

# THE NUTCRACKER COUP

Janet Kagan

Marianne Tedesco had “The Nutcracker Suite” turned up full blast for inspiration, and as she whittled she now and then raised her knife to conduct Tchaikovsky. That was what she was doing when one of the locals poked his delicate snout around the corner of the door to her office. She nudged the sound down to a whisper in the background and beckoned him in.

It was Tatep, of course. After almost a year on Rejoicing (that was the literal translation of the world’s name), she still had a bit of trouble recognizing the Rejoicers by snout alone, but the three white quills in Tatep’s ruff had made him the first real “individual” to her. Helluva thing for a junior diplomat not to be able to tell one local from another-but there it was. Marianne was desperately trying to learn the snout shapes that distinguished the Rejoicers to each other.

“Good morning, Tatep. What can I do for you?”

“Share?” said Tatep.

“Of course. Shall I turn the music off?” Marianne knew that The Nutcracker Suite was as alien to him as the rattling and scraping of his music was to her. She was beginning to like pieces here and there of the Rejoicer style but she didn’t know if Tatep felt the same way about Tchaikovsky.

“Please, leave it on,” he said. “You’ve played it every day this week-am I right? And now I find you waving your knife to the beat. Will you share the reason?”

She had played it every day this week, she realized. “I’ll try to explain. It’s a little silly, really, and it shouldn’t be taken as characteristic of human. Just as characteristic of Marianne.”

“Understood.” He climbed the stepstool she’d cobbled together her first month on Rejoicing and settled himself on his haunches comfortably to listen. At rest, the wicked quills adorning his ruff and tail seemed just that: adornments. By local standards, Tatep was a handsome male.

He was also a quadruped and human chairs weren’t the least bit of use to him. The stepstool let him lounge on its broad upper platform or sit upright on the step below that-in either case, it put a Rejoicer eye to eye with Marianne. This had been so successful an innovation in the embassy that they had hired a local artisan to make several for each office. Chornian’s stepstools were a more elaborate affair, but Chornian himself had refused to make one to replace “the very first.” A fine sense of tradition, these Rejoicers.

That was, of course, the best way to explain the Tchaikovsky. “Have you noticed, Tatep, that the further away from home you go, the more important it becomes to keep traditions?”

“Yes,” he said. He drew a small piece of sweetwood from his pouch and seemed to consider it thoughtfully. “Ah! I hadn’t thought how very strongly you must need tradition! You’re very far from home indeed. Some thirty light years, is it not?” He bit into the wood, shaving a delicate curl from it with one corner of his razor sharp front tooth. The curl he swallowed, then he said, “Please, go on.”

The control he had always fascinated Marianne-she would have preferred to watch him carve, but she spoke instead. “My family tradition is to celebrate a holiday called Christmas.”

He swallowed another shaving and repeated, “Christmas.”

“For some humans Christmas is a religious holiday. For my family, it was more of...a turning of the seasons. Now, Esperanza and I couldn’t agree on a date-her homeworld’s calendar runs differently than mine-but we both agree on a need to celebrate Christmas once a year. So, since it’s a solstice festival, I asked Muhammed what was the shortest day of the year on Rejoicing. He says that’s Tamemb Nap Ohd.”

Tatep bristled his ruff forward, confirming Muhammed’s date.

“So I have decided to celebrate Christmas Eve on Tamemb Nap Ohd and to celebrate Christmas Day on Tememb Nap Chorr.”

“Christmas is a revival, then? An awakening?”

“Yes, something like that. A renewal. A promise of spring to come.”

“Yes, we have an Awakening on Tememb Nap Chorr as well.”

Marianne nodded. “Many peoples do. Anyhow, I mentioned that I wanted to celebrate and a number of other people at the Embassy decided it was a good idea. So, we’re trying to put together something that resembles a Christmas celebration-mostly from local materials.”

She gestured toward the player. “That piece of music is generally associated with Christmas. I’ve been playing it because it-gives me an anticipation of the Awakening to come.”

Tatep was doing fine finishing work now, and Marianne had to stop to watch. The bit of sweetwood was turning into a pair of tommets-the Embassy staff had dubbed them “notrabbits” for their sexual proclivities-engaged in their mating dance. Tatep rattled his spines, amused, and passed the carving into her hands. He waited quietly while she turned it this way and that, admiring the exquisite workmanship.

“You don’t get the joke,” he said, at last.

“No, Tatep. I’m afraid I don’t. Can you share it?”

“Look closely at their teeth.”

Marianne did, and got the joke. The creatures were tommets, yes, but the teeth they had were not tommet teeth. They were the same sort of teeth that Tatep had used to carve them. Apparently, “fucking like tommets” was a Rejoicer joke.

“It’s a gift for Hapet and Achinto. They had six children! We’re all pleased and amazed for them.”

Four to a brood was the usual, but birthings were few and far between. A couple that had more than two birthings in a lifetime was considered unusually lucky.

“Congratulate them for me, if you think it appropriate,” Marianne said. “Would it be proper for the embassy to send a gift?”

“Proper and most welcome. Hapet and Achinto will need help feeding that many.”

“Would you help me choose? Something to make children grow healthy and strong, and something as well to delight their senses.”

“I’d be glad to. Shall we go to the market or the wood?”

“Let’s go chop our own, Tatep. I’ve been sitting behind this desk too damn long. I could use the exercise.”

As Marianne rose, Tatep put his finished carving into his pouch and climbed down. “You will share more about Christmas with me while we work? You can talk and chop at the same time.”

Marianne grinned. “I’ll do better than that. You can help me choose something that we can use for a Christmas tree, as well. If it’s something that is also edible when it has seasoned for a few weeks’ time, that would be all the more to the spirit of the festival.”

###

The two of them took a leisurely stroll down the narrow cobbled streets. Marianne shared more of her Christmas customs with Tatep and found her anticipation growing apace as she did.

At Tatep’s suggestion they paused at Killim the glass-blower’s, where Tatep helped Marianne describe and order a dozen ornamental balls for the tree. Unaccustomed to the idea of purely ornamental glass objects, Killim was fascinated. “She says,” reported Tatep when Marianne missed a few crucial words of her reply, “she’ll make a number of samples and you’ll return on Debem Op Chorr to choose the most proper.”

Marianne nodded. Before she could thank Killim, however, she heard the door behind her open, heard a muffled squeak of surprise, and turned. Halemtat had ordered yet another of his subjects clipped-Marianne saw that much before the local beat a hasty retreat from the door and vanished.

“Oh, god,” she said aloud. “Another one.” That, she admitted to herself for the first time, was why she was making such an effort to recognize the individual Rejoicers by facial shape alone. She’d seen no less than fifty clipped in the year she’d been on Rejoicing. There was no doubt in her mind that this was a new one-the blunted tips of its quills had been bright and crisp. “Who is it this time, Tatep?”

Tatep ducked his head in shame. “Chornian,” he said.

For once, Marianne couldn't restrain herself. "Why?" she asked, and she heard the unprofessional belligerence in her own voice.

"For saying something I dare not repeat, not even in your language," Tatep said, "unless I wish to have my quills clipped."

Marianne took a deep breath. "I apologize for asking, Tatep. It was stupid of me." Best thing to do would be to get the hell out and let Chornian complete his errand without being shamed in front of the two of them. "Though," she said aloud, not caring if it was professional or not, "it's Halemstat who should be shamed, not Chornian."

Tatep's eyes widened, and Marianne knew she'd gone too far. She thanked the glassblower politely in Rejoicer and promised to return on Debem Opp Chorr to examine the samples.

As they left Killim's, Marianne heard the scurry behind them-Chornian entering the shop as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible. She set her mouth-her silence raging-and followed Tatep without a backward glance.

At last they reached the communal wood. Trying for some semblance of normalcy, Marianne asked Tatep for the particulars of an unfamiliar tree.

"Huep," he said. "Very good for carving, but not very good for eating." He paused a moment, thoughtfully. "I think I've put that wrong. The flavor is very good, but it's very low in food value. It grows prodigiously, though, so a lot of people eat too much of it when they shouldn't."

"Junk food," said Marianne, nodding. She explained the term to Tatep and he concurred. "Youngsters are particularly fond of it-but it wouldn't be a good gift for Hapet and Achinto."

"Then let's concentrate on good healthy food for Hapet and Achinto," said Marianne.

Deeper in the wood, they found a stand of the trees the embassy staff had dubbed gnomewood for its gnarly, stunted appearance. Tatep proclaimed this perfect, and Marianne set about to chop the proper branches. Gathering food was more a matter of pruning than chopping down, she'd learned, and she followed Tatep's careful instructions so she did not damage the tree's productive capabilities in the process.

"Now this one-just here," he said. "See, Marianne? Above the boll, for new growth will spring from the boll soon after your Awakening. If you damage the boll, however, there will be no new growth on this branch again."

Marianne chopped with care. The chopping took some of the edge off her anger. Then she inspected the gnomewood and found a second possibility. "Here," she said. "Would this be the proper place?"

"Yes," said Tatep, obviously pleased that she'd caught on so quickly. "That's right." He waited until she had lopped off the second branch and properly chosen a third and then he said, "Chornian said Halemstat had the twining tricks of a talemstat. One of his children liked the rhyme and repeated it."

"Talemstat is the vine that strangles the tree it climbs, am I right?" She kept her voice very low.

Instead of answering aloud, Tatep nodded.

"Did Halemstat-did Halemstat order the child clipped as well?"

Tatep's eyelids shaded his pupils darkly. "The entire family. He ordered the entire family clipped."

So that was why Chornian was running the errands. He would risk his own shame to protect his family from the awful embarrassment-for a Rejoicer-of appearing in public with their quills clipped.

She took out her anger on yet another branch of the gnomewood. When the branch fell-on her foot, as luck would have it-she sat down on a heap, thinking to examine the bruise, then looked Tatep straight in the eye. "How long? How long does it take for the quills to grow out again?"

After much of a year, she hadn't yet seen evidence that an adult's quills regenerated at all. "They do regrow?"

"After several Awakenings," he said. "The regrowth can be quickened by eating welspeth but..."

But welspeth was a hot-house plant in this country. Too expensive for somebody like Chornian.

"I see," she said. "Thank you, Tatep."

"Be careful where you repeat what I've told you. Best you not repeat it at all." He cocked his

head at her and added, with a rattle of quills, "I'm not sure where Halemstat would clip a human, or even if you'd feel shamed by a clipping, but I wouldn't like to be responsible for finding out."

Marianne couldn't help but grin. She ran a hand through her pale white hair. "I've had my head shaved-that was long ago and far away-and it was intended to shame me."

"Intended to?"

"I painted my naked scalp bright red and went about my business as usual. I set something of a new fashion and, in the end, it was the shaver who was-quite properly-shamed."

Tatep's eyelids once again shaded his eyes. "I must think about that," he said, at last. "We have enough branches for a proper gift now, Marianne. Shall we consider the question of your Christmas tree?"

"Yes," she said. She rose to her feet and gathered up the branches. "And another thing as well.... I'll need some more wood for carving. I'd like to carve some gifts for my friends, as well. That's another tradition of Christmas."

"Carving gifts? Marianne, you make Christmas sound as if it were a Rejoicing holiday!"

Marianne laughed. "It is, Tatep. I'll gladly share my Christmas with you."

###

Clarence Doggett was Super Plenipotentiary Representing Terra to Rejoicing and today he was dressed to live up to his extravagant title in striped silver tights and a purple silk weskit. No less than four hoops of office jangled from his belt. Marianne had, since meeting him, conceived the theory that the more stylishly outré his dress the more likely he was to say yes to the request of a subordinate. Scratch that theory....

Clarence Doggett straightened his weskit with a tug and said, "We have no reason to write a letter of protest about Emperor Halemstat's treatment of Chornian. He's deprived us of a valuable worker, true, but..."

"Whatever happened to human rights?"

"They're not human, Marianne. They're aliens."

At least he hadn't called them "Pincushions" as he usually did, Marianne thought. Clarence Doggett was the unfortunate result of what the media had dubbed "the Grand Opening." One day humans had been alone in the galaxy, and the next they'd found themselves only a tiny fraction of the intelligent species. Setting up five hundred embassies in the space of a few years had strained the diplomatic service to the bursting point. Rejoicing, considered a backwater world, got the scrapings from the bottom of the barrel. Marianne was trying very hard not to be one of those scrapings, despite the example set by Clarence. She clamped her jaw shut very hard.

Clarence brushed at his fashionably large mustache and added, "It's not as if they'll really die of shame, after all."

"Sir," Marianne began.

He raised his hands. "The subject is closed. How are the plans coming for the Christmas bash?"

"Fine, sir," she said without enthusiasm. "Killim-she's the local glassblower-would like to arrange a trade for some dyes, by the way. Not just for the Christmas tree ornaments, I gather, but for some project of her own. I'm sending letters with Nick Minski to a number of glassblowers back home to find out what sort of dye is wanted."

"Good work. Any trade item that helps tie the Rejoicers into the galactic economy is a find. You're to be commended."

Marianne wasn't feeling very commended, but she said, "Thank you, sir."

"And keep up the good work-this Christmas idea of yours is turning out to be a big morale booster."

That was the dismissal. Marianne excused herself and, feet dragging, she headed back to her office. "'They're not human,'" she muttered to herself. "'They're aliens. It's not as if they'll really die of shame....'" She slammed her door closed behind her and snarled aloud, "But Chornian can't keep up work and the kids can't play with their friends and his mate Chaylam can't go to the market. What if they starve?"

“They won’t starve,” said a firm voice.

Marianne jumped.

“It’s just me,” said Nick Minski. “I’m early.” He leaned back in the chair and put his long legs up on her desk. “I’ve been watching how the neighbors behave. Friends-your friend Tatep included-take their leftovers to Chornian’s family. They won’t starve. At least, Chornian’s family won’t. I’m not sure what would happen to someone who is generally unpopular.”

Nick was head of the ethnology team studying the Rejoicers. At least he had genuine observation to base his decisions on.

He tipped the chair to a precarious angle. “I can’t begin to guess whether or not helping Chornian will land Tatep in the same hot water, so I can’t reassure you there. I take it from your muttering that Clarence won’t make a formal protest.”

Marianne nodded.

He straightened the chair with a bang that made Marianne start. “Shit,” he said. “Doggett’s such a pissant.”

Marianne grinned ruefully. “God, I’m going to miss you, Nick. Diplomats aren’t permitted to speak in such matter-of-fact terms.”

“I’ll be back in a year. I’ll bring you fireworks for your next Christmas.” He grinned.

“We’ve been through that, Nick. Fireworks may be part of your family’s Christmas tradition, but they’re not part of mine. All that banging and flashing of light just wouldn’t feel right to me, not on Christmas.”

“Meanwhile,” he went on, undeterred, “you think about my offer. You’ve learned more about Tatep and his people than half the folks on my staff; academic credentials or no, I can swing putting you on the ethnology team. We’re short-handed as it is. I’d rather have skipped the rotation home this year but...”

“You can’t get everything you want, either.”

He laughed. “I think they’re afraid we’ll all go native if we don’t go home one year in five.” He preened and grinned suddenly. “How d’you think I’d look in quills?”

“Sharp,” she said and drew a second burst of laughter from him.

There was a knock at the door. Marianne stretched out a toe and tapped the latch. Tatep stood on the threshold, his quills still bristling from the cold. “Hi, Tatep-you’re just in time. Come share.”

His laughter subsiding to a chuckle, Nick took his feet from the desk and greeted Tatep in high-formal Rejoicer. Tatep returned the favor, then added by way of explanation, “Marianne is sharing her Christmas with me.”

Nick cocked his head at Marianne. “But it’s not for some time yet...”

“I know,” said Marianne. She went to her desk and pulled out a wrapped package. “Tatep, Nick is my very good friend. Ordinarily, we exchange gifts on Christmas Day but since Nick won’t be here for Christmas, I’m going to give him his present now.”

She held out the package. “Merry Christmas, Nick. A little too early, but-”

“You’ve hidden the gift in paper,” said Tatep. “Is that also traditional?”

“Traditional but not necessary. Some of the pleasure is the surprise involved,” Nick told the Rejoicer. With a side-long glance and a smile at Marianne, he held the package to his ear and shook it. “And some of the pleasure is in trying to guess what’s in the package.” He shook it and listened again. “Nope, I haven’t the faintest idea.”

He laid the package in his lap.

Tatep flicked his tail in surprise. “Why don’t you open it?”

“In my family, it’s traditional to wait until Christmas Day to open your presents, even if they’re wrapped and sitting under the Christmas tree in plain sight for three weeks or more.”

Tatep clambered onto the stool to give him a stare of open astonishment from a more effective angle.

“Oh, no!” said Marianne. “Do you really mean it, Nick? You’re not going to open it until Christmas Day?”

Nick laughed again. "I'm teasing." To Tatep, he said, "It's traditional in my family to wait-but it's also traditional to find some rationalization to open a gift the minute you lay hands on it. Marianne wants to see my expression; I think that takes precedence in this case."

His long fingers found a cranny in the paper wrapping and began to worry it ever so slightly. "Besides, our respective homeworlds can't agree on a date for Christmas.... On some world today must be Christmas, right?"

"Good rationalizing," said Marianne, with a sigh and a smile of relief. "Right!"

"Right," said Tatep, catching on. He leaned precariously from his perch to watch as Nick ripped open the wrapping paper.

"Tchaikovsky made me think of it," Marianne said. "Although, to be honest, Tchaikovsky's nutcracker wasn't particularly traditional. This one is: take a close look."

He did. He held up the brightly painted figure, took in its green weskit, its striped silver tights, its flamboyant mustache. Four metal loops jangled at its carved belt and Nick laughed aloud.

With a barely suppressed smile, Marianne handed him a "walnut" of the local variety.

Nick stopped laughing long enough to say, "You mean, this is a genuine, honest-to-god, working nutcracker?"

"Well, of course it is! My family's been making them for years." She made a motion with her hands to demonstrate. "Go ahead-crack that nut!"

Nick put the nut between the cracker's prominent jaws and, after a moment's hesitation, closed his eyes and went ahead. The nut gave with an audible and very satisfying craaack! and Nick began to laugh all over again.

"Share the joke," said Tatep.

"Gladly," said Marianne. "The Christmas nutcracker, of which that is a prime example, is traditionally carved to resemble an authority figure-particularly one nobody much likes. It's a way of getting back at the fraudulent, the pompous. Through the years they've poked fun at everybody from princes to policemen to"-Marianne waved a gracious hand at her own carved figure-"well, surely you recognize him."

"Oh, my," said Tatep, his eyes widening. "Clarence Doggett, is it not?" When Marianne nodded, Tatep said, "Are you about to get your head shaved again?"

Marianne laughed enormously. "If I do, Tatep, this time I'll paint my scalp red and green-traditional Christmas colors-and hang one of Killim's glass ornaments from my ear. Not likely, though," she added to be fair. "Clarence doesn't go in for head shaving." To Nick, who had clearly taken in Tatep's "again," she said, "I'll tell you about it sometime."@

Nick nodded and stuck another nut between Clarence's jaws. This time he watched as the nut gave way with a explosive bang. Still laughing, he handed the nutmeat to Tatep, who ate it and rattled his quills in laughter of his own. Marianne was doubly glad she'd invited Tatep to share the occasion-now she knew exactly what to make him for Christmas.

###

Christmas Eve found Marianne at a loss-something was missing from her holiday and she hadn't been able to put her finger on precisely what that something was.

It wasn't the color of the tree Tatep had helped her choose. The tree was the perfect Christmas tree shape, and if its foliage was a red so deep it approached black, that didn't matter a bit. "Next year we'll have Killim make some green ornaments," Marianne said to Tatep, "for the proper contrast."

Tinsel-silver thread she'd bought from one of the Rejoicer weavers and cut to length-flew in all directions. All seven of the kids who'd come to Rejoicing with their ethnologist parents were showing the Rejoicers the "proper" way to hang tinsel, which meant more tinsel was making it onto the kids and the Rejoicers than onto the tree.

Just as well. She'd have to clean the tinsel off the tree before she passed it on to Hapet and Achinto-well-seasoned and just the thing for growing children.

Nick would really have enjoyed seeing this, Marianne thought. Esperanza was filming the whole party, but that just wasn't the same as being here.

Killim brought the glass ornaments herself. She'd made more than the commissioned dozen. The dozen glass balls she gave to Marianne. Each was a swirl of colors, each unique. Everyone oohed and aaahed-but the best was yet to come. From her sidepack, Killim produced a second container. "Presents," she said. "A present for your Awakening Tree."

Inside the box was a menagerie of tiny, bright glass animals: notrabbits, fingerfish, wispwings.... Each one had a loop of glass at the top to allow them to be hung from the tree. Scarcely trusting herself with such delicate objects of art, Marianne passed them on to George to string and hang.

Later, she took Killim aside and with Tatep's help, thanked her profusely for the gifts. "Though I'm not sure she should have. Tell her I'll be glad to pay for them, Tatep. If she'd had them in her shop, I'd have snapped them up on the spot. I didn't know how badly our Christmas needed them until I saw her unwrap them."

Tatep spoke for a long time to Killim, who rattled all the while. Finally, Tatep rattled too. "Marianne, three humans have commissioned Killim to make animals for them to send home." Killim said something Marianne didn't catch. "Three humans in the last five minutes. She says, Think of this set as a-as an advertisement."

"No, you may not pay me for them," Killim said, still rattling. "I have gained something to trade for my dyes."

"She says," Tatep began.

"It's okay, Tatep. That I understood."

Marianne hung the wooden ornaments she'd carved and painted in bright colors, then she unsnagged a handful of tinsel from Tatep's ruff, divided it in half, and they both flung it onto the tree. Tatep's handful just barely missed Matsimoto who was hanging strings of beads he'd bought in the bazaar, but Marianne's got Juliet, who was hanging chains of paper cranes it must have taken her the better part of the month to fold. Juliet laughed and pulled the tinsel from her hair to drape it-length by length and neatly-over the deep red branches.

Then Kelleb brought out the star. Made of silver wire delicately filigreed, it shone just the way a Christmas tree star should. He hoisted Juliet to his shoulders and she affixed it to the top of the tree and the entire company burst into cheers and applause.

Marianne sighed and wondered why that made her feel so down. "If Nick had been here," Tatep observed, "I believe he could have reached the top without an assistant."

"I think you're right," said Marianne. "I wish he were here. He'd enjoy this." Just for a moment, Marianne let herself realize that what was missing from this Christmas was Nick Minski.

"Next year," said Tatep.

"Next year," said Marianne. The prospect brightened her.

The tree glittered with its finery. For a moment they all stood back and admired it-then there was a scurry and a flurry as folks went to various bags and hiding places and brought out the brightly wrapped presents. Marianne excused herself from Tatep and Killim and brought out hers to heap at the bottom of the tree with the rest.

Again there was a moment's pause of appreciation. Then Clarence Doggett-of all people-raised his glass and said, "A toast! A Christmas toast! Here's to Marianne, for bringing Christmas thirty light years from old Earth!"

Marianne blushed as they raised their glasses to her. When they'd finished, she raised hers and found the right traditional response: "A Merry Christmas-and, God bless us, every one!"

"Okay, Marianne. It's your call," said Esperanza. "Do we open the presents now or"-her voice turned to a mock whine-"do we hafta wait till tomorrow?"

Marianne glanced at Tatep. "What day is it now?" she asked. She knew enough about local time reckoning to know what answer he'd give.

"Why, today is Tememb Nap Chorr."

She grinned at the faces around her. "By Rejoicer reckoning, the day changes when the sun sets-it's been Christmas Day for an hour at least now. But stand back and let the kids find their presents first."

There was a great clamor and rustle of wrapping paper and whoops of delight as the kids dived into the pile of presents.

As Marianne watched with rising joy, Tatep touched her arm. "More guests," he said, and Marianne turned.

It was Chornian, his mate Chaylam, and their four children. Marianne's jaw dropped at the sight of them. She had invited the six with no hope of a response and here they were. "And all dressed up for Christmas!" she said aloud, though she knew Christmas was not the occasion. "You're as glittery as the Christmas tree itself," she told Chornian, her eyes gleaming with the reflection of it.

Ruff and tail, each and every one of Chornian's short-clipped quills was tipped by a brilliant red bead. "Glass?" she asked.

"Yes," said Chornian. "Killim made them for us."

"You look magnificent! Oh-how wonderful!" Chaylam's clipped quills had been dipped in gold; when she shifted shyly, her ruff and tail rippled with light. "You sparkle like sun on the water," Marianne told her. The children's ruffs and tails had been tipped in gold and candy pink and vivid yellow and- the last but certainly not the least-in beads every color of the rainbow.

"A kid after my own heart," said Marianne. "I think that would have been my choice too." She gave a closer look. "No two alike, am I right? Come-join the party. I was afraid I'd have to drop your presents by your house tomorrow. Now I get to watch you open them, to see if I chose correctly."

She escorted the four children to the tree and, thanking her lucky stars she'd had Tatep write their names on their packages, she left them to hunt for their presents. Those for their parents, she brought back with her.

"It was difficult," Chornian said to Marianne. "It was difficult to walk through the streets with pride but-we did. And the children walked the proudest. They give us courage."

Chaylam said, "If only on their behalf."

"Yes," agreed Chornian. "Tomorrow I shall walk in the sunlight. I shall go to the bazaar. My clipped quills will glitter, and I will not be ashamed that I have spoken the truth about Halemstat."

That was all the Christmas gift Marianne needed, she thought to herself, and handed the wrapped package to Chornian. Tatep gave him a running commentary on the habits and rituals of the human Awakening as he opened the package. Chornian's eyes shaded and Tatep's running commentary ceased abruptly as they peered together into the box.

"Did I get it right?" said Marianne, suddenly afraid she'd committed some awful faux pas. She'd scoured the bazaar for welspeth shoots and, finding none, she'd pulled enough strings with the ethnology team to get some imported.

Tatep was the one who spoke. "You got it right," he said. "Chornian thanks you." Chornian spoke rapid-fire Rejoicer for a long time; Marianne couldn't follow the half of it. When he'd finished, Tatep said simply, "He regrets that he has no present to give you."

"It's not necessary. Seeing those kids all in spangles brightened up the party-that's present enough for me!"

"Nevertheless," said Tatep, speaking slowly so she wouldn't miss a word. "Chornian and I make you this present."

Marianne knew the present Tatep drew from his pouch was from Tatep alone, but she was happy enough to play along with the fiction if it made him happy. She hadn't expected a present from Tatep and she could scarcely wait to see what it was he felt appropriate to the occasion.

Still, she gave it the proper treatment-shaking it, very gently, beside her ear. If there was anything to hear, it was drowned out by the robust singing of carols from the other side of the room. "I can't begin to guess, Tatep," she told him happily.

"Then open it."

She did. Inside the paper, she found a carving, the rich wine-red of burgundy-wood, bitter to the taste and therefore rarely carved but treasured because none of the kids would gnaw on it as they tested their teeth. The style of carving was so utterly Rejoicer that it took her a long moment to recognize the subject, but once she did, she knew she'd treasure the gift for lifetime.



It was unmistakably Nick-but Nick as seen from Tatep's point of view, hence the unfamiliar perspective. It was Looking Up At Nick.

"Oh, Tatep!" And then she remembered just in time and added, "Oh, Chornian! Thank you both so very much. I can't wait to show it to Nick when he gets back. Whatever made you think of doing Nick?"

Tatep said, "He's your best human friend. I know you miss him. You have no pictures; I thought you would feel better with a likeness."

She hugged the sculpture to her. "Oh, I do. Thank you, both of you." Then she motioned, eyes shining. "Wait. Wait right here, Tatep. Don't go away."

She darted to the tree and, pushing aside wads of rustling paper, she found the gift she'd made for Tatep. Back she darted to where the Rejoicers were waiting.

"I waited," Tatep said solemnly.

She handed him the package. "I hope this is worth the wait."

Tatep shook the package. "I can't begin to guess," he said.

"Then open it. I can't stand the wait!"

He ripped away the paper as flamboyantly as Nick had-to expose the brightly colored nutcracker and a woven bags of nuts.

Marianne held her breath. The problem had been, of course, to adapt the nutcracker to a recognizable Rejoicer version. She'd made the Emperor Halemstat sit back on his haunches, which meant for less adaptation of the cracking mechanism. Overly plump, she'd made him, and spiky. In his right hand, he carried an oversized pair of scissors-of the sort his underlings used for clipping quills. In his right, he carried a sprig of talemstat, that unfortunate rhyme for his name.

Chornian's eyes widened. Again, he rattled off a spate of Rejoicer too fast for Marianne to follow...except that Chornian seemed anxious.

Only then did Marianne realize what she'd done. "Oh, my God, Tatep! He wouldn't clip your quills for having that, would he?"

Tatep's quills rattled and rattled. He put one of the nuts between Halemstat's jaws and cracked with a vengeance. The nutmeat he offered to Marianne, his quills still rattling. "If he does, Marianne, you'll come to Killim's to help me chose a good color for my glass beading!"

He cracked another nut and handed the meat to Chornian. The next thing Marianne knew, the two of them were rattling at each other-Chornian's glass beads adding a splendid tinkling to the merriment.

Much relieved, Marianne laughed with them. A few minutes later, Esperanza dashed out to buy more nuts-so Chornian's children could each take a turn at the cracking.

Marianne looked down at the image of Nick cradled in her arm. "I'm sorry you missed this," she told it, "but I promise I'll write everything down for you before I go to bed tonight. I'll try to remember every last bit of it for you."

###

"Dear Nick," Marianne wrote in another letter some months later. "You're not going to approve of this. I find I haven't been ethnologically correct-much less diplomatic. I'd only meant to share my Christmas with Tatep and Chornian and, for that matter, whoever wanted to join in the festivities. To hear Clarence tell it, I've sent Rejoicing to hell in a handbasket.

"You see, it does Halemstat no good to clip quills these days. There are some seventy-five Rejoicers walking around town clipped and beaded-as gaudy and as shameless as you please. I even saw one newly male (teenager) with beads on the ends of his unclipped spines!

"Killim says thanks for the dyes, by the way. They're just what she had in mind. She'd so busy, she's taken on two apprentices to help her. She makes 'Christmas ornaments' and half the art galleries in the known universe are after her for more and more. The apprentices make glass beads. One of them-one of Chornian's kids, by the way-hit upon the bright idea of making simple sets of beads that can be stuck on the ends of quills cold. Saves time and trouble over the hot glass method.

"What's more-

“Well, yesterday I stopped by to say ‘hi’ to Killim, when who should turn up but Koppen-you remember him? he’s one of Halemstat’s advisors? You’ll never guess what he wanted: a set of quill tipping beads.

“No, he hadn’t had his quills clipped. Nor was he buying them for a friend. He was planning, he told Killim, to tell Halemstat a thing or two-I missed the details because he went too fast-and he expected he’d be clipped for it, so he was planning ahead. Very expensive blue beads for him, if you please, Killim!

“I find myself unprofessionally pleased. There’s a thing or two Halemstat ought to be told....

“Meanwhile, Chornian has gone into the business of making nutcrackers. -All right, so sue me, I showed him how to make the actual cracker work. It was that or risk his taking Tatep’s present apart to find out for himself.

“I’m sending holos-including a holo of the one I made-because you’ve got to see the transformation Chornian’s worked on mine. The difference between a human-carved nutcracker and a Rejoicer-carved nutcracker is as unmistakable as the difference between Looking Up at Nick and...well, looking up at Nick.

“I still miss you, even if you do think fireworks are appropriate at Christmas.

“See you soon-if Clarence doesn’t boil me in my own pudding and bury me with a stake of holly through my heart.”

Marianne sat with her light pen poised over the screen for a long moment, then she added, “Love, Marianne,” and saved it to the next out-going Dirt-bound mail.

###

Rejoicing

Midsummer’s Eve

(Rejoicer reckoning)

Dear Nick-

This time it’s not my fault. This time it’s Esperanza’s doing. Esperanza decided, for her contribution to the our round of holidays, to celebrate Martin Luther King Day. (All right-if I’d known about Martin Luther King I’d probably have suggested a celebration myself-but I didn’t. Look him up; you’ll like him.) And she invited a handful of the Rejoicers to attend as well.

Now, the final part of the celebration is that each person in turn “has a dream.” This is not like wishes, Nick. This is more on the order of setting yourself a goal, even one that looks to all intents and purposes to be unattainable, but one you will strive to attain. Even Clarence got so into the occasion that he had a dream that he would stop thinking of the Rejoicers as “Pincushions” so he could start thinking of them as Rejoicers. Esperanza said later Clarence didn’t quite get the point but for him she supposed that was a step in the right direction.

Well, after that, Tatep asked Esperanza, in his very polite fashion, if it would be proper for him to have a dream as well. There was some consultation over the proper phrasing-Esperanza says her report will tell you all about that-and then Tatep rose and said, “I have a dream.... I have a dream that someday no-one will get his quills clipped for speaking the truth.”

(You’ll see it on the tape. Everybody agreed that this was a good dream, indeed.)

After which, Esperanza had her dream “for human rights for all.”

Following which, of course, we all took turns trying to explain the concept of “human rights” to a half-dozen Rejoicers. Esperanza ended up translating five different constitutions for them-and an entire book of speeches by Martin Luther King.

Oh, god. I just realized...maybe it is my fault. I’d forgotten till just now. Oh. You judge, Nick.

About a week later Tatep and I were out gathering wood for some carving he plans to do-for Christmas, he says, but he wanted to get a good start on it-and he stopped gnawing long enough to ask me, “Marianne, what’s ‘human’?”

“How do you mean?”

“I think when Clarence says ‘human,’ he means something different than you do.”

“That’s entirely possible. Humans use words pretty loosely at the best of times-there, I just did it

myself.”

“What do you mean when you say ‘human’?”

“Sometimes I mean the species homo sapiens. When I say, Humans use words pretty loosely, I do. Rejoicers seem to be more particular about their speech, as a general rule.”

“And when you say ‘human rights,’ what do you mean?”

“When I say ‘human rights,’ I mean Homo sapiens and Rejoicing sapiens. I mean any sapiens, in that context. I wouldn’t guarantee that Clarence uses the word the same way in the same context.”

“You think I’m human?”

“I know you’re human. We’re friends, aren’t we? I couldn’t be friends with-oh, a notrabbit-now, could I?”

He made that wonderful rattly sound he does when he’s amused. “No, I can’t imagine it. Then, if I’m human, I ought to have human rights.”

“Yes,” I said, “You bloody well ought to.”

Maybe it is all my fault. Esperanza will tell you the rest-she’s had Rejoicers all over her house for the past two weeks-they’re watching every scrap of film she’s got on Martin Luther King.

I don’t know how this will all end up, but I wish to hell you were here to watch.

Love, Marianne

###

Marianne watched the Rejoicer child crack nuts with his Halemstat cracker and a cold, cold shiver went up her spine. That was the eleventh she’d seen this week. Chornian wasn’t the only one making them, apparently; somebody else had gone into the nutcracker business as well. This was, however, the first time she’d seen a child cracking nuts with Halemstat’s jaw.

“Hello,” she said, stooping to meet the child’s eyes. “What a pretty toy! Will you show me how it works?”

Rattling all the while, the child showed her, step by step. Then he (or she-it wasn’t polite to ask before puberty) said, “Isn’t it funny? It makes Mama laugh and laugh and laugh.”

“And what’s your mama’s name?”

“Pilli,” said the child. Then it added, “With the green and white beads on her quills.”

Pilli-who’d been clipped for saying that Halemstat had been overcutting the imperial reserve so badly that the trees would never grow back properly.

And then she realized that, less than as a year ago, no child would have admitted that its mama had been clipped. The very thought of it would have shamed both mother and child.

Come to think of it...she glanced around the bazaar and saw no less than four clipped Rejoicers shopping for dinner. Two of them she recognized as Chornian and one of his children, the other two were new to her. She tried to identify them by their snouts and failed utterly-she’d have to ask Chornian. She also noted, with utterly unprofessional satisfaction, that she could ask Chornian such a thing now. That too would have been unthinkable and shaming less than a year ago.

Less than a year ago. She was thinking in Dirt terms because of Nick. There wasn’t any point dropping him a line; mail would cross in deep space at this late a date. He’d be here just in time for “Christmas.” She wished like hell he was already here. He’d know what to make of all this, she was certain.

As Marianne thanked the child and got to her feet, three Rejoicers-all with the painted ruff of quills at their necks that identified them as Halemstat’s guards-came waddling officiously up. “Here’s one,” said the largest. “Yes,” said another. “Caught in the very act.”

The largest squatted back on his haunches and said, “You will come with us, child. Halemstat decrees it.”

Horror shot through Marianne’s body.

The child cracked one last nut, rattled happily, and said, “I get my quills clipped?”

“Yes,” said the largest Rejoicer. “You will have your quills clipped.” Roughly, he separated child from nutcracker and began to tow the child away, each of them in that odd three-legged gait necessitated by the grip.

All Marianne could think to do was call after the child, "I'll tell Pilli what happened and where to find you!"

The child glanced over its shoulder, rattled again, and said, "Ask her could I have silver beads like Hortap!"

Marianne picked up the discarded nutcracker-lest some other child find it and meet the same fate-and ran full speed for Pilli's house.

At the corner, two children looked up from their own play and galloped along beside her until she skidded to a halt by Pilli's bakery. They followed her in, rattling happily to themselves over the race they'd run. Marianne's first thought was to shoo them off before she told Pilli what had happened, but Pilli greeted the two as if they were her own, and Marianne found herself blurting out the news.

Pilli gave a slow inclination of the head. "Yes," she said, pronouncing the words carefully so Marianne wouldn't miss them, "I expected that. Had it not been the nutcracker, it would have been words." She rattled. "That child is the most outspoken of my brood."

"But-" Marianne wanted to say, Aren't you afraid?, but the question never surfaced.

Pilli gave a few coins to the other children and said, "Run to Killim's, my dears, and ask her to make a set of silver beads, if she doesn't already have one on hand. Then run tell your father what has happened."

The children were off in the scurry of excitement.

Pilli drew down the awning in front of her shop, then paused. "I think you are afraid for my child."

"Yes," said Marianne. Lying had never been her strong suit; maybe Nick was right-maybe diplomacy wasn't her field.

"You are kind," said Pilli. "But don't be afraid. Even Halemstat wouldn't dare to order a child hashay."

"I don't understand the term."

"Hashay?" Pilli flipped her tail around in front of her and held out a single quill. "Chippet will be clipped here," she said, drawing a finger across the quill about half-way up its length. "Hashay is to clip here." The finger slid inward, to a spot about a quarter of an inch from her skin. "Don't worry, Marianne. Even Halemstat wouldn't dare to hashay a child."

I'm supposed to be reassured, thought Marianne. "Good," she said aloud, "I'm relieved to hear that." In truth, she hadn't the slightest idea what Pilli was talking about-and she was considerably less than reassured by the ominous implications of the distinction. She'd never come across the term in any of the ethnologists' reports.

She was still holding the Halemstat nutcracker in her hands. Now she considered it carefully. Only in its broadest outlines did it resemble the one she'd made for Tatep. This nutcracker was purely Rejoicer in style and-she almost dropped it at the sudden realization-peculiarly Tatep's style of carving. Tatep was making them too?

If she could recognize Tatep's distinctive style, surely Halemstat could-what then?

Carefully, she tucked the nutcracker under the awning-let Pilli decide what to do with the object; Marianne couldn't make the decision for her-and set off at a quick pace for Tatep's house.

On the way, she passed yet another child with a Halemstat nutcracker. She paused, found the child's father and passed the news to him that Halemstat's guards were clipping Pilli's child for the "offense." The father thanked her for the information and, with much politeness, took the nutcracker from the child.

This one, Marianne saw, was not carved in Tatep's style or in Chornian's. This one was the work of an unfamiliar set of teeth.

Having shooed his child indoors, the Rejoicer squatted back on his haunches. In plain view of the street, he took up the bowl of nuts his child had left uncracked and began to crack them, one by one, with such deliberation that Marianne's jaw dropped.

She'd never seen an insolent Rejoicer but she would have bet money she was seeing one now. He even managed to make the crack of each nut resound like a gunshot. With the sound still ringing in

her ears, Marianne quickened her steps toward Tatep's.

She found him at home, carving yet another nutcracker. He swallowed, then held out the nutcracker to her and said, "What do you think, Marianne? Do you approve of my portrayal?"

This one wasn't Halemstat, but his-for want of a better word-grand vizier, Corten. The grand vizier always looked to her as if he smirked. She knew the expression was due to a slightly malformed tooth but, to a human eye, the result was a smirk. Tatep's portrayal had the same smirk, only more so. Marianne couldn't help it...she giggled.

"Aha!" said Tatep, rattling up a rainstorm's worth of sound. "For once, you've shared the joke without the need of explanation!" He gave long grave look at the nutcracker. "The grand vizier has earned his keep this once!"

Marianne laughed, and Tatep rattled. This time the sound of the quills sobered Marianne. "I think your work will get you clipped, Tatep," she said, and she told him about Pilli's child.

He made no response. Instead, he dropped to his feet and went to the chest in the corner, where he kept any number of carvings and other precious objects. From the chest, he drew out a box. Three-legged, he walked back to her. "Shake this! I'll bet you can guess what's inside."

Curious, she shook the box: it rattled. "A set of beads," she said.

"You see? I'm prepared. They rattle like a laugh, don't they?-a laugh at Halemstat. I asked Killim to make the beads red because that was the color you painted your scalp when you were clipped."

"I'm honored..."

"But?"

"But I'm afraid for you. For all of you."

"Pilli's child wasn't afraid."

"No. No, Pilli's child wasn't afraid. Pilli said even Halemstat wouldn't dare hashay a child." Marianne took a deep breath and said, "But you're not a child." And I don't know what hashaying does to a Rejoicer, she wanted to add.

"I've swallowed a talpseed," Tatep said, as if that said it all.

"I don't understand."

"Ah! I'll share, then. A talpseed can't grow unless it has been through the"-he patted himself-"stomach? digestive system? of a Rejoicer. Sometimes they don't grow even then. To swallow a talpseed means to take a step toward the growth of something important. I swallowed a talpseed called 'human rights.'"

There was nothing Marianne could say to that but: "I understand."

Slowly, thoughtfully, Marianne made her way back to the embassy. Yes, she understood Tatep-hadn't she been screaming at Clarence for just the same reason? But she was terrified for Tatep-for them all.

Without consciously meaning to, she bypassed the embassy for the little clutch of domes that housed the ethnologists. Esperanza-it was Esperanza she had to see.

She was in luck. Esperanza was at home writing up one of her reports. She looked up and said, "Oh, good. It's time for a break!"

"Not a break, I'm afraid. A question that, I think, is right up your alley. Do you know much about the physiology of the Rejoicers?"

"I'm the expert," Esperanza said, leaning back in her chair. "As far as there is one in the group."

"What happens if you cut a Rejoicer's spine"-she held up her fingers-"this close to the skin?"

"Like a cat's claw, sort of. If you cut the tip, nothing happens. If you cut too far down, you hit the blood supply-and maybe the nerve. The quill would bleed most certainly. Might never grow back properly. And it'd hurt like hell, I'm sure-like gouging the base of your thumbnail."

She sat forward suddenly. "Marianne, you're shaking. What is it?"

Marianne took a deep breath but couldn't stop shaking. "What would happen if somebody did that to all of Ta"-she found she couldn't get the name out-"all of a Rejoicer's quills?"

"He'd bleed to death, Marianne." Esperanza took her hand and gave it a firm squeeze. "Now,

I'm going to get you a good stiff drink and you are going to tell me all about it."

Fighting nausea, Marianne nodded. "Yes," she said with enormous effort. "Yes."

###

"Who the hell told the Pincushions about 'human rights'?" Clarence roared. Furious, he glowered down at Marianne and waited for her response.

Esperanza drew herself up to her full height and stepped between the two of them. "Martin Luther King told the Rejoicers about human rights. You were there when he did it. Though you seem to have forgotten your dream, obviously the Rejoicers haven't forgotten theirs."

"There's a goddamned revolution going on out there!" Clarence waved a hand vaguely in the direction of center of town.

"That is certainly what it looks like," Juliet said mildly. "So why are we here instead of out there observing?"

"You're here because I'm responsible for your safety."

"Bull," said Matsimoto. "Halemntat isn't interested in clipping us."

"Besides," said Esperanza. "The supply ship will be landing in about five minutes. Somebody's got to go pick up the supplies-and Nick. Otherwise, he's going to step right into the thick of it. The last mail went out two months ago. Nick's had no warning that the situation has"-she frowned slightly, then brightened as she found the proper phrase-"changed radically."

Clarence glared again at Marianne. "As a member of the embassy staff, you are assigned the job. You will pick up the supplies and Nick."

Marianne, who'd been about to volunteer to do just that, suppressed the urge to say, "Thank you!" and said instead, "Yes, sir."

Once out of Clarence's sight, Marianne let herself breathe a sigh of relief. The supply transport was built like a tank. While Marianne wasn't any more afraid of Halemntat's wrath than the ethnologists, she was well aware that innocent Dirt bystanders might easily find themselves stuck-all too literally-in a mob of Rejoicers. When the Rejoicers fought, as she understood it, they used teeth and quills. She had no desire to get too close to a lashing tail-full. An unclipped quill was needle-sharp.

Belatedly, she caught the significance of the clipping Halemntat had instituted as punishment. Slapping a snout with a tail full of glass beads was not nearly as effective as slapping a snout with a morning-star made of spines.

She radioed the supply ship to tell them they'd all have to wait for transport before they came out. Captain's gonna love that, I'm sure, she thought, until she got a response from Captain Tertain. By reputation he'd never set foot on a world other than Dirt and certainly didn't intend to do so now. So she simply told Nick to stay put until she came for him.

Nick's cheery voice over the radio said only, "It's going to be a very special Christmas this year."

"Nick," she said, "you don't know the half of it."

She took a slight detour along the way, passing the narrow street that led to Tatep's house. She didn't dare to stop, but she could see from the awning that he wasn't home. In fact, nobody seemed to be home...even the bazaar was deserted.

The supply truck rolled on, and Marianne took a second slight detour. What Esperanza had dubbed "the Grande Allez" led directly to Halemntat's imperial residence. The courtyard was filled with Rejoicers. Well-spaced Rejoicers, she saw, for they were-each and every one-bristled to their fullest extent. She wished she dared go for a closer look, but Clarence would be livid if she took much more time than normal reaching the supply ship. And he'd be checking-she knew his habits well enough to know that.

She floored the accelerator and made her way to the improvised landing field in record time. Nick waved to her from the port and stepped out. Just like Nick, she thought. She'd told him to wait in the ship until she arrived; he'd obeyed to the letter. It was all she could do to keep from hugging him as she hit the ground beside him. With a grateful sigh of relief, she said, "We've got to move fast on the transfer, Nick. I'll fill you in as we load."

By the time the two of them had transferred all the supplies from the ship, she'd done just that.

He climbed into the seat beside her, gave her a long thoughtful look, and said, "So Clarence has restricted all of the other ethnologists to the embassy grounds, has he?" He shook his head in mock sadness and clicked his tongue. "I see I haven't trained my team in the proper response to embassy edicts." He grinned at Marianne. "So the embassy advises that I stay off the streets, does it?"

"Yes," said Marianne. She hated being the one to tell him but he'd asked her. "The Super Plenipotentiary Etc. has issued a full and formal Advisory to all non-governmental personnel...."

"Okay," said Nick. "You've done your job: I've been Advised. Now I want to go have a look at this revolution-in-progress." He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

He was right. All Clarence could do was issue an Advisory; he had no power whatsoever to keep the ethnologists off the streets. And Marianne wanted to see the revolution as badly as Nick did.

"All right," she said. "I am responsible for your safety, though, so best we go in the transport. I don't want you stuck." She set the supply-transport into motion and headed back toward the Grande Allez.

Nick pressed his nose to the window and watched the streets as they went. He was humming cheerfully under his breath.

"Uh, Nick-if Clarence calls us...."

"We'll worry about that when it happens," he said.

Worry is right, thought Marianne, but she smiled. He'd been humming Christmas carols, like some excited child. Inappropriate as all hell, but she liked him all the more for it.

She pulled the supply-transport to the stop at the entrance to the palace courtyard and turned to ask Nick if he had a good enough view. He was already out the door and making his way carefully into the crowd of Rejoicers. "Hey!" she shouted-and she hit the ground running to catch up with him.

"Nick!"

He paused long enough for her to catch his arm, then said, "I need to see this, Marianne. It's my job."

"It's my job to see you don't get hurt--"

He smiled. "Then you lead. I want to be over there where I can see and hear everything Halemstat and his advisors are up to."

Marianne harbored a brief fantasy about dragging him bodily back to the safety of the supply-transport, but he was twice her weight and, from his expression, not about to cooperate. Best she lead, then. Her only consolation was that, when Clarence tried to radio them, there'd be nobody to pick up and receive his orders.

"Hey, Marianne!" said Chornian from the crowd. "Over here! Good view from here!"

And safer too. Grateful for the invitation, Marianne gingerly headed in that direction. Several quilled Rejoicers eased aside to let the two of them safely through. Better to be surrounded by beaded Rejoicers.

"Welcome back, Nick," said Chornian. He and Chaylam stepped apart to create a space of safety for the two humans. "You're just in time."

"So I see. What's going on?"

"Halemstat just had Pilli's Chippet clipped for playing with a Halemstat cracker. Halemstat doesn't like the Halemstat crackers."

Beside him, a fully quilled Rejoicer said, "Halemstat doesn't like much of anything. I think a proper prince ought to rattle his spines once or twice a year at least."

Marianne frowned up at Nick, who grinned and said, "Roughly translated: Hapter thinks a proper prince ought to have a sense of humor, however minimal."

"Rattle your spines, Halemstat!" shouted a voice from the crowd. "Let's see if you can do it."

"Yes," came another voice-and Marianne realized it was Chornian's-"Rattle your spines, Great Prince of the Nutcrackers!"

All around them, like rain on a tin roof, came the sound of rattling spines. Marianne looked around-the laughter swept through the crowd, setting every Rejoicer in vibrant motion. Even the grand

vizier rattled briefly, then caught himself, his ruff stiff with alarm.

Halemtat didn't rattle.

From his pouch, Chornian took a nutcracker and a nut. Placing the nut in the cracker's smirking mouth, Chornian made the bite cut through the rattling of the crowd like the sound of a shot. From somewhere to her right, a second crack resounded. Then a third.... Then the rattling took up a renewed life.

Marianne felt as if she were under water. All around her spines shifted and rattled. Chornian's beaded spines chattered as he cracked a second nut in the smirking face of the nutcracker.

Then one of Halemtat's guards ripped the nutcracker from Chornian's hands. The guard glared at Chornian, who rattled all the harder.

Looking over his shoulder to Halemtat, the guard called, "He's already clipped. What shall I do?"

"Bring me the nutcracker," said Halemtat. The guard glared again at Chornian, who had not stopped laughing, and loped back with the nutcracker in hand. Belatedly, Marianne recognized the smirk on the nutcracker's face.

The guard handed the nutcracker to the grand vizier-Marianne knew beyond a doubt that he recognized the smirk too.

"Whose teeth carved this?" demanded Halemtat.

An unclipped Rejoicer worked his way to the front of the crowd, sat proudly back on his haunches, and said, "Mine." To the grand vizier, he added, with a slight rasp of his quills that was a barely suppressed laugh, "What do you think of my work, Corten? Does it amuse you? You have a strong jaw."

Rattling swept the crowd again.

Halemtat sat up on his haunches, his bristles stood straight out. Marianne had never seen a Rejoicer bristle quite that way before. "Silence!" he bellowed.

Startled, either by the shout or by the electrified bristle of their ruler, the crowd stopped rattling. As Marianne watched, the crowd spread itself thinner. The laughter had subsided only because each of the Rejoicers had gone as bristly as Halemtat. Chornian shifted slightly to keep Marianne and Nick near the protected cover of his beaded ruff.

"Marianne," said Nick softly, "That's Tatep."

"I know," she said. Without meaning to, she'd grabbed his arm for reassurance.

Tatep.... He sat back on his haunches, as if fully at ease-the only sleeked Rejoicer in the courtyard. He might have been sitting in Marianne's office discussing different grades of wood, for all the excitement he displayed.

Halemtat, rage quivering in every quill, turned to his guards and said, "Clip Tatep. Hashay."

"No!" shouted Marianne, starting forward. As she realized she'd spoken Dirtsides and opened her mouth to shout it again in Rejoicer, Nick grabbed her and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"No!" shouted Chornian, seeming to translate for her, but speaking his own mind.

Marianne fought Nick's grip in vain. Furious, she bit the hand he'd clapped over her mouth. When he yelped and removed it-still not letting her free-she said, "It'll kill him! He'll bleed to death! Let me go." On the last word, she kicked him hard, but he didn't let go.

A guard produced the ritual scissors and handed them to the official in charge of clipping. She held the instrument aloft and made the ritual display, clipping the air three times. With each snap of the scissors, the crowd chanted, "No. No. No."

Taken aback, the official paused. Halemtat clicked at her and she abruptly remembered the rest of the ritual. She turned to make the three ritual clips in the air before Halemtat.

This time the voice of the crowd was stronger. "No. No. No," came the shout with each snap.

Marianne struggled harder as the official stepped toward Tatep....

Then the grand vizier scuttled to intercept. "No," he told the official. Turning to Halemtat, he said, "The image is mine. I can laugh at the caricature. Why is it, I wonder, that you can't, Halemtat? Has some disease softened your spines so that they no longer rattle?"



Marianne was so surprised she stopped struggling against Nick's hold-and felt the hold ease. He didn't let go, but held her against him in what was almost an embrace. Marianne held her breath, waiting for Halemstat's reply.

Halemstat snatched the ritual scissors from the official and threw them at Corten's feet. "You," he said. "You will hashay Tatep."

"No," said Corten. "I won't. My spines are still stiff enough to rattle."

Chornian chose that moment to shout once more, "Rattle your spines, Halemstat! Let us hear you rattle your spines!"

And without so much as a by-your-leave the entire crowd suddenly took up the chant: "Rattle your spines! Rattle your spines!"

Halemstat looked wildly around. He couldn't have rattled if he'd wanted to-his spines were too bristled to touch one to another. He turned his glare on the official, as if willing her to pick up the scissors and proceed.

Instead, she said, in perfect cadence with the crowd, "Rattle your spines!"

Halemstat made an imperious gesture to his guard-and the guard said, "Rattle your spines!"

Halemstat turned and galloped full tilt into his palace. Behind him the chant continued-"Rattle your spines! Rattle your spines!"

Then, quite without warning, Tatep rattled his spines. The next thing Marianne knew, the entire crowd was laughing and laughing and laughing at their vanished ruler.

Marianne went limp against Nick. He gave her a suggestion of a hug, then let her go. Against the rattle of the crowd, he said, "I thought you were going to get yourself killed, you little idiot."

"I couldn't-I couldn't stand by and do nothing; they might have killed Tatep."

"I thought doing nothing was a diplomat's job."

"You're right; some diplomat I make. Well, after this little episode, I probably don't have a job anyhow."

"My offer's still open."

"Tell the truth, Nick. If I'd been a member of your team fifteen minutes ago, would you have let me go?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "Of course not," he said. "But at least I understand why you bit the hell out of my hand."

"Oh, god, Nick! I'm so sorry! Did I hurt you?"

"Yes," he said. "But I accept your apology-and next time I won't give you that option."

"Next time, huh?"

Nick, still grinning, nodded.

Well, there was that to be said for Nick: he was realistic.

"Hi, Nick," said Tatep. "Welcome back."

"Hi, Tatep. Some show you folks laid on. What happens next?"

He rattled the length of his body. "Your guess is as good as mine," he said. "I've never done anything like this before. Corten's still rattling. In fact, he asked me to make him a grand vizier nutcracker. I think I'll make him a present of it-for Christmas."

He turned to Marianne. "Share?" he said. "I was too busy to watch at the time. Were you and Nick mating? If you do it again, may I watch?"

Marianne turned a vivid shade of red, and Nick laughed entirely too much. "You explain it to him," Marianne told Nick firmly. "Mating habits are not within my diplomatic jurisdiction. And I'm still in the diplomatic corps-at least, until we get back to the embassy."

Tatep sat back on his haunches, eagerly awaiting Nick's explanation. Marianne shivered with relief and said hastily, "No, it wasn't mating, Tatep. I was so scared for you I was going to charge in and-well, I don't know what I was going to do after that-but I couldn't just stand by and let Halemstat hurt you." She scowled at Nick and finished, "Nick was afraid I'd get hurt myself and wouldn't let me go."

Tatep's eyes widened in surprise. "Marianne, you would have fought for me?"

“Yes. You’re my friend.”

“Thank you,” he said solemnly. Then to Nick, he said, “You were right to hold her back. Rattling is a better way than fighting.” He turned again to Marianne. “You surprise me,” he said. “You showed us how to rattle at Halemstat.”

He shook from snout to tail-tip, with a sound like a hundred snare drums. “Halemstat turned tail and ran from our rattling!”

“And now?” Nick asked him.

“Now I’m going to go home. It’s almost dinner time and I’m hungry enough to eat an entire tree all by myself.” Still rattling, he added, “Too bad the hardwood I make the nutcrackers from is so bitter-though tonight I could almost make an exception and dine exclusively on bitter wood.”

Tatep got down off his haunches and started for home. Most of the crowd had dispersed as well. It seemed oddly anticlimactic, until Marianne heard and saw the rattles of laughter ripple through the departing Rejoicers.

Beside the supply-transport, Tatep paused. “Nick, at your convenience-I really would like you to share about human mating. For friendship’s sake, I should know when Marianne is fighting and when she’s mating. Then I’d know whether she needs help or-what kind of help she needs. After all, some trees need help to mate....”

Marianne had turned scarlet again. Nick said, “I’ll tell you all about it as soon as I get settled in again.”

“Thank you.” Tatep headed for home, for all the world as if nothing unusual had happened. In fact, the entire crowd, laughing as it was, might have been a crowd of picnickers off for home as the sun began to set.

A squawk from the radio brought Marianne back to business. No use putting it off. Time to bite the bullet and check in with Clarence-if nothing else, the rest of the staff would be worried about both of them.

Marianne climbed into the cab. Without prompting, Nick climbed in beside her. For a long moment, they listened to the diatribe that came over the radio, but Marianne made no move to reply. Instead, she watched the Rejoicers laughing their way home from the palace courtyard.

“Nick,” she said. “Can you really laugh a dictator into submission?”

He cocked a thumb at the radio. “Give it a try,” he said. “It’s not worth cursing back at Clarence-you haven’t his gift for bureaucratic invective.”

###

Marianne also didn’t have a job by the time she got back to the embassy. Clarence had tried to clap her onto the returning supply ship, but Nick stepped in to announce that Clarence had no business sending anybody from his ethnology staff home. In the end, Clarence’s bureaucratic invective had failed him and the ethnologists simply disobeyed, as Nick had. All Clarence could do, after all, was issue a directive; if they chose to ignore it, the blame no longer fell on Clarence. Since that was all that worried Clarence, that was all right.

In the end, Marianne found that being an ethnologist was considerably more interesting than being a diplomat...especially during a revolution.

She and Nick, with Tatep, had taken time off from their mutual studies to choose this year’s Christmas tree-from Halemstat’s reserve. “Why,” said Marianne, bemused at her own reaction, “do I feel like I’m cutting a Christmas tree with Thomas Jefferson?”

“Because you are,” Nick said. “Even Thomas Jefferson did ordinary things once in a while. Chances are, he even hung out with his friends....” He waved. “Hi, Tatep. How goes the revolution?”

For answer, Tatep rattled the length of his body.

“Good,” said Nick.

“I may have good news to share with you at the Christmas party,” added the Rejoicer.

“Then we look forward to the Christmas party even more than usual,” said Marianne.

“And I brought a surprise for Marianne all the way from Dirt,” Nick added. When Marianne lifted an eyebrow, he said, “No, no hints.”

“Share?” said Tatep.

“Christmas Eve,” Nick told him. “After you’ve shared your news, I think.”

###

The tree-trimming party was in full swing. The newly formed Ad Hoc Christmas Chorus was singing Czech carols—a gift from Esperanza to everybody on both staffs. Clarence had gotten so mellow on the Christmas punch that he’d even offered Marianne her job back—if she was willing to be dropped a grade for insubordination. Marianne, equally mellow, said no but said it politely.

Nick had arrived at last, along with Tatep and Chornian and Chaylam and their kids. Surprisingly, Nick stepped in between verses to wave the Ad Hoc Christmas Chorus to silence. “Attention, please,” he shouted over the hubbub. “Attention, please! Tatep has an announcement to make.” When he’d finally gotten silence, Nick turned to Tatep and said, “You have the floor.”

Tatep looked down, then looked up again at Nick.

“I mean,” Nick said, “go ahead and speak. Marianne’s not the only one who’ll want to know your news, believe me.”

But it was Marianne Tatep chose to address.

“We’ve all been to see Halemstat,” he said. “And Halemstat has agreed: no one will be clipped again unless five people from the same village agree that the offense warrants that severe a punishment. We will chose the five, not Halemstat. Furthermore, from this day forward, anyone may say anything without fear of being clipped. Speaking one’s mind is no longer to be punished.”

The crowd broke into applause. Beside Tatep, Nick beamed.

Tatep took a piece of parchment from his pouch. “You see, Marianne? Halemstat signed it and put his bite to it.”

“How did you get him to agree?”

“We laughed at him—and we cracked our nutcrackers in the palace courtyard for three days and three nights straight, until he agreed.”

Chornian rattled. “He said he’d sign anything if we’d all just go away and let him sleep.” He hefted the enormous package he’d brought with him and rattled again. “Look at all the shelled nuts we’ve brought for your Christmas party!”

Marianne almost found it in her heart to feel sorry for Halemstat. Grinning, she accepted the package and mounded the table with shelled nuts. “Those are almost too important to eat,” she said, stepping back to admire their handiwork. “Are you sure they oughtn’t go into a museum?”

“The important thing,” Tatep said, “is that I can say anything I want.” He popped one of the nuts into his mouth and chewed it down. “Halemstat is a talemstat,” he said, and rattled for the sheer joy of it.

“Corten looks like he’s been eating too much briarwood,” said Chornian—catching the spirit of the thing.

Not recognizing the expression, Marianne cast an eye at Nick, who said, “We’d say, ‘Been eating a lemon.’”

One of Chornian’s brood sat back on his/her haunches and said, “I’ll show you Halemstat’s guards—”

The child organized its siblings with much pomp and ceremony (except for the littlest who couldn’t stop rattling) and marched them back and forth. After the second repetition, Marianne caught the rough import of their chant: “We’re Halemstat’s guards/We send our regards/We wish you nothing but ill/Clip! we cut off your quill!”

After three passes, one child stepped on another’s tail and the whole troop dissolved into squabbling amongst themselves and insulting each other. “You look like Corten!” said one, for full effect. The adults rattled away at them. The littlest one, delighted to find that insults could be funny, turned to Marianne and said, “Marianne! You’re spineless!”

Marianne laughed even harder. When she’d caught her breath, she explained to the child what the phrase meant when it was translated literally into Standard. “If you want a good Dirt insult,” she said, mischievously, “I give you ‘birdbrain.’” All the sounds in that were easy for a Rejoicer mouth to utter—and when Marianne explained why it was an insult, the children all agreed that it was a very good

insult indeed.

“Marianne is a birdbrain,” said the littlest.

“No,” said Tatep. “Halemntat is a birdbrain, not Marianne.”

“Let the kid alone, Tatep,” said Marianne. “The kid can say anything it wants!”

“True,” said Tatep. “True!”

They shooed the children off to look for their presents under the tree, and Tatep turned to Nick. “Share, Nick-your surprise for Marianne.”

Nick reached under the table. After a moment’s searching, he brought out a large bulky parcel and hoisted it onto the table beside the heap of Halemntat nuts. Marianne caught a double-handful before they spilled onto the floor.

Nick laid a protective hand atop the parcel. “Wait,” he said. “I’d better explain. Tatep, every family has a slightly different Christmas tradition-the way you folks do for Awakening. This is part of my family’s Christmas tradition. It’s not part of Marianne’s Christmas tradition-but, just this once, I’m betting she’ll go along me.” He took his hand from the parcel and held it out to Marianne. “Now you can open it,” he said.

Dropping the Halemntat nuts back into their pile, Marianne reached for the parcel and ripped it open with enough verve to satisfy anybody’s Christmas unwrapping tradition. Inside was a box, and inside the box a jumble of gaudy cardboard tubes-glittering in stars and stripes and polka dots and even an entire school of metallic green fish. “Fireworks!” said Marianne. “Oh, Nick....”

He put his finger to her lips. “Before you say another word-you chose today to celebrate Christmas because it was the right time of the Rejoicer year. You, furthermore, said that holidays on Dirt and the other human worlds don’t converge-”

Marianne nodded.

Nick let that slow smile spread across his face. “But they do. This year, back on Dirt, today is the Fourth of July. The dates won’t coincide again in our lifetimes but, just this once, they do. So, just this once-fireworks. You do traditionally celebrate Independence Day with fireworks, don’t you?”

The pure impudence in his eyes made Marianne duck her head and look away but, in turning, she found herself looking right into Tatep’s bright expectant gaze. In fact, all of the Rejoicers were waiting to see what Nick had chosen for her and if he’d chosen right.

“Yes,” she said, speaking to Tatep but turning to smile at Nick. “After all, today’s Independence Day right here on Rejoicing, too. Come on, let’s go shoot off fireworks!”

And so, for the next twenty minutes, the night sky of Rejoicing was alive with Roman candles, shooting stars and all the brightness of all the Christmases and all the Independence Days in Marianne’s memory. In the streets, humans oohed and aaahed and Rejoicers rattled. The pops and bangs even woke Halemntat, but all he could do was come out on his balcony and watch.

A day later Tatep reported the rumor that one of palace guards even claimed to have heard Halemntat rattle. “I don’t believe it for a minute,” Nick added when he passed the tale on to Marianne.

“Me neither,” she said, “but it’s a good enough story that I’d like to believe it.”

“A perfect Christmas tale, then. What would you like to bet that the story of The First Time Halemntat Rattled gets told every Christmas from now on?”

“Sucker bet,” said Marianne. Then the wonder struck her. “Nick? Do traditions start that easily-that quickly?”

He laughed. “What kind of fireworks would you like to have next year?”

“One of each,” she said. “And about five of those with the gold fish-like things that swirl down and then go bam! at you when you least expect it.”

For a moment, she thought he’d changed the subject, then she realized he’d answered her question. Wherever she went, for the rest of her life, her Christmas tradition would include fireworks-not just any fireworks, but Fourth of July fireworks. She smiled. “Next year, maybe we should play Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture as well as The Nutcracker Suite.”

He shook his head. “No,” he said, “The Nutcracker Suite has plenty enough fireworks all by itself-at least your version of it certainly did!”

End