbery, not like he expected. Still, it screamed and backed off, oozing purple sludge.

Sergeant McKinstry looked at the mass of spears with dismay. His sword was a lot shorter than the hssswwx spears. The sword had meant that he was a Third Lieutenant, but why did it have to be so **short**?

One of them came out at him with its spear. Sergeant McKinstry batted the spear head away with his sword. It came at him again. This time Sergeant McKinstry chopped the wooden spear as hard as he could. He was delighted when the spear head came off. In less time than it takes to tell about it, Sergeant McKinstry stepped inside the radius of the decapitated spear and swung his sword at the creature's head. He did not quite cut its head all the way off, but a mass of purple ooze came out and the head was hanging by a flap of skin. Yes, the creature was kind of deflating down onto the ground. Sergeant McKinstry picked up the spear shaft before looking for his next target. He should be able to use the length of that to good advantage.

Tom kept poking and jabbing at the hssswwx with his spear. He realized that unless they cut both his arms completely off, he had no choice but to continue poking and jabbing at the hssswwx. His shoulder hurt, but he was still able to use it. He and Peter and a soldier whose name he had never learned had formed a unit.

That worked pretty well as a way to watch each others' backs.

“They are pulling back.” Said the soldier whose name Tom did not know. “They are not coming at us any more. See, they are bunching up and pulling back.”

Forty Seventh One was less than pleased with the turn of events. These humans fought like a scalded *jjjmmkkkuuy*. Runs On All Six Legs had got killed by one with a short weapon when it somehow got next to him and chopped off his head. Then it stole the ancestral hunting spear.

They had done some damage to the human force, but now the humans seemed to be deploying in small groups that were harder to crack. Time to withdraw. He started spreading the word, and *the 122* was glad to obey.

Later that same day

Peter and Matthew were looking at Tom's shoulder wound. Tom had finally figured out that the other soldier's name was Matthew. Finally Peter spoke.

“My mother sent a needle and thread with me. How about I sew that up for you?”

Tom was glad not to have to do it himself. “Sounds good.” He replied.

The 122 made its way back to hssswwx territory. None too fast, and their number was somewhat less than 122. The name would stay the same.

Sixty Eleventh One was not keeping up, even with their slow pace. Her wounds were serious. Before sunset, Forty Seventh One would end her life and *The 122* would take nourishment from her. This was in accordance with the tales from long ago, and it would enable them to recruit more volunteers in this war.

General Nail was sitting in his tent, writing the after-action report. At least he was trying to. It is hard to write a report after seeing red and purple blood soaking into the ground.

“Here is your tea, sir. Earl Gray with a dash of lemon.” The orderly came into the command tent.

The orderly had a wagon load of questions he wanted to ask. But how to get started? He was not sure General Nail even knew his name.

“That was my first battle, General Sir. It was like nothing I could have imagined.”

“It was everybody's first battle.” Was the flat reply. “We did good for ourselves.”

“Sir” ventured the young orderly “Are we going to win? Eventually, I mean.”

General Nail looked thoughtful for a moment. “How many brothers and sisters do you have?” he inquired.

Awww. General Nail did care after all. “Fourteen. Brothers, that is. And I have sixteen sisters.”

“It is the same with every family in Altgeld. A woman can bear something like thirty children in her lifetime. That is a huge population to provide soldiers, as well as manufacturing weapons and providing food.

“All our intelligence suggests that the hssswwx reproductive rate is not all that high. Probably it is just enough to replace deaths by natural causes. The ones they lost today, they will not be able to replace. Furthermore, they were using stone spear points. Our manufacturing is just starting up, and it will increase rapidly. The hssswwx have shown no inclination for innovation.”

By now the orderly was not sure if the General was talking to him or to the tent pole. But it was still fascinating to listen to.

“We need to put every man on horseback. The enemy might not always be accommodating enough to come up to us and let us kill them. And communications were not good. Some system of bugle commands is really needed. The one remaining replicator can do kind of musical instrument, I am sure. I will check that really soon.”

Now General Nail looked at his orderly and addressed him directly. “Yes, we will win. You will not see it, and neither will your children. But eventually we will control all of Altgeld.”

Chapter 14

The Present

“Alright, country boys. You have done a good job of learning everything we set in front of you. You have changed into the period clothing we have manufactured for you. Yes in the Heroic Era they used buttons, not submolecular attractors.”

“Tracy, I have a question.” Horace Wilson politely raised his hand.

Tracy was glad enough for the interruption. Her pep talk was supposed to take half an hour, and she was having trouble thinking of anything to say. “Yes, Horace, what is it?”

“One of my sleeves is longer than the other. See, the right sleeve is two inches longer than the left.”

Everybody looked and yes, his right sleeve came down over his hand but the left ended well above the wrist.

“Yes Horace, there was a problem with the replicator that produced these items. One of the programmers made a mistake, can you believe it.”

“I can't say **that** to the people in the past. What do I say when they see these goofy sleeves?”

This was a good thing for Tracy. Jesse was supposed to be here by now, but there was no sign of him. Get this group going on something stupid, and you could spend all day. All Tracy needed was to get them started.

“Maybe you can say that shirt belonged to your Uncle Wayne. One of his arms was two inches longer than the other.”

Timmy was not to be outdone. “That shirt was made by your Aunt Shirley. She could never sew worth a darn.”

Others contributed ideas.

“Try to act like one of your arms is longer than the other. Hold yourself at an angle and keep talking fast.”

“You were so poor that you could not afford long sleeves on both sides.”

“You were attacked by a group of sheep and they nibbled the one side off.”

“Just tear the sleeves off both sides.”

Tracy turned to see who had offered a slightly sensible idea. There stood Jesse Plowshare, the man who has invented time travel.

“Alright time travelers, settle down. Jesse is here to brief you on departure procedure.”

“Your Uncle Keith fell down a well and he was holding onto that sleeve and stretched it out.” Timmy still had ideas to share.

“Jesse is also going to give you the pickup procedure. Maybe you want to hear *that*.”

The group settled down. Jesse Plowshare pulled out a wad of handwritten notes and began to speak.

“The multidimensional correlational n-matrices are not convergent with the aspect of variable spatial variation. This impacts our operational doctrine contrarilywise.”

Tracy looked out at the time travel cadets and saw nothing but blank faces. “Jesse” She said in a stage whisper. “They did not understand that. Say it simpler.”

Jesse paused for a long moment. Finally he managed “Time travel is really complicated. We have to pick

one place to do both insert and pickup.

“We have identified a geological formation that is mentioned in writings from the Heroic Age. There is a group of three rocks, one large and two much smaller. Insert and pickup will be there. You will be in the past for one Altgeld year. Make every effort to return to the group of rocks one year to the day after insertion.”

Frank gently nudged Nelson. “My junior year I did some research about Heroic Age writings that described unique geological constructs. These three rocks were a part of that.”

“We are always finding connections that we did we did not suspect.” Was Nelson's reply. He would have said more but Dick was asking a question.

“...what the transfer to the past will actually be like.” Dick stood there demanding an explanation.

Jesse was glad to talk about the time transfer process. “You will see a semicircle of brightly colored lights. If you look at it directly you will think the lights fade to purple. The gateway will only be open for a moment, so everybody will need to run through as quickly as possible. Whatever you do, do not fall down partway through. It could close and the residents of the past will be puzzled by half a corpse.”

“I demand to see the results of the cross-dimensional glopudurennial analysis of this process.” Dick was nowhere near done with his questions.

Jesse looked like he was going to cite some statistics, but Tracy spoke first. “Dick, participation in this program is *entirely* voluntary. But if you quit, the confidentiality agreement remains in effect. The ones that do go will not be allowed to tell you one thing about it.”

Dick did have more questions, but after that nobody was paying any attention to him. Jesse continued.

“There is a slight possibility of gastric discombulation after transiting the portal. This will pass after a moment.”

A polished speaker would have given a conclusion, quickly restating all his points. Jesse just started folding up his notes.

Tracy stepped into the silence. “Thank you Jesse. Now it's almost time for your predeparture dinner. Before we do that, everybody stand up and turn around.”

The time travel cadets stood up and turned around. Tracy scurried to one side, taking Jesse with her. Frank saw a large fan in front of them. Behind the fan he could see a pile of dirt and two men with shovels. Then his attention was drawn to the fact that the fan was starting to turn rapidly.

Things happened quickly. Someone shouted “Turn that off.” The two men started shoveling dirt into the fan, and the cadets were coated with topsoil.

“We got all dirty.”

“I said to turn that thing off.”

“Now we have to go get cleaned up.”

Tracy had an answer for that. “**No**, you are not going to go get cleaned up. You will stay dirty. People in Heroic Times very seldom took a bath. It would be very strange if you appeared there all clean. Frank, stop trying to brush it off.”

Later that same day.

“Gateway activation is imminent. Cadets stand by to transit the portal.”

The time-travel cadets stood there while Jesse and his assistants did incomprehensible things.

“We're standing by.” Said Nelson to Frank.

“We can look at the three rocks.” Frank replied to Nelson.

“I counted them too. I got three, just like you did.” For once Timmy was subdued.

“Stay sharp, you fools!! You won't have all day to do this.” Tracy was showing the strain.

Frank was staring blankly at a nondescript piece of ground. It was a mixture of bedraggled grass and mud. Frank realized that the grass was a kind of hazy purple rather than green. And there were vague purple bushes where there had been none before.

The past. He was looking at the past.

“Go GO GO” Shrieked Tracy. Nelson had Frank by the arm and together they moved toward the purple. All the time travelers clumped together and ran into whatever it was.

For the slightest instant Frank felt like he did not exist at all. Then he was on his feet stumbling forward. He fell to the ground and vomited out every bit of the farewell dinner.

Frank Mills felt a sympathetic hand in his shoulder. “I remember the last time I was that sick. It's no fun.” It was Timmy offering encouragement.

Frank managed to look up at Timmy, who was standing on his two feet. “Did the time transit make you sick too?” He managed to croak.

“Huh? No, that was the last time I got really drunk.”

Frank began to realize that he did exist again and that he might as well get up. His fellow travelers were also collecting themselves and looking around.

“We're clear. No one saw us arrive.” That was Horace's observation.

As Frank looked about, the only persons he saw were his little group of time travelers. There was no Tracy, no Jesse or any of the others. The grass was thick and there were low bushes here and there. The land and sky were empty, silent.

Nelson pointed to the west. “There should be a road that way. We should get going.” Nelson started moving west, leading by example.

Frank fell in beside his friend. “I wish I could have brought a pencil and paper. There are so many things I want to remember.”

“The Committee was afraid that might be out of character. We have to look like a bunch of country boys straight off the farm.” Timmy cut to the heart of the matter.

Dick came up with something agreeable to say. “We're a bunch of well educated young men, but we have to act like the most common men that we can.”

Nelson turned, facing the group as he walked backwards. “That starts **now**. No more discussing great ideas, books you read, or your vacation on Neptune. Before we know it we will be meeting other people, and we should be in character.”

Then Nelson turned around and the group made its way west. There was little conversation, and the empty land and sky did not fill the silence.

Chapter 15

“So this is a road. Aren't you glad we found this road?”

“Dick, just shut up. This time yesterday you were complaining about travelling overland.”

Frank kept out of Timmy's argument with Dick. He was walking along the edge of the road, where the mud was not as bad. Nelson insisted that traveling along a road of any kind, you would find other humans.

“Those wagon tracks in the mud look fresh. We are close to some kind of settlement.” Nelson spoke to the whole group.

“Nelson, in an earlier time, your instinct for tracking would be a great asset.” Frank could be quite witty at times.

His old friend Nelson regarded him with a baleful look. “No, in *this* era my instinct for tracking is an asset. We are in an earlier era.”

“I see some houses up there.” One of the group announced. And yes, a little further down the muddy path was a small collection of buildings.

After some more glopping through the mud, the group of young men came to the hamlet. Frank spied a boney woman standing in a doorway. “Howdy” Frank offered uncertainly.

“Howdy yourself.” She returned. “Where are you from?”

Timmy spoke up. “I'm Timmy. This here is Frank, Nelson, Horace and Dick.” By saying *something*, Timmy was avoiding the larger question of where were they from.

A rail-thin girl of indeterminate age appeared beside the woman. “Those men are really dirty.” was her observation.

Frank felt the need to defend himself. “We have been walking along that muddy road. Our feet are going to be muddy.”

“Well yes.” she replied reasonably. “But you look like you have been rolling around in dirt. Most people clean up before they come to town.”

Frank would have given much for Tracy and her friends to hear *that*. But he was sensing that their arrival was creating a stir. A group of strangers walking into a small town will not go unnoticed. They had to say something to state their business, and say it pretty quick.

“We are coming in to join up with the Greater Altgeld Defense Force. Who can we talk to about that?” Nelson looked up and down the line of ramshackle houses.

“You really *are* lost.” That came from somewhere behind him, he did not see who.

“You boys want to enlist, talk to Gary.” This helpful statement came from a man picking tomatoes in a small plot next to the road.

“Where's Gary?”

“In his house.” With that, the man turned and resumed picking tomatoes.

“So where is his...” Nelson began before Frank took him by the arm and spoke softly to him.

“I've seen this before in small towns. They think you know everybody and everything about them. Like where Gary's house is. Let's just walk around a little and see what we can find out.”

So the group slowly walked around the small town. Slowly so they would not get to the other side and go back into the countryside.

A tall stringy man approached at a trot. "I hear tell you boys are looking for Gary."

The tall stringy man said no more. He and the group of time travelers stood there looking at each other.

The silence stretched into awkwardness. At last the man spoke again. "I'm Gary. Do you want to enlist?"

They instantly agreed. Frank hoped that this was in keeping with what would be expected of them. Gary showed no particular reaction, so they must still be in character.

"The recruitment depot is in Ed's Crossing. Following this road you would have missed it for sure. I have a wagon, I can take you there."

They followed Gary to an unpainted barn. Gary rounded up a swaybacked horse and hitched it to his wagon. The volunteers climbed in, and they started out for Ed's Crossing.

Horace spoke up. "Gary, it's nice of you to take us to Ed's Crossing." Actually Horace was afraid they would be expected to pay for the ride, and he wanted this issue out in the open before they got there.

"No need to thank me. I get three-quarters of a credit for each of youse that I bring there."

So they rode in the wagon to Ed's Crossing. The wagon stopped at a large building with peeling paint and a large door hanging off its hinges.

"Is this Ed's crossing?" ventured Frank. He was getting tired of having to ask everything.

An angry bundle of energy burst around the corner. "Yes, this is Ed's Crossing, you dumb county boy. Don't you know nothing?"

"I'm Sergeant Pain. I have been tasked with the task of making you into soldiers. Are you going to enlist or are you going to sit in that wagon all day? I said get down off there, didn't you hear me?"

They got down off the wagon. None of the men from the future had any military experience, and it might not have helped here in any event. "We want to enlist." offered Nelson.

"Then get your hands in the air! Not both hands, just your right. Not all the way up, you look like you want to ask the teacher something!!"

After a moment, they all had their right hands held up palms outward, at something like shoulder height.

"Do you solemnly swear affirm and double-promise to obey all orders of your legal and lawful superiors, smite the enemy, and always obey the man on the brown horse?"

Nobody said anything.

"Say YES."

They all said YES, more or less in unison.

Sergeant Pain walked up to Frank. "Where are you from?"

"I'm from Elm Branch, which is in Superior Altgeld." Frank began his cover story. Elm Branch was a long way from Ed's Crossing, and they were unlikely to check details.

“Who cares where you're from? Nobody asked you!! Everybody in this Oak Leaf must be pretty dumb if they're anything like you!!”

Two Weeks Later

Frank was in the middle of yet another drill with the pike. The pike was a long heavy pole with a combination spear-point and ax on the end. Did I mention that it was heavy? The group from the future was dispersed in the Company of maybe 25 men.

Frank looked at the man next to him. Sergeant Pain was berating Dick yet again, and they could talk a bit as long as they kept up the drill with their pikes.

“Your name's Sam, right?”

“Yup. Sam Samuels.”

“Sam, why did you enlist?”

“Look out the corner of your eye and see where Sergeant Pain is sending your friend.”

Frank took the merest glance at the edge of his vision. “He's sending him to help the cook. Again. What does that have to do with anything?”

“The cook is tending a big old stewpot. It has food in it. That's more than I can say about where I came from.”

Frank realized that he had not seen any fat people in the two weeks that he had been in the past. In his time, the health department was bemoaning the 'obesity epidemic'. Here in the past everyone was lean, mean, and none too happy.

“Things tough at home, sounds like.” When in doubt, say something obvious.

“There were fourteen kids at home, and we had to take turns eating. I got to eat on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday. I joined up when I heard that ‘Everyone Eats in the Greater Altgeld Defense Force’.”

Now the man on the other side of Sam spoke up. “There's barely enough sweet land to feed the people we have now. If we can't do *something*, there will be famine and pestilence. That is why the Pan-Altgeld Assembly has decreed that the Greater Altgeld Defense Force has priority for all resources.”

Sam picked up the conversation again. “That means horses for us to ride on, food for us to eat, supplies for the men on brown horses. Steel for these pikes comes before plows, kitchen knives, anything.”

“Are you men talking instead of working?” I turn my back one minute and see what happens.” Sergeant Pain had finished with Dick and was back on duty with the line of sweating men.

“We're talking about how we're going to poke holes in all the hssswx.” Frank was out of his mind to attempt any kind of answer, but he did anyway.

“Oh you think so, do you? Before you're ready for that, you have to learn to ride your horses. They're

coming in tomorrow. Have any of you misfits ever ridden a horse before?”

Someone else ventured an answer. “I’ve followed one behind a plow many a time.”

“The horses you are going to ride are coming tomorrow, so start getting ready now.”

Sergeant Pain was going to say more, but someone came up to him and whispered in his ear. “What is it, Corporal Ache?”

The Corporal whispered in his ear for quite some time. Sergeant Pain whispered back. The men did not mind them whispering like two schoolgirls because that meant they got a break from pike drill.

“Thank you Corporal, run along now.”

Sergeant Pain turned to the group with a conspiratorial look. “I have just received word that three pathizers have been captured. We can go down to the barge dock and take a look at them. What do you think of that?”

Frank flinched. He did not mean to, but it's hard not to react when someone speaks the ultimate arch-obscenity.

Sergeant Pain of course noticed, and strolled over to where Frank stood at attention. “What's the matter? Did your mother tell you there is no such thing? I bet in your home such things just were not talked about.

“What about the rest of you? Did your father wash your mouth out with soap for saying 'pathizer'? Did your uncle tell you this is just something people say to get attention?”

Now the Sergeant lowered his voice, with good dramatic effect. “Yes gentlemen, there **is** such a thing as a person who sympathizes with the hssswx. These people say things like 'They were here first.' and 'We ought to share.' Do you know why this cannot be?”

Suddenly the quiet voice was gone, and Sergeant Pain was red-faced and livid, screaming “I want one man to step up and tell us why such a thing cannot ever be. One man!! Who is it going to be?”

Suddenly the man down the line from Sam took one step forward. “Bud Grace, sir. This cannot be because the very presence of the hssswx poisons the land for us. The droppings from one of them can ruin as much as 20 acres. Our scientists have worked hard to make the land suitable for humankind. But none of the native life-forms can be used as food by human beings. Likewise, our presence poisons the land for them. We cannot share with them.”

For a long instant Frank thought Sergeant Pain was going to be happy. His reaction was hard to read. Then he said “That will be all, Grace. Back in line. Everybody, port arms and march this way.”

They marched out of their camp along a road Frank had not seen before. It led down to a muddy river. At a dock on the river was a barge. Chained on the barge were three men, guarded by half a dozen men in uniform.

“Take a good look. **THIS** is the enemy, as much as those things with six legs.”

Sergeant Pain turned to the three men chained on the barge. “Would you like to tell us something?” he asked

sweetly.

“I have spoken with the hssswwx, and we can come to an accommodation. We can have peace if we really want it.” The tallest of the chained men spoke in a loud voice.

Sergeant Pain seemed delighted. You have spoken with the hssswwx? So have I. This is what I told them.”

With that the Sergeant snatched Nelson's pike and thrust it at the tall man. The pathizer jerked his head out of the way, just barely. Pieces of his hair drifted down into the muddy river. The pikes were very sharp.

The leader of the guards was offended. “If you're going to act that way, we will just go on our way. You're not allowed to kill them, just look at them.”

With that the guards untied the barge from the dock, and soon they were floating downriver. After they were well out of Sergeant Pain's reach, the tall man called out “The hssswwx have been resisting, but not as much as they could. Now we are pressing them so much that they are going to make an all-out effort. Their whole society is going to be behind this, not just a minority like before. We would be wise to negotiate.”

Two days later

“Work them pikes!! I don't want to hear any complaints, you have it so much easier now that you are riding horses!!” Sergeant Pain loved to encourage his boys.

“We spend all day fighting these giant dummies filled with dirt.” Frank had discovered that he could say a little something to another trainee if his back was to Sergeant Pain.

Nelson guided his horse to where Frank and Timmy were having this quick conversation. “This morning I thought it was going to rain. Then we would have had giant dummies filled with mud.”

Frank turned to Bud Grace. Bud was a trainee like Frank, but he was actually from this time period. “We have been learning to recognize all these trombone signals. Stop, go, gallop, turn right or left. So why do they use a trombone?”

“What's the matter, can't you remember what the different signals mean?”

“I'm actually getting pretty good at it. Who would have thought. But why a trombone? Why not ... something else?” Careful, Frank. Don't show that you know about musical instruments that others have never heard of.

“Oh, that's easy. There was one replicator from The Fair Winds that worked for a long time after everything else had quit. The first army under General Nail needed a way to send messages quickly. That replicator could only make certain things. The best thing that it could make for that purpose was a trombone. A trombone, with the sliding thing that you work back and forth to make the different notes. So the military tradition of sending messages by trombone got started that way.”

The men continued with their pike exercises. It would not do to let Sergeant Pain catch you talking.

“Dick, you are the sorriest excuse for... I don't know what!” Sergeant Pain was yelling at Dick again. They could talk for another moment.

“Is this really any easier on horseback?” Frank asked the other two.

“I'm sore in all different places than when we were on foot.” was Nelson's contribution.

“Sergeant Pain says that a man on foot is at a huge disadvantage against a hssswwx.” Timmy had developed a respect for Sergeant Pain's opinions.

Frank was skeptical. "My horse will probably throw me off and go join the hssswwx."

"What are you three ladies doing, not working? Are you confused about something?" Uh oh, Sergeant Pain finished yelling at Dick early. They had better think of something to say.

Frank spoke up. "Yes Sergeant, I was wondering - What is my horse's name? Nobody told me what his name is."

"What kind of a silly question is that? Call him whatever you want."

Frank's cousin Louise had spent a week at a riding camp. Her horse had been named David, and she came back from camp with pictures of the two of them. She had even written David a letter after she returned home. This certainly was not riding camp.

"Get back to work right now. The hssswwx are not going to let you rest whenever you want to." Sergeant Pain slapped Frank's horse on the rump. The nameless steed galloped full speed, more or less in the direction Sergeant Pain intended.

For a long moment Frank thought the horse was going to get completely bug-eyed and run away with him on board. But then he pulled hard on the reins, and the mount came to a halt.

Frank wrestled his horse into line. They took turns attacking the dummies that were supposed to look like hssswwx. Now it was his turn. He kicked his horse and it obediently broke into a gallop. Frank barely got his pike into the proper position before they arrived at the 'enemy'. Jab with the point, now hack with the little ax. The sharp parts of their pikes were covered with wooden guards so that they would not destroy the dummies.

"Attack quickly, then move away! If you stand still, they have the advantage! General Nail said that every fighting man should be on a horse. The first battle we did not do so good because they were in foot and the hssswwx had the advantage in height and speed." Sergeant Pain could lecture all day at a shout. Let Professor Lively try that!

"Mills, you've killed that poor hssswwx enough. All of you, gather round. I've got something to tell you."

Great, they were going to catch it for something. It did not much matter for what. They moved their horses into a semicircle around Sergeant Pain. This was not so easy because the horses were poorly trained and would barely tolerate a rider,

"You are going to get inspected by Captain Lefferson. Look sharp and make me proud."

"Sergeant Pain" Someone said politely.

Frank was startled. It had been a while since he had heard anyone speaking politely. There was a man sitting on a gray horse. On his collar were two bars. A Captain, then.

"Captain Lefferson." spoke Sergeant Pain sweetly. "How nice to see you today." Then Sergeant Pain snapped a machine-sharp salute.

Captain Lefferson addressed the men directly. "I see you men have been working pretty hard. That is good, because things are going to start happening fast.

"General Armstrong wants every man who can stand on two feet to be in uniform. I hear that some of you came in from way out in the country, and that's real good. We are all on this planet together sink or swim.

"We have been fighting the hssswwx ever since General Nail first led a group of men into the badlands. The first few encounters were indecisive because they were on foot. Once General Nail got every man on horseback we have been steadily pushing the hssswwx back. We now have sweetened slightly more than half the land area of Altgeld.

“You will be deployed alongside Ax Company. I am designating you Hatchet Company. General Armstrong is going to inspect all of you and then you will head into the badlands. You will get plenty of action then.”

Late that evening

Frank rolled himself into his blanket. Sleeping on the ground seemed normal by now. He could not get over seeing General Armstrong when he inspected them. One radical revisionist at the University of Altgeld had taken the position that General Armstrong was not an actual person, that he was an archetype of Heroic Age cultural ideals. This archetype had had three small stars on his collar and a big handlebar mustache. Frank thought that he was going to find the truth behind a number of things that he had learned as a child. But now he was pretty tired. Time to sleep.

Chapter 16

“We need to get started.” Edgar Lively strode into the room, faster than anyone had remembered seeing him move.

“Professor Lively, I have pulled the records on the late Heroic Era just like you asked. I feel like an underclassman looking for a subject for a research paper. What are we looking for?” Tracy was a little put out about this Saturday morning meeting that Professor Lively had called.

Professor Lively turned his distinguished-looking head to survey the room. Besides Tracy the senior archivist, there was Betsy Neuman and Luke Tyndall. Professor Lively looked at the young man. “I remember you from my History of the Heroic Era class. You got an A-triple-plus.”

Betsy spoke up. “You said to pick out a student who had recently studied the Heroic Era. Luke is the best of the current crop.”

“Yes ma'am. Thank you ma'am. It's an honor just to be here.” Luke seemed uncomfortable being the center of attention.

Professor Lively turned to the business at hand. “You are to examine at the historical transcripts and look for any differences between that and what you learned in class.

Now Tracy was really put out. “Professor Lively, I think all of us remember what you taught us.”

“Of course you do.” The distinguished historian replied kindly. “I want to see if the *records* have changed.”

Luke was outraged. “You mean somebody has been sneaking in here and changing things? That's a crime!”

“We have sent a group of men into the past. They are *doing things* back there. I am scared to death that they will change something that will affect the future. Meaning our present.”

Betsy spoke up. “If the historical records have changed because they have changed the past, would not our memories of what we learned in history class also be changed? This is complicated. I'm getting a headache already!”

That last statement got a chuckle from the group. Professor Lively did have an answer.

“You need to look at the cross-spatial temporal vectors. Your memories of my class would be affected only if the temporal disruption was on a vector which was statistically significant with reference to the q and α variables. So you would remember one thing and the records would say another.”

There were no further questions. Luke hoped that was not going to be on a test. But Professor Lively had further instructions.

“Betsy and Luke, start looking at the primary records. Tracy, come with me.”

Professor Lively led Tracy to the back of the archives where there was a huge vault. The door was stainless steel and enormous. Word was that it took four people to open it, two of whom had to be current Trustees. Edgar Lively walked up and opened it with one hand.

Tracy hesitated to follow him inside. “Come on” He said impatiently. “We don't have all week.”

Inside were shelves holding boxes. Professor Lively picked a large box and put it on the table in the middle of the room.

Tracy reached into the box and pulled out an oversize volume, bound in leather and antique wood. The pages were of some kind of soft leather. She looked at the first page.

“Ooooh, early Altgeld picture writing. I remember having this in grade school. The early settlers did not have much education, so they devised this form of picture writing. I just love the old-fashioned, scripty way they drew these pictures. **What??**”

Professor Lively was regarding her with considerable bemusement. “That’s about half right. And entirely wrong.”

“No, I definitely remember this from when I was a kid.”

“You said the early settlers devised this. Think further back.”

“I thought this picture writing was devised by the first generation. Professor Lively, you are being very cryptic.”

“Start reading, right there on the first page.”

Tracy felt unsure about reading the early Altgeld picture writing, since she had been nine or ten when she studied it. But it came right back to her and it was really pretty intuitive.

“Today we ran to the place where there are three rocks, one of them bigger than the other two. The hunger was always inside us but we still went. The old ones told us the way since none have been there in a very long time.

“The habitations that had been there were gone, and there was no sign that there ever had been habitations in that place. We saw many of the plants that come with those with four limbs. One Who Runs To The Side ate one of those plants, and her dying was horrible to watch. I have never seen anything as horrible since the day I was...”

Tracy was unsure of the next pictogram. “Professor Lively, I am puzzled. I swear that looks like a picture symbol for 'hatched'. What is it?”

“It means 'hatched', just like you said.”

Tracy struggled to absorb the meaning. “People are not hatched, they are born. Hatched is for chickens and...”

“hssswwx!!! This is written by the hssswwx!!!” Tracy was quite indignant.

“Keep your voice down. This is restricted information, you have to know. This is called the Azariah Document, and it is not to be discussed outside this vault.”

“Another thing. How did you just open this vault door? This is a level six secure facility.”

“I have level seven clearance. Stay on topic. If you’re going to have a fit, have it about what is important. This information can be given to doctoral candidates, so you are hearing it maybe six months early.

“Some people see this and go into deep denial. I have been called a pathizer more than once. Yes, this was written by hssswwx, on the skins on their ancestors. These books were captured by human forces at various times, mainly after the battle of overall. Now get out that smaller book and read from it.”

Tracy reached into the box to comply in spite of her shock. Everybody knew that the hssswwx were a primitive society, without a written language or technology. Or not. What was she going to find out next? Ah, there was that smaller book.

“Find the tab about a third of the way in and start reading there.”

Tracy found the tab. Here there were some elements of the picture writing that were not taught to children. But the general narrative still understandable, so she began to read once more.

“Today we went to the place of departure to say the last things we shall say to those who are leaving. Their

optical receptors will turn upon things for which we have no words, once they have arrived at...

“Help again, Professor Lively. That symbol looks like 'sky' or 'far away'. What is it?”

This time the distinguished Historian just shrugged. “That is the closest anyone has come. That symbol appears nowhere else in the hssswwx writings that are in human hands. You are a Historian yourself. What else do you see here?”

Tracy felt honored that she was asked her opinion. “There are a number of six-legged figures going into some large container. Then the container is leaving, with lines that suggest great speed. Then there are some figures still standing on the ground.”

“Now go to the next section.”

“We have said our last words to those who are making the journey to... somewhere, somewhere else and... another place.”

Tracy turned to her mentor without much hope of him being able to help. “I would give much to know where those planets are.” was his only answer.

“Professor Lively, this concerns the history of our world. But this truth is locked away in a vault, so that if an unauthorized person tries to come in, snakes will come out of the ceiling and drop down the back of their neck.” Tracy had been told about the snakes as a freshman, and she just felt like mentioning it. Maybe it was not really true, but it somehow seemed pertinent.

Professor Lively waited patiently to give his answer. “Do you remember Professor Jackson? He was a young man.”

“Yes, I remember having one class with him. Suddenly he was gone. What happened to him, anyhow?”

“He wanted to publish all of this, just give it out to the public. He was summoned before the Council and his doctorate was revoked. He was forbidden to ever teach again anywhere on Altgeld. The last I heard he was writing Cobol code in a provincial capital.

“His approach was too sudden, the average man in the street would never have accepted it. Two generations ago, a group of educators devised a gradual approach to reveal this hidden truth about the hssswwx. Step one was to introduce the pictorial script as a fun thing for children. Kids a long time ago thought it up, or whatever the story was. Step two never came, for reasons you can see now.

“Tracy keep reading. There is another part you need to know.”

“Those who are no longer here have chosen to follow the path that they follow. Now we will make the choice that we desire. We are few now that many have departed. This pleases me and many others.

“Now we are giving up all the things that allow us to run swiftly without actually running, and those things which allow us to run through the air. And we are giving up the weapons that strike from far off and everything that is not told of in the tales told from long ago.

“Now we will each of us run with our own clan, on our own six legs. We have rid ourselves of those bright and shiny things that please at first but do not fill the emptiness deep inside us. As a final service, those-who-know-many-things will alter our bodies so that we will each produce only one hatchling in our lifetime. That way our numbers will not overrun the land and the way of life that was lived by those long ago can continue.”

“Luke, have you found anything that does not seem right to you?” Betsy was none too happy about being stuck with the little freshman, but she was not going to take it out on him.

“No, ma'am. It looks like exactly what I learned in class. I honestly can't see that history has changed. And I have no idea what we would do if we did find a discrepancy.”

“There are no answers to things like that, Lukie.” Betsy was showing a *little* resentment by calling him 'Lukie'. “I just wonder what top-secret things they are doing in that vault.”

“Professor Lively, I am honored to be shown these things. I do realize that the average citizen of Altgeld would have a hard time processing some of this. All of this, actually. Sorry that I kind of threw a fit. But how does this relate to the time travel?”

The Grand Old Man hesitated a moment. Finally he said “This is a very new area, time travel. Jesse and some others have disagreements about the underlying theory. Just be aware of all this.”

The day was getting on. After a moment Tracy started putting things away. Finally Professor Lively spoke again.

“Tracy”

“Yes?”

“If you see a hssswwx walking around, call me. Any time day or night.”

Chapter 17

Late Heroic Era, Deep in hssswwx territory

“We greet you, One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent.”

“Come, all of you. You have come because my words were brought to you, do not stumble now.” One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent was making every effort to be gracious.

One Who Collects Water stepped forward. At the same time, First Of Those Who Fight moved forward and made a point of colliding with One Who Collects Water.

First Of Those Who Fight regarded One Who Collects Water with only one of his tertiary optical receptors. This was of course an insult, but One Who Collects Water chose not to react in the presence of One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent.

First Of Those Who Fight had no such inhibition. “One Who Collects Water, I have in my tent a stone knife from my father's father. I can use it to cut off two of your limbs. That way you will have only four limbs and you can be like your friends from the sky.”

“First Of Those Who Fight, you speak like a blind deformed hatchling who knows nothing.” One Who Collects Water knew some insults too.

“Silence both of you”, growled One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent. “One Who Tells Of Things Past, you come in too. Maybe you can behave better than these two.

“I have summoned you here because I have three visitors from the humans. They came to me carrying a large white cloth on a long stick. That means they wish to communicate without fighting. I am sure you know the meaning of that, First Of Those Who Fight.”

First Of Those Who Fight had no reaction to that. It was impossible to hurt his feelings, since he had no feelings. Their leader continued his speech.

“These humans have different opinions than those you meet in battle. They would like to go to their leaders and say that we with six limbs will communicate with them without fighting. These visitors believe that a way can be found to end the fighting.”

“The only good human is a dead human.” Replied First Of Those Who Fight.

One Who Collects Water did not agree. “We would be foolish indeed if we did not try to find a way to share this world. We should open our sound receptors to what they communicate to us.”

One Who Tells Of Things Past felt the need to say something. “In days of old, in the tales told by our ancestors, two tribes would become weary with fighting. The elders from each tribe would come together and sit in a square and speak of the great bbbggrrttt. After that it would be known by all that these tribes fought no longer.”

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent hated not to agree with the traditionalist, but facts were facts. “One Who Tells Of Things Past, the humans would want to sit in a circle, not a square. And they know nothing of the great bbbggrrttt.

“But any being will act in his own best interest. It is my hope that by communicating directly with the human leaders, we will discover a way that is good for us and for them.”

First Of Those Who Fight had a good objection. “You will go to meet with them, and they will fall upon you and slay you.”

“Then you will be proved right, and you will have your all-out war. I will be dead and you will be happy about that as well.”

First Of Those Who Fight decided not to press his objection. Let them have this silly meeting. They would see how *different* these four-limbed creatures were.

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent motioned to a servant. “Bring in my guests. They have been waiting patiently for this time.”

The servant went out, and in a moment he returned with three human beings. They carried no weapons and they were moving rather slowly.

One Who Tells Of Things Past was impressed. “They are walking on only two legs. That looks really *hard*.”

One of the humans spoke, in his own language. “*We three sympathize with our friends the hssswwx. I am Tom, and this is Bob and Larry.*”

Now One Who Tells Of Things Past was offended. “They would have more courtesy if they spoke so that we might understand.”

First Of Those Who Fight was happy to furnish information. “Humans cannot speak our language. Their sound projectors are too different from ours. Or maybe they are just stupid. Those who question the human prisoners must learn their language. I will be happy to translate for all of us.”

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent graciously declined the offer by First Of Those Who Fight. “First Of Those Who Fight, I know human speech well enough. I would be a poor host if I asked a guest to do some of the work.”

The military leader did not argue. Each of the others spoke for a sizable number, and he did not want to offend.

Tom spoke again. The meeting went slowly because everything had to be translated back and forth. “*We have come a great distance to speak of a way that the fighting might be ended.*”

One Who Collects Water was concerned. “They look sick to me. Ask them if they are sick.”

When the question was translated to him, Tom replied “*We are indeed sick. We thank you for your concern. Humans cannot stay a long time in territory controlled by those with six limbs. The men on brown horses have much to say about that. We hope to soon travel back to human territory where our sickness will go away.*”

One Who Tells Of Things Past spoke. “Did those who lead your kind give you words to bring to us?”

Bob answered. “*Our leaders have given us no words. We bring you the words that we three say. Our leaders hate us who sympathize with you who have six limbs, and they call us many hurtful things. We barely escaped from New Pinckneyville with our lives.*”

“*Then tell us the words that the three of you say.*” Even One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent was growing impatient with the slow pace of the meeting.

The three men shared a glance and Tom stepped forward. “*We three humans speak words to our friends with six limbs. We will speak these same words to our leaders.*”

“*We say that the leaders of those with six limbs should come to the same place as the leaders of those with four limbs so that they communicate directly. This is a thing that has not been done since the days of Captain Samuels. When beings communicate directly, they may find that they agree about many things. These are our words.*”

It took a while for One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent to translate Tom's words to the speech of

the hssswwx. For a long while no one spoke.

First Of Those Who Fight ventured a remark. "I have been together in the same place with humans many times."

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent turned to the three men and spoke to them in their language. *"We have heard your words and I say that we will come together with the leaders of those who have four limbs. When the twin moons next shine bright in the sky, we will be at the place where ten stones are in a circle. This is near the place where the great River Beaucoup hatches from water that comes from the ground. If your leaders want to come, they will come. If your leaders do not want to come, they will not come. There are my words."*

First Of Those Who Fight had been translating to the other hssswwx as One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent spoke. His manner was always on the very edge of insolence. He had been told not to do translation, yet here he was taking human words and making them into the words of his kind.

Tom, Bob and Larry turned to go. For an instant One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent thought that First Of Those Who Fight was going to follow and slay them on the spot. But then he did not. The Old Ways held sway, for at least a little while longer.

One Who Tells Of Things Past spoke. "I wish to come with you to the ten stones when the twin moons next shine bright in the sky. These beings have not heard of the great bbbggrrrrttt, so I must teach them. Great will be their rejoicing when they have heard."

"One Who Tells Of Things Past, you will indeed be there. As will First Of Those Who Fight and One Who Collects Water. In something of this importance all the major leaders must be involved." Thus did One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent skirt the fact that the newcomers did not wish to hear of the great bbbggrrrrttt. Nor would time be given to tell them.

Chapter 18

“Come **on!** We are moving out! That means **right now !!!**”

The men stumbled in the pre-dawn darkness. They were so tired that Sergeant Pain's frantic urging scarcely registered.

“Is training really over?”

“I hope so. Sergeant Pain is really getting old. We will be getting somebody new for regular duty.”

Timmy was standing there, looking barely alive. “No such luck. Sergeant Pain has been assigned to us for combat duty.”

Nelson took time to be skeptical. “And how would you know this, mister dead man walking? You can't even find your shoes.”

“I got drunk with him last night. He has been switched from training raw recruits to leading men in combat.”

Timmy was interrupted when Sergeant Pain came near them, still bellowing like he was...what?

“I had to end your training a day early. I did not get to have The Talk with my boys!! Do you know what you are going to see? You are going to see a hssswwx! Up close!!”

Timmy waited until their military leader had passed them and was encouraging another group of men. “His whole career he has been training recruits. This will be his first taste of war, just like it will be for us. He's scared to death.”

“Scared? Sergeant Pain?” Horace was skeptical.

“Think about it. Training recruits, the only danger is that someone will trip over his own stupidity. Now he has to face the hssswwx just like the rest of us.”

Frank took what comfort he could from this fact. It was not much comfort. He went to the corral to find his horse. The still unnamed animal was light gray with big tan spots. At least Frank thought that was what it looked like. Once it got a little more light he would recognize it, for sure.

“Ooof”

“Ooof yourself Frank. What does your horse look like?”

“Hello Dick. You are looking for your horse too. My horse looks kind of like he was decorated with leftover bits of this and that. I don't know him by feel so I am waiting for better light.”

“My horse is a light tan all over except where he is black. We have horses of every color except brown. I wonder why nobody has a brown horse.”

“If you want a brown horse, maybe you could rub dirt on yours.” Frank was in no mood to entertain trivial questions.

“Frank, I am serious. I think we have a right to know why none of us has a brown horse. Where's Sergeant Pain? I have some questions for him.”

Frank walked away from Dick Burlington. He had no desire to share in whatever punishment Sergeant Pain might give Dick.

And ran right into something. Whatever it was, it almost stepped on Frank's foot with a great big hoof. In a second he recognized his horse. This creature had turned to the dark side long ago. Now to get it saddled.

An Hour Later

The line of mounted men moved single file along the narrow cowpath. Cows are lazy and they always walk in the exact same place, which makes a cowpath. But today there were no cows nearby, and the mounted troops moved steadily in the direction of the Bad Lands.

Frank ate the last bite of his breakfast sandwich. He had thought there would be no food for them that morning, but on the way out of camp the cook had given each of them a large dinner roll filled with some kind of meat paste. Not too bad, really.

The next day

“This is it, men. Camp Sieber. This is where you greenhorns meet men who are veterans of this long struggle. Go on, introduce yourselves.”

Frank, Nelson and Dick stood there looking at the mass of hardened veterans. The hardened veterans looked back at them without showing much interest. The greenhorns would have to show the interest.

Frank picked out a knot of three veterans. There were three greenhorns there, so maybe they could strike up a conversation. Frank had a mental technique for meeting new people: He assigned them names to use in his own mind until he found out the real name. So the one on the left would be Stupid. The next one would be Stupider, and the one on the right would be Ugly. As long as he did not say any of this out loud, it would be fine.

Frank took a small step forward, motioning for Nelson and Dick to do the same. They took an even smaller step forward, kind of staying behind Frank.

“Hi. I'm Frank, and this is Nelson and Dick. We just finished Basic with Sergeant Pain. We were sent here for combat deployment.”

“Good for you.” Was Stupider's reply.

“I bet old Sergeant Pain hasn't changed a bit. Does he still get bug-eyed late in the day?” Ugly seemed to be slightly friendlier.

Nelson spoke up. “Oh no, Sergeant Pain is just the greatest man in the world. He would do anything for you, all you have to do is ask.”

That got a small laugh from the hardened veterans. A small laugh was probably all they were going to give the newcomers. Frank realized that he needed to contribute some humility.

“So what is a hssswwx like? Tell us greenhorns.”

“What's the matter, didn't Pain tell you?” Stupider was not inclined to share his knowledge.

Stupid came to Frank's defense, almost. “Pain has never seen one. All he knows is the stories his grandmother told him.”

Ugly spoke. “Did you ever have a dream that was so frightening that you did not feel right the entire next day?”

“Uhhh..yes.” Stammered Frank. “When I was really small.” he quickly added. Hopefully they did not think he was a coward now!

“A hssswwx is like that. They aren't **right**. Their bodies are too long and squirmy. The eyes aren't where they are supposed to be, and when you do see the eyes they don't exactly seem like eyes. I've been fighting them for eight years and I'm still not used to it.”

With that Ugly decided to be friendly. “My name's Tom. My family has been going into the bad lands to fight since General Nail led the first group out.

“My great, great, however many times, grandfather was named Tom like me. He went out on the very first foray with General Nail. His first battle his right arm was ripped completely off. He just sewed it back on and kept going. That happened a couple of times. He would scare all the kids by showing them his shoulder.”

Frank tried to say something that showed some interest. “How many greats-grandfather, did you say?”

“I don't rightly know.” Tom waved his hand dismissively. “It's all writ down in the family history. I could go read it sometime, if I could read. My family goes all the way back in this long struggle.”

Later that day

“We have been riding so long I've forgot how to walk.”

“We have been riding so long that I've turned into a horse.”

“If you are a horse now, we'll start feeding you oats and hay!” Timmy had a reply for most everything.

“Fine! That would be better than what they give us to eat now! That slop would make a horse puke.”

“That's why **you** have to eat it. We can't have the horses getting sick!” Timmy really did have an answer to everything.

Stupid slowed down his mount until he was riding alongside Frank. “Hey Elm Branch, what do you think of this country that we're riding through?”

Frank winced inwardly. He *hated* it when they called him Elm Branch. But since there was absolutely nothing he could do about it, he made sure he did all his wincing inwardly.

So Frank looked around in hopes of finding a suitable answer. His eyes scanned the featureless landscape in hopes of finding something to talk about. There was hardly any vegetation, and what there was looked kind of sick. In any direction he looked there was just this dreary...drearyness. Of its own accord, his upper lip curled up in disdain.

“What's the matter, Elm Branch, don't you like what you see?”

“There's not a lot to like. It looks pretty bad.”

Stupid whooped with delight. “That's right!! These are the Bad Lands! Human plants do not grow very well at all. Some of the plants that you see are actually hssswwx plants.”

“That's what she said.” shouted Timmy from somewhere down the line. Not all of his remarks were to the point.

Tom did have something sensible to say on the subject. “When my ancestor Tom went out with General Nail, this was all Dead Lands. It was totally under hssswwx domination.”

Stupid turned a disdainful eye toward Tom. “And if this ancestor of yours was so great, why didn't he whip the hssswwx all by himself? Why are we still fighting today?”

“He just might have finished the job, but he had to lay out for a while each time he had his arm sewed back on. That does slow a man down.” Tom was immune to scorn.

Stupid leaned close to Frank and spoke in a confidential manner. “I have it on good authority that we might be going into the Dead Lands. Not just the Bad Lands like this, but the Dead Lands. We will have to carry all our own food and water. The air ain't too good there either. A man can only stay in the Dead Lands so long before he starts to get sick.

“I was talking to Crazy old Wayne, and he had been talking to Casey in supply, and he overheard somebody say something about he thought he heard that General Armstrong said that we might go into the Dead Lands. Furthermore...”

“Form up, form up!! Standard Formation Three!! The hssswwx have been sighted, and we have to get ready. What if the hssswwx showed up and saw that we weren't ready. What would they think of us!!” Sergeant Pain galloped his steed along the line of mounted men. He had already whipped his poor horse into a lathered frenzy.

Stupid left Frank without another word. His place in Standard Formation Three was a little distance away. For a long moment Frank sat there astride his nameless horse, unable to act. Finally he moved his horse and himself into his proper place. This was beside Nelson.

“I can't believe this.” Muttered Frank to himself.

“What?” Shouted Nelson.

“I never thought this would happen.”

“Little Frankie, make some sense.”

This diminutive and possibly derogatory childhood nickname brought Frank Mills around. “What Pain said made perfect sense. Standard Formation Three is a defensive posture that also allows for reasonable mobility. Just what we need. Since when did that idiot make sense?”

“He is not our problem. **They** are!!” Nelson pointed to a place on the featureless horizon. Except now there was something there. It was a line of moving black specks that undulated as they made their way toward the mounted men. The line of moving black specks wavered as it increased in size, and now he could see that the individuals also had a kind of squiggly quality about them.

“Slow trot. Keep formation.” Captain Lefferson made himself heard without having to scream at the top of his lungs. The distance closed.

“One Who Leads Others To Where Some Do Not Return, these are the humans that I saw.”

“You have done well, One Who Runs Ahead And Then Comes Back And Tells What She Saw. The humans are here, as you told to me.”

“The sight of them gives me no pleasure. And I say that I have seen humans many times, and this time there are **more** of them together than I have ever seen before.”

One Who Leads Others To Where Some Do Not Return heard these words but was not pleased by them. The humans became more and more, while those with six limbs were less and less. The only answer he knew was to kill as many of them as he could.

“Steady. Stay together.”

Frank needed no encouragement about staying together. He was not about to run ahead and fight the hssswwx all by himself. And if they wanted a volunteer to help bring up the rear, he was their man.

“Hey! Do you want some of this? I'll bring it to you.” Timmy raised his pike a foot higher than the men around him.

The distance closed then there was no distance at all. Frank held his pike with both hands and jabbed at a long wormy-looking thing. The sharp point penetrated a couple of inches. He pulled his weapon out of the

rubbery flesh and maneuvered his horse closer to Nelson and two other men that he did not know. Strength in numbers!!

The hssswwx were also re-forming into groups of a few individuals. Suddenly a knot of them charged Frank's group. Frank held his pike sticking out directly in front of himself. That probably forced the closest hssswwx to change course slightly but even so a long wooden spear passed about six inches from Frank's left ear. He had the barest glimpse of a stone spear point lashed to a wooden shaft with some kind of organic material. Standard historical doctrine taught that the hssswwx never advanced beyond the stone age.

Frank knocked the hssswwx spear away with the shaft of his pike. Then he raised his pike over his head and brought the little ax down onto the hssswwx's ... head?

The ax-head part of the pike was embedded in one end of the creature's long body. It was not exactly a head, but now the hssswwx did seem to be sagging like a balloon with a slow leak.

Frank pulled his pike loose with a wet *plop*. He wheeled his horse around to face the next threat. There was not a next threat, at least not in the next two seconds. Frank's hssswwx would soon be in hssswwx heaven. One of the others that had rushed them was underneath Nelson's horse, doing absolutely nothing. The rest must have fled, if there had been any more of them in the first place.

Frank and the three other men looked around, suddenly not sure what to do. Captain Lefferson spoke to them above the clamor.

“You four. There's a man in trouble over there. Help him.” And Captain Lefferson pointed to a place where three hssswwx had surrounded a lone human.

The four men dug spurs into their horses, and off they galloped to the rescue. The man was still on his horse, but just barely. He did not seem to have a pike, but was attempting to fight off the three hssswwx with a sword.

“Pain!!” shouted Frank mainly to himself. “Old Sergeant Pain got himself cut off and surrounded!!”

The four rescuers came in at a full gallop. Frank rammed his pike into the nearest hssswwx at about midsection. It let out a high-pitched squeal and thick purple grease oozed out the wound. Frank was getting the hang of this!!

He had to extract his pike by making the horse back up. Another of the hssswwx was down and all the men were surrounding the remaining one. At first it darted from one human to the other, looking for an opening. Then finding none, it violently flung itself onto Nelson's pike.

“The new guy is showing us how to do it. Look how far in it went.” Said Stupid.

“He trained the hssswwx to do that.” Replied Stupider. Frank realized that the two men he did not know were Stupid and Stupider. He really needed to find out their names.

“You boys done me proud.” crowed Sergeant Pain. “Everybody stick together, just like I told you.”

Stupid was not so jolly. “Pain, that stupid sword nearly got you killed. Go trade it in for a pike.”

“It's over.” Observed Stupider, meaning this engagement.

“Come on, form up for Environmentals.” Captain Lefferson's voice cut into their conversation.

The men gently nudged the horses to a walk and made their way to the flag. The flag signified the central rally point. Once there the mounted men formed a line, more or less.

Sergeant Pain spoke softly to Frank and Nelson. “Boys, there's something I was going to tell you on the last day.”

“You need a pike to fight the hssswwx.” Offered Stupid. “You were going to tell them that.”

“Smythe shut **up**.” Hissed Pain. “They need to know that...”

“Ten-Hut!! Cut that chatter in the line!”

The men fell silent. The line became straighter except that Frank could not get his horse to do anything.

“Here comes the man on the big brown horse!” This came from an enormously fat man who was astride a huge brown horse. The horse *needed* to be huge because of the size of the man and the overloaded saddlebags which clanked with every step the horse took.

“I hear you did good today.” Shouted the fat man. “You finished the macro work, now we have to do the micro.”

“You have to do whatever the man on the brown horse tells you to do.” Whispered Sergeant Pain. “I think you can see that now.”

The fat man swung a leg and dismounted from the brown horse. He slipped and nearly fell in the mud, but at the last second he caught the saddlehorn and stayed standing. Nobody laughed.

“Captain, did they leave any dead hssswwx on the battlefield?” inquired the fat man in a most cheerful manner.

“No **sir**. They took all their dead and dying with them. They eat them you know.” was Captain Lefferson's prompt reply.

“Oh, that is just excellent.” beamed the oversize newcomer. “That means we will not have to clean them up before we begin our work.”

Frank stared like the country hick he was supposed to be. This was the first fat person he had seen in the past. And he did not think he had ever seen anybody so cheerful.

“Oh Captain, do you think some of the men could help me here?”

“Yes **sir**. Our pleasure **sir**. Troop, dismount!”

The men got off their horses. They dropped the reins on the ground. The animals were trained to stay in place when this was done the same as if they had been tied to something. This is called ‘ground tied’.

“I think some of you are new.” began the jolly fat man. “I am the Environmentalist. I take an area that you have captured from the enemy and begin the process of making it into sweet land, where a farmer can grow crops that you can eat.

“An environmentalist always rides a brown horse. That has been the rule for I don't know how long. When my class graduated, they were short one brown horse and a man named Zichery Zuckerman had to take a tan horse for a while. He did his best to dye it brown, but we all still laughed at him.

“You two, get out the plows and get started.” The man waved his hand vaguely at the waiting soldiers.

“Come on Elm Branch, he means us.” Stupid/Smythe grabbed Frank by the arm. They made their way to one of the saddlebags where they found two folding plows.

Following Smythe's example, Frank got his folding plow unfolded and assembled. This plow was basically a piece of steel bent at an angle with a wooden framework attached so that when it was dragged thru the soil, it would turn over the soil, covering what had been on top of the ground and bringing up the topsoil that was a few inches underground.

They extracted a tangle of harness from the saddlebag and walked over to where their horses were waiting. Off came the saddles, on went the harness to pull the plows. Frank was **very** glad for all the drills he had had

back in his time.

When they were finished, their cavalry horses were each hitched to a small 'walking plow'. With a walking plow, man holds two handles to guide the plow while the horse pulls the thing. It looked just like pictures he had seen of...farming in Heroic Times. How about that, he *was* in Heroic Times.

The man who had been riding the brown horse padded over to where Frank and Smythe were waiting. His heart was filled with joy and gladness. "It's good you two are going to turn over the soil so that the soldiers with the beneficial soil bacteria can get them deep into this sterile soil. And I like to put the fungi and protozoa in at the same time."

Frank wanted to jump up and down. The people in Heroic Times **did** have a well-defined strategy for dominating the planet at the microscopic level. Many historians in Frank's time held that science in Heroic Times was not advanced enough to do anything like that. He wanted to run over to the fat man and ask him all sorts of questions about his strategy and methods. But of course he did not.

"Any instructions, Mister Environmentalist?" Smythe inquired respectfully.

For a moment the poor man could not decide. "Oh, what shall I have you do? Why don't you?" The man waved his hand in the general direction of Frank "go and start at that corner there. And we'll have the veteran go to the opposite corner and start there. Each of you move across the field and you can say hello when you meet in the middle."

Frank moved himself, the horse and the plow (carrying it to where he was supposed to start turning over soil) to his assigned corner of the field. As he went, he could hear Captain Lefferson saying "Our pleasure, **sir**. The men would be disappointed if they didn't get to help **sir**."

They arrived at the place. Frank placed the bent piece of metal on the ground so that when the horse started pulling it would turn over the soil.

"Gidyaup." The horse did not move. He seemed to know that this would be work. Frank flipped the reins, clucked, whistled, threw a small pebble. The horse was not motivated. Finally Frank screamed

"Gidyaup" as loud as he could and the reluctant horse started to pull the plow. The sterile soil of Altgeld was steadily turned over revealing more sterile soil just like it.

Frank tried to guide this operation in a straight line. He had been told that people would make fun of him if he did not. In the distance he could see Smythe plowing his way toward him. They would pass and then continue on past each other.

They were getting closer to each other. What was he supposed to do when they met? Oh yes, they were supposed to say hello.

Now Smythe was just a few feet away. "Hello" ventured Frank.

"Hello yourself. I bet you joined up to get away from working on the farm. Now look at you. Ha ha!!"

"Ha ha" echoed Frank without enthusiasm. Now the two men were even with each other.

"I've been doing this 20 years and I have never seen them dump so many men into the front lines at once. They even put Sergeant Pain on combat duty. Why we need Somebody Like That I'll never know."

Now they were moving away from each other. "What do you think is up?" Frank asked, but Smythe did not answer.

It was kind of peaceful, walking along behind the little plow. There were not even any birds to make a sound. Before long Frank was coming to the opposite side. To his surprise he saw Dick Burlington. Dick was digging a hole with the teeniest little shovel Frank had ever seen. Sergeant Pain was supervising.

“Dick what are you doing? You need a bigger shovel.”

Sergeant Pain answered for him. “He got confused, thought he was General Armstrong. This will help him remember. Hey, keep working!! I was good enough to let you use that nice shovel.”

For just a second it looked like Dick was going to attack Sergeant Pain with the nice shovel. Then Sergeant Pain put his hand on his sword hilt and Dick resumed digging.

“This is my ditch. And that is your dirt in my ditch. Get your dirt out of my ditch!!” Dick was having a very bad day.

Frank had his hands full getting himself the plow and the horse turned around and moving back in the opposite direction. But soon they were moving back toward their starting point.

Over to one side he could see Nelson and Horace being fitted with some kind of sprayer-backpack. The Environmentalist had talked about treating the soil with something. At least Frank had a horse to do most of the work.

Now he could see Smythe coming back toward him. He needed to see if he could resume their conversation. Smythe saw that Frank wanted to talk so he spoke first.

“I’ve heard that there will be a big push to end it once for all.”

“Huh? End what?”

“End the war, stupid. I’ve heard that the big high-ups are feeling the heat to mount an all-out push to conquer the entire rest of the planet.”

Frank was feeling tongue-tied. “Do you think we can do that?”

Smythe stopped his horse and looked at Frank, hard. “I don’t know how things are up in Elm Branch, but a lot of people are hungry. We *have to* bust loose somehow. From now on, things are going to get a lot hotter.”

Smythe got his horse going again and soon he was out of earshot. Frank continued also. That was a really silly question he had asked Smythe. Frank was from the future and he **knew** that the hssswwx were exterminated and the whole planet was terrerestialized. He must be going native.

He was again approaching the edge of the field. The Environmentalist had recruited another helper from the soldiers. The helper looked like Timmy, but it wasn’t him.

Historians in Frank’s time talked about the Battle of Overall, a huge turning point in the war against the hssswwx. Was that coming up here? If so, he would have a lot of material for his doctoral dissertation.

That **was** Timmy. He somehow seemed different. “Timmy, did the Environmentalist draft you as his helper?”

“I volunteered. I wanted to learn the science behind planetary ecology. He’s teaching me a lot of things.”

“Tim, make sure those sample bottles are sterile. We can’t have any contamination.”

Timmy replied quickly. “Absolutely, Mister Environmentalist. I’ll be right there with them.”

Frank continued his plowing. The next time their paths crossed Smythe tried to tell him a joke about two pathizers and a wooden shoe salesman. Frank did not get it, and he did not much care to. Great events were coming up, he could tell.

Chapter 19

“One Who Tells of Things Past, do come in.”

“One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent, I did not think it was yet time to depart for our meeting with the humans.”

“It is not yet time for that. I wish to speak of many things.”

One Who Tells of Things Past twirled his primary optical receptors as a sign of respect. “Then I am deeply honored, One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent,. And greetings to you, One Who Collects Water.”

“First Of Those Who Fight will not be here. He had many tasks to perform and he asked to be excused.” said One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent in answer to the unspoken question. The truth was that he had not been invited and knew nothing of this meeting.

“One Who Tells of Things Past, when I was a hatchling I cared only to run to and fro. I could hardly sit still when I was told of things past. When I was an adult I was busy with many things. But now I wish you to tell me of things past.”

One Who Tells of Things Past was honored but also somewhat puzzled. But he started to tell the familiar tale.

“In The Beginning, The First Ones lived free in the vast open spaces. Food was plentiful and ...”

“One Who Tells of Things Past, forgive the interruption. I wish to hear of what came before The Beginning.”

For a moment One Who Tells of Things Past had no words to say. Then he understood. His primary, secondary **and** tertiary optical receptors all opened wide as a measure of his sudden understanding.

“One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent, now I know what you wish to hear. These things are told to but a few. Most have no idea that these tales exist at all.”

“When I came to this place of leadership I was told that there is more to our history than what is told to every hatchling. Now I wish to hear it.”

One Who Tells of Things Past took a moment to collect his thoughts, then he began. “The first of our kind did indeed live on the broad open plains. Sometimes food was plentiful and often it was not. They lived in small groups, who fought each other constantly.

As time went by, the small groups became larger. They learned to farm and to use metal.”

One Who Collects Water interrupted. “Metal??”

One Who Tells of Things Past was unperturbed at the interruption. “Yes, metal. Metal is now unknown among our kind, although the humans use it for many things.

“They used metal to make things which enabled them to run swiftly without having to run at all. Next they learned to run in the sky and to travel beyond the sky to other worlds.”

Now One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent had something to say. “The humans came from beyond our sky in a huge thing made of metal.”

“So it is told. But today humans do not run in the sky. They also have forgotten much that their ancestors knew.

“Many of our kind went to other worlds in the sky. Those who stayed here chose to return to a simple existence. They of their own choice forgot much. These are what we now call The First Ones.”

Now One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent came to the point. “One Who Tells of Things Past, in your brain, in your midsection, there may be the key to hidden treasures of knowledge. First question: Where did they get metal?”

“My leader, I do not know.”

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent was not yet discouraged. “**You** do not know. But you can ask another or look in a book of writings.”

The historian was silent. One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent asked more questions. “What about changing our bodies so that each of us can lay many eggs and so produce many hatchlings?”

“One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent, you think more highly of me than you ought to.”

“Running in the sky? Calling fire down from the sky? Becoming young again?”

One Who Tells of Things Past gathered himself for a final answer. “The First Ones made a promise never to speak of these things. Some say this knowledge was taken from them. I think they simply said nothing about these things, ever. So their hatchlings knew nothing of any of these things. Thus it has been since that time.”

For a while One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent had no words. Finally he said “Then we will fight the humans with what we have now, and with who we are now.”

A short distance away

“First Of Those Who Fight, what are we doing?”

“I have divided you into three groups. Each group is called an edkar. Each edkar is lead by an edkar-hhqq. Now you are all standing there looking at me.”

“Can we now go running in the wide open spaces?”

“You will stay where you are and listen to my words. You have promised to do everything I say, and I say this.

“Think how it is when one of you fights one human. You might win or the human might win. Now suppose your entire edkar fights the one human. The human stands no chance. Then the edkar fights another human with the same outcome.”

One Who Digs Holes could be silent no longer. She stepped forward and spoke. “This is not the way it was in the tales from long ago. We cannot do this way!!”

First Of Those Who Fight drew himself up to his full height, so that he was standing on his rearmost legs. Then he shouted as loud as he could “**Shut your primary communication orifice!!**”

One Who Digs Holes stepped back to her edkar and voiced no further objections. The great bbbggrrrrttt, that felt good, First Of Those Who Fight mused. The survival of his race was at stake, and his leadership was also at issue. But apart from all that, it felt good to shout and have another do your bidding. But now he must give further instructions.

“**We** will be the ones they speak of when tales are told in generations to come. They will speak of how edkar one and edkar two and edkar three fought the humans and won.

“Think of all the tales from long ago. In every one, our hero was hard-pressed and nearly perished. But they kept on fighting, kept on trying, when the sensible thing to do would have been to fall on their ancestral hunting spear and rest from all striving.

“Now we *will* go running in the wide open spaces. But each of you will stay in the edkar in which I have

placed you. That is the key to our success. Now follow me.”

One Who Digs Holes turned to her best friend, He Who Fell In A Hole. “Truly we shall run side by side here in our edkar.”

He Who Fell In A Hole was not impressed. “So you forsake the tales from long ago for the words of one who speaks very loud.”

“Run by my side in this edkar and we shall kill many humans. It does not matter so much if my name is not told. The name of edkar one will be told and that will be enough.”

First Of Those Who Fight was pleased. He had expected one or two of them to burst open and spill their insides on the ground when he went against tradition. He turned both secondary optical receptors back, and his command was following him - in the three groups. Next he was going to tell them to look for metal. They could not make metal, but they could reach down and pick it up off the ground.

Chapter 20

The army under General Armstrong rode in the wide open spaces. It was a fine day in the Bad Lands. No greenery, no water except what they carried, lots of dust. It did not get any better than that.

Frank was riding in a very loose formation with his usual companions. He realized that he still needed to get to know people better. For instance, there was Stupider riding just a few feet from him. Time to find out his name.

“Hey! I never got your name.”

Stupider looked over blankly. “Huh? Who's that?”

“Frank Mills. Two weeks out of Basic.”

“Oh. My name is Bartimaeus.”

“Bartimaeus. I'll remember that.”

“Want to know why they call me Bartimaeus?”

Riding a horse is not the best way to have an extended conversation. But he **was** trying to get to know people.

“So why do they call you Bartimaeus?”

“Because I can't see anything at all.”

Then blind Bartimaeus turned his face toward the far horizon. Suddenly he looked very startled and surprised.

“Enemy sighted!!! Thataway!!!” The blind man pointed behind and to his right at what he had seen.

Word spread quickly. Frank heard the trombone signal to turn the army one quarter turn to the right. That took a while. Frank was feeling a little confused, but he concentrated on obeying his immediate orders. Before long the line of mounted men was heading directly toward the hssswwx.

Smythe noticed Frank's confusion. He pulled his horse close to Frank's and said “Bartimaeus can't see anything unless it's at least two miles away.”

Now everybody could see the enemy. Anticipation was building. Frank was beginning to feel like a veteran himself. This would be his second battle. Would he ever get used to seeing the hssswwx up close?

Smythe caught his eye. “A line of men, a mile from end to end. The hssswwx line is every bit as long. When the two come together you can hear the crash for miles.” Smythe grinned in huge anticipation.

Frank looked at the hssswwx line. They were getting closer fast. And they were not in a line, they seemed to be in three groups.

Smythe was no longer in earshot. So Frank turned to Bartimaeus. “Are they all bunched together, not in a line like we are?”

“How would I know? I can't see that close.”

First Of Those Who Fight was pleased. His army was staying in the three edkars, just like he taught them. He was not with any of the edkars, but was with a small group behind all of them. It had not been his original intention to keep himself out of harm's way, but it was a nice side effect. Now to see if this system

worked in a battle.

The hssswwx were nearly there, there was no more time for conversation. They were definitely bunched together, all right. Frank was a little to the left of the middle group.

He set his pike as he had been taught and waited for the hssswwx. But this time a huge mob of them stormed right past him, no more than 10 feet away. Frank felt a little disappointed. But the men who were in the path of the hssswwx juggernaut were not so lucky. Frank saw several men on the ground. Some of their horses were running in a wild panic, and others were dead.

First Of Those Who Fight watched from a small distance. The initial rush had been a success. Now it was up to each edkar-hhqq to turn his edkar and cut through the human forces again. He fidgeted. Every instinct told him to take his ancestral hunting spear and go take on a human, one on one. This is the way told in the tales from long ago. But that would completely undermine what he was trying to build in always staying with your edkar. First Of Those Who Fight stayed where he was.

Frank looked around. He had never seen such chaos. There were no orders, either from Captain Lefferson or the trombone. He decided to go a small distance, to where it looked like some men might be gathering.

The horse sullenly carried Frank in the direction he ordered. Everything the horse did was sullen but at least he was moving.

Frank spun around in the saddle just in time to see the mob of hssswwx thundering by right behind him. Some kind of peripheral hearing or sixth sense had told him there was *something* back there. They continued past him, overrunning the place he had just been. Apparently if you were not in their direct path, you were safe.

Frank kicked his horse a little harder to get to where some other lost souls were gathering. Not that the extra kick made it go any faster. He was considering naming the horse after his uncle Wayne, but then he had arrived where the others had gathered.

“What just happened? Why are they running around in these big groups?” All the others here were veterans, and Frank was looking for answers.

Smythe regarded Frank with a baleful eye. “It’s not real funny. Bartimaeus is dead. He never saw them coming. The whole army is milling around like a herd of lost cows. No one has heard any orders since they came at us in these huge bunches.”

“Hey, I never said anything was funny. Maybe if we organized into big units we could put up a fight against those huge bunches of hssswwx.”

Smythe was having none of it. “Well **hello** there, General Armstrong. Until right now I thought you were this stupid kid from Elm Branch. For your information the ranking man here is Sergeant Thomas. Anybody tells us what to do, it’s gonna be him.”

Sergeant Thomas was sitting on his horse looking like he might throw up any minute. No orders came from his mouth. Frank decided that if that huge bunch of hssswwx came at them he was going to move, orders or not.

A rider approached at a full gallop. It took Frank a while to realize that was Nelson. “What’s going on? Don’t we have a way to deal with this?” Nelson was full of questions.

“What is it with You People? Always asking questions. Always making suggestions. Every time I turn around you are running up to somebody and saying 'Hi. What's your name? Will you be my friend?'“ All this came from a dour-looking man on a nondescript gray horse.

Nelson was not intimidated. “So what is your name?”

“My name is Dick Jones. And I don't care what your name is so don't bother telling me.”

“Dick, shut **up**. You like to fight with everybody except the hssswwx.” Captain Lefferson had come up to the happy little group without anyone noticing.

But now they did have a leader. “I have orders for us to counterattack. Ride double-file. Each of you pair up with somebody and stay with him. We are going to gather anyone else we can find and strike at their main force.”

Frank paired up with Dick Jones. That gave Dick opportunity to make conversation.

“I want to know where Captain Lefferson got these orders. I have not heard a trombone since this whole thing started. Headquarters has to be two or three miles away. That old nag that Lefferson rides could not have come that far in that amount of time.”

Frank was surprised to find that he agreed with the lout. “I think you're right. Lefferson has to be acting on his own, claiming to have orders.”

“Hey, what do you know!! You have your nerve coming in like this and telling everybody what to do!! Who do you think you are, anyway?”

Frank looked around for a way to end the conversation short of killing Dick Jones. Looking around, he saw a lone rider, not going much of anywhere. “Hey!! Over here!! Come join us!”

The man trotted over and joined the impromptu company led by Captain Lefferson. Not until they were nearly face to face did Frank realize that it was Timmy. “I've never seen such a mess.” was Timmy's comment. “They threw something at us that we couldn't handle.”

There were about a dozen of them now. Frank had time to think how he would incorporate this engagement into his doctoral dissertation. He was abruptly brought back to the present (Frank's past, he reminded himself) when Captain Lefferson barked orders.

“There they are. Now we are going to give them back some. For Altgeld!!”

The company of human soldiers broke into a gallop. The mob of hssswwx was dead ahead, coming right at them. Frank's horse was in a full gallop, which was rare for that lethargic beast. It felt good to be moving into something big!!

Except that they were not moving as fast as they could. Frank spurred the horse, to no effect. Then he saw Nelson's hand on his bridle, slowing him down.

“Nelson what do you think you are *doing*? We are going to get there after it is all over.”

“That would be just fine. Lefferson would run us into a brick wall. We can bring up the rear.”

Captain Lefferson was at the front of the charge, and he readied his pike when he was maybe 30 feet away from the enemy. Suddenly his horse went from a full gallop to a weird sidewise sidestep that brought them just to the side of the hssswwx edkar. Captain Lefferson jabbed his pike at the hssswwx but they were just out of reach. He did succeed in breaking off the end of one hssswwx spear, but that was all.

The rest of them easily scattered in front of the charge. The mass of hssswwx was impenetrable, but it was slow-moving. It lumbered past the more nimble humans.

Frank noticed an object on the ground. He dismounted and picked it up. It was a piece of metal tied to a short length of wood. As Frank remounted his horse, Nelson took a look. "That's the spearpoint that Captain Lefferson broke off." was his observation.

Frank was stunned. "They are using metal. I think it's the broken-off tip of one of our pikes, but the fact remains that they are using metal."

"Put that thing in your pocket," ordered Nelson "and don't show it to anyone."

They heard a low mournful sound, slow and protracted. "That's got to be the trombone. But what's it saying?" Frank was frustrated; he was supposed to know all the trombone signals.

"That means retreat, Elm Branch. You don't hear that a lot, but we're hearing it now. Come on, this way."

He Who Fell In A Hole was not happy. This whole battle had come and gone without his going one on one against the enemy. True, you could not eat this enemy after slaying him, but still you needed to be able to cry mmmnnbbb over the body of your enemy.

One of them was lagging behind. The creature he was riding was having some kind of trouble.

The humans were retreating back to their territory. "Hey, where's Timmy? I don't see him."

"Who's that? Oh yes, the crazy one. That's him back there. His horse threw a shoe."

He Who Fell In A Hole looked at his edkar-hhqq. The leader of the edkar was trying to get the attention of First Of Those Who Fight. Now was his chance. He Who Fell In A Hole broke away from his edkar and headed for the human whose riding-creature was moving slowly.

"Yes, that's Timmy. Wait, one of them is going after him. Watch out, Timmy!!"

"Help him. All of us." ordered Smythe. All of them took off at a gallop. But Timmy was at least 500 yards away and the hssswwx was nearly on him. It was a terrible feeling.

Timmy was carrying his pike in his right hand. In less time than it takes to tell about it, Timmy reversed the pike so that the business end was pointing back. Then he tossed the pike up and caught the very bottom of the pike shaft in his hand and then he *jammed* the head of the pike backwards into the hssswwx who had just got in reach of the long-poled pike.

He Who Fell In A Hole felt the metal pike-head enter his body. He extended his ancestral hunting spear in a vain attempt to reach the human, but he could not. A human pike is longer than the hssswwx spear, by deliberate design. He Who Fell In A Hole felt himself fading away.

Timmy pulled his pike from the dying hssswwx as the horse continued its crooked gallop. In a few minutes his friends reached him. Timmy pulled his horse to a stop and looked at them inquisitively. "Do you men need any help? I saw you come running to me."

First Of Those Who Fight stood by edkar one watching the encounter. "Back to our territory, now." he

ordered.

One Who Digs Holes spoke up. “We must now eat the one that was slain.”

First Of Those Who Fight wished that One Who Digs Holes had been killed by the human along with He Who Fell In A Hole. But best not to wish too many of his fighters dead. What to say here? Yes, he knew the perfect answer.

“He Who Fell In A Hole died while going against the words that I have said to you. Such a one is not worthy for us to eat. We shall return and leave his body where it is.” The truth was they needed to get out of there before the humans fell on the edkar while it was in a feeding frenzy. Also, this strengthened his authority with the edkars.

First Of Those Who Fight felt good about the day's events. They had actually won a battle against the humans. And his command of these fighters was firmer than ever. It was good to have others do as you say.

Chapter 21

Time travelers Frank Mills, Nelson Jones, Horace Wilson and Timmy Thatchenson were sitting on a large rock. Dick Burlington was on disciplinary report, again. They had been joined on the rock by Smythe, Bud Grace, and another man that Frank did not know.

Frank was wondering if the humans were going to win the war after all. In some kind of unconscious way he had *forgotten* that he was from the future and that he knew how it would all turn out. He needed information from somebody close at hand.

“Smythe.”

“What do you want, Elm Branch?”

“The trombone called Retreat today.”

“Yes it did.”

“Did you ever hear Retreat before that?”

Smythe considered for a moment. “The last day of Basic they played it for us. So we would know what it sounded like.”

“That's not what I mean and you know it. Did you ever hear Retreat for real, before today?”

“Elm Branch, what's with all the questions? Bud here was just saying, you are always asking about something else or six other things.”

But Frank got help from Bud on this one. “Smythe, you really do not want to talk about this, do you? Your little friend here actually asked a good question this time. For him, I mean, considering that he's an idiot.” Bud was embarrassed that he had said something nice about Frank so he had to quickly insult him extra to make up for it.

Smythe was visibly considering what to say. Finally he spoke.

“No. If you must know. I spoke to some other old timers before joining this rock club. Never before have humans retreated from the hssswx. A lot of times we don't exactly win, and sometimes both sides decide not to continue fighting right then. But never before have we had to run. Their new way of staying together in big groups, it has me worried.”

Now Bud was curious about something. “So why do you keep re-enlisting, Smythe? A man your age would not be expected to serve if he did not want to.”

“Maybe you have a way to eat outside of the Army. I don't. As long as the Army keeps giving me food, I'm here.”

Frank looked over at Nelson, and he saw that Nelson thinking the same thing that he was. The food here in this army was more vile and gooberous than they would have ever believed. Yet it was the only choice for some. Humanity here on Altgeld was in a bad way.

“Mills. Where's Mills?”

There stood Sergeant Pain. The conversation ended. Everybody sat there looking at him.

“Frank Mills, I have a message for you.”

“I'm right here. You can tell me any time you want to.” Frank was tired and he did not feel like getting up. Besides that, getting up might look like he was inviting Sergeant Pain to sit on the rock.

“Frank Mills, I have a special message for you from Captain Lefferson. This is official and special.”

“Just shut up and tell me.”

“As I said, this is directly from Captain Lefferson.”

“Sergeant Pain, I'm right here. Some messenger you turned out to be.” Captain Lefferson strode past the sergeant to deliver his own message.

“Frank Mills.” There was something formal in the way Captain Lefferson said it.

Frank rose. “Yes **sir**.”

“You are assigned to Special Duty, effective immediately.” Frank could hear the capital letters.

“Get your gear and your pike. And get your horse and walk him over to Headquarters. I will meet you there.”

Frank looked back at the rock. The remaining men must have rearranged themselves, because there was still no room on the big rock for Sergeant Pain. People will cling to spite even when they have nothing else. Sergeant Pain was standing there kind of awkwardly trying to make conversation.

Frank quickly collected his meager backpack and his pike. That pike was by far the most valuable thing he had. If something keeps you from getting killed, it is valuable. Then he found his ill-tempered steed and walked it over to Headquarters. Lefferson was waiting.

“Over here Mills, meet some people.”

Headquarters was a large tent with a center pole. To one side was a nondescript tent that would not normally get a second glance. Captain Lefferson waved him over. “Tie up your horse and go in here. And lean your pike with the others, there isn't room for that in the tent.”

Frank was feeling more flustered with every passing minute. Finally he ducked his head and went inside.

“Hi”

“Look there. We got ourselves a greenhorn. Where do they all come from.”

“My name is Frank Mills and I'm from Elm Branch.”

“We don't **care** where you're from. And we just want to hear your first name so don't have to remember so much.”

Frank came into the gloomy tent and sat down. He did not think he was sitting on much of anything. Best not to act too timid.

“So what are your names? Just your first names.”

“I'm Tom. This is Raymond, Elmer, Robert and Harold. We are Special Duty.”

Frank wanted to know what Special Duty was but decided not to ask. There was no casual conversation in this tent.

Chapter 22

“Professor Lively, we have some concerns.”

“That is why we called this special session of the Academic Oversight Supracommittee, to voice our concerns.”

Professor Edgar Lively regarded the other two men. John Cole and Samuel Prophet were reputable Historians, but they were not the Grand Old Man of Altgeld history. He was. He was not overly concerned.

“... and we feel that other viewpoints should have been considered in staffing the trans-temporal incursion personnel. We also feel that the team members were not adequately trained in non-intrusive research protocols.” John Cole sat back, confident that most everyone felt the same way.

Samuel Prophet was quick to speak next. “There is also the issue of representing the hssswwx perspective. It is well-known that the pre-posttechnological hssswwx were a spacefaring race. They founded colonies in several star systems. Has adequate consideration been given to the possibility of contacting hssswwx in any of these other locations?”

Edgar Lively snorted in derision. “The Azariah Document is hardly well-known. Any knowledge of it is restricted to doctoral degree candidates and those already with earned doctoral degrees in advanced historical analysis. Just last week I showed it to a doctoral candidate who is usually quite level-headed. She threw a huge fit. I thought she was going to have a stroke! The man on the street is nowhere near ready to know these things.”

“You're avoiding my question. I don't care if you **are** the Grand Old Man of Altgeld history. I demand that you address the issues which have been raised in this legal meeting.”

“You have seen the Azariah Document. It is one sheet of hssswwx-skin leather. In pictorial script it describes some of the hssswwx going into space while others stayed on the planet and reverted to a preindustrial civilization.

“That's it. There is absolutely nothing to tell where the travelers went. No interstellar coordinates, planetary descriptions or letters home. They could be anywhere. So where do we look?”

Professor Samuel Prophet took a minute to gather his thoughts. Finally he managed to say “If we did locate the spacefaring hssswwx it would give a new perspective to our early history.”

But now Professor Cole was not supporting his position. “We will find the present day hssswwx, then they come here with a massive space fleet and blow Altgeld to rubble in revenge for what we did to their cousins.”

Edgar Lively decided to play good cop for Professor Prophet. In his most kindly voice he said “Our department budget will not support any kind of search for these colonies. While I would be intrigued by such a discovery, it simply is not feasible.”

Professor Prophet decided to switch topics. “What about cross-temporal contamination? Were the travelers properly trained? Why were the travelers not chosen from a variety of age groups?” Professor Prophet had wanted to go himself, but was refused because he was too old.

This time Edgar Lively was not so kindly. “The time-travelers were thoroughly trained in nonintrusive observation techniques. Only the best and brightest were chosen. You are put out that 'best and brightest' did not include you.”

Professor Cole decided to introduce another topic. “So have these bright young men changed history? How can we be sure about that?”

Professor Edgar Lively kept his face neutral. Never let them see you sweat. Everything these men knew was generalities, and he was not going to give them anything new.

“All the participants were told in no uncertain terms that any attempt to improve conditions or communicate any knowledge of events to come could have disastrous consequences.

“All the time travelers were screened for emotional stability. That is, men who liked the way things are now and would not want it changed.”

Now **that** was a big whopping lie. All the participants were at the very least, edgy. That is the type of person you get for a venture that pushes the envelope of reality. Timmy was actually insane, but his brilliant mind made up for that. Time to end this meeting.

Professor Edgar Lively stood. “I have answered all your concerns. This meeting is adjourned.” Lively strode from the room, leaving the other two men with nothing but silence.

Chapter 23

“Get up, you stupid apes. General Armstrong wants you out there right **now!!**”

Frank woke out of a dead sleep. At first he thought he had done something horrible and was in really big trouble with General Armstrong. He had once written a paper about Armstrong's harsh discipline. He began to rehearse how he would say that everybody else was doing it, and being new, he did not know it was against the rules. Then he realized that he had not actually done anything, and that they all had been summoned, not just him.

He was dressed, mounted, and ready faster than he would have thought possible. It saves time when you don't wash your face or have breakfast. The other men in Frank's new unit were surly and cross, as was Frank's horse. The nameless mount fit in quite well.

Then he rode up. General Armstrong. The quasi-legendary leader who cemented the human victory. Some historians tried to say he could not be real, but was an archetype assembled from idealized attributes.

They all stiffened to attention as Armstrong approached. He needed a shave and he seemed preoccupied. There was a smell of whiskey in the air that had not been there before. General Armstrong looked at the group of men with bleary eyes.

“Captain Schultz, did we get a new man to replace Tyndall?”

“Yes sir. He came in yesterday.” Frank realized that it was Captain Schultz who had woke them so abruptly.

“Let's hope he does better than Tyndall.” With that General Armstrong turned his horse in a tight circle and rode toward the center of the camp. Bob pointed Frank toward a place behind and to the left of the general.

So they were General Armstrong's bodyguard. Frank had mixed feelings about being here. He was uneasy about being separated from the other time travelers. But being this close to General Armstrong could provide a lot of original research material. Providing that he was actually allowed to hear anything. Being here in the Heroic Age was nothing like watching a movie about it.

Back at the rock

Frank's friends had set up camp around the rock. Sergeant Pain must have felt the chill, because he had not returned. They had been there a whole day, and the place was getting a lived-in look.

Nelson felt itchy. Mentally itchy, that is. He had come from an environment of instantaneous trans-cranial news feeds to - this. The only source of information was the man next to you, and he didn't know anything either. Nelson wanted to hear that the human leaders had a bold new strategy for dealing with the setback. The others were uneasy too. For as long as anyone could remember, humans had been steadily making gains against the hssswx.

A rider entered the camp. He was maybe two hundred yards away from their place beside the flat rock. Nelson called out “Somebody just came into camp. I wonder if he's heard anything.”

Bud looked up from whatever he was doing. “Try to flag him down and see what he knows.” It was the custom that a man riding into camp would toss a few crumbs of information to anyone he encountered.

Nelson came to the edge of the path and waved at the rider. “Hey, what's new?”

The rider kept on going as if no one had spoken to him. Nelson was glad he was standing on the edge of the path and not in the path. “Can't you hear? What do you think you're doing?”

Then they were watching the silent rider trot away from them. Timmy stood beside Nelson and shouted

“Good talking to you! See you next time!”

General Armstrong's party, a short distance away

General Armstrong continued his tour of the camp. Frank noticed that things were much quieter in General Armstrong's presence than was otherwise the case.

They heard hoofbeats. It was the tight-lipped rider approaching General Armstrong. The General said something to Captain Schultz, who turned to the guard detail.

“De-tail, stand *off*.” The bodyguard detail stayed where it was, while General Armstrong rode over to meet the newcomer. Just out of earshot. Frank could have screamed about *that* but he didn't.

The two men talked for some time. The rider showed something to Armstrong or maybe he didn't. Armstrong was not happy, but the other man did not flinch. Frank later realized that he had missed the full significance of the fact that the other man did not flinch.

The conversation ended and the mystery man turned and rode away. General Armstrong summoned Captain Schultz and *they* had a conversation out of Frank's hearing. General Armstrong then rode back toward his tent, without bothering to bring his bodyguard.

Captain Schultz turned to the bodyguards-if-that-was-what-they-were in a blind fury. “The General says to pack full gear for alien territory incursion, two weeks minimum. And **I** want to know why you're just standing there, not packing your gear. I never saw such a lazy bunch of soldiers!!

At the flat rock

Nelson heard the horseman returning. His back was turned to the path, but he knew who it was. He did not turn to see who it was or to look at him in any way. The others must have heard it as well, but Nelson did not look to see if they had any reaction. This was a small victory for Nelson, but it was a victory nevertheless.

Deep in hssswwx territory

“One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent, where are we going?” Asked One Who Collects Water, not for the first time.

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent did not turn any of his optical receptors toward One Who Collects Water. He hoped that this would convey his weariness with the pacifist.

“One Who Collects Water, you whine like a blind hatchling with five limbs.” First Of Those Who Fight conveyed *his* weariness in a very straightforward manner.

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent decided that he too would be more direct. “I told you where we are going before we started. I said all of it more than once, even though the others understood after the first telling. Now on the journey you keep asking, like one whose hearing organs have withered.”

“One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent, there are some issues which I feel to be made more clear.”

“What is clear is your lack of respect. You are like a xxxcccggt who says words of friendship and then steals the point from your friend's ancestral hunting spear. From this time onward, you are to shut your primary communications orifice, and keep it closed until I order you to open it.”

One Who Collects Water ran with the others and attempted no further communication. He had no other choice. After a time One Who Tells Of Things Past came beside him.

“I spend most of my time telling things which are already known. With many tellings comes full understanding. So I will tell you where we are going, and why.

“We are going to the place where ten stones are in a circle. This is near the place where the great river

hatches from water that comes from the ground. This group of us are the leaders of all those with six limbs. We shall communicate directly with the leaders of those with four limbs.

“The leaders of these very different creatures have not communicated directly since the day the big silver... thing came from the sky. Captain Samuels spoke for his kind, and First Speaker spoke for us.

“It was proposed that today's leaders meet together. Just today we were told that the humans would be coming. This is an opportunity that we cannot afford to waste.

“I am bringing edkar one, as well as those who always stay near me. If the humans hope to defeat us by killing all our leaders at once, they shall not succeed.” First Of Those Who Fight was not one to be excluded from a conversation.

One Who Tells Of Things Past continued his narrative. “You know that we are gradually being destroyed in this war. We truly need to find a way to end the fighting in a way that allows us to survive.

“Some believe that the humans also are strained to the limit of their resources. Not quite as bad as we are, but perhaps they do not know that. This meeting is to see if there is some way that those with six limbs and those with four limbs can allow each other to live.”

First Of Those Who Fight leaned forward so as to speak where all could not hear. “There has been much rejoicing because when I divided our fighters into edkars, we forced the humans to retreat in confusion. We have had some victories, but we cannot hope to exterminate those with six limbs. There are too many of them, and they are very determined. What I do hope is that with our newfound military strength, the human leaders will count the cost of war and decide to make peace.”

One Who Tells Of Things Past had one final thing to say. “If this meeting succeeds, it will be a huge marker-post in our history. Future generations will tell **our** names as Great Ones who lead our tribe to safety.”

Chapter 24

The Present

“Hello? Aunt Emma?”

“Hello? Oh, Louise!! How's my favorite niece?”

“Oh, I'm doing fine. My internship is about what I expected. What I'm calling about is, have you heard from Frank lately?”

“No, I have not, Louise. Have you heard anything from him?”

“Well, no. I did not expect to hear from him very often. Mail service to and from the third asteroid belt is slow at best. I just hope they are able to find enough Californium to make a profit.”

“**What??** Why do you think he's prospecting for Californium in the asteroid belt?”

“Aunt Emma, that is what he told me the day he left. A friend of a friend talked to an old prospector who told them the location of a huge deposit of Californium. They had to go quickly and keep it quiet so someone else did not beat them to it.”

“That's funny, Louise. I talked to him about a week before he left and he said that he had been invited to an archeological dig to identify the site of Landington. They have been looking for Landington for many years, and it would be a huge boost to his career to be a part of that.”

Louise was not sure what to say. “And the asteroid mining was going to make him rich. Wherever he is, he had better stay out of trouble because Mother is not going to be able to come and help him.”

“Louise most men will not write. You would think they do not know how.”

“Aunt Emma, I think all men are like that. Frank is about as likely to write as David from riding camp.”

“Louise, David was your horse and he was **not** going to write you a letter.”

“Oh, I suppose not. As for Frank he seems pretty sensible and I'm sure he can take care of himself, wherever he is.”

“Louise, it was nice of you to call. We will see at Thanksgiving.”

“Sure, Aunt Emma. Bye.”

Chapter 25

Frank Mills was not happy. Not that he had ever been happy since entering the past, but now he was *really* not happy. His every breath was hampered by the breathing filter he was wearing. He was wearing the breathing filter because they were in the Dead Zone and if you breathed the air directly you would get a lungful of hssswwx microbes and eventually die. The native microfauna were at odds with terrestrial life, the same way that terrestrial microbes were deadly for the native lifeforms. But knowing all that did not make you like the breathing filter any better.

So Frank was wearing a breathing filter like all the other soldiers. As were all the horses and the drivers that were driving four large draft horses that pulled a cumbersome water wagon. In the Dead Zone you had to bring *everything* you needed. There was a complicated way to eat and drink wearing the breathing filters, but it wasn't any fun.

Frank checked the breathing filter on his horse. He - the horse - seemed to be tolerating it well. Frank thought his horse was a he, but he had never actually checked.

Bob rode beside Frank. It had to be Bob because Bob always rode beside Frank. It was impossible to recognize someone wearing a breathing filter. The thing covered your entire face and you peered out at the world through these scratched, blurry pieces of glass. It resembled a gas mask that was used in the times before spaceflight.

"Hey Mills." It had to be Bob because nobody else talked to him.

"What?"

"How do you like the Dead Zone?"

"It's dead."

"Oh? You don't like it?"

Frank pointed to his breathing filter. "This thing is horrible."

"You'd better not take it off or you'll be dead, just like the Dead Zone. Ha Ha!!"

Bob chuckled to himself over his joke for the next five or ten miles. The human delegation continued its journey.

A few miles away.

"One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent, we will soon be at the place where ten stones are together. The ten flat stones are scattered on the ground in a circle, just as you have told us." One Who Tells Of Things Past was stating what they all knew.

"One Who Tells Of Things Past, you have diligently told us of what has happened before. Now if we accomplish that purpose which is our goal, there will be new things to tell. Indeed, since you will be one of those whose feet were there in the place where these things were done, you will be First To Tell of these events.

"Now we are at the place where ten flat stones are together. We will wait for the humans. Truly, the twin moons do not yet both shine in the sky, so it is not yet time for us to meet. We will wait a short distance away. When the humans are near, we will enter among the circle of ten stones at the same time they do. Thus we shall communicate directly."

With the human delegation

“Ho” With this command, the band of humans came to a stop. Captain Shultz came riding up to Frank and Bob. Through the scratched glass of his eyepieces Frank could see that Captain Shultz had his breathing filter off.

“The Environmentalist says that you can take off the breathing filters. We just came out of the Dead Zone into the Bad Zone. Man and horse both can take them off.”

Frank lost no time taking off his breathing filter. He looked over and saw that Bob had just removed his as well.

Bob gazed at Frank with a disdainful eye. “You are a poor excuse for a soldier, Mills. Any good soldier would take the breathing filter off his horse before seeing about himself.” Then Bob turned and took the breathing filter off his own horse.

With the hssswx

First Of Those Who Fight approached One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent. His secondary optical receptors were fixed directly at the sky in a suitable show of respect.

“One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent.”

“Yes.”

“This place where we wait, it is not a place where we can be for a long time. After a time, we will become sick.”

“I know that. This is also a place where humans and the creatures they ride can be for only a short time before *they* become sick. So I chose this place for us to meet. It will not take all that long for the leaders of these very different creatures to communicate and see if we can share this world.

“When I can stand next to the human leader and communicate my words directly, all my hearts will be glad. When a message must be carried by another, it always arrives with some words missing and others added. Until now, all such messages have been carried by those humans called... What is it that they are called?”

“Pathizers.” Replied the military leader.

“Yes, pathizers. I have never seen a more pathetic group of beings, with six limbs or four. Their own kind despises them. But until now there has been no other way to send a message to the human leadership.”

Some of the other hssswx stirred when they heard the two leaders speaking a human word. But no one came closer or turned a hearing organ so they could hear better.

First Of Those Who Fight was in a rare pensive mood. “For the first time in my life, I shall look upon humans and just - look at them. I shall not try to kill them or direct my forces to do so.”

“Not unless I tell you to, First Of Those Who Fight. Keep your weapons handy, because I have no idea how this will end.”

Human delegation, at the ten stones

“This fog is really creepy.” This came from somewhere in front of Frank. He could not see who it was because of the fog.

“We are at the stones. Try not to trip over them. They are scattered around here and there.” That was Captain Shultz. Captain Shultz was a very practical man.

“I tell you I can't see nuthin in this fog!!”

“Then at least we don't have to look at you. Now shut up, all of you.” **That** was General Armstrong.

Frank tried to look into the fog. It was patchy, and it came and went in clumps. In the near distance were

some peculiar clumps.

“Move into the circle of stones. Slow and easy.”

Frank barely nudged his horse, letting it find their way through the stones. Those peculiar clumps of fog were more than clumps of fog. They were long and squiggly, and they seemed to have other parts coming out of them. A fresh breeze arose, clearing the area of the fog.

hssswwx. There stood hssswwx.

Their bodies were long and segmented, and they carried various items in their numerous appendages. They were as silent as the fog. From the human side the only sounds were little horsey sounds and the occasional clink of metal.

Frank took his first real look at the creatures which had inhabited Altgeld before humankind. In battle everything was a blur and the enemy was constantly in motion. He had seen plenty of dead hssswwx, but the living creatures were something else altogether.

A mounted man separated from the clump of humanity. Frank knew it was Armstrong, even in the dim light. And on the hssswwx side, one individual stepped forward.

The one hssswwx just stood there for a long moment. Then it spoke. In human speech.

“I am called One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent. I lead all of us with six limbs. I have come to this place to communicate with the one who leads those with four limbs.”

Frank nearly fell off his horse. In the cavalry the one thing you never ever do is fall off your horse. But it was a huge shock to see that the hssswwx were intelligent beings and could speak his language as well as he could.

The hssswwx was no longer speaking. Then General Armstrong was making a strangled, choking noise like he could not breathe properly. That hssswwx was doing something to choke General Armstrong!! Frank had to rescue General Armstrong. He grasped his pike and spurred his horse.

And went nowhere because Bob was holding his horse's reins. Bob looked Frank in the eye and gave him a barely visible shake of the head. General Armstrong did not need rescued.

Feeling pretty silly, Frank returned his attention to General Armstrong. The general was still making those funny noises.

“I am the leader of the fighting forces of the humans. The other human leaders will abide by whatever decisions I make.” Frank could not locate the low human voice.

“I have come here with a few of my kind to talk. As a show of goodwill I have brought only a small number.” Frank realized that Bob was translating for him. Bob was a lot smarter than he looked.

“General Armstrong is one of the very few humans who can talk to the hssswwx in their own language. That will make them take him much more seriously.” Harold was whispering to Raymond, somewhere in back of Frank and Bob.

Frank wondered if the hssswwx had a reserve force hidden in the fog. The humans did not, he knew. Being a graduate student in history did not help because the history books said nothing about this conference. Frank really hoped that the travelers' presence had not somehow altered history.

Armstrong had ceased making funny noises. Now the hssswwx - One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent - spoke again.

“When our forces last met, you saw something different from us. We won. If you continue this war as you have, there will be more of the same.”

Armstrong spoke and Bob translated “We could argue with words forever and it would mean nothing. You asked for this meeting. Did you have an idea how peace could happen?”

One Who Collects Water stirred slightly. Humans were not supposed to know their language. It raised questions as to what else they might have learned from the wounded on the battlefield. Why had he not been told? But his hurt feelings were not the most important thing here.

Now the hssswwx leader replied “The wisest of us have considered this question. We - six limbs and four - would agree to draw a line across this world. On one side would be you and your kind. On the other would be me and my kind. None would cross this line, not for any reason.”

Nice, thought Frank. General Armstrong had moved the discussion past the recent human defeat without revealing anything of human plans or capabilities.

Now Armstrong spoke again. “You surely know it is not that simple. When humans are near your kind for very long, we get sick. In the same way, you become sick and die when you are near humans or their animals. A line drawn in the dirt will not solve this problem.”

“I will explain my idea in more detail. There would be two lines, running parallel to each other. On one side would be my kind, on the other side yours. In between the parallel lines none would venture. None would **want** to enter there, because it would be death to both.

“The parallel lines would be drawn so that they did not cross a stream or river. Any watershed would be either all six limbs or all four limbs. Otherwise contamination would flow from one side to the other. There would be no trade between the sides, no goodwill visits.”

General Armstrong's head hurt. This was like when he was in school, when old man McKinstry would say things that were stupid. Everybody knew they were stupid. But old man McKinstry made you explain **why** the things he said were stupid. That was harder than he would have thought.

If he did not see this peace conference through, there were those who would tell the pathizers, who would tell their cousins the sob sisters, and pretty soon the Assembly would want to know all about it. His statement that the other human leaders would abide by whatever decisions he made was far from the truth.

A sudden thought intruded: *Could* they beat the hssswwx? The human forces had been chipping away at hssswwx territory for generations. But Armstrong had read enough history - not just Altgeld history - to know that these ragtag, thick-headed farm boys were hardly a real army. If the hssswwx were going to start fighting like a disciplined, well-oiled machine then this war might well go against humankind.

Everyone was waiting for him to speak. He would talk with this creature and see what was possible.

“You say we should draw a thick line across this world. I am agreeing to nothing right now. But let us say we start the line at this place.” Place names were going to be tricky. ‘Right here’ should be a universal concept.

“This way” Armstrong pointed in the direction of human territory, “will be for my kind. The line will go in that direction.” Armstrong pointed north by northwest.

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent had no comment, so General Armstrong continued. “The line will continue in that direction until it reached the area drained by the Beaucoup River. Our oldest settlements are there. Then the line will go straight north until it includes the iron mines in Ferrousburg.”

“No!! Not acceptable!!”

“You have not heard everything I have to say. You should try being silent yourself.” After *that* remark, Armstrong decided to be slightly conciliatory. “We have a map of this entire world. If you wish I can signal my adjutant and he will bring the map. We can look at it as we talk.”

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent waved an appendage in a very human gesture of dismissal. “I know all of this world. It is right here, in my mind.” He pointed to a place in his midsection. “The line you propose goes like this:” The hssswx leader waved the appendage in a wavy line

General Armstrong had no idea what the point was. This was *way* worse than trying to understand the members of the Assembly when they made a three-hour speech. Maybe this would work...

“I’m really confused. Could you explain what you mean by that?” This statement, served with a spoonful of sarcasm, usually forced the Assemblyman to explain himself.

“Everywhere the land of your kind touches the land of my kind, poison creeps from your land to our land. Very rarely is it the other way. For that reason the boundary must be as short as possible.”

Frank was very interested in *that* statement. Many historio-biologists believed that the terrestrial microbes were smaller and tougher than their native Altgeld counterparts. This sounded like confirmation. Frank wanted to run up to One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent and demand further details. But he did not. And now General Armstrong was talking again.

“Another thing is that we must have the iron mine. It is way in the east, at the top of a huge hill”

“I would call you every vile thing that we know but you would not understand any of it. That area is sacred to us, and we must have it.”

“Iron is central to all the things we make.” Replied General Armstrong reasonably. “Like this sword.” The human general put his hand on the short sword that hung from his belt.

“It is central to us to have the shortest border with you that is possible. Draw the line at the center of the planet. What do you call it? The equator. Draw the line there.”

“That would not give us nearly enough land that could be farmed. Our population is increasing steadily, and any agreement must allow room for that. And the Beaucoup Valley is on one side of the equator and the iron mine is on the other.”

General Armstrong paused for a moment, then he continued. “You may have told that I was coming here to negotiate. When two parties negotiate, one gives up something they want, and then the other gives up something else, until an agreement is reached.

“This is not the case here. I have simply spoken as one...being to another telling what we *must* have. Without all of these things no agreement is possible.”

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent became very agitated, moving all his limbs at once. He held up his ancestral hunting spear and proclaimed:

“You are a blind deformed hatchling with five limbs! You are one who finds an egg clutch and breaks them all for sport. You journey to a sacred place and pile up garbage! You...”

“I understand this well enough.” Interrupted General Armstrong. And he began to draw his sword from the scabbard.

Frank felt sick. They were going to fight while trying to maneuver among these huge boulders. A hssswx did not have to be careful not to trip his horse on a boulder because he was both the man and the horse. Now the humans were not going to have either speed or maneuverability. Speed and maneuverability were the reasons that General Nail first put his men on horseback.

General Armstrong suddenly let the sword slide back into its scabbard and held his hands out, palms up. “We will not fight now. Among my people, it may be that enemies meet to talk of a possible end to the war. At such a meeting there is no fighting. Even if there is no agreement and the war will continue, they do not fight then. They leave that place. Later if they meet on the battlefield, then yes they certainly do fight. It will be

this way. We will leave and then continue the war.”

General Armstrong flicked his reins, and his horse turned and began to make its way out of the boulder field. Some kind of signal must have gone to Captain Shultz, because he pointed at the honor guard and pointed at a location outside the stones. Slowly and carefully Frank and the others made their way back to open ground.

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent also pointed an appendage back the way they had come. “We will return. First Of Those Who Fight, we will be gone from here before we become sick, as I said to you.”

But First Of Those Who Fight was not interested in who had said what. “Edkar one is hidden in the mist and the humans have not seen them. Say the word, and we will fall upon these humans and slay them all.”

“No.”

“One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent, what is the *matter* with you? Humans are for killing.”

“My command should be enough for you. But I will also say to you that I want these beings with four limbs to understand that we are beings who do what is right. I think they use the word 'honor' for this. I do know that if I let you kill them now, they will never agree to a peace, ever. Even if the humans have everything they will ever need, still if we kill these humans now in this place they will never rest until they have wiped every last one of us from the planet.”

First Of Those Who Fight twitched his left middle leg as an expression of his disagreement. Then he returned to edkar one and ordered them back to their own territory. Even he had those who he must obey.

“Fall in.” Frank had not expected this. They were barely out of the area with the flat rocks where they nearly had to fight, and now they were lining up like this was the parade grounds.

“Look sharp.” Snarled Captain Shultz.

Without turning his head, Frank was aware that General Armstrong was talking to the Environmentalist. The Environmentalist was not in line with the rest of them because he did not have to be. Now Armstrong was talking to the first man actually in line. Not for long, now he was talking to the next one.

Now General Armstrong was right in front of Frank. He needed a shave and smelled of whiskey. The General edged his horse forward until the two mounted men were face to face.

“General, **sir**.” Frank Mills was beyond awestruck. This was the man who led/would lead humankind to own the entire planet. Most historians felt he was more pivotal than either General Nail or Captain Samuels. And the man was talking to Frank.

“Soldier, what you saw and heard today - It did not happen. Not any of it. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir, General Armstrong **sir**.”

General Armstrong moved on to the next man in line. This was the closest that Frank came to actually talking to the man. Somehow Frank did not mind that the memory of the inter-species peace conference had been annulled because he had seen General Armstrong up close.

Soon Armstrong had spoken to everyone, including the drovers on the water wagon. The order was given and all of them headed back to human territory.

Chapter 26

A few days later, hssswwx territory

“One Who Collects Water, I have a task for you. It is much different from what you were trying to do before, but it is very important.”

“One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent, I am honored to serve in any way.” That was very much the truth. One Who Collects Water had been worried that he was Not There. When an individual is Not There no one speaks to him. His very existence is not acknowledged. Everyone treats him like a pile of dirt that you just walk around and otherwise ignore.

“One Who Collects Water, I am invoking elgad-shaderrou. Do you know what that means?”

“All are called out for the common defense. All other activities are suspended, and everyone comes to the place that is told.” Interjected One Who Tells Of Things Past. He was not one to be left out of a conversation.

“One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent, I am most humbly amazed. Has this ever been done before?”

“It has been done before under very limited conditions. Never fully and completely, as is being done now.” Interjected One Who Tells Of Things Past again.

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent suppressed his irritation. He needed to build consensus for something as big as this. One Who Tells Of Things Past had a sizable following.

“One Who Collects Water, you are to go from place to place telling of this. All are to come to where many stones are jumbled together, near the most sacred place.”

Suddenly One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent had an idea that pleased him immensely. “One Who Tells Of Things Past, you are to go with him. You can tell of the traditions that we are invoking with elgad-shaderrou. This has not been done before, but all must know that it is in keeping with the tales from long ago.”

One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent watched them turn and go. Now he was alone. First Of Those Who Fight would not be there for a while. One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent was weary of the endless war. It was a strange thought, that it might soon be over. One way or the other, but it would be over.

At the human camp, a few weeks later

“Listen up men, we've got some Special Duty for you.”

Frank *hated* Special Duty. It meant that they had to go arrest some poor slob that had got drunk and done something really stupid. One of these days he would have to arrest Timmy.

“General Armstrong is going to tell you about it.”

Frank sat straighter in the saddle when General Armstrong rode up. Usually the General did not concern himself with these matters.

“Men, there is a message that we have to be sure everybody hears. By everybody I mean every human being on Altgeld.

“We are calling out every able-bodied person. It does not matter if crops need harvested or the cows need milked. Just come. Everybody come to Camp Seiber and await further orders.

“I don't need to tell you that the hssswwx have been showing unexpected strength. It can take a brigade to

do what used to take a company or two. And we have had reports of the hssswwx striking back into lands that have been settled. Farms have been burned and the settlers are nowhere to be found.

“We think that the hssswwx have disrupted their breeding cycle to mobilize their whole population. We have not found any of their egg clutches lately. But I don't want to bore you boys with all this egghead stuff.”

Frank wanted to scream 'Tell me more, *tell me more, tell me more.*' But of course he didn't. He got very little feel for what was happening anywhere else, much less planet-wide. But the General was still talking.

“The hssswwx are massing for an offensive the likes of which we have never seen before. We are going to see an endless mass of the long squirmy things.

“Bob, you start at Rice and take the Shamrock Road to Todds Mill and beyond. Frank you start the same place and work towards Swanwick. The rest of you go to New Pinckneyville. In every possible way, urge them to drop everything and to Report.”

Frank urged his steed into a slow trot. It always needed urging to do anything. Rice was some distance away, so he had time to think of what he would say.

Deep in hssswwx territory

“Come one and all. Hatchlings and elders alike. We have a matter of great importance to communicate to you.”

Some of the onlookers turned a vision organ towards One Who Collects Water and One Who Tells Of Things Past. None showed a great interest.

“We are invoking elgad-shaderrou.” One Who Tells Of Things Past said this obviously thinking that it would command everyone's interest.

“You say words that we do not know. One Who Tells Of Things Past should retell tales from long ago, that all but the youngest already know.”

One Who Collects Water took a step forward. “The humans are coming. They will kill you all and poison the land.”

“This place is far from where the humans dwell. You speak things that are not true.”

“And I say to you that the humans are coming everywhere. No place is safe.” They were beginning to listen. But he needed something big to make it stick.

And when they come they will find every clutch of eggs and break them all. The next generation will be gone.”

That did it. All those who heard showed their distress by raising their left front leg and right rear leg at the same time. And they had questions.

“Can't you do something? Tell us where is a safe place. How many colored pebbles must I pay for them to leave me alone?”

“As I said, we are invoking elgad-shaderrou. That means all are to assemble as quickly as possible to where many stones are jumbled together, near the most sacred place. This applies to one and all with no exceptions.”

Now came someone wanting to be an exception. “The time is near when I will lay my egg. If I go running to this far away place, the egg will be absorbed back into my body. I will have no descendents.”

“If the humans are not stopped you and your eggs will all die. All with six limbs will die. That is why all must help.

“Those with an ancestral hunting spear are to bring it. Those who do not have an ancestral hunting spear are to make one. Grab what materials for spear making that you have and depart immediately. You can work on your spear when you rest or after you get there. If you do not have the proper materials look for them along the way. Share materials among each other as you are able.”

Now another one of those listening spoke up. “How can I just *make* an ancestral hunting spear? This is a sacred artifact for each family, handed down from generation to generation.”

One Who Tells Of Things Past now spoke. “Where do you think the ancestors got their spears? Did you think that in the days of long ago there was a spear tree from which one and all could pick an ancestral hunting spear? If you had a brain anywhere in your midsection you would know that each of our ancestors had to make their ancestral hunting spear. As you will now do.

“And I also say to you that in days to come, what we are doing now will be 'days of long ago'. Those then living will talk of us as Great Ones who lived in the 'days of long ago'.”

Slight pause. No one was certain if the words of One Who Tells Of Things Past were ended or not.

“Assuming of course that you really do these things and do not just endlessly run in a circle like one who has had three limbs cut off.”

That did it. One and all prepared to go to where many stones are jumbled together, near the most sacred place.

Frank Mills, deep in human territory

Frank was approaching a farmstead. He figured that he was now in the area where he would start telling his message. He had two semesters of Speech in college, how much different could this be?

“You're riding a horse.” Said a boy of indeterminate age.

“That's right. And what's your name?” Meeting people wasn't really that hard.

“His name's John. Ain't no use talking to him, he ain't got no sense.”

Thirty feet away stood a very bedraggled man and woman. A large but indeterminate number of children was swarming about the house and grounds. Frank never got an idea of how many of them there were because they were running around everywhere and they all kind of looked alike.

Frank spurred his horse to hurry over to them. The horse responded by going the same speed he had been going before. But soon Frank was alongside the couple.

“I have a message from General Armstrong. This is for everyone on Altgeld.”

They stood there looking at him. Better keep talking.

“The hssswwx are rising up against us. It's like nothing they have ever done before. There will be an endless herd of them, extending as far as the eye can see.”

“Ain't that what the army is for, to keep them under control?”

The man was uncomfortably close to the truth. Frank was fortunate that one of the many children asked a question.

“What's your horse's name?”

“His name is ... Mark. Yes, his name is Mark.”

Frank returned his attention back to the man. “Every man and woman in Altgeld who is able-bodied and not insane has an obligation to serve if called upon.”

“Why did you give her a boy name?” This was the same kid. Best to ignore him. Frank continued:

“When the hssswwx get here, they will overrun the countryside and poison the land. Then they'll burn your house down.”

“The house ain't no account, nohow.”

“All able-bodied citizens are to report to Camp Seiber and await further orders. To stop these things it is going to take everyone pulling together.”

“And what is you a-gonna do if I don't just go running to wherever you said it was?”

Frank dug deep. And when he reached bottom he found his inner storyteller.

“They will take your children and make them slaves”

“Ain't none of them wants to work at all. Some slaves they would make.”

“They will demolish all the churches and promote their own beliefs.”

“We don't go to church nohow. We did go one time, and all they would talk about was how we were supposed to give money.”

Maybe the hssswwx were going to win after all. Frank kept trying. “They will nationalize your farm and make it into a hssswwx park. They will...”

“Hey!! What did you say they was a-gonna do?”

“Huh? I said they would take your farm and...”

“They ain't a-gonna do no such thing!! I inherited this farm from my pappy and he got it from his pappy, and he got it from his grandpappy Gibson, and he took it from the hssswwx fair and square. They ain't a-gonna take this farm, they just ain't a-gonna!!

“I'm glad you feel that way...”

The wife and mother found her voice. “This here farm is as much mine as it is yours. I'm a-going to fight the hssswwx too. They ain't a-gonna take *my* farm!!”

“I'm a-gonna come too. You ain't a-gonna go without me!!” This was the boy Frank had spoken to. What was his name? John, that was his name.

“John, you can't come. You ain't got no sense.”

“If I stay here, I'll have to eat Shirley Jo's cooking. That'll kill me for sure.” John motioned toward an older sister who was staring daggers at him.

“John if you don't go fight the hssswwx, you'll be fighting me. I'll cook up something special just for you.” Shirley Jo was not amused.

Frank decided to make one more statement. “Report to Camp Seiber as soon as you can. Things are going to happen fast.” Since no one was listening, Frank decided to stop speaking.

“We's a-going right now! Them cows can milk themselves if they have to.”

“John you can come with us. The way you're always fighting at school, you should do just fine.”

Frank knew that his work here was done. He urged his horse down the road. He was grateful he had found a way to motive the civilians to volunteer, but he did not understand it. Frank would eventually buy a house in a housing development and live there for many years, but he never understood the attachment that a farmer feels for his homestead.

Later that same day

Frank had to stop for the day. It was getting dark. In a time with no street lights, that meant **dark**. In the last of the light he could see an old building up ahead. He steered the horse toward it.

Frank took off the horse's bit and bridle to let it graze as it could. "It?" It was time to check if the horse was a boy or girl. But it was too dark now. Frank saw a darker piece of darkness that could be the door of the building. He would just lie down on the floor and sleep in there.

He moved cautiously. He had no idea what was inside so he was groping with his hands. In school someone had once asked 'When a person is blind is it all black or all white?'. It certainly was all black in this deserted building.

"Oof". Frank had bumped into something.

"What did you say?" This came from somewhere else. Frank was reminded of this joke where a drunk falls into an open grave. He could not remember the punch line.

Best to be open and friendly. "I just came in and I bumped into something."

"Your wife will never believe that." another voice.

Frank felt of the thing he had bumped into. It was slightly below chest high and flat.

"Put another log on the fire." That reminded Frank of something but he could not remember what.

There was the sound of someone shuffling around and a plop. Sparks came from the plop, and a fire started burning brighter. In a moment Frank could see some seated figures. What were they doing?

"This here's Joe's bar. I'm Joe. What'll you have?"

"I thought no one was in here."

"No one **is** in here, not that is any account anyhow. I guess we all know our way around in the dark. Did you want a beer or are you just lost?"

"Oh, I'll have a beer. Whatever you got." Frank decided to go with the flow. He had not had a beer since coming to the past.

Joe brought him the beer and Frank held up a small copper coin. The soldiers did get paid some small amount. Joe took the coin and held it up in wonderment.

"What's this?"

"For the beer. You did not say how much it was."

Joe held up the coin for everyone to see. "This here is a man that **pays** for what he gets. That's the way it's supposed to be, don't you know."

One man spoke up. "I'm a-gonna pay, you, I really am."

"Oh really. When?"

"My cousin Wayne has me in his will. And he's not been feeling very well at all."

Joe decided not to say anything more to this particular deadbeat customer. He had heard that Wayne was pretty sick, and there might be money available there after all.

Frank realized that he needed to give his recruitment speech here. "I have orders from General Armstrong to go to everyplace I can and recruit volunteers. The hsswwx are rising up really bad and everyone needs to

help out or we will all be lost.

“I already served.” This from a dark shape at the end of the bar.

Frank needed to show polite interest. “Oh that is great. When were you in the Army?”

“It guess it was not exactly me. It was my brother. Not my brother exactly, but it was this guy who lived down the road. I knew him pretty well.”

Frank continued his speech. “The hssswwx are going to come in a huge herd, as far as the eye can see. We all need to do our part.”

“Before that huge herd of hssswwx come, I need to be drunk.” That got a laugh from some of them.

Frank continued his persuasive speech. “If the hssswwx win this one, no place will be safe. Even the areas that have long been human territory could be taken back by the wiggly devils.”

Frank took a sip of his beer. It tasted horrible, but beer always tastes horrible. 'An acquired taste' is the polite phrase.

“This is your chance to do something that really matters. Surely you want to do something in life.”

“That is what my wife says.” No one laughed at that one.

Joe brought Frank a plate of ham and beans. “So if someone volunteered, would they be fighting alongside the regular soldiers like you?”

Frank was glad that someone was showing some interest. “I don't really know details. I was told to say report to Camp Seiber and you will be told what to do”.

Joe continued to show interest. “What does a hssswwx look like? I have never actually seen one.”

“They are all long and squiggly, with six arms and legs. You can't look one in the eye because they don't have eyes like we do. Their blood is purple.”

It was getting late. The regulars were shuffling out. Frank realized that except for the small coin he had given Joe he had seen no money change hands. Frank went outside the ramshackle tavern and just lay down on the ground. Bedtime is pretty simple if you just lay down on the ground.

Joe stood alone in his tavern. All his customers owed him money. He owed money to the man who drove the beer wagon. Everybody owed money to everybody. Joe had this secret wish to just leave and go do something else. He knew where Camp Seiber was, he could walk there in a day or two. The old drunks would be surprised when they showed up the next morning (yes, bright and early in the morning) and found his place closed. Everybody needs a fresh start ...

Bob

Bob rode through the countryside. Civilian territory. Bob hated civilians; They were so disorganized and un-military. Bob had been a civilian when he was born, but he did not like to talk about that.

Once there civilians were inducted into the Army, **then** they would make proper soldiers out of them. That was a happy thought, that all these disorganized un-military civilians would have to shape up. Bob continued through the countryside in a much better mood. Need to keep a sharp eye out for some civilians he could recruit.

There were some. A group of men was standing in one end of an open area. They were passing out these long sticks that almost looked like spears. Not exactly your standard Army pike, but maybe they were trying to practice up ahead of time. Recruiting them should be easy.

Bob rode up to the group of men holding makeshift spears. "Hello! It looks like you want to join the Army."

"No one was riding horses at The Battle of Barleycorn." said one man. He then turned away from Bob, ignoring him from then on.

"If you men want to get into a real battle now is the time. We need all the men we can get to turn back the hssswx threat. Just what you are looking for."

Actually they were all looking at the other end of the big open field. There was nothing and nobody there but they were looking at it just the same.

"The hssswx came from the north-northwest at a moderate trot." One of the men was reading from some papers.

"The Forty-Second saw the threat and advanced with spears at the ready." The men started moving into the open field, none too fast.

Bob gently nudged his horse so as to follow the group. In spite of himself he was curious what they were doing.

"We are re-creating The Battle of Barleycorn. We do this every year." said one man in an undertone to Bob. He then turned his attention back to the group, which was trying to follow what the man reading from the paper was saying.

"One man said 'This is it.' "continued the man with the paper.

One man spoke up and said "This is it." A couple of them nodded their approval.

Bob was getting impatient. "Hey!! You are not helping anything by walking around in this empty field! There are no hssswx over there. Just in case none of you can see that far, I'm telling you there is nothing there!"

"No one said that at The Battle of Barleycorn." said the man with the papers in a disapproving tone.

Bob noticed that the youngest of the group was late middle age, and the rest of them were in various stages of old. One man had a spear in one hand and a cane in the other.

By now they nearing the middle of the big field. "Then they all threw their spears at once."

They all threw their spears, kind of. They did not all throw them at once, and the man with the cane just dropped his spear on the ground in front of himself.

"They won a great victory that day." That was the end of it. The man started putting away his papers, and the rest of them prepared to leave.

Bob applauded, much louder than he felt like. "Good job. Now you can come with me to Camp Seiber and

kill yourselves some more hssswwx.”

The man with the papers looked at Bob. “We can't do that.”

“Oh? And why not?” Bob fixed him with his most military disapproving stare.

“If anyone gets killed there won't be enough of us left to re-create The Battle of Barleycorn next year.”

Bob continued down the road. He would talk to many more people, and some of them would volunteer to fight the hssswwx. But none of the volunteers were from the group in the field.

Chapter 27

Professor Lively, you have been ordered to report to the Assembly of all Altgeld.”

“And I am here, reporting as ordered.”

“Raise your right hand. If you have no right hand, raise your left hand and hold it on your right side.”

Professor Lively stood with his right hand raised, keeping his expression carefully neutral. These Assemblymen had absolutely no sense of humor, and any wisecrack would only work against him.

“Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“I so swear.”

“If your religious compunctions forbid you to swear, just nod your head.”

“I have already said that I swear.” Professor Lively came dangerously close to talking back.

“Please have a seat. Remember that you are under oath.”

Professor Lively sat. He reminded himself that whatever it was that they had planned, they had to bring it to him. Let *them* make the mistakes.

“Is it true that a group of time travelers was inserted into the past at the late Heroic Age.”

“Yes that is true.” Edgar Lively answered in a carefully neutral tone.

“For what purpose.”

“Historical research. In particular they were to ascertain when the Battle of Overall occurred, and if possible to determine if it was really the turning point of the war against the hssswwx.”

“How were they to record these observations?”

“They had to just remember. Of course no modern recording devices could go back in time. And we decided that even a notebook and pencil might look out of place for a semi-literate country boy straight off the farm. All those chosen were bright, well-adjusted young men, certified for high IQ and sanity.” Not sanity of course, not for Timmy. Fortunately they had had the foresight to falsify the records.

“What kind of training were the time travelers given?”

“They were given extensive orientation in the customs and linguistic conventions of the time. They were shown how to do common tasks that are done on the farm.”

So far, so good, thought Edgar Lively. All this was stuff that any up-and-coming staffer would think of to ask. Show these boys some respect and he would get out of here in one piece.

“Have you done analysis into the multi-dimensional causality threshold of trans-temporal time-line disporia? In other words, what actions of the time-travelers would change history?”

Woah. This buffoon had stumbled onto the one issue that was causing serious back-room debate in Historian circles. The real question was, did these Assemblymen really know anything about it? Had someone tipped them off to the very real concerns in the time-travel project, or was this Assemblyman just saying big words that he did not understand?

He was probably just fishing. It was the oldest trick in the book, say something and see if anyone becomes all defensive and nervous. That might work on most people, but they were not going to see Edgar Lively become all defensive and nervous.

“How do you mean?” Let this pompous Assemblyman finish framing his own question. And Professor Lively needed to know how much they really knew.

“Do not try to play dumb with us. We know that many reputable Historians are concerned that this little incursion into our past could change Altgeld history in some very significant way. Our question is, have you done a thorough analysis of what actions in the past would really make a mess of things, and what would not make any difference? Be specific and give examples.”

“Assemblyman, we did an exhaustive progressional analysis of the linear statistological elements in the temporal cubilological matrices.” Sometimes you have to throw a fastball.

“Humph. Professor Lively, I hope you realize that we have our own experts in this field. I must insist that you make your research available for independent analysis.”

“Of course, Assemblyman. As soon as I get back to my office I will forward to you all our research and analysis of this topic.” He would throw together a bunch of - stuff - that no one could possibly understand. And before he saved the copy that went to the Assembly, he would reset the date on his computer to a date six months before when the time travelers departed. All the AutoDates would make it look like the research was done six months before the time travelers departed. Not many people knew you could do that.

“Very well, Professor. And how were the time travelers trained in nonintrusive observation techniques?”

“They were trained to be alert for pivotal events that could cause the flow of history to go in an alternate direction. They were not to take any kind of leadership position or to express opinions on any topics concerning the conduct of the war or our relations with the hssswx.”

“Professor Lively, we cannot help but feel that you are somehow skating around something very significant. We do not know what it is, but you can be sure that we will continue our investigation.”

“Assemblyman, I stand ready to assist you and your colleagues in any way possible.”

“You are dismissed for the time being. Do not attempt to leave the planet.”

Professor Edgar Lively left the Assembly with a mixture of relief and trepidation. Relief because he was no longer under their baleful gaze. Trepidation because he was not sure how much they knew or what they would find out. Also there was the big question: *Was* time travel going to disrupt their timeline and change things in the present? Professor Edgar Lively did not think it would. He kept telling himself.

Chapter 28

Frank Mills was returning from his mission to help call out the entire population. He had covered his assigned area, including some places that did not even have a name. It had given him a good look at ordinary life outside the military. Life was hard, here in the late Heroic Age. Food was scarce. Nobody had invited him to dinner, although some had tried to beg something from him.

The human population was in dire need of more cropland, and the hssswwx had suddenly developed a better military strategy. Frank could see why General Armstrong and the other human leaders wanted to end the war *now*, not the distant future.

He could see the army camp ahead. It would be good to be back home. He now thought of the army camp as home, he realized. Frank had hopes that Bob would start to respect him since he had done his route and returned in one piece.

Here came Captain Scultz. He was going to yell at Frank for being late, or maybe for coming back too soon. Once he had bawled Frank out for being too ugly. **That** was uncalled for!

“Mills, you are reassigned back to your old unit.” Said Captain Scultz without preamble. “No shame on you, Tyndall came back.”

So Frank went back to the old group, including the ones who had come with him from the future. All his meager possessions were with him in his saddlebags, so there was no need to go back to the tent where Armstrong's personal guard lived.

“Hello Nelson. I'm back.”

“Oh, hi, Frank. You didn't miss much.”

“Has the entire army been here all the time I was mobilizing the population?”

“Frank, we have not been anywhere else. Keep your ears open and you will hear all sorts of strange rumors. I honestly don't know what General Armstrong thinks he is doing.”

Bud Grace tiptoed up to Frank and Nelson. Before speaking, he looked in all directions to see if anyone was looking. All of which was peculiar because they were standing out in the open, with dozens of men milling about.

After a moment Bud was satisfied that it was safe to speak. “Did you hear?” Bud asked mysteriously.

“What?” Replied Frank. He could tell that he was supposed to say “What?”

Bud took another quick look around and then whispered “I heard that they are going to put The Fair Winds back together and use it to bomb the hssswwx from above. Then The Fair Winds will bring every one of us to his new farm in what is now hssswwx territory. Every one of us will get 80 acres and three cows. Plus a good looking wife that knows how to cook.”

Frank just looked at Bud in mute dumbfoundment. To start with, the remains of The Fair Winds had never been found. There were scattered bits of metal and equipment in all sorts of places that tradition said were from The Fair Winds. But the actual remains of their ancestral ship had not been found.

Frank's mind was spinning trying to sort it all out. Everyone assumed that the rusting hulk of the old ship was somewhere on the surface of Altgeld. But suppose Bud knew what he was talking about (!!!?) and The Fair Winds was going to get back some kind of flight capability. In that case, it could have ended up in a lot of places!! The implications were staggering. (Historians get all worked up about things like this.)

Bud saw that Frank was slow in replying. He reached out and touched Frank's arm in a kindly fashion. "I know that they don't teach you much up there in Elm Branch. The Fair Winds was the spaceship that brought our ancestors to this planet. Just so you'll know."

Bud again looked around to see if anyone was paying any attention to them. No one was. "Keep this to yourselves, both of you. I was told this in complete confidence, if you know what I mean." Bud then very casually sauntered off. He headed toward a group of four men who were standing around with nothing much to do.

Frank looked at Nelson. "I have not heard *that* before, any time." 'Any time' meant either the time they were in now, or the time they came from. Frank figured anyone else would not see that there was a hidden meaning.

"Oh, I made that one up myself." Replied Nelson. "I told it to two people a day and a half ago. I have now had it told back to me four times, counting Bud there. I did not think I had it in me to start a whopper like that."

Frank realized he was very tired. People in the Heroic Age were wearing him down. You would think that they would be more... well, heroic. And that stupid crying was not helping anything.

Frank looked around to see who was crying. It was Dick Burlington, just crying his poor little eyes out.

"Dick, what's the matter?"

"What do you **think**?" Wailed Dick in reply.

"Dick I have been away and I do not know what has been going on here. Why don't you tell me?"

"I had already done it!! I had done everything they told me to but it didn't make any difference!!"

"Dick you're not making any sense. You are being like this uncle of mine. When he tells something he starts in the middle and goes toward both ends at once. Now first of all, who are you talking about?"

"I'll tell them. That's right, next time I'm really going to tell them."

Frank needed to get away from this conversation. So it came as an immense relief when he realized that he was not actually **in** a conversation with Dick Burlington. Dick was staring into the middle distance telling all about whatever it was. Frank's funny story about his uncle had not penetrated Dick's brain at all. Frank walked away.

Frank was tired, but he still felt the need to connect with some people. There was Horace Wilson. He could have a few words with him.

"Hello Horace. How have things been around here?"

"All right."

Frank waited for Horace to give a few more details. Or gossip or rumors or supposition, or **anything**. After waiting a few minutes he remembered that Horace was a man of few words. Some would call him taciturn. So it was up to Frank to extract whatever information he wanted.

"Have you fought the hssswwx while I was gone?"

"No."

"Did any units go out on foray?"

"No."

“Did it rain?”

“Last week.”

Topics. Frank needed more topics. “Hey, where's Timmy? I have not seen Timmy.”

“Who **cares!!!** If I never see that stupid Timmy ever again that will be just fine with me!! And if you do find your precious stupid Timmy do me a favor and keep him away from me!!”

So Horace did have some opinions. You just had to ask about the right thing. Or maybe Timmy was the wrong thing to ask Horace about.

“Horace calm down. I just asked a simple question.”

“Fine. Fine!! Timmy entered some kind of program where he will study under the Environmentalist. He started right after you left.”

“Is this temporary or permanent?”

“I don't know.” Horace was slipping back into taciturn.

Frank really needed to rest now. He took his leave of Horace and found their camping place, by the big flat rock. He spread his bedroll where it had been before, beside Nelson. It was late in the evening, and Frank just lay down. As Frank Mills went to sleep that night, it was in the midst of an army that had been in the same place way too long, and that was slowly stewing in its own juices.

Chapter 29

The Army was idle no longer. Gone were the days of spending all day sitting on the flat rock. Frank and Bud Grace were stationed at the main entrance of Camp Seiber, mounted and in full battle gear. Their orders were to 'stand there and show them what real soldiers look like.' They also gave a lot of directions.

"This is Camp Seiber. Go through the gate there and keep going straight until someone tells you to stop."

"Is this here the place where we's supposed to go to fight the hssswwx?"

"That's right. Keep moving, there are people behind you."

"I don't see no hssswwx up there. How are we going to fight them if there ain't any of them up there?"

"Just go through the gate and some nice people will tell you all about it."

They went. Bud was laughing over Frank's statement about 'nice people'. Bud was not really Frank's type, but by now Frank knew how to act around people like that.

It was Bud's turn to talk to the next group of ragtag humanity. Frank took the opportunity to look down the road. As far as the eye could see there were groups of people coming to Camp Seiber in response to the universal mobilization. There were a surprising amount of women, and some children who looked way too young to be in the military. Frank wondered if he would see John and his family. Since they were the first ones he talked to, they were kind of special to him.

Frank's turn again. "Welcome to Camp Seiber. Keep moving, you didn't come all this way just to stand there looking around."

"Is we going to get fed here?"

Yes, but only if you go through the gate **right now**. Plenty for everybody, but you have to go through the gate to get it."

Now there was a gap before the next group was in earshot. Bud nudged his horse over to where Frank and his steed were standing. "That was a whopper you just told about plenty for everybody. I spent some time in Supply while you were on your little adventure on Special Duty. There were not all that many supplies in Supply. We are not going to be able to feed all these people for all that long."

Frank was a little taken aback. "We were told to say this was the final push, that we were going to end it now."

Bud regarded Frank with a baleful stare. "We had better hope so. I could tell you forty-six different ways that this universal mobilization can't last very long."

The next group was coming, and Bud moved back into his place. Frank picked out one woman at random. What was her story? Where had she come from and why? No telling. When you were playing *Time of the Ages* you could just focus your attention on any character and it would bring up complete biography and stats.

Frank had come to the gradual, grudging realization that Bud was a very intelligent man. Bud still suspected that Frank and his friends were somehow different from everyone else. He would have no way of knowing about time travel, but it would be bad enough to be labeled a pathizer. The only thing to do was try to act normal and not give any more cause for suspicion.

"Welcome to Camp Seiber. Keep moving." It was going to be a long day.

Inside Camp Seiber

“Fall in, all of you!! You with your mouth hanging open, that means you!!”

The group of newcomers struggled to arrange themselves into a line. After a few minutes they were in a straight line, except that it was kind of crooked.

Sergeant Pain was in a cold fury. “You are the sorriest bunch of recruits I have ever seen!! I am 28 years old and I've been training recruits for the last thirty. And I have *never* seen anyone who had so little clue how to act in the Army.” This last part was the actual truth. Before the universal mobilization, the men who entered the Army were young, leaving home for the first time. They could be rowdy, but they were used to Dad telling them what to do.

Not so the man standing there now. His wife and innumerable children were there with him, and his Dad had not bossed him around for a long time. Pain decided to confront this head-on.

“You, what's your name? Speak up!”

For a long moment the man did not speak. “My name is John. I thought everybody knew that. My name is John, my Daddy's name is John, as was his daddy's before him. And my great-grandpappy's name was John and...”

Pain decided to interrupt. “It sounds to me like you people have no imagination at all. And what about this boy here? What's his name?”

“His name is John. Don't try talking to him, he ain't got no sense.”

“Very well, *John*, first you and your family are going to practice marching and taking orders. Then you will receive instruction in weapons and tactics. You are going to learn things you didn't even know before.”

The wife spoke for the first time. “Are we going to ride horses? I think it would be nice to ride a horse.”

Careful how you answer, thought Pain to himself. The Army had barely enough horses for their usual number. No way could they mount any of the newcomers. John and his family were going to war on their own two feet. This woman had stumbled onto an embarrassing truth.

“You have to earn the right to ride a horse. We don't give things away for nothing, not in this here Army.”

Now John the boy found his voice. “What kind of weapons are we going to get? The man that came out to our place, he had this big old pole with a sharp shiny thing on the end. I'd like to stick a hssswwx with **that!!**” John made a motion like he was sticking a hssswwx with a big old pole.

This had to be national embarrassing truth week. There was a critical shortage of all kinds of weapons and the materials to make any more. Metal was in especially short supply. Every bit of metal that came from the Fair Winds was carefully cataloged and accounted for. Some iron was mined from Altgeld, but it was of inferior quality.

In the meeting last week, the thinking had been that the people coming in would all be carrying a scythe, pitchfork, hoe, or *something* that could be used as a makeshift weapon. But no. Every last one of them was oh so very proud of the fact that they had left the farm behind and they had not brought along *anything* like a scythe, pitchfork, or hoe. Well, the officers would have to worry about that. Sergeant Pain needed to teach these clods a few things.

“Son, I think you will be surprised at what kind of weapons you will have. Now we are going to practice marching. That means you all walk together, putting your feet up and down at the same time.”

Deep in hssswwx territory

“You have come to this place because One Who Speaks When Others Must Be Silent has invoked elgad-shaderrou. I am She Who Gathers Stones Together, and I welcome you.”

“We had no choice in this matter. If one ignores lgad-shaderrou, then he or she is forever Not There. If you thought that we are happy to be here, get that thought out of all your brains.”

“You will train for a time, then this small group will join many others to fight humans. It will be a glorious fight.”

“We know nothing of fighting. We and all our ancestors have always played the cgggbbbnnnmmm, telling tales for one and all.”

She Who Gathers Stones Together pretended a polite interest. “Oh? How nice. Do you think you could kill a human with a cgggbbbnnnmmm?”

“What? Probably not, no. It is actually quite fragile. See, I have mine here. I will sing a song of heroics and valor.”

“There will be no singing!! Or music, or telling of tales. Or happiness either. This is a camp of those who fight, and happiness is not allowed at all.”

“We are not ones who fight, as I have told you before...”

“**Do not say that again!!** If you say that again, I will place a large stone in your primary communication orifice. They don't call me She Who Gathers Stones Together for nothing.”

“Whatever you were before, you are now ones who fight. As are all of us with six limbs, so you will have many companions on this journey. My helper, One Who Collects Small Stones, will be giving each of you a spear. You will learn how to use it.”

One Who Collects Small Stones passed out the newly made spears. Except that they were obviously brand new, they were identical to the ancestral hunting spears that were lovingly passed down from generation to generation. These weapons were made of tough wood from the low scrubby trees that were native to this world.

The spears were more or less straight. The gnarled native trees did not allow for any piece of wood to be perfectly straight. For this reason ancestral hunting spears were held in an appendage, never thrown. All of which was equally true for ancestral hunting spears that had been made that very morning.

“Take time each of you to examine your new spear. You will see that it is anywhere from one third to one half of your body length. The textured wood and slightly irregular shape allow it to be easily held in any appendage. The tip has been cut to a point and placed in fire briefly to harden the point.” They did not have enough stone to make stone spear points. All the ancestors help them, this was a mess.

The new fighters dutifully examined their weapons. The one in back seemed unsure which end was the business end. Their leader was beginning to compose a ballad about this day.

She Who Gathers Stones Together knew she had to do something, and fast.

“These spears are new today, but in times to come they will be the ancestral hunting spears for the families of those of you who survive the war.”

Everyone stopped what they were doing, including the one composing a ballad.

“What do you mean, 'survive the war'?”

“Yes, of course. In the event that any of you are still living after the war is over and are still able to reproduce, these new spears will be the ancestral hunting spears of their families.”

They all began to turn a dull gray color, indicating severe emotional distress. She Who Gathers Stones Together found this most gratifying. Now to follow it up with learning.

“What did you half-blind hatchlings think, that you would sing a nice song to the humans? Did you think that you and the humans would sit together in a triangle and speak of that which had once been?”

“What will happen is that a human will ride up to you on one of those creatures that they ride and stick one of those long spears into you. The point of it has some kind of material that is harder and sharper than anything we can make. Your insides will ooze out and make a puddle on the ground. And there will be none to sing the song of sadness because the same thing will be happening to all those that are with you.”

“I say that this shall not happen. I say that it will be the insides of the humans that will heap up on the ground. I shall take this great hunting spear that I hold in my appendage and fight many humans. This is what I have spoken.”

This statement was from the one in the back that had seemed to have one too few brains. Now he was showing magnificent fighting spirit! She Who Gathers Stones Together was filled with joy and she nearly leaped straight into the air as an expression of this joy. Just in time she remembered that joy and happiness were strictly forbidden in this camp of those who fought. Time for instruction to begin in earnest.

“I am from edkar one. This edkar is the best of our fighting beings, and it has been *temporarily* disbanded so that we can each of us serve as teachers for you soft, wet hatchings. One thing we have learned is that we must stay close together. If a group all runs and stays near each other, together they can overcome any one human they encounter. If they know what they are doing they can overcome two or three humans at once.

“Each edkar is led by an edkar-hhqq. I will say who is your edkar-hhqq. Your edkar-hhqq will say which way all of you are to run. If one of you runs off in a different direction from what was said by your edkar-hhqq, the rest of you will fall on him and kill him without mercy. His name shall never be spoken again. Thus you shall learn to obey the words of your edkar-hhqq.

“I will be your edkar-hhqq until such time as I say who is to have this position. That's right, get close to each other. Hold you spears out like this so that you are always ready to fight. Now we are going running together.”

“Where are we going?”

“Where ever I say. That is where we will go.”

Camp Seiber, a few days later.

Frank, Bud and Nelson were watching a large group of new recruits drill.

“That's a large group of new recruits.” Bud took the initiative by stating the obvious.

“That is regiment 114.” Nelson offered.

“They are not a regiment yet.” Shot back Bud. “Right now they're a bunch of goobers straight off the farm, stomping around making a lot of dust. And another thing, there ain't none of them getting my horse. This morning one of the officers from this so-called regiment was going around saying that officers in the infantry should be mounted. I told him he should set an example by walking just like the rest of them.”

Frank absently patted his horse's neck. As much as he hated the surly beast, without it he would be walking just like the newcomers. There were no replacement horses to be had by anyone. Maybe Frank did not hate his horse all that bad after all.

There was nothing better to do than watch regiment 114, endlessly drilling. Suddenly Frank recognized a face.

“Hey John!! Over here!!”

At first John looked the wrong way, but then he spotted Frank at the edge of the drill field. His face

brightened with a huge smile.

“Looky there!! That there's the man that came out to our place!! And he's still got that big old stick with the sharp thing on the end!!”

“John, it's called a pike. If you had any sense you would know that by now.” Shirley Jo was not going to cut her little brother any slack at all.

John did not attempt a reply. Some time ago he had realized that he had as much sense as anybody else. Part of his good sense was not to get into arguments that he could not win.

Out here on the drill field, John was as good as anyone else. That included Dad, who was always yelling at him about something. John had no idea how long he and his family were going to be in the Army. But when this was over, he did not think that things were going back to the way they were. No, he was **not** going to go back to being John, the boy with no sense.

Chapter 30

“This classified meeting of this Committee is now in session. No minutes will be kept, and you shall not speak to anyone about these proceedings.” The Chairman looked out at the Assemblymen that made up his committee. *His* committee. He had served forty-two consecutive one-year terms in the Assembly, and that gave him a considerable measure of confidence.

“Assemblyman Adams, did you want to say something.”

“Is there any way we can have Professor Lively arrested? I'm sure he was lying about *something*.”

The Chairman gazed at Assemblyman Adams with bemused contempt. “And what exactly was he lying about? And can you prove it? The physics of time travel is not anything that a normal person can understand. This whole thing was created by a small group of insiders, and we have no independent experts to consult.”

“I think these are people who are not happy with the way things are, and they are looking for a way to make changes.” Assemblyman Baker voiced the concern that they all shared.

Now Assemblyman Cedric spoke. “Would we even *know* if they changed things back in the past? Or would we just say 'It has always been that way'? If we don't watch out we all are going to find a hssswwx in our back yard.” As a small child he had had a vivid dream about a hssswwx in the back yard. It had stayed with him ever since.

“I have been told that if there was a change in the timeline that altered some specific event, those of us who personally remembered that event would say 'I don't remember it that way!! I swear I remember that it happened this other way!!' The history books would tell it the altered way, not the way we remembered.” Assemblyman Davis was quoting what they all had been told by a disgruntled former worker at the time lab.

Now Assemblyman Ellerman decided it was time for a joke. “Maybe that's already happening. Last week I could have sworn that I had parked on Elm Street, and it turned out that I had parked on Maple Street.”

The Chairman laughed dutifully along with the rest of them. Then the thought came to him, what if that really *was* because of a timeline distortion? Probably not, Assemblyman Ellerman was kind of goofy. And best not to dwell on it, or every time that he misplaced his keys it would be because of a timeline distortion. He would push these thoughts aside by taking action.

“We could sit here all day talking about Professor Lively or the physics of time travel. We need to make plans to make sure that nothing gets messed up. And I need to know that you all are with me on this. We've got to have all our ducks in a row and quacking in unison.”

Assemblyman Adams dared to interrupt. “I thought that they were just over halfway through their one-year journey.”

The Chairman was unperturbed. “Yes, that is true. But these things take time anyway. I have to talk to some people who know some people who know how to get in touch with other people. Then I have to meet with more people who know some folks whose second cousins can maybe help us. So no need to get in a hurry.”

The meeting soon adjourned. Each Assemblyman was left with his own thoughts about what the future might hold.

Chapter 31

Frank Mills and his unit were on the move. Provided that by 'on the move' you meant 'plodding very slowly'. Frank and his friends were on horseback, but they were being passed by people on foot. If this had been an interactive holo-drama, Frank could have focused his attention on the mental link for "See the problem" and it would have showed the overturned watermelon cart (or whatever) that was blocking the road. But since this was real life they would never find out what was happening a mile or so up the road.

"There's another holdup." Remarked Frank to Nelson.

"Yes there is." Responded Nelson.

"I wonder what it is this time."

"There is no way we can know that."

They had had this conversation before. They would have this conversation again.

"It seems strange that people on foot are passing us who are on horseback."

"That's because our orders are to stay on the road. We can't run off and leave the supply wagons unprotected."

"From who? All these newcomers to the Army?"

"Probably."

Frank looked around at the sea of newly minted foot soldiers. There were a lot of them. Here came a man carrying what was probably supposed to be a pike. A crudely fashioned pike, it was.

It happened that their eyes met. "Howdy." Said the man on foot.

"Howdy yourself." replied Frank.

This man was obviously straight off the farm. His face was deeply sunburned and he walked like he was going through deep mud. What could Frank say to him?

"Aren't you afraid to leave the home place with nobody to watch things?" Smooth or not, that is what Frank thought of to say.

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Ain't nobody left in the whole countryside. Everybody's done been called out."

At that point the man had moved past Frank, so the conversation was at an end. Frank was left to stand in place and envy the soldier who had recruited that area. The whole neighborhood!! In Frank's areas, maybe half the people seemed receptive to being drafted. Frank wondered what the man had said to get one hundred percent cooperation.

In the hssswx camp

She Who Gathers Stones Together looked at the group she had been training. She could not find it in any of her hearts to call them an edkar. They just stood there looking at her. When one of them wanted to go somewhere he simply went, without making any effort to stay with the "edkar".

Time was short. Soon they would go into battle against real actual humans. While these misfits would never measure up to edkar one, she needed to try to scare them into trying harder.

“Did you know that humans can reproduce up to thirty times in their lifetime? In each reproduction event, it is usually one hatchling, but it can be two or even three at once. So when you kill a human, you are preventing ninety human hatchlings from infesting our land.” Start slow, with positive motivation.

One supposed fighter raised an appendage. “She Who Gathers Stones Together, I would like to go to where the humans are right now.”

She Who Gathers Stones Together felt a surge of pride. One of her hearts beat a little faster. He was actually impatient to start fighting! And he had more to say.

“I would go to the humans and sing them songs of the great heroes and mighty deeds of long ago. These heroes always fought with the greatest honor and according to all the rules. These humans need to hear how it was done in the tales from long ago, so that they too will fight in accordance with the rules. Once they know the proper way to fight and die, this war will be much nicer for everyone.”

It was time for scare tactics. She Who Gathers Stones Together opened her primary communication orifice and spoke to those she was to train.

“I have told you many times that you are to stick your ancestral hunting spear in the *center* of a human. Not in an appendage, but the center.

“If you stick your ancestral hunting spear in one of a human's rear appendages, the appendage will just break off. Then the human will keep coming after you, hopping on the other rear appendage. If you stick the remaining rear appendage, that one will fall off too, and the human will pull himself toward you using his two front appendages. They call their two front appendages 'arms' you will remember.”

“What about the middle pair of appendages? Are you going to talk about them? I think you're forgetting something.” This came from He Who Does Not Know Very Much. She Who Gathers Stones Together hoped that he would be killed in the fighting before he fertilized any egg clutches and passed his genome on to another generation.

“Hey He Who Does Not Know Very Much. How many appendages does a human have? Three and a half, isn't it?” This came from someone's secondary communication orifice, but pitched loud enough for all to hear.

“Hey, He Who Does Not Know Very Much. How did you get your name?” No way to tell who said that, but he/she/it was speaking for all of them.

It was time to take back their attention. She Who Gathers Stones Together continued her narrative. “If you cut off one of the arms, the human will pull himself toward you with the remaining arm. It will be slower than with two arms, but these humans are very determined.

“If you chop off the second arm the human will lie down and roll himself toward you. He will then bite you when he is close enough.

“And if you...” She Who Gathers Stones Together stopped because everyone was looking at something behind her.

It was a nearly-grown youngling. He was holding a blue circle which of course meant he had an important message.

“Do you have a message? Then give it to me and do not waste our time.”

“My message comes from First Of Those Who Fight. All are to come to the place of gathering.”

She Who Gathers Stones Together tapped the end of one appendage on the ground in a very human show of impatience. “And *when* are we to come to the place of gathering? You are to give the entire message, not just the part that it pleases you to tell.”

“That was the entire message. Which means you are to go as soon as my words reach your aural receptors.” Then the messenger crinkled the last third of his long body, as a show of deference. He wanted She Who Gathers Stones Together to know that he took no pleasure in speaking thus to one who was hatched long before he was.

“Then go we shall.” Replied She Who Gathers Stones Together. There was no time to be angry at this young one for an imperfectly delivered message. Besides, from the looks of him, he had never held a blue circle before.

“We are going now. What is your name, young one?”

“I am He Who Walks Beside Flowing Water. It was my honor to meet you.”

Then She Who Gathers Stones Together and her ragtag group were gone. He Who Walks Beside Flowing Water was unsure what to do next. For one thing, what should he do with the blue circle? He decided to keep it with him, but not to hold it up like he still had an important message.

He had strict orders to rejoin his group after the message was delivered. His fighting group was composed of nearly-grown younglings like himself. They called themselves 'edkar last'. Their leader was a gruff old veteran named He Who Does Not Want To Hear About It. He Who Does Not Want To Hear About It did not call them an edkar, saying that was an honor that had to be earned. They hoped that after a battle or two they would be worthy of being an edkar.

'Edkar last' would also be on the move to the place of gathering. It would be best if he could join them on their way there. He Who Walks Beside Flowing Water calculated a direction that would enable him to intercept 'edkar last' before they reached the place of gathering. Then he started running across the unmarked wilderness.

In General Armstrong's Tent

“General Armstrong, we need you.”

General Armstrong did not bother to act happy about this latest interruption. These people needed him for everything! Once he had been asked how they should pull the tent pegs out of the ground. His answer had been sufficiently forceful so that he was never asked that again.

“General Armstrong, there is a problem at the bridge.”

“There is?”

“Yes sir, there is.”

General Armstrong just sat there and looked at the quivering little corporal standing in the door of the tent. He was **not** going to say 'what?'.

“General Armstrong, the army is bottled up at the bridge. They are trying to go west and there is an old man on the bridge trying to go east with a cart pulled by two horses. There is not enough room for the horse cart and the army to pass each other on the bridge. The horses are stubborn and they won't back up or anything. We tried talking to them, but they won't listen to reason.”

General Armstrong smiled. That did not happen very often, and the corporal became even more nervous.

“Corporal, tell whoever is in charge on the bridge to kill the horses where they stand and throw them and the cart into the river. The old man will complain, but he will get out of the way and then the army can move.”

The corporal left, glad to be out of there. For just a moment, General Armstrong was left with his thoughts. He had received a Classical education. His last year of school, he had been given access to materials from The Fair Winds. Not everybody had that !! There was one training vid where a general was confronted with

much the same situation as General Armstrong had been just now. This general had pulled out a gun and shot the mules (It was mules in the training vid) and ordered them and the cart dumped in the river. (Oh, how General Armstrong wished they had guns. But it did not good to brood about that). So something from his Classical education had come in handy after all.

In Another Part Of The Human Camp

Frank was having a long conversation with Smythe. Smythe was discoursing on how the recruits coming off the farms nowadays were not on a par with those that you saw when he was a young man. Frank was encouraging him a little, hoping to put something about genetic degradation in his doctoral dissertation. All of the time travelers would be doing a dissertation based on this journey into the past, and Frank was looking for something that would really make his stand out.

Nelson was listening at a slight distance. Let Frank be the one to encourage old Smythe. Nelson was thinking that this diminishing of recruit quality could be because of childhood starvation. If a child does not get proper nutrition, he or she can be stunted in many areas of life. Maybe this insight could make Nelson's dissertation stand out from the crowd.

Captain Schultz rode up in a frantic hurry. His horse was out of breath and bug-eyed with excitement. "Get up you lazy baboons!! General Armstrong wants every man mounted and moving out **now** !! I heard General Armstrong say that myself." Then the man and his bug-eyed horse turned to go.

"Captain Schultz." Called Smythe in his most polite voice. "Where are we going?"

"To the hssswx." Shouted Captain Schultz over his shoulder.

Smythe looked at Frank and Nelson. "Well, let's go boys. I think this is it."

Chapter 32

He Who Walks Beside Flowing Water felt like events were spinning out of control. He had rejoined 'edkar last' right before they reached The Place Of Gathering. They did not stop there at all, but kept on moving to an unknown destination. He Who Does Not Want To Hear About It had not communicated to them at all after pointing in the direction they were to run. It had been over half a day now, and not once had he told He Who Walks Beside Flowing Water that his mother had come from a cracked egg. Puzzling.

Then suddenly He Who Walks Beside Flowing Water understood. He Who Does Not Want To Hear About It knew what was going to happen. No, he did not have a mystical ability to foretell the future. But he knew that they were going into battle today. And he knew what *that* was like, which explained his change of mood.

There was a huge cloud of dust not very far way. There seemed to be such chaos in the dust cloud that he could not tell who was in there or what they were doing. And those that were in the dust cloud, they seemed somehow *wrong*.

Humans. He Who Walks Beside Flowing Water was seeing humans for the first time in his young life. For this moment he had been preparing. He grasped his newly-made ancestral hunting spear and rushed into the heart of the dust cloud.

Frank could not see anything for the dust. There was no wind at all to blow away the dust so it just stayed there. Sergeant Pain had led them into the dust cloud at a full gallop, but all they found was the dust.

“To your left!!” Bellowed Smythe. “Young ones.”

Frank wheeled his horse to the left and indeed there were some smallish hssswwx. The men set their pikes and charged 'edkar last'.

He Who Walks Beside Flowing Water saw the misshapen creatures that rode on other misshapen creatures. One of them was coming right at him !! He Who Walks Beside Flowing Water held out his ancestral hunting spear. “Go back to the sky where you came from!” He screamed.

Frank saw that his target was rather timidly holding out a spear. Without thinking about it Frank slapped the spear aside and jammed his pike into the creature. It screamed pitifully and thrashed its limbs around.

Frank's horse backed up without being told, which pulled the pike out of He Who Walks Beside Flowing Water. The horse was already a veteran when Frank had emerged from the future and it knew what to do.

“Frank, put down that hssswwx spear!” shouted Sergeant Pain. “Act like a human being!” Frank looked and yes, he was holding a hssswwx spear in his left hand.

With General Armstrong

General Armstrong was fuming. He did not know what was happening everywhere. Usually the Army was not so big but what he could see the big picture. But now he had to sit on his horse exhibiting leadership qualities while messengers rode up and gave him reports. Then he would give orders for the messengers to take back. It was about as exciting as a life insurance company.

Here came another one. He was from the 449th volunteer infantry. The messenger was regular Army riding on a horse, but the 449th volunteer infantry was a bunch of farmers trying to hold their pike like it was a pitchfork.

“Report, soldier.”

“The 449th volunteer infantry met up with a big herd of hssswwx. At first it went rough, we lost some killed. Then the 449th bunched together like a ... defensive formation. Nobody taught them that, it just kind of happened. They were in a big circle with the pikes sticking out all around. The silly hssswwx just came at them in groups of two or three. It was easy enough to kill them before the next little group came up. The 449th volunteer infantry may be greenhorns but these hssswwx did not know their business either.”

General Armstrong was not sure what to say about that last statement. Anyway he needed to give the messenger some orders to take back. “Tell the 449th to keep going until they reach Edgar’s Clearing. Once there they will join up with the 67th cavalry. I want foot and horse to move into hssswwx territory together.”

In the Beaucoup Valley

He Who Runs Where Others Will Not Go was quite pleased with himself. He had left his group and headed straight into human-occupied territory. During his training there had been these *long* boring lectures about how human presence made the land sick and he would soon become sick himself if he went where humans lived. Whenever possible their strategy was to draw the humans toward their territory, not the other way around.

Those who taught were *so* stupid. And the same for those who commanded the fighters. Here he was, where the humans lived. He was ready to fight all the humans here. The only problem was that there were not any humans here. It was like they all had suddenly left. There were many odd structures, which had to be human-built. No one of his kind had been here since the very earliest days after the humans came from the sky. There were a lot of strange creatures in this place, all of which had four limbs. None of them wanted to fight. Maybe that was just as well, because He Who Runs Where Others Will Not Go was not feeling very well right now. He needed to rest. He would lie down right here and rest until he was feeling much better.

Hssswwx headquarters

First Of Those Who Fight was no happier than his human counterpart. He wanted to charge into a mass of humans and water his ancestral hunting spear with their body fluids. This actually did strengthen the wood of the shaft. But no, here he was in a safe location that he hoped was where messengers could find him. There could come a time when he had to make a critical decision. Their survival as a race might well hinge on this decision.

First Of Those Who Fight wondered if the humans would be more agreeable to negotiations if they were losing badly. Even after living on the same planet for so long, no one knew what kind of deal these creatures might consider. Here came a messenger.

“First Of Those Who Fight, I bring news from the fighting.”

“Then shut your primary communication orifice and tell it.” First Of Those Who Fight had long ago realized that he could skip most social courtesies.

“Edkar two met a huge herd of humans. They kept formation and cut a path through the humans. Then they turned around and came back the way they came, cutting another path.”

“So you have come here to tell of a victory. Asssdddfffg be praised !!”

“Not a victory, no. The herd of humans was from one end of the sky to the other. There were some of them lying on the ground after what edkar two did, certainly. As were three from edkar two. But the humans were so many that you could not tell that there were any fewer of them when this encounter was finished.”

First Of Those Who Fight realized that **now** was the time to make this pivotal decision. As far as he could tell his forces were running here and there, doing this and that. When you are greatly outnumbered that is not good enough. There had to be some kind of a way that their lesser numbers and inferior technology could

still beat these creatures from the sky.

They'd had some success with forming the edkars. These units were trained to stay together and fight together, which gave an advantage over small knots of humans. Now both sides had called out their entire population. The humans **must** have called out everyone with three or more limbs, there were so many of them.

He would put everyone together in one huge unit. If he had all the time under the sun, he might actually make a proper edkar out of everyone. As it was, he was just throwing everyone together. Edkar two and edkar three were still together. Edkar one had been broken up. Each member of edkar one was now leading a unit somewhere. It had been his decision to try to spread the discipline and focus of the edkars in this way.

First Of Those Who Fight turned his attention to the messenger who was still standing there. He had all six limbs firmly on the ground, as a show of respect.

“All are to gather in the place where there are two pointed stones close together.”

“First Of Those Who Fight, when you say 'all', do you mean...”

“I mean all. Everyone with six limbs is to gather in the place where there are two pointed stones close together. We will all gather together to rid our world of this menace. We will be called 'edkar all'. Tell this to the ones that sent you, and any others that you see. All are to spread this message by any means possible. I have spoken.”

The messenger hurried away. First Of Those Who Fight was left to contemplate his new policy. Calling the whole population 'edkar all' was a stretch of his still-new doctrine of an edkar being a highly trained and disciplined unit. Oh well. If they won this war, many things about their society would never be the same.

Frank's unit

“Look at all them hssswwx. They're no more than half a mile away, and they are just running along like we aren't even here.” Smythe had a talent for explaining the obvious.

Sergeant Pain had an opinion. “They're scared of us, that's what. They're running away from because they are just plain scared.”

“Somebody's scared, all right.” Said Nelson so that only Frank could hear. By now it was accepted fact that the Sergeant who was so tough in training was actually terrified of war.

Frank said nothing. Truth be told he was terrified of war too. And he saw no profit in chasing after some hssswwx that were just traveling along. Somebody could get killed. **He** could get killed. Their unit sat on horseback, watching the hssswwx move to some destination.

Chapter 33

Frank's unit was traveling at a gallop. There had been sudden orders, and then they were off and running. Frank was curious as to where they were going in such a hurry.

“Where are we going anyway?” It is not easy to talk from the back of a galloping horse, but Frank managed.

“That way!!” Shouted Smythe, pointing straight ahead of them. “You didn't know that, did you!! Ha ha!!”

Frank realized that he needed to accept that he was 'right here, right now', and that was all he was going to be able to find out about it. In this thought, Frank did not add 'in the late heroic era'. It was beginning to feel normal to be this situation, eating miserable food and fighting creatures that were completely alien to him.

“Hswwx!! Left!!”

Frank looked to the left and there was a huge mass of hssswwx. They stopped and turned to face the hssswwx and got organized and before they were done with all that the hssswwx were on them.

Each battle brought fresh terror, as much as the very first time. This was because *this* might be the time that you bought the farm, cashed in your chips, went down for the last time, *got killed*.

The humans were fighting with no organization or plan. Frank used his pike on whatever hssswwx was closest. He used the pointy part on the very end of the pike, the little ax below that, and he used the butt end as a club. Once he punched a hssswwx with his fist. It felt kind of rubbery, kind of creepy.

Frank saw Nelson a few feet away. It seemed further than a few feet because of the huge clouds of dust billowing everywhere. They positioned their horses beside each other, Frank and his horse facing one way and Nelson and his horse the other. But it was hard to stay like that because there were big groups of hssswwx and mounted men stampeding back and forth. A big country boy was trying to pin a hssswwx to the ground with his pike, but the thing was quick on its feet and kept skidding just far enough away to keep from being pinned. This unlikely pair crashed into Frank and Nelson, driving them apart.

Frank shouted for Nelson, but he could not see him. Now a hssswwx was coming at him from behind. His horse shifted its weight to its front feet and kicked the hssswwx with both rear legs. A mule could not have done it better. The hssswwx rolled away and did not return. “Good job, boy.” said Frank gratefully, as he patted the horse's neck. It turned its head and tried to bite his hand.

With General Armstrong

“General, all the scouts report there is a mass of hssswwx a mile or two across. And there are not any others, anywhere.”

General Armstrong took this news with a straight face. Never let them see you grimace. Much of their success to date had depended on fielding a unit bigger than a typical hssswwx war party. That, and their pikes were longer than a hssswwx spear.

General Armstrong pondered - How long would it take to gather all human forces into one mass? It would take... Long enough for the Assembly to relieve him of command. Then he had an idea. He motioned to his Commander of Trombones.

“I want all the trombones to pass this message to all units. This message is to be repeated at every opportunity.

“Calvary is to form units of six to eight men. Infantry is to form into units of 12 to 15. All these small units are to hit the edges of the mass of hssswwx, then retreat before the hssswwx can mount a significant

response. Furthermore, they are to hit the mass of hssswwx on the side that is closest to human territory.”

The Commander of Trombones dared to speak up. “General Armstrong **sir**, if they hit them on the side that is closest to human territory, then the hssswwx will be drawn into our towns and farms. Maybe they should hit them on the side away from human territory.”

General Armstrong did not reply. He just sat on his horse and seethed his unutterable contempt toward the Commander of Trombones. He did not utter one word, that is how unutterable was his contempt for the Commander of Trombones. After a couple of minutes the man went to give the General's instructions to the tromboners to repeat everywhere.

Yes, it was galling to have to resort to guerrilla tactics in his own back yard. You did what you could. And it *was* a risk to draw them into human-settled territory. However, as long as General Armstrong could remember, the Environmentalists had been preaching that human microbes and body chemistry were poison to the hssswwx. (And vice versa.) That was why every piece of conquered territory had to be treated and seeded under their supervision. So if the hssswwx came storming into a region long under human control, they would wilt like daffodils in a bonfire. Wouldn't they?

Frank's Unit

The human cavalry was milling around like a bunch of old cows. A year earlier, Frank would have been trying to get some of the other soldiers organized into an effective unit. Now he knew better. Any effort like that on his part would be immediately shot down as 'Trying to take over.' So he contented himself to mill around like everyone else.

Now the trombones were saying something. Those men did know how to pitch their message so that it carried a long ways. The message was something about 'form units of six to eight men'. Frank understood most everything the trombones might say, but it was hard to hear all of it over the din of battle.

Where was Nelson? Frank wanted to be in the same group as Nelson. There he was, finishing off a hssswwx. The main body of hssswwx was 40 or 50 yards away. In less time than it takes to tell about it, five hssswwx came out of the main body and rushed Nelson. He jabbed one with his pike, but he had no chance.

“Nooooo !!” Screamed Frank. He set his pike and charged the five hssswwx.

Smythe saw at a glance what was happening. “Frank, no!” He shouted. “You don't stand a chance!”

Frank rode on, not hearing anything. So Smythe turned his horse and rode after Frank. It was not a good idea, but he did it anyway. Fortunately for both of them, the five hssswwx ran back into the main body of hssswwx that was moving away from them.

Frank looked down at Nelson's body. He was barely recognizable. The hssswwx had stabbed him repeatedly with their crooked wooden spears. Dead is dead, whether it is from crooked wooden spears or a neutron bomb.

Frank started to dismount from his horse. He would have dismounted, if it had not been for Smythe's hand on his collar.

“Frank, stay on your horse. They will get you for sure if you are on foot.”

“I've got to **do** something for him! We can't just leave him laying on the ground!!”

“Frank right now we have to form into small groups and start our operations against that huge mob of hssswwx.”

“First we have to have a funeral. I'll have to compose a suitable eulogy, and then...”

Smythe grabbed Frank and looked him in the eye. “We will do that. I promise. But first we have to strike

back at the hssswx. In a week or less we will be right back here and we will give Nelson the best funeral you ever saw.” This was a lie, but it was a necessary lie.

Frank did not protest when Smythe took his horse's reins and led them to where a group of men was gathering. There was not much conversation. Even the horses were not making much noise.

Smythe looked at the men clustered around. Sergeant Pain was nowhere to be seen. Since he, Smythe, had been in the Army the longest by far, he needed to be the leader. But he would have to be careful about it. Sergeant Pain would be mad as a wet hssswx if he found that Smythe was 'Taking over.' That sword of his would be a wicked close-in weapon.

“You heard the trombones. We are to hit them quickly and then retreat, then hit them again a little distance away. Bud, you are paired up with Frank.” Then Smythe turned his horse and rode off to the southwest. They all followed. He had not actually said 'follow me' or 'let's go'. That would have been 'giving orders'. It was a sad thing that besides fighting hssswx, he had to be careful to stay out of trouble with the Army.

Frank rode numbly beside Bud Grace. It did not occur to him that no one else was 'paired up'. He had never known such pain. This was way worse than when Grandpa had died on the living room sofa. The hssswx were going to pay for this, every last one of them.

Chapter 34

The hssswwx

First Of Those Who Fight had never seen such a mess in all the days since he had been hatched. He was in the center of a great mass of his kind. It was **all** of his kind, to be exact. Never before had this been done, and First Of Those Who Fight could now see why. There was absolutely no way for him to give orders. His primary communication orifice could not be heard more than three or four individuals away. And since they were packed together bnkuu to wgvxdt there was no way to send a messenger to anywhere.

He *hoped* that it did not look like he was in the middle of the mob to protect his own precious self. Third Of Those Who Fight would love for everybody to think that. That ambitious underling was somewhere on the leading edge of this mess. Maybe some nice human would kill him. Victory has its price, certainly.

First Of Those Who Fight could tell that they were moving toward human territory. Right now they were in an area where both sides moved freely, but before long they would be in the part of their world that had been totally remade in the human image. From the few garbled reports he received, it seemed that those with four limbs were making quick strikes against those with six limbs in an attempt to force them back the way they had come. There was nothing to do now but see what was going to happen.

Frank

Smythe had a sort of de-facto command of their group. No one else wanted it so they obeyed his orders without question. They would ride along roughly parallel to the endless mass of hssswwx. Not too close, considering what had happened to Nelson. Then when Smythe sensed was just the right time, they would gallop full speed toward one particular place in the hssswwx mob and attack one poor hssswwx. Then they would immediately retreat, whether they had killed the poor hssswwx or not. If they retreated immediately the hssswwx could not organize a counterattack.

Frank was a machine, without thought or emotion. The horse heard Smythe's orders and kept them with the group. Frank wielded his pike when everybody else did. Sometimes the hssswwx they attacked sagged to the ground like a balloon deflating. Other times it scurried away, making that inhuman screeching sound that wounded hssswwx always made.

Cold or heat, wind and dust - none of this touched Frank. He was surprised when he heard Smythe say "We'll stop here for the night." He had not noticed that the sun had set.

The hssswwx

Third Of Those Who Fight was not happy. This battle was supposed to bring glory, honor, and eternal fame. For him. The way things were going, they would ensure the survival of their race, and First Of Those Who Fight would get all the credit. Third Of Those Who Fight had to **do** something.

The humans had broken off their hit and run attacks. When it was dark they fell into a coma and could not be awakened until the sun again rose above the world. It was time to get in front of this parade.

"Listen up everyone. We are assembling a party to foray further into human lands."

"Do we **have** to?"

"I am Third Of Those Who Fight. And I could slay you without trying very hard. Yes you **have** to."

"It is getting dark. We can do it tomorrow."

"That is the best time for this foray. All you have to do is close you primary, secondary, and tertiary optical

receptors. Then your quaternary optical receptors will open and you will be able to see just fine. Humans don't have that. They actually cannot see in the dark.”

The fighters in the immediate area realized they had no choice. Third Of Those Who Fight was giving a direct order and there was no escape from that. They followed him away from the massive herd into the late evening darkness.

Frank

The men were beginning to settle down for the night. The first step was to get off your horse. After twelve hours in the saddle, that is not as easy as it sounds. Jonsey was cooking some food for them. They were starting to make a tepee of their pikes, metal end off the ground. A good soldier never lays his pike on the ground.

“hssswx !!”

Frank had just started to add his pike to the tepee of pikes. He immediately grabbed back his pike, set the butt end on the ground and pointed the pointy end at the mob of hssswx that was thundering down onto them. Everyone else was doing the same. A great roar came from the men as they pointed their pikes at the threat and waited for the assault.

Third Of Those Who Fight felt very frustrated. They had caught a group of humans out in the open after they had disconnected from the creatures that carried them around. And yet they still grabbed their long weapons and made ready to fight. Who knew that they could do that?

He could not order a retreat now. A great military leader always pushes ahead no matter what the difficulty. This slightly unauthorized foray **had** to succeed.

“Everyone, attack right there. All of you, bunch up and hit that big group of them. You there, quit bringing up the rear like that and get with everyone else.” Third Of Those Who Fight hoped that no one would notice that he was not personally leading the group that was rushing the mass of upraised pikes.

The hssswx hit the small group of men like a tidal wave. Frank felt his pike begin to bend under the weight of the hssswx that was impaled on it and the three hssswx that were piled up behind **that** one. He kicked the end of the pike to dislodge it from where he had planted it in the ground. It came free and the four hssswx crashed to the ground, all tangled up with each other. Frank decided to move away before they could figure it out.

Frank scampered away, feeling foolish for not being on horseback. He saw his horse maybe thirty feet away. “Come here boy.” He coaxed.

The scruffy beast trotted away. Frank decided to take another approach. “Come here girl. Right here, be a good girl now.” Maybe it was female **and** enough of a feminist that it did not like being called 'boy'.

It ran away again, this time further than before. Frank could see that he had one more chance to get the surly beast under his control. What had Sergeant Pain taught them in Basic? Oh yes, you were supposed to whistle. All the horses were especially trained to come when you whistled.

Frank put two fingers in his mouth and whistled as loud as he could. The horse turned and galloped away as fast as it could. For all Frank ever knew, it immediately went and joined the hssswx.

Now what? On foot anywhere he wanted to go was going to take a lot longer. He needed to get back with Smythe and the others. Looking around, he did not see them. He did see a lone hssswx standing there all by itself. Oh no!! It was coming toward him.

Third Of Those Who Fight was dismayed by the results of their attack on the dismounted humans. Five of those that he had led away from the main body were now dead. Two more were seriously wounded, and one

had run away screaming like a stuck cvggesvj.

But wait, there was one of them all by himself. He was not riding on one of the creatures that they normally rode, so this should be easy.

Frank knew he could not outrun this hssswx. He could barely walk. So he held his pike at an angle and waited for it to come to him.

Third Of Those Who Fight galloped toward Frank, singing the song of how the great ones of long ago overcame overwhelming difficulties. He was going to take his ancestral hunting spear and slay that sorry little human.

Who was holding **his** ancestral hunting spear in a most threatening manner. This thing looked like he really knew how to handle himself in a fight. Maybe Third Of Those Who Fight should reconsider this...

“You there. Yes, you three. We are going to drive deeper into human territory.”

The three that Third Of Those Who Fight was addressing were the last ones of the foray party that were still alive and unhurt. Third Of Those Who Fight's little command was really little now.

He Who Drives Fenceposts Into The Ground turned one primary optical receptor toward Frank and then asked a question of Third Of Those Who Fight. “Do you have unfinished business here before we go?”

Third Of Those Who Fight waved an appendage at Frank in dismissal. “That one is just about dead.” was his reply. “He will be dead really soon without my help.”

He Who Drives Fenceposts Into The Ground, She Who Is Usually Next To Last, and She Who Brings Clear Water said nothing. They accepted the obvious lie because none of them wanted to take on the lone human. They followed Third Of Those Who Fight deeper into human territory.

Frank did not know where he was. His feet moved without purpose or direction. He had his battered pike and half a canteen of water. There were no other humans that he could see in the deepening twilight. Soon it would be fully dark, and he would not be able to see anything at all.

There was something on the ground over there. For some reason Frank gathered his strength and hurried over to...

It was a person, lying on the ground, feet sticking up. With the absolutely last bit of light, Frank recognized Sergeant Pain. He was on his back with his dead eyes staring up into nothing. There was a hssswx spear sticking out of his chest.

Working by feel, Frank verified that Sergeant Pain still had the sword that signified his exalted status as a Sergeant. He laid his pike on the ground and unbuckled the stiff leather belt that held the sword and scabbard.

He still could not pull everything free of the stiff corpse, so he stood and kicked Sergeant Pain onto his belly. The spear sticking out of his chest snapped with a loud crack, and Frank picked up the belt, scabbard and sword. After buckling the on the sword, Frank picked up his pike and walked away into the night.

Chapter 35

“Mills wake up. You're going the sleep the whole day like a man of leisure.”

Frank slowly pried open his eyes. He was lying on the ground like a dead man. He did not remember lying down. Under Smythe's baleful glare he got up.

“Have some food.” Smythe gave Frank a dry piece of bread. Frank ate it gratefully.

Now Smythe became downright chatty. “The hssswwx herd has stopped. They are not moving at all. The experts say that every last hssswwx that there is has gathered in that one big herd. The word from Headquarters is that we are going to win. Win once for all, that is.”

Frank looked at the group of mounted men under Smythe. There was not as many of them as there had been. One of them was leading a riderless horse. Smythe spoke again. “Mills you take Jonsey's horse. He didn't make it.”

Frank climbed onto Jonsey's horse. “Her name is Gertrude.” Declared Smythe. “She will do better if you call her by name.”

The hssswwx

First Of Those Who Fight aligned his optical receptors in all directions. He had time to do this because no one was moving. First Of Those Who Fight could not move because none of those around him were moving. They could not move because none of those around *them* were moving. And so on, for as far as his optical receptors could tell him. What was more, his aural receptors had heard a strange report that those on the edge were dead.

First Of Those Who Fight wished that some humans would come here so he could fight them. They seemed to have stopped their hit and run attacks. Very odd, even for beings they did not understand at all. Anyway, he felt kind of tired so he was just going to take a little rest.

General Armstrong

“General Armstrong, we are from the Assembly and we want to talk to you.”

Armstrong fumed. These people always stated what was obvious. Probably because they did not know anything else to say.

“General Armstrong, how is the war with the hssswwx going?”

“Fine.”

The delegation from the Assembly waited for him to say more. General Armstrong did not say more, he just stood there. He had learned long ago that if you walked away from someone, they could make an issue of *that*. So he just stood there.

“General Armstrong, we saw a huge herd of hssswwx. They occupy the whole northwest quarter of the Beaucoup Valley.”

General Armstrong continued to stand there saying nothing. They had not exactly asked him a question, so he did not exactly have to answer.

“We want to know what you are going to **do** about it.”

Time to say something. “That huge herd is not moving at all. They got this far and now they are not going anywhere.”

Now the delegation from the Assembly was silent. He needed to give them a little more.

“What is more, they are dropping dead all over the place. This far into human territory the terrestrial microbes will be getting to them.”

General Armstrong was strategically rearranging the truth. Yes, there had been several reports that the hssswwx herd had stopped in place. However, he had not been told anything about them dropping dead. This was his hope and this was the reason he had drawn them into the Beaucoup Valley. If he was wrong about this it was going to be bad. Very bad.

The delegation from the Assembly was leaving now. They were not exactly satisfied, but they had run out of things to complain about. And a scout was standing nearby, politely waiting to report.

“Report, soldier.” Snapped Armstrong.

“General Armstrong **sir**, the hssswwx are dropping dead where they stand. It started at the edges of the mob of them and now you see it everywhere.”

General Armstrong smiled to himself. It was just as he had hoped. And no would ever be able to prove that he first received this report *after* he had talked to the men from the Assembly.

Third Of Those Who Fight

Third Of Those Who Fight was walking. Where to, he knew not. The three that had been with him were with him no more. Half a mile back he had a dropped his ancestral hunting spear. A warrior never dropped his ancestral hunting spear. Now he was coming to a dip in the landscape.

It was the Beaucoup River. Third Of Those Who Fight did not know what his kind had once called it. The Beaucoup River had been in human hands so long that his kind no longer had a name for it. On he walked without thinking. He came to the steep river bank and immediately went over it into the Beaucoup River. He was dead before he hit the water, and his ragged corpse slowly floated downstream. It would poison the water for forty miles before an Environmentalist fished it out.

The Battle of Overall was finished. The humans had won.

Chapter 36

All fighting with the hssswwx had ceased. Frank's unit felt ill at ease. Nobody knew what they were supposed to be doing. They figured they would eventually be in trouble for not doing whatever it was they were supposed to do.

Here came Captain Crawford.

“Who's in charge here? Sergeant?”

Frank realized that the man was talking to him.

“Yes sir.” In the Army that was usually the right answer.

“Get these men ready to move out. We have orders, there is a new mission.”

“Where to, sir?”

The captain pointed to the northwest. “That way. You *know* what's in that direction.” With that the man rode away, leaving Frank in charge.

Smythe and the others were convulsed with laughter. Smythe was lying on the ground weakly pointing his finger at Frank.

“You took that sword off Sergeant Pain's dead body. And now the Captain thinks you're the Sergeant. Boy, officers are sure dumb.”

Smythe raised his head enough to look at Frank. “And you ain't so smart yourself.”

Frank was listening to all this joviality with half an ear. He had to get these men motivated and riding to the northwest. Yes, he wanted to be Sergeant. Seeing how bad a job Sergeant Pain had done made him want to show that he could do better.

Trouble was, they were all laughing at him. Smythe was first and foremost in laughing at Frank. How was a little twerp from the future going to make these rock-hard men from the Heroic Age do *anything*?

He had to try. “Ok, you heard the Captain. Mount up. Don't leave anything behind.”

They all looked at him. Then Smythe got up off the ground and started gathering his equipment. One by one, the others did the same. Frank Mills would be forever grateful to Smythe. In a few minutes they were mounted and riding to the northwest.

Later that same day

The men were in high spirits. They were calling each other pathizers and then laughing about it. There were many other mounted soldiers on the road to the northwest.

Frank still did not know their destination. He realized that did not really need to know. The Army did not like for you to know too much. Frank could tell that a sizable portion of the Army was involved with this operation. He had seen the regimental flags for several regiments, and he had heard scraps of conversation about how this operation was “completely different”. Curious.

And all the soldiers he saw were mounted. He saw none of the ground-pounders that had been called up from the civilian population. Maybe they had already been discharged and had gone back to their farms, small towns, mudholes, or where *ever* it was they came from.

“Hey sarge.” This was Bud Grace.

“What is it Bud?”

“Where are we going?”

Frank pointed straight ahead. “That way.”

That was very funny. Every man under Frank's command roared with laughter. One man nearly fell off his horse. Yes, Frank had learned how to relate to these people.

“I think **he's** a pathizer!!” Declared Smythe. That was even funnier than what Frank had said.

Frank did not react to this the worst insult in the Altgeld language. He held himself aloof, the loneliness of command.

“Hey sarge.”

“What is it now?” Frank did not bother turning around.

“What is this place?”

Frank looked up and saw that they were coming to a large open area at the top of a ridgeline. There were already many horse soldiers there with more coming. At the center of the open area was one man mounted on a magnificent cream white stallion. It was General Armstrong. No one came within thirty feet of him as the rest of them crowded into the open area.

Frank's group was among the last to arrive. While they were waiting their turn to file in, Frank looked around. He noticed a bedraggled little town some distance away. It was situated at one end of a large flat area. The rest of the large flat area was empty except for a small grove of trees towards the other end of it.

Finally everyone had found a place. It was crowded because men on horseback take a lot more room than men standing on their own two feet. General Armstrong was still on his cream white stallion. The animal was high-spirited and kept turning in place, restless to be on his way. Armstrong began to speak.

“Men of Altgeld. We are here today to rid our world of a great evil. For a long time we have had to devote all our resources to the struggle against the hssswwx. That threat has now been eliminated. But we dare not rest while this other cancer threatens our way of life.”

The horse kept turning while Armstrong spoke, so that he eventually had faced in every direction. To every man there it seemed that General Armstrong had looked him right in the eye.

“Down there is Landington. In Landington you will find every sort of pathizer, freethinker, socialist and activist. They say, think, and write all sorts of things that your Mother never said to you. They sympathized with the hssswwx and made it plain that they thought we should try to share this world with them.

“That is why they are called pathizers, you know. They sympathize with the hssswwx. For a long time the Army let them go. Now through your blood and sacrifice we have achieved final victory against the hssswwx. But those pathizers down there are saying that we did the wrong thing. They say that the hssswwx were here first and that we should be happy that *they* might want to share with *us*.”

Armstrong now changed his voice to a deep growl, like your Dad would use to tell you something really important. “Now we have the chance to do something about it. We are going to ride down there and clean out that nest of corruption. **Are you with me !!!**”

From the men came a primal roar of agreement, Frank no less than anyone else. At that moment Frank truly believed, truly wanted, to burn this corruption from their society. Such is the power of a great orator.

They descended from the large open area by a different route. General Armstrong had given orders that the Ninety-Fourth would circle to the left of Landington, and the Eleventy-First would circle to the right. The rest of their force would make a frontal assault. Frank was part of this group.

Frank had a little time to think. Altgeld tradition said that The Fair Winds had landed in a large flat area, and that the town of Landington had sprung up near the ship. It looked like they were right. And if the little town was Landington, what was in the grove of trees? Maybe it was the remains of the Fair Winds. Frank was determined to find out.

And yes, Frank still wanted to kill every last pathizer in Landington. The cold-blooded Heroic Age soldier lived in complete harmony with the inquisitive modern scholar. Now they were in position.

They had to wait until the Ninety-Fourth and the Eleventy-First were in position. The men were getting figiditey.

“When are those lunkheads going to get into position? Those pathizers are going to hear us and get away.” Grumbled Bud.

“Don't worry about that.” Soothed Smythe. “I have it on good authority that all pathizers are deaf. They won't hear a thing.”

The trombones spoke “Advance”. Frank could now understand all the signals and did not need to look at others for clues. He drew his sword and pointed it in the direction of Landington. They moved forward at a light trot. “Advance” means to move, but not at a gallop. That would be “Charge”.

It did not take long to arrive at the main and only street of Landington. They found no resistance, no residents, no anything. Soon the cavalry was milling around like a flock of sheep. Frank still could not see anything that told him that this was *the* Landington. Besides, he had his men to tend to.

“Bud get back on your horse!! There was no dismount order!!”

“I'm tired of riding this horse. Besides, we ain't going nowhere.”

“It is not up to you to say we ain't going nowhere.”

“No, it's up to General Armstrong. And he's over there meeting with the Colonels.”

Frank realized that only Armstrong was General, the next highest men were Colonel. This would make a good point for his dissertation.

The meeting with the Colonels broke up. Bud remounted his horse very quickly. All the men nudged their horses forward so they could hear what General Armstrong had to say.

“Go into all the houses and gather every book and piece of paper. Pile them in the middle of the street and burn them. Then burn down every building. I want nothing left.”

General Armstrong turned to go, but then he thought of something else. “And no reading the stuff you bring out. I don't want anyone to be corrupted.”

Frank heard Smythe give a little snicker. He would have to give that man a talking to!

Everyone dismounted and left their horses in the street. The horses were trained not to run away. Frank went into the same house as Smythe.

“Smythe, what were you doing laughing at General Armstrong? Do you want to pull the supply wagon all by yourself?”

“I can't read at all. I thought it was kind of funny that he said not to read anything.”

“And if he heard you laugh and called you out, is **that** what you were going to say?”

“General Armstrong likes his soldiers none too smart. Besides you, the only one in our squad who can read or write is Bud Grace. I seen him write his name one time.”

Frank grabbed an armload of books from an overturned bookshelf. He motioned with his head that the other

men from his squad were to exit the house with their armloads before him. He wanted to make it look like he was being a nice guy, letting them go first.

He had just a minute. He opened a book. On the first page was written:

Brittania est insula. Italia paenea est insula.

Freshman in high school Latin. Somewhere in all these volumes there must be things that were more controversial. But Frank would never know.

Back in the middle of the street men were busy piling books and other materials onto a huge pile. Already the pile was higher than the top of Frank's head. Here came General Armstrong carrying maybe three books. Frank decided that later Armstrong would try to make it sound like he did it all himself. He was that type of man.

Someone lit the pyre of books. Frank moved away from the searing heat. You can warm yourself by a small campfire, but a huge fire like this is too hot to approach. Frank wandered into an area away from the small houses that made up Landington. There he found an ornamental iron fence that encompassed a few square feet of ground. The iron fence was badly rusted, but you could tell that it had once been very fancy. Inside were mainly weeds and some small trees. And a stone with writing on it.

Frank carefully leaned over the rusting iron fence and read:

Here lies Captain S. Samuels, who commanded The Fair Winds. He brought us to our new home here in Altgeld.

So much for the neo-revisionists who claimed that Captain Samuels was an archetype symbolizing... something. Frank never much cared for the neo-revisionists.

“Hey, what are you doing there?” It was Captain Crawford, and did he ever sound mad.

“I was checking to see if they ditched anything here when they were leaving town.”

Captain Crawford was suddenly interested. “Was there anything?”

Frank waved a hand dismissively. “Nothing. Just a bunch of junk.”

Captain Crawford took Frank by the arm. “Get your men together. We need to get every building burning by the end of the day.”

Frank had never burned down a house, but he was glad enough for a chance to try. He was sure he could figure it out if they gave him a chance. Being in the Army gave him a chance to try all sorts of new things!

Chapter 37

“Frank, it's time.”

Frank had been in a deep sleep, and at first he did not recognize Horace Wilson or the fact that he was one of those who had come with Frank from the future.

“What.”

Horace looked around. There were a lot of Heroic Age soldiers nearby, so he had to be careful what he said. “It has been a year.”

Frank's brain clicked and whirred. Finally it computed that the time travelers would soon finish their year in the Heroic Age and needed to be at the pickup point in few days. It had been made abundantly clear to them that anyone who missed the pickup would be stuck in the Heroic Age for the rest of their lives.

Frank sat up on his bedroll. He too was conscious of the need to talk around their real topic. “We are getting out after the year's service, is that right?”

“Yes. And besides that they are discharging anyone who wants out. The war is over. There will not be much of an Army now that the hssswx are defeated for good. We can go with you back to your home in Superior Altgeld.”

Frank was relieved to hear that getting discharged would not be a problem. If it came right down to it they were prepared to desert to make the pickup date. Now that would not be necessary.

The next day

They were assembled again. Now they were wearing civilian clothes. The ragtag outfits they had worn on the way to enlistment had been dutifully given back to them.

“Is everyone here?” Frank had to remind himself not to look around for Nelson.

“Hmmm...Everyone but Timmy.”

“What is it with that guy!! He would be late to his own funeral !!”

“He is not going to make **me** late. You guys can stay here looking for Timmy if you love him so much.”

That drew a small laugh. None of them liked Timmy, even though they were a little bit scared of him.

“Now that I think about it, I saw Timmy carrying a bucket of water toward the Environmentalist part of the camp. I didn't say anything, I just assumed he would be along.”

So they all marched off to the edge of the Army camp where the Environmentalist had set up his tent. Timmy must have got roped into doing some work for the Environmentalist and could not get away.

There was the Environmentalist, sitting on a large tree stump. The man was so grossly overweight that no ordinary chair would hold him. Then they saw Timmy dumping out some trash.

“Timmy.”

“Hey, everybody.” Timmy looked up at the visitors.

They just stood there looking at him. You had to be *really* careful what you said around an Environmentalist.

Timmy stood there looking back at them. The silence stretched.

“Timmy, we have to *go*. We are all invited to... Frank's aunt's wedding and we don't want to be late.”

“Oh. I've decided to stay here.”

“*Timmy*, don't be joking about this.”

“Seriously. The Environmentalist has taken me on as an apprentice. I will be an apprentice for three years, then I will strike out on my own as a Journeyman. They have authorized a **lot** of new Environmentalists because we have to terresteralize almost half the planet.”

Frank took a closer look at Timmy. His eyes were bright and his hands were steady. He had **not** been drinking. Yes, Timmy was serious about this. He had found his calling.

There was not much more to say. The rest of the time-travelers started down the road.

It took two days of steady walking to reach the place where they had entered the Heroic Age. They ate their food cold because there was no wood to build a fire. At night they lay down on the ground and slept.

“This is the place.”

“Yes it is.”

“And this is the day. I hope we aren't too late.”

Frank spoke up. “Pickup is at ten. It's about nine.” Without realizing it, Frank had learned to tell time by the sun.

The sat on the muddy ground and waited. The weeds were tall enough to be irritating, but did not provide enough greenery to sit on.

“Man, am I hungry.”

“We agreed to not have breakfast today. Do you want to barf all over everything the minute you get back to our time?”

There was no answer to that. They continued to wait.

Suddenly Frank saw that an area a little ways off looked...different. There was a different kind of light, and instead of tall weeds, there seemed to be neatly trimmed grass.

“There!!”

They were up in an instant sprinting toward this strange place. There was just a split second of discontinuity, and then they were stumbling along in an open area.

“There they are.”

Frank saw a group of people standing all in a bunch. They started applauding politely. From the crowd emerged Professor Edgar Lively, and he shook hands with each of them in turn. Frank noticed that there were tears in his eyes. Odd.

The rest of the small crowd greeted them. There was a lot of commotion over the two that did not return. Frank tried to console Nelson's parents, but there is nothing you really can say. There was no one there to greet Timmy.

There was a group of men standing in a line a few yards away. They did not greet the returning time travelers, and each of them was holding a sledge hammer. Scanning the group, Frank kept going back to the one next to last in line. Did he know him? Could it be...

“Johnny. Johnny Johnson, from school.”

For a moment Johnny looked totally blank. Then recognition dawned. “Frank Mills. It has been a long time.”

Frank was about to walk over and talk to Johnny some more when Somebody Important arrived. He might as well have had "Somebody Important" above his head, it was that obvious.

"The Chairman." Whispered Horace Wilson. Yes, it was The Chairman.

Once everyone had gathered around, The Chairman began to speak. "We have been patient with You People long enough. You go into our past, to a pivotal time in our history no less, and poke your little noses into everything. Who knows what you might have changed! Did you try to get permission or fill out the necessary paperwork? No, you just went right ahead. But now we are shutting down You People for good. Don't say we didn't try to warn you."

The Chairman turned on his heel and strode towards his waiting car. A man in some kind of uniform was holding the door open for him. In less time than it takes to tell about it, he was gone.

Professor Edgar Lively motioned for the returned time travelers to gather round. "This is the confidentiality agreement that each of you signed."

"What? I did not sign anything like that!" Blurted Frank. Then he saw his signature on the document. It was amazing what they could do these days.

"You are not to discuss this journey back in time to anyone, ever. If you do try to go public, the Greater Altgeld Psychiatric Society will see that you are declared mentally insane and confined to an institution until you are able to see reality clearly."

"Let's go, we're wasting time." This came not from Professor Edgar Lively but from somewhere behind Frank. The line of men with sledgehammers began to move toward a nondescript one-story building about a hundred yards away.

"The time machinery." Horace called out. Why are they going in there?"

"Don't try to stop them." Warned Professor Lively. "There's nothing you can do."

Soon they could hear the sounds of smashing and breaking coming from the little building. They were smashing the time-travel machinery. Frank was speechless. Not only would there be no more time-travel, this one just concluded had not happened.

Frank saw Jesse Plowshare sitting on the ground, weeping uncontrollably. He did not feel like comforting him. Frank's parents were waiting. He got into the back seat of their car, just like when he was a kid. They drove away.

Epilogue

Frank and Tracy are married now. They have a baby girl. Frank did his doctoral dissertation on the history of marital semantics. Nothing to do with the Heroic Age. Frank is Assistant Professor of Historical Studies at Central Western Altgeld University, tenure track. Life is good.

Frank and Tracy never discuss time-travel. Frank has lost touch with the other men who returned from the Heroic Age. It seems better this way. But buried in a drawer with many other items is a long piece of metal wrapped in a bit of cloth. It is the metal point from a hssswwx spear that he and Nelson found. Frank finds it once in a while when he is looking for something else. A year of his life, distilled into this one small object.

The End