

Gog Said "Boulder-Stump"

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Contents

Verk Sends a Message	2
A Miraculous Find	15
Thag	46
Caveman Thag	53
Getting to Know Baby	63
Appendix	75
Crecspeak	75
Idiomatic Crecspeak	75
Glossary	75
Cardinal and Ordinal Directions	80
Language and Naming Surrounding Women	80
Abundance of Human Predators and Other Dangers	80
Numbers and Reckoning	80
Whole Numbers	80
Negative Numbers (and friends)	81
Fractions	81
Abstract Ratios	81
Angles	81
Time	82
Mass	82
Volume	82
Length/Distance	82
Speed	83

Verk Sends a Message

The Crec's was a peaceful, shady and verdant world. Bright red-orange stones the size of mountains jut out of the otherwise unbroken green here and there. The Crec were a sort of "cavemen". Words like this are used unironically throughout this story. It's how they would have described themselves.

"Cave", the literal word meaning exactly that, was used by the Crec as a prefix to denote sophistication and superiority. A "person" was just a person. But a "caveperson" was a sort of gentleman-savage.

They were rather puritanical as ancient cultures go. They were rather stubborn about their beliefs and would resort to violence over trifles, just as modern humans will do; not an uncommon characteristic.

As a tribe, however, as with most tribes, there was much intratribal respect, love, and kindness. And it was genuine. The good guys outnumbered the bad guys, again, pretty much like any sufficiently large collection of humans. This is baked in. We would not have survived otherwise.

They have their flaws but they are worth getting to know. Their culture is as rich, tragic, beautiful, and self-contradictory as your average culture, timeline being more or less unimportant. They are worth learning about as much as any of the fascinating ancient cultures that your studies have only been able to touch upon.

Modern humans are as unaware of the gaps in their historical knowledge as just about any that came before.

We moderns congratulate ourselves on knowing so very much about ancient cultures. We went to a lot of trouble to figure all this out, after all. These are only a small sliver of the reality of what has come and gone; just here on plain old Earth.

Modern humans don't *know* that extraterrestrials exist, but most who have an opinion seem to be pretty confident that they are awesome if they're out there.

It's trivial to make the case that we don't know *all* that has happened here on Earth. It's not much harder to make the case that the gaps are likely many times greater than what we know, or at least think we know.

Therefore we can be confident that there are cultures of the past that have come and gone, about which we would be utterly fascinated were we able to really *know* about them. We know in *actuality* that they are "out there" somewhere in unrecorded history. They can be considered "the aliens we know of".

Consider just this: We know of multiple ancient human settlements hundreds of kilometers from land and under many meters of water, so much has our geography changed in recent history¹.

¹Let's say: 15,000 years ago or longer.

Back to the Crec and the amazing opportunity we have to know so much about them.

Fire produces smoke, and smoke must go *somewhere*. As the Crec saying goes, "Where there is fire, there is smoke."

A bit of light in the early evening is nice. A bit of warmth is even nicer, but not always needed. All year long, fires get used for something or other.

And that smoke makes a mess. You would be forgiven if you thought someone was trying to smoke someone else out of their cave.

The Zog clan, whom you will soon meet, live in such a cave. A nice cave, for sure.

The enormous irregular mound of red rock in which the Zog clan lived was at this point in time very much hollowed out. It was among the lighter mountains.

The same family, all marriage and blood relations, all the way back to the time of Grut², had continuously occupied the inside of this hill, which was given the name Bhorv Zolk by some anonymous caveman long ago. The name had as much meaning to them as it does to you.

A hollowed-out rock 167 men tall can be a cozy kind of place. The soot above the openings were in this case considered "quaint" and it gave a place for the small-ones to scratch in their names and draw rock-sticks with haste and pleasurable guilt³.

The thick soot collected above the opening to the parlor-burrow were an especially large and at the current moment, an especially shameful bit of soot-palette. Grandsons Darcc and Dragg were currently hard at work with rhino soap and a basket of pine cones for scrubbing.

Sometimes it's a matter of who gets caught, but sometimes the club of justice falls true.

Fires make for a cozy cave and the current grand matriarch Nud⁴ was the artful, watchful, and opinionated keeper of the fires. Having wrapped up the cleaning and dressing of the ancient-speak burrow's fireplace, Nud was now working her way toward Grav, Son of Zog as she cleaned.

Grav was taking a well-earned rest in the ancient-speak burrow sitting on what was agreed by all to be the most comfortable stone. It had several polished areas to prove its merit. Whether it had been found more or less in the current shape, created by some ancient caveman's hand, had been worn in this way by generations of use *or* some combination of the three, it really knew all his curves and folds. It was remarkably comfortable.

²The great

³Followed always by a rapid retreat and in the case of the smart ones, a quick wash of the telltale soot from hands, legs, feet, and usually just about everywhere.

⁴Zog's seventh and it would turn out final wife.

Grav was staring at an upside-down river of smoke that gently flowed in its bed of soot, making its way to the *highest* point among all the inverted valleys, cliffs, and mesas. Grav was ignoring Nud.

Out of the corner of his eye, Grav saw Nud's attention transition to him. He could feel the disapproval immediately. She opened her mouth as though preparing to speak.

"I will move momentarily, *mother*. Father-Brother Verk is not even here yet."

"You'll move now because I need to clean your nasty stone. Relax-marks are not a thing we show Father-Brother Verk. What do we know they indicate? You know his generation."

"Sloff.", muttered Grav.

"What?"

"*Sloff!* Do your whatever later. Go away."

Nud grunted elegantly and begin cleaning the area right next to, and indeed underneath Grav's left sit-ham with a crusty, stiff bush-derived broom.

Wordlessly, but with all the feeling he could muster, Grav sprung into to an angry jog towards his burrow. Farting loudly in Nud's direction as he left.

He had a lot to think about with the "enjoyable" family get-together coming closer every day, and now *here*, on this day. It was a miserable thought. *Ancient-speak was just a way to list out the things you were supposed to "think"* Grav always thought.

He'd had a sneaking suspicion that had grown stronger with time, that many, if not most others have a completely different definition of "think".

To Grav, *think* meant to take what you've seen, heard, and felt in the past and try to use it as a way to *understand*, which in turn to him meant "to be able to predict". This was a relatively new idea of his, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. If something could predict something, it made *sense*. It was worthy of scratching down.

"He comes! Verk, Son of Jik and his party have been seen moving through Monkey-Tail Pass.", an anonymous clan member shouted just as a general announcement.

That would mean another palm at most. Grav did his best to go back to not thinking in the black silence of his burrow. Most parts of the cave system were nearly pitch black. One would usually do without light, there being few surprises. Yet sound traveled a long way. It didn't get quieter, it got more garbled as echo interferes with echo. It was a trick to really listen. In the blackness of his sleeping quarters it was easy to think, and to listen.

Father-Brother Verk, Son of Jik had been sitting in the ancient-speak burrow accepting polite—and completely obligatory offers of refreshment, with forced modesty.

Today Verk would tell all those who gathered⁵ in the ancient-speak burrow of The Battle of the Snake Meal during The Great Club War and the profound life lessons learned therein.

This was a good crowd-warming tactic. The crowd in this case being literally every occupant of Bhorv Zolk. Everyone attended, guaranteed, and for the audience at least, it was the highlight of Verk's visit.

Verk had other business that would be gotten to in time.

"Shall we all be quiet and let you begin Father-Brother Verk, Son of Jit?", one of the several-finger caveladies dotting over him.

"Oh, well. I just." Verk noisily deposited a quantity of bird-scat into a finely woven, and yet unavoidably coarse rag. "Whaaaa... dortyses⁶!!", he wailed at the ceiling as he sneezed. Verk had a severe allergy to a very poisonous flowering plant that more or less reproduced continuously.

"I'll get started. Thank you, rhino-calf."

Verk shifted his weight from one ham⁷ to the other in his chair in a way that somehow expressed contempt for everyone in the room. It was rumored that he's had a progressively worsening case of between-ham-fire-pebbles for generations.

Verk began.

As some of you know, I had a modest part to play in The Battle of the Snake-Meal, which the spin-minders⁸ inform me was exactly one half of one all-finger all-finger and one⁹ years ago, exactly as of today.

There was a practiced gasp of wonder from the audience.

The Smash Heard 'round the Forest, as you know marked its start. The story of that bit is simple: A Clorp soldier lying in wait smashed the sturdy-gourd-hat right off of a devoted Forest-Hero who was guarding a position. It happened to be *my* position at the time as well, which explains my involvement.

⁵Which for a combination of reasons was literally every inhabitant of BZ xxx.

⁶This is an adjective that means 'rubbery and resistant to mastication'

⁷'Butt cheek', of course. They use this word here as some English speakers may on occasion and the translation efforts have focused on many of the charming allusions the Crec make, especially when they overlap with or challenge us to think about our own in the target language, which in this case is plainly spoken, modern, North-American, 21st Century English. The "target" is relevant here because other languages give different opportunities. You're welcome.

⁸Astronomers

⁹51

That Bludgeoned-Hero's¹⁰ name was Gonk, Son of Blank¹¹, as you will have learned in your studies.

It is now known that Clorp infiltrator had been hiding behind a rock!

There was an apparently genuine gasp of surprise from the audience.

From within our tactical-burrow we could hear the shouts of the hated Clorp coming our way.

Audience members dutifully made faces of disgust at the mention of the name.

It seemed like in no time at all the Clorp were climbing up the scree of Rhino-Scat, mere men away from me. They were slow. The going was slow, but there were many of them. It's a known fact that the ratio was 3 to 1, in *their* favor.

Measured gasp from the audience.

We were the defenders, which favors one in battle. They had to do all the slow and treacherous scurrying. We just had to lob rocks down on them. But their number was great, as I mentioned, and soon we were quite literally running low on rocks¹².

Just then, my pal Lu and I realized that almost none of the troops were permitted to know about the boulder-rhino up at the top! We looked at each other seemingly at the same time and both had the idea at the same time. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?", I said. "*Let's go!*", said Lu.

There it was after a gasping, wheezing sprint up the steep hillside, our "secret" weapon. Why it was kept secret to most of *our guys* I still do not know to this day. It was complete alright, and pointed in exactly the right direction. Lu starts talking to me about which one of us is going to go out there to the verge and give their life by dislodging the required stones, there not in that day being the more modern practice yet of just tying some sturdy twist-vine to it and giving a pull from a safe distance.

I had spied something on the way up and decided to have one over on old Lu. I say, "Well by rights, Lu, even as my friend, you need to be the one to go out there and do this. You know I got a family to support and my new position at camp comes with a lot of

¹⁰This term included both those who died in battle of any injury and those with any severe life-altering brain damage. Gonk was of the latter sort.

¹¹Longer, grander formal name mentions often include this appendix, 'Son of X'. Here the Crec word for 'blank' is used. It's a linguistic placeholder that doesn't mean 'unknown' but is closer to the English 'blank'. Taken altogether it course means 'bastard'.

¹²There having been a strike among the ammunition suppliers (they carry rocks uphill), resources ran low off and on throughout Snake-Meal. The strikers supplied their last delivery in the form of their heads.

responsibility, one that there just ain't a lot of good replacements for. You think for a minute about what old Corporal Bogh would say in this situation. I'm sorry Lu, but I'm thinking of the Forest here. My hand to Ender-Of-All-Questions, this is my thinking, Lu. I'm sorry. I'll hear you out my friend, but. . . "

We could see clearly that the Clorp were making ground, slowly. It looked like a great storm of people. Vast waves of blood an' people washing up against the shores of Rhino-Scat. We had indeed gotten lost in time a bit about the urgency of our mission.

I apparently had, anyhow. But it's a memory me and Lu share fondly as we became real Crec *men* by stages over the many moons of suffering in battle.

We could now see the masses of Crec coming our way

The sight was awesome.

An inexplicable snicker from a younger Crec was shushed by his mother.

Having cleared my head and realizing I was in the middle of some unnecessary nonsense, I let him sit on my proposal for just a drop-stone and was just about to let him in on gag, but just then he got choked up a bit and stiffened and said, "Private Verk, sir! It has been a privilege fighting for our home, this Forest alongside with you. Friend."

I saw a tear forming so I figured I should get a move on. Did I mention I was in a hurry now?

Laughter.

"Lu!", I says, "Lu I was just having a go at ya pal! I spied a stick on the way up that should be long enough. I'll go back and fetch it! You shoulda seen your face!"

I ran not one half of one boulder-door man¹³ back down the trail and fetched the stick, and was back in a jiffy.

Lu and I heaved and heaved and oh how that little tree's trunk bent and bent. My hands were shaking. Lu's hands were shaking still more. All at once, we heard a rumble. We hadn't even seen any of the stay boulders move a bug before we heard it. It was like The Army of Ender-Of-All-Questions itself was at full charge! Coming to save the day!

Brfgf. Bugrgl. Bunjle. Brrrkk.

Verk, in his way, was trying to make the sound of a thousand mighty boulders on their way to smite the enemy.

¹³About 300 ft. See *Numbers and Reckoning*.

I mean these things come crashing down, leveling everything! There were trees a man around that were not just snapped, they were sheered off at the floor, after which their roots were pounded into pulp. The land on that side of the hill is still good for working to this day, and it was only known as Morning-sun-left-side¹⁴ Rhino-Scat Woods before that. And a woods it was.

Then the rhino started meeting up with the men. . . and the Clorp.

Verk gave his signature knowing wink and the audience laughed nervously.

It went through rank upon rank of the Clorp. Leaving a genuine bloody mess. Walking through the aftermath was like seeing a flooded mouse burrow after a good rhino trampling. It is something I will always remember.

Our men cheered mightily, tempered indeed by the thought of those among our ranks who tragically got caught up in the destruction.

The audience collectively gave a pained but soft groan of regret and some gently pulled on their noses.¹⁵

And that was the end of The Battle of the Snake-Meal. It was over just about that fast. We got lucky. You can be sure we stroked all the snails we could find¹⁶. At this point the Clorp who weren't dead were running for their lives, leaving us a wide swath of good farming land to occupy, which we used to great effect in years to come, leveraging our successes¹⁷.

A quiet, knowing laugh from the audience made its way around the burrow.

Verk slowly sat back in his carefully shaped and ornamented stone chair. He slowly interlaced his fingers over his remarkably big belly, let out a long, slow, quiet sigh and seemed to be challenging the audience to interrupt his rest.

Indeed, no one was quite sure what to do. It was understood that you stay seated and reverent, but meanwhile, your mind was sprinting around trying to guess exactly the right posture and empathetic tilt-of-the-head, much less *saying* anything. It was a very quiet sort of panic.

It had been a while, possibly the longest pause-for-effect at the time. *What if he's dead?*, some of the audience dared to allow themselves to wonder. The subsequent thoughts varied considerably.

Verk slowly opened his eyes. "Now, do any of the precious cavechildren in our audience have any questions? Maybe you get an idea of what silly old Verk is

¹⁴North

¹⁵This is a gesture of lament and deep respect for unavoidable sacrifices made.

¹⁶This is a bit of luck-giving for the Crec. Rabbit's foot, but taken just a bit more literally. The snail comes up a lot in their mythology.

¹⁷This is the great, mostly unoccupied bulge to Crec's south that still makes up most of its territory.

trying to say here?" For Verk especially loved the children's questions. He made the sweetest mall-Santa¹⁸ smile he could muster.

One of the older male cousins¹⁹ stood, and looked behind him at his nervous mother.

"Father-Brother Verk, why was the boulder-rhino kept a secret from the Crec army?"

Verk was sure that he had covered this and was duly annoyed. He stared at the boy for what seemed like a very long time. Naturally the boy fidgeted.

"Little rhino-buck, do you remember me talking about that? It's not known nor is it likely ever to be known. *Genuine* historical research has come up empty so far I'm afraid. You're a clever lad. Have a seat, please."

A girl in her late teens, that could only charitably be considered a child stood *with some off-putting confidence*, Verk thought. *Likely a lovely child. Well shaped.*

"Father-Brother Verk," Verk thought she had rushed the whole name part. "Were there any other things we could have done to avoid all this dying, for everybody? Like. . ." She looked around. "could we just maybe get along with and share with the other tribe? After all, Nature has given us all this. Who has the claim?"

Verk knew that if he put his hand anywhere near his face it would, all by itself, gently cradle his forehead. He did not want to be unpleasant to the girl, but Verk's near exhausted patience with this Two-Squirrel-Hoard generation was getting to breaking point more and more all the time. *In a pitiful and disrespectful state, that lot*, he would often think for example.

"Miss." He thought he would mix in just a dash of good-talking-to, as a signal to others as well. "I believe a lot of dedicated Forest Heroes put in a lot of blood, sweat, and dare I say lives in far too many cases."

Noses tugged.

"Have *you* ever tried negotiating with a Balrag?"

Snickers.

"These men you are learning about today were quite capable and paid a high price; all of them. Miss, what have you done for your Forest lately?" That last bit Verk thought might have a bit more sting than intended.

There was a muttering in the audience. The mood was becoming ever more glum. Even during his speak Verk had seemed 'off', distracted, irritated. Was he well?

¹⁸The Crec would say 'looks-nice-traveler'.

¹⁹The Zog clan, like all other Crec clan, was ranked in a very loose way by generation: grandparents → parents → cousins → small-ones. Grav was technically still a cousin, but was the actual age of many parents.

"Miss, I mean every bit of love and respect for you, rhino-calf. Let us reflect on what happened and the true magnitude of it. Let us never forget. . . "

"Yes, Father-Brother Verk." She managed a small curtsy and did sound legitimately regretful.

"Sweet child, please have a seat."

She nodded and sat.

There was a rather long, very quiet murmur as parents discretely mouthed ideas to their children.

One very small, sweet cavegirl tottered slightly as she stood, and made an exaggerated bow. The audience, nervous and hyper-aware, giggled with surprising generosity.

"Father-Brother Verk. . ." She had just a twist of endearing toddler speech, as she rolled her head self-consciously. She smiled broadly, proudly showing everyone that one rather large, prominent tooth had fallen out recently²⁰.

"Faver-Brover Verk, why do people have to die?"

There it was; a gem that Verk could work with.

"Sweet, sweet rhino-calf, please . . . please come here." Verk was visibly moved.

The girl tottered towards Verk as he sat smiling in his fine stone throne. Halfway there, Verk, with unbelievable slowness, began to raise his arms to receive the girl. His smile slowly broadening with similar uncanny slowness.

The girl gave a little hop as Verk's arms, met with precision by the girl's underarms, lifted elegantly, rotated and plopped her in his lap.

He made a gesture of caressing his heart and nodding his head slowly with a smile.

"Sweet rhino-calf, what a precious question you ask. Can you say it again, real loudly so everyone can hear your question?"

The girl perked up, faced the audience, with hands cupped around her mouth, faced the audience and in exaggerated toddler fashion screamed the words in the echoey burrow.

"WHY DO PEOPLE HAVE TO DIE?"

She giggled and thrust her head into the various fine jungle regalia covering Verk's big belly, still giggling loudly.

"Yes indeed, tender-tuber, why must this terrible thing happen? Why must people die like this?"

²⁰They have a *sort* of tooth fairy and it is complicated.

In another fluid motion that belied his size and shape, Verk had set the girl down gently in front of him and seemed to have immediately forgotten her. She wandered aimlessly into the crowd.

He began to pace back and forth on his large dais.

He paced almost athletically, making sharp, possibly "military" about-faces at each end of the dais. His now slightly pinker face was facing the floor at a fixed angle.

Suddenly he stopped in front of the throne, stiffened, adjusted his rhino-calf²¹ skin ceremonial uniform with dignity and began.

My admirable audience, men have to die because other men *are bad!* And that is it. Showing softness of any kind toward your *enemy* is a big mistake. Once your enemy, always your enemy. Some things are not forgivable, and it is *essential* that we as a Forest stick together and maintain that fierce pride and unashamed love for this community of humble, hard-working, honest men and baby-makers²².

It is essential!

Verk's voice cracked such that for the remainder of his speech he was noticeably hoarse.

It is for the Love of The Forest that my being is filled with this unstoppable surety that right will ultimately triumph. Right will ultimately triumph.

And the things that the *Clorp* have *caused to come to pass* sting less with every generation but its unforgivable nature is eternal. Know that. Remember that. If you are Forgetting, you are betraying your Forest. Forgetting is *treason!*

Verk let that sink in while staring tearfully above the heads of the audience. He had paused mid-gesture with his arms to his side and palms upward.

The audience considered this for a while and waited for the next cue from their lecturer. Verk slowly lowered and relaxed his arms, and then dramatically rest his chin on his chest, looking at the dais.

The audience rightly guessed that this concluded his talk, and so cheered "reverently" as best they could.

"Please think long and hard on this my dear cavepeople; as though your lives

²¹Aside from being cute and a good way to express one's impressions when encountering something "dear", the *hide* of a rhino calf was exactly the right combination, if slaughtered at the right time and in the right way, of supple, tough, and long-wearing. It made a perfect armor and, as it is comfortable, found its way into the "ceremonial" wardrobe of many admired cavemen, actual soldiers and otherwise.

²²This is the Crec word for 'women', transliterated.

depend upon it. Now *who's ready for some thistle bread with ambling-feast*²³ *icing!?*"

Cries of excitement and joy erupted from the youngest of the clan. The older ones, also anticipating the joy of a good meal and fellowship silently concurred. They were also happy for this awkward and troubling ordeal to be over.

Verk stood, still center-stage on the dais, nodding and smiling to the people as they filed towards the exits and into the all-clan-meal burrow for several relaxing palm of food and banter. No one had eaten. Haste to prepare and receive Verk, along with nervousness had gotten in the way of even dawn-meal. Even if had been practical to sneak a bite no one would have been seen eating on such a morning; before Verk's arrival.

There was snatching of food and grunting, like that seen at a modern wedding reception.

Verk's gaze caught Grav as he sauntered into the meal burrow. Grav had his usual nonchalance about him and was unimpressed both with Verk's words and his passion. The words were confused and poorly connected. The passion added nothing. They sounded good to most of the audience, but Grav felt that if one had scratched all that out using neutral language, others would see his point. He did a lot of scratching.

He thought he might try something like that someday to see if a literate caveperson would have the same reaction if the ideas were just presented clearly and without emotion.

Grav looked back, looked forward at the meal-burrow door and then swept his head back to Verk again. He was still staring, seemingly angrily. Grav smiled while their eyes remained locked and turned his head back in the direction he was headed in what he hoped was a polite, demur manor. Verk stood motionless as only his head followed the progress of Grav across the burrow. It appeared that his hands were slowly making fists. *He's probably just flexing his fingers*, Grav thought lamely. He'd have to get over Verk. Food!

Much later, after a responsible (given the occasion) amount of juff and enough to eat for everyone, plus half again, Grav found himself standing, bowed gently backward, with most of his weight on his heels, urinating contentedly on the wall at the far-back arc of the circular relief-room.

A couple of laughing, squealing almost-fertile baby-makers thoroughly woke everyone up as they darted behind him and out of the relief-room²⁴ enjoying their private joke; almost surely at the expense of some hapless teenage boy.

To Grav's utter horror, and with an exaggerated shuffling of the feet, Verk slowly situated himself for a good piss right next to him. He was smiling serenely,

²³Mammoth.

²⁴Bathrooms are not separated by gender. This would strike the Crec as a truly inefficient and pointless arrangement.

swaying almost imperceptibly, and reeking of juff and female-hippo-musk²⁵.

"My noble, hopeful, young elk-buck. It's Grav, yes? Grav, Son Of Zog Many-Follow-Then Son of Grut? I wonder what you have planned for succession." One eyebrow wagging. "I don't see or hear of any intrigue involving your brothers, younger all of them. Seems they have other plans and are happy with them. Here comes Grav clan, yes?", Verk says and winks drunkenly.

Verk was a practiced drunk. It seemed like he affected some amount of drunkenness when sober *in addition to* working hard at appearing sober when drunk. Verk had learned to work both ends of his spear. With this added to the almost universal instinct to look at Verk as a kind of infallible caveman's caveman²⁶ resulted in the vast majority of others genuinely never suspecting he had much interest in juff. And was mostly always stone-sober²⁷ "He's as he always is, Dear Father-Brother Verk.", one would surely say with a smile.

Verk's voice became calm, clear, and purposeful.

"Here is what's what, you inept, disrespectful, ruinous young man." Verk closed his eyes and inhaled slowly and smoothly through his nose.

"I know exactly what you are *thinking*, and what's more, I know exactly what you have *done*. It will not stand, and you will be made to pay. After which, I will grant you the privilege of getting on your knees before all and convincing us of your *genuine* remorse and renewed understanding.

You are my blood, and there is a bond and love that transcends almost all things. What you need to do is work hastily on the *almost* before you cross a line, child."

Verk's eyes opened and he smiled. His voice now was unnecessarily loud with an affected cheerfulness. He shook himself and said, "Clear enough young buck?"

He slapped Verk's bare shoulder with his clean hand. "I will see *you* at club-drill next time, yes? I believe in four days?" Verk's smile broadened and his form froze as he awaited a response.

Thinking that he should acknowledge so that all in the burrow could hear, since the question was asked in such a way he loudly said, "Oh! Yes Father-Brother Verk! I will be there!". He could feel his lips quivering.

"Very well!", Verk turned and left with a smile that swept the burrow. All eyes in the crowded, now silent burrow were on Verk and Grav.

Grav affected a casualness as he finished and casually made his way out of the crowded relief-burrow.

Grav now had yet more, unwelcome thoughts to anxiously dwell upon. This sounded like a declaration of war straight from soldier Verk.

²⁵Female hippo musk is indeed used as a perfume. However, as this is scarce and valuable, it is also used to just mean "perfume" or "cologne"

²⁶You may think: Tarzan-meets-John-Wayne.

²⁷The Crec do not use this expression, but they do say "stone-drunk" for obvious reasons.

"What in the *Forest* was that about?", he mouthed. If nothing else, he needed sleep.

A Miraculous Find

Plans for the next morning included: Wander around in the woods with Gog. Gog and Grav were cousins. Pretty much the same age, much-little.

Grav and Gog had been same-cousins²⁸ and highest-friends for their whole lives. They'd been living together in Bhorv Zolk for about half of that time, off and on throughout their lives.

They had the same instinct for benefit-crazy-think, a term that means, "To benefit from free and open thinking and doing." In other words, to experiment. Importantly, this was a word of *theirs*. The Crec almost universally would never buy the "benefit" part.

Both realized, through their endless talking about ideas, that if you explore the idea places that no one else will because they are lazy or superstitious, you will more easily find value-stones²⁹ of ideas that, because they were original, unexplored, and sometimes striking in their unusualness, were more profitable than average.

Grav and Gog were no longer children. Their minds had sort of overlapped, after years of complex communication. There was nothing supernatural or exceptional about this. It happens all the time, and they were just a slightly higher-functioning example. They, together, had some pretty amazing ideas. Some would call this relationship a "friendship".

Grav and Gog *were* friends. They were also accomplished gentleman philosophers. The advantage they could have had over people was immense, but they used their powers for good. They wanted to have fun and wanted for everyone else to have fun. Like many good people, they saw a spoil-sport as a kind of project for them to undertake; someone who needed some loosening up, or possibly someone who just needed to have a good cry, which they were always willing and able to help bring forth, with purity of heart.

Not everyone was of this mind. Verk was staying in the burrow just two down from Grav, and inevitably they would run into each other. Often this was in the relief-burrow, as had happened the night before.

The relief-burrow was positioned and shaped for optimal sound-deadening, for reasons that would utterly relate to modern readers. It was shaped, looking top-down, something like a daisy; scalloped around the perimeter so that sound would naturally dampen. The walls were also gently bowed outward from top-to-bottom. It offered the predictable visibility and view-ability characteristics of

²⁸First cousins

²⁹This just means 'gem', but the literal meaning of the constituent words and their order is exactly what the Crec say. The concept of 'value' is one of Grav's obsessions. He therefore is one of relatively few who had stopped to decompose this particular word and realize, like you have done at least once: *Oh neat. it's X + Y. I've been using this word my whole life and I only just now realized!*

a large, circular room, but didn't have the *acoustical* characteristics of a large, circular room. Get it?

There was a constant, rather soothing, gurgle and splash of water. Although minimal and somewhat temperamental, the cave system had a small number of spring-fed waterworks. The relief-burrow was by a wide margin the biggest consumer of water. The Crav thought it all pretty clever and eminently maintainable: The circular room had a slight, very inconspicuously conical floor that was highest at the center and had a "one part down for each one half of one boulder-door parts over³⁰" grade; enough to keep the entire room's floor (8 man diameter) covered in a sheet of two bowstring-finger-knuckle deep, rapidly moving water from the center, where an immense gurgling pot of cold water overflowed continuously.

This was enough to create two small semicircular rivers from the entrance side of the room, around each half-circle of gutter, to the opposite side, closest to the hill's exterior, for the whole circular gutter was slightly tilted in this way. Once the water met the far side of the room (Where Grav noticed some mesmerizing patterns made by the two "rivers" colliding head-on.), it finally exited the room through a few arm-sized holes heading down what everyone always thought of as "the back of the mountain".

This arrangement both took all your business briskly away, but it also thoroughly washed your feet, which were likely to be entirely black upon entering. Most Crec made it past the center of the room on their way out to wash their hands, always nearest the center.

In addition to this, there was a snaking entranceway into the relief-burrow that had two intentional characteristics: As the other end of this passage was facing the opening of the cave system to receive the most sunlight this would make the relief-cave more well-lit (as the walls, floor and ceiling of this passage were polished) but it would also catch the eye when someone was making their way into the burrow. It also had a couple of switchbacks, so the passage could be made longer and prevent a direct view into the burrow, for the Crec were not shy about pooping together, but they did think of the relief-burrow as unclean; a kind of topic and thing that should be kept hidden, but without overdoing it.

Yes, carving out an enormous room did take years. It would take a single person several lifetimes. But there were many hands to help and enough demand to make it a "not-think-thought". It took centuries of struggle and countless lives for the Crec and surrounding Forest to brute-force this kind of sophistication. It was a matter of survival. In a way, all of this was driven by the love of children. A humble Crec of note once remarked, "If we have gone further than others, it is because we are standing on a pile of bodies."

The Crec had the kind of sophistication and coordination abilities that you might find in a rather-out-of-the-way, mid-sized bronze age settlement thousands

³⁰1:50

of kilometers from Babylon. The Crec Forest may have indeed been just that exactly. They would not be able to offer much more than speculation themselves. It's plausible. Either way, these things vary over distance as well as time. They were just doing them, and were not *all* morons. There's a whole bunch you don't know about the "archaeological record".

A point to all of this is that the relief-burrow, given the right level of vigilance, could be thought of as reasonably suited for private conversations.

And as the day before, Verk and Grav found themselves in such a "conversation" this morning. But this time, there were no ears to witness. Both men were noted early-risers. And both men were practiced at judiciously using the relief-borrow for "clay-talk".

Verk had, what for Grav was a very unsettling characteristic as a person: He was a complete prolapsed-bison-rectum whenever he and Grav talked in truly private circumstances. He would be a slapper of shoulders and grinner of grins in more-or-less public circumstances. He seemed to be spending his life pretending to run for Elders-Quorum. As for his public behavior, something very close to that would be the only reasonable assumption for a neutral observer: *This person appears to be trying to sell his persona actively to people for some gain*, a very articulate and objective caveperson would say. And if he just shuts that off completely and becomes a different, increasingly nasty person in his presence. . . Grav was just not quite sure what to do with that.

Verk automatically smiled broadly at Grav as he walked into the otherwise empty relief-burrow to see Grav urinating with his back to the entrance. Grav therefore did not see this smile, though he knew someone was there.

"Grav, what is the good grunt?!", Verk said sharply, causing Grav's head to jerk around a bit too far.

"Good morning Father-Brother Verk. Father-Brother Verk, I was genuinely taken aback by our words from yesterday. I *do* feel the way you do about our Forest. I know. . . about all that stuff. trust me. I will *never* forget. My feelings *also* are quite strong.

What have I done? Please, believe me; my conscience is free and I want to learn from you."

"Your conscience is free, huh? No, I want you to think on it. That's what you need. Verk stared with noticeable anger still. Nice of you to at least notice I'm put-out with you. Your lot forgotten a lot more than you think you know."

While trying to decipher that, Grav was sure at least some kind of helpful hint was to follow. It seemed to break the very rules of caveperson communication to just leave things hanging like this. He raised his eyebrows in a careful effort to relay this observation, gave up, closed his eyes and did his best at a 'reset', so he could think.

It often seemed that Verk could make it harder for him to do this, as if he had some *power* that made you instinctively 'squirm' in a mental sense, as opposed to 'gather your thoughts and give a meaningful, honest response'. *It was as much Verk himself as it was that people had allowed Verk to become this way*, Grav guessed.

"Yes, Father-Brother Verk. I will. Please forgive me. It is a large stone you put upon me. As you say, I will likely learn more if I do some discovery myself. That way I will remember stronger, as it is surely a grave misstep."

Verk made a hissing sound that Grav couldn't categorize for meaning, as he could not comfortably turn to look at Verk.

"What are you doing today?", asked Verk, still not *using* the relief-burrow, but now standing where Grav could comfortably look at him. Now facial expressions could be used to hopefully glean more meaning from inscrutable Verk.

"Oh!" Grav was both excited to share some news and thankful for the change of topic. "Father-Brother Verk, Gog and I . . ."

Verk hissed again but Grav now could see that he was huffing with contempt, with an oddly abbreviated roll of the eyes.

"Gog, huh? You two copulating-monkey boys going deep into the woods today?", Verk made a complex dance of facial expressions and other gestures that Grav could not decipher, other than to note that maybe there was now glee. "Stay away from the bachelor-tree, you two." Verk made a sour, disdainful face. Grav thought that he could interpret this as an invitation to "yuck it up" with another man using banana-humor. He knew well that that was not the case here. So he responded with indignation, as he knew he should.

"Father-Brother Verk! I would never! Please, there could be a quiet-one nearing in the entrance."

"We both know there is not.", Verk said with his arms crossed.

"What are you and Gog up to? Hopefully something constructive."

"Yes, I think so, Father-brother Verk. We are going to find more value-stone where we have been for several moons. We have quite an infrastructure there. We think there is a vein of them following the river, but we didn't have time to look around much last time."

"Get some strenuous work in while you're at it. If you bring me a value-stone agreed by all to be worth three deer carcass I will let you out of this upcoming club-drill. You probably want to frolic in the woods."

"Father-Brother Verk, I will do *both!* I will bring you such a stone and I will excel at the next club-drill with the spirit of the Forest strong in me!"

"Yeah." is all Verk said.

He turned on his heels and said to Grav while leaving, "Keep your entrails on the inside."

The click of his hyena spurs³¹ faded down the entranceway.

'I didn't believe an After-Die-Monster scat-pile of that!!', thought Grav, with fury building inside him. 'I just go into dying-monkey mode³² and simply say the things I'm *supposed* to say!', and with that Grav added a twinge of shame to the mix of feelings.

'Why', Grav wondered, 'do I *do* that?' And whatever he did or said when in that state was pretty much what you would expect a respectable caveperson to do. He thought, 'It works both ways. I *seem* to be thinking something because, unless I am putting on an act, to the outside person, I look like I really mean them. How do I know that's not exactly what *everybody else* is doing?'

It was a dizzying thought. 'Maybe others *also* do and say as I do in those situations.' This occurred to him along with another thought that was surely worth scratching: 'The inner caveperson in another caveperson, was just like my inner caveperson. I am not special. Others are not just *things* for me to use. I cannot know if there really is someone in there! I will never know, but life goes better if I assume there is another "me" behind other's eyes. And maybe even a friend', Grav felt an odd cringe at that last part that he didn't understand.

Grav and Gog were to be at The Helpful Monkey River-Join by three palm from dawn. Grav sprinted into the clearing with spear and atlatl strapped to his back in not-ready form, and smoothly slowed to a trot. They were only carried for opportunistic hunting. This was another predict-tool of theirs. The prediction was: You could do hunting almost as effectively as you normally do while doing something completely unrelated that involved walking through the woods. "A Forest Wanderer Never Hunts", was a saying they thought worth wide adoption. For most cavemen hunting was an "activity" and the rest of the time was to be used doing nothing, showing off, or fighting with your neighbors.

Gog was there, clearly lost in thought but aware of Grav's arrival.

In each hand, Grav was carrying a large hemp basket, heavy with the best mining equipment they could conjure.

As Grav approached the glade at the very crook of the confluence³³. Taking *the short way* Grav had to stop and repair the twist-vine bridge crossing The Great Meal Stone's last angry-cauldron, which delayed him a half-palm.

Gog watched expressionless as Grav approached.

³¹These are raptor talon that are strung by sinew so that they point backward and downwards from the heel, with just one talon per foot, but they are large and serve their function. They are fastened strongly, but often with just enough slack so that the talon makes an audible "click" while the wearer walks around in-cave.

³²What we would call 'zombie mode'.

³³Where, legend has it, the Crec clan and culture had its beginnings.

Grav knew from experience that one had to pretty much shout over the thunder of the cascades. The Great Meal Stone came from the northwest and The Lame Rhino came from the northeast. They converged dramatically to form the Helpful Monkey, both picking up speed and rage from the steepening, rocky surroundings.

All this angry water out of place created a truly odd and kind of magical Forest-shaking, low rumble that was something like an earthquake that has been ongoing for thousands of years. The dirt doesn't mind. It just gets shaken about. And it turns out plants didn't mind it either, or as many suspect, were just a bit more productive because of the light massage. The occasional tree here and there didn't move visibly, but a hand on the trunk would bring your mind back to the power around you. Trees, and rocks and whatever else hummed harmonically, which added some color to the sea of white noise in the area.

Gog had once put a straight, stiff stick hard against a boulder near one of the more dramatic cascades. Putting his ear up to the other end, he could definitely hear an *audible* hum that was clear and distinct from the surrounding tempest of noise.

Grav handed the heavier of the baskets to Gog. He shouted, "Whatever we do, let's get the scat upstream!"

Gog nodded, turned, and led the way.

The practiced, efficient jog an experienced Forest-man slipped into while following an established path, especially one that follows a river, became hypnotic in a way that Grav loved. The noisy, often unhelpful part of your mind had no choice but to keep making plans and rapidly solve unending puzzles to optimize one's next steps, which your legs had to perform with a perfect, unbroken rhythm, and sureness.

This also had to be done in time with a rhythm that maximized your breathing and even your heartbeat's efficiency; a serious constraint, if you were a long-term thinker. Exhale on down-stride when possible, especially if you think your heart needs a good squeeze; inhale on the rebound, when your torso unwinds itself like a spring, guided by the big breathing muscles to fill your lungs with air.

The top of your vision saw the upcoming terrain, which you keep scanning for possible complications. In the lower, nearer part of your vision, you make fine adjustments to your macro plans, given new information: This rock has wet moss. That footfall has deer scat that we mustn't stir up³⁴. That limb will break if I land this stride on it. And of course, there was the built-in constraint of trying to make as little noise as possible, and to not step on anything spiny and deadly, and to continue making no noise even if you do, which added to

³⁴Hunters knew that if they were just *traveling* and were willing to sacrifice game abundance in the area for maybe the next few palms, it would definitely do no harm to purposely step in, and spread the scat of any predator, but freshened *game* scat attracted predators.

the immersive challenge that often helped one to think more clearly. So Grav thought at least.

This, he discovered, was a cultivatable state: Get into the groove right away and you'll have a pleasant ride as a passenger in your own body. Your mind is now free to wander about the Forest.

Gog felt the same way. For them, even more than most elite Hunters, traveling through the forest was fast, reliably breezy, pleasant, and just no big deal. It was a kind of lounging for them. It could be done for hours on end with few breaks (which were their own treat), possibly bringing you to a part of the Forest that, despite being a well-traveled caveman of late-age³⁵, you had never seen before. And there were landscapes that even these people, however traveled of the infinite, abundant Forest, would stop stunned to gaze at for lengths of time, mouth agape.

This meditation and thinking went on for both men for a little over a palm as they flexed and honed their fundamental survival systems, both muscle and mind. It was surprisingly pleasant to be so wasteful of energy, Grav often thought.

Their usual first stop on this route was a small falls near The Great Crocodile lake, a semicircular lake near a bend in The Lame Rhino. Standing on a high stone on the upper bank, you could see about half of the lake; the far, rounded shore. It got its name from a five-man-long, angry bull³⁶ crocodile that would not bother with you so long as you didn't get within a quarter-mile of *its* lake.

The croc died in the men's youth, but they both remember having to take the shortcut across the adjacent bend in the river and being lectured by their parents all the while about exactly what the situation was and exactly what the stakes were. Parents knew how and when to scare their children dumb, to great effect. Crec parents were otherwise reputed to be very loving toward their children. Mostly. It was considered a "daring" thing to follow the river here until just about all-finger year ago.

In the comparative quiet, with the nearby cascade only a gurgle, Gog turned to Grav.

"So, I was thinking. These veins run in parallel, probably. I mean, I've seen that in lots of places with regular rock. And the vein goes from within the earth, upwards, which is *also* where you see the parallel veins in the regular rock. A vein of reflect-stone³⁷ often has a parallel twin a man or two away, to one side or the other. And most value-stone grow in neat patterns, just like reflect-stone.

³⁵A classification to which both men belong. At this time, Grav is 36 and Gog 37.

³⁶You rightly ask, 'how do we know?' The story is known as "Khrob's Muddy Trap-Burrow"

³⁷Quartz. Both for the obvious reason and also because of what is being discussed here: a vein of quartz has concentrated mirror powers strong enough to create another one, just like it, feet away. It is thought that the formation of a reflected vein of reflect-stone has never been observed because whenever they appeared, they must have appeared together. Crec did not recoil in terror at their reflection. They had mirrors of various types. But they did have a very mystical concept of a "reflection" and didn't blithely play around with mirrors.

Since we know that the river has eroded much of one side, snaking in and out; it pretty much parallels our first 'vein'³⁸, I'm thinking let's concentrate on upstream where it cuts in and out of a vein that might have been there."

"Yup. Sounds good.", is all Grav said in response, having had the same hunch. "But wait, what about the sluice?"

"We will *chain multiple* sluices if necessary, or make another if that's easier."

"Yaah. Good enough, I guess.", said Grav.

Grav was quiet for a bit and then spoke. "Gog?"

"Yu-huh?"

"How do you feel about Father-Brother Verk?"

Gog didn't react but continued to stare at a falls. He spoke softly at first.

"Why?"

"I don't know. Does he seem different to you when you're alone with him than he is otherwise? You know, among the people?"

"Mmm", Gog's eyes squinted slightly.

"I haven't been alone with him much. I mostly just try to avoid that possibility, honestly. I kind of get the feeling that he needs to throw some rocks³⁹ at people a lot of the time and I feel like, whoever's job it is to put up with, it has got to be a lot of 'work', if you know what I mean.

Lots of making sure everything's going according to 'plan', but the plan also seems to change over time. Lots of getting into your business if he feels you've got a job to do for him. It looks like he likes to really let lose and let folks know not to cross him."

Grav interjected, "Don't you feel like that could have some push-back? Treating people that way? I mean, he and everyone else knows that he's way up there and above criticism. After a while of that I think a caveman could stop seeing his own faults."

"Heh. Yeah, I have definitely seen that effect in play with some people. It exists like rocks⁴⁰. And I don't think you're way off the mark.", agreed Gog.

"And also," Grav expanded on his unoriginal theory. "wouldn't that kind of thing feedback on itself, rapidly?"

If you've driven those away who, on occasion, just *reasonably* object to whatever urgent thing they're being lectured on, what's left over are a particular kind

³⁸Gog was being colorful with his language because when they said 'vein' it referred to a *pattern of deposits* and not much more. It was assumed to be a vein of sorts because it seemed to go in a straight line and keep producing even if you dug downward.

³⁹Let off steam."

⁴⁰"it is a thing"

of caveperson. Kind of the last-part I'll call it. Or no, the 'tail', like what you see disappearing into the bush when you've scared off a big lizard. There's a part that hangs around a bit longer. The 'tail'. Father-Brother Verk's tail of hangers-on are desperate for his approval. They will silently undergo *even worse* mistreatment by him⁴¹ which in turn means that mistreatment can *expand* and meet the new allowance, and so a person's⁴² behavior can get *more* extreme, which scares those around even more, making them willing to just let any kind of behavior go; pretend it didn't happen. Do whatever, just don't get 'kicked out', you know what I mean? Rather simple people, usually.

Cult of Verk has a long tail." He said without thinking.

Simultaneously, both shot a look at the other; each noticing an air of shock. Having gotten lost in the indignation he felt welling up, his speech was in sick-monkey mode. He had stopped suddenly with his mouth still slightly open.

Grav continued, with patience. "Father-Brother Verk was a bit on the abusive side with me this morning. And earlier."

Gog made a pouty lower lip face at him. He pantomimed a child about to cry, with a quivering face.

Grav felt like they were nearing a point where they both just wanted to drop the prefixes and the pretense. Their many heretical conversations had a rhythm they both knew well: Adjust loudness based upon scandalousness, try to use a lot of mutually-understandable wrapper language, even when no one is around (and no one *should* be), and speak the polite deferential, pious parts just above normal conversational volume.

"Uh-huh. Don't act like you haven't been there. Being shunned by The Great Bear⁴³ on the one hand is just dew off the leaf, but on the other hand. . ."

Grav paused and stared into the distance, slowly squinting his eyes with some kind of mental strain.

"Figuring out where you are supposed to be in the clubbing-order⁴⁴ is a lifelong task. I think so. I've only just now come to accept that the disorienting feeling of not knowing for sure and always being in great doubt about it is a permanent feature of one's reflect-soul. Just dumbly accepting that fact helps and helps you get on with more important things.

But this is new to me. Having it seem like a clan member is turning on you with little explanation is like a kind of this-world⁴⁵ destabilizer. You've known and understood *this* part of the clubbing-order all your life: Verk is great. If you're in with Verk you are snug and happy, like being beside a warm fire just after

⁴¹They both felt a stir referring to Verk this way.

⁴²Gog was trying to steer back into the *abstract* caveperson as the topic of conversation.

⁴³This term is used more or less equally in both reverence and mockery.

⁴⁴They really say exactly this and it pretty much exactly means 'pecking-order'.

⁴⁵Reality.

dawn with a cold drizzling rain outside. You know that you're safe in your part of the tribe. It's a safe-with-many⁴⁶ feeling that helps you to relax and have clear thoughts. And just be happier.

That's all you've known and it's not even something you think about.

And then that is sort of yanked away from you without explanation, or so it seems. Like whipping away someone's sleep-skins while they're snugly and peacefully sleeping on a cold night. 'What is happening?' you want to ask but don't even understand how to ask the question or to whom you should ask.

Make any sense?", a mentally tired Grav said and sat back, purposefully relaxing, working on his wolf-sleep and listening to Gog's response.

"I think so.", said Gog. "The whole clan is your close-circle⁴⁷. All of those people deeply admire and revere Father-Brother Verk and if you feel like you're the only one who sees that nasty side of him, it makes you feel like you're going spurned-rhino.

I've just come to accept: It's there. No big deal. Do your best. Blaze your way through⁴⁸ life. "

Grav jumped up, in part because it was time to get going again, but also in part out of surprise. He turned in the air, landing on his feet to face Gog⁴⁹. Gog continued to sit on his rock with his chin on his fist, staring at Grav.

"That's its own kind of power!", said Grav, *feeling* the idea more than thinking it.

"Well, yeah. I guess."

"No, think: if disagreeing makes you feel *bad* and then eventually *crazy* well... obviously stop disagreeing⁵⁰."

"That's true, brother.", said Gog "I don't even think it takes a bad person, necessarily. Under some circumstances, plain old cavemen will mostly react in the same way. It's not entirely the 'fault' of the individual. It's also not entirely the 'fault' of the circumstances. It's a mix. Like when a lizard-bird's egg just

⁴⁶Safety in numbers.

⁴⁷The closest layers of one's 'tribe'.

⁴⁸*transitive verb To indicate (a trail) by making blazes.* Did you think this had something to do with fire? Isn't this *your* language? The expression used by Gog refers to marking a trail as you go with a sharp axe. It's an expression that simply means 'make your way through...' (e.g. life)

⁴⁹Being as fit as a monkey, some of the caveperson physical mannerisms would often astound you. "The peak of human fitness" is not any kind of cliché for them. Everyone is pretty close to there out of necessity. And what is more, it was never seen as any kind of burden to them to maintain this kind of fitness. Life was just life. A Crec would leap your 8-foot garden fence with a grunt in the same way you would deftly leg over crotch-high barrier with a beer in each hand.

⁵⁰It is worth noting that the men could literally be killed for most of this talk if overheard by any two other Crec. The confidence that they were alone was nearly absolute. No different from assuming you won't some day get hit by a stray arrow.

happen to fall into a pond full of crocodile hatchlings⁵¹. That one lizard-bird pretty much has the productivity of a whole pond to himself⁵², neatly packaged up."

"It's not the fault of either, kind of. It just is.", said Grav

"Is indeed!", huffed Gog "Let's get there!"

They were off in an efficient run immediately.

The place where they would soon arrive was waiting, with its turned up mud and various mining implements. There were what could be called water-works for processing bulk quantities course, rocky earth for something rare and stubborn.

Gog's helpful contribution, which now looked like a monstrous, tired giraffe leaning over the river as if to drink⁵³, was in fact *not* supposed to be leaning over the river, but no matter. It was a structure that was mostly STRUCTURE. Its long, cantilevered, nearly horizontal span was rather tirelessly engineered, with experiments and all, resulting in a lot of triangles and neatly uniform, arm-thick⁵⁴ spans of twist-vine.

Its justifying feature was a relay of split bamboo culverts that made about a five pinkie-thumb diameter⁵⁵ channel for water. Big enough for an all-finger child to use as a kind of water slide, which happened only once. All the splicing work had been done expertly, so it was about as water-tight as a stone channel over a rope bridge, but it could *swivel*. It was fed by the river starting about one and half of one boulder-door⁵⁶. men upstream.⁵⁷

The floating-slucie swiveled expertly on a conveniently already extant poplar tree⁵⁸ about 10 man high and one and one half man around at the base. It had polished, dense, shiny sections at intervals where the oiled⁵⁹ oak bearings burnished the wood. Once worked in, the wood was like smooth, ancient stone. This bit of the rigging would last forever. The sluice itself ran out to a fixed 12 man length and continuously gave a heavy, ongoing, cold, laminar punch into whatever it was hanging over. Left overnight, it would gouge a parabolic hole into the river bed three man deep.

⁵¹The lizard-bird does not bother to nest or even land to lay its eggs. It simply drops them while in flight, and always over water. The egg floats just under the surface in what is usually a calm, stagnant, warm lake at the height of summer, and then hatches several days later. What emerges has nothing to fear from a crocodile hatchling.

⁵²Yes, Crecspeak has gendered 2nd-person pronouns. And yes they would blithely use this word here.

⁵³But instead was vomiting ferociously.

⁵⁴No offense, but *their* arm, not yours.

⁵⁵Bamboo, being well "engineered", can scale even bigger than this. This was not the biggest bamboo available to them (although this was definitely on the larger side), but, yes, it is far larger than anything you may have seen.

⁵⁶100

⁵⁷As the math is tedious here: about 300 meters. Crec reckoning is covered in the appendix.

⁵⁸Pronounced 'wazlic'

⁵⁹Bear

The poplar had been chosen for its straightness (among other things). With a bit of patience, the sluice could be tuned and squared up such that two men could work it with long pieces of twist-vine, and some heaving.

It could be shortened at will, down to just over 9 man. Viewed from above, this created a working area in the shape of a three-man wide "ring", with an outside radius of 12 man. There was a one-part-out-of-ten⁶⁰ pie slice in the ring where the spillway works fed the sluice.

This gave the two men and their "concern" a lot of destructive potential from the local ecology's point of view. They had been making good use of it. One might think that you methodically blast away sections of this great ring and patiently sort through what comes up, and it does go this way in some places. In most places, the pounding water would just completely blast away whatever it was slung over. *Getting* to that stuff without wasting time or missing anything valuable was the trick.

You could position this blast-zone by swinging the sluice over the un-mined bits slowly, so that it gently (as it were) eats into virgin river bed⁶¹. The force of the water was such that more than just silt and pebbles got stirred up. Head-sized boulders would swirl merrily along this twisting torus of purposeful erosion.

"River-Fist", the Workers had named this exciting part of the destruction.

Irregular, jagged rocks weighing up to about 30 gourd⁶² would be tossed more or less at random by all this mostly toroidal swirl of water.

The higher a rock ended up on the parabolic cavity made by the River-Fist, the longer it stayed there. Rocks that happen to land toward the bottom of the gouge got knocked around until they were sucked up by the River-Fist again, for another go.

The highest-up of these rocks, if they passed even the most cursory inspection for potential got fetched by some brave, mostly tethered Workers and were thrown as far from the current work area as possible, usually a particular direction or area that was carefully selected after much consideration.

These were the "Feelers". The river water, being completely opaque here for obvious reasons, required Feelers to fish around with their feet and stoop, but hopefully not *dive* down to fetch whatever healthy-sized rock was there and heave it at least *towards* the prescribed direction.

This area was often tended by a rather relaxed crew of Soon-Leave to ensure, depending on circumstances, that the newly-mined rocks did not fall into the river or otherwise go missing. They might maintain a berm to check the rocks and

⁶⁰The Crec just talk in terms of fractional circles, not "degrees" for example.

⁶¹Of course, the river is not a circle. The sluice's arc went over riverbank, ancient riverbed, low cliffs and the like.

⁶²A "gourd" was a unit of both mass and volume. Its mass worked out to just over a half a kilogram. Its volume was of course the volume of just over a kilogram of water. It works out to roughly one pound (mass) or two 'modern' cups of water.

boulders at risk of falling back in, depending on circumstances, or sometimes help with the heaving of an especially stubborn rock. A lot of what the Soon-Leave did depended on "circumstances".

Everybody was naked, boys and baby-makers, and covered entirely in smooth, rich clay. It had the look of a troupe of especially smart, uniformly brown monkeys working intently on some vast, seemingly pointless project.

They hadn't had the Feelers until about three-part-of-four moons⁶³ ago. Inevitably some Worker's child would be flailing around in the already-worked areas and helpfully point out a healthy-sized rock that deserved examination. And, quite rarely, but not never did this turn out to be a real value-stone of a value-stone. Before, they had only been collecting stones small enough to fetch as they were cast up near the surface and there had been general sorting and sifting of the surrounding, more convenient work areas. Having learned that some of the massive rocks were worth their while, a new career track had been born.

This was all a lot of work, in case you hadn't guessed.

Downstream of the Feelers were, with the size and age of the caveperson descending as we go downstream, were a squirrel-hoard of Feeler-Lookers⁶⁴, who of course had to both feel and look for any rock, according to guidelines regularly communicated, drilled upon, and featured in the mandatory training skit, where nervous new-hires would sit uncomfortably, watching the Worker Onboarding Troupe explain the criteria by which they were to identify and handle potential value-stone. And they were many⁶⁵.

Downstream of the Feeler-Lookers were, of course, the Lookers. These were the youngest and the smallest, safe in the broad, shallow, and now comparatively gentle *Lame Rhino*. To the extent possible, Gog⁶⁶ would only hire the more clever children for this role. It was easy physically, but it was important and so needed to be done right; to the extent possible.

The Lookers' job was to look for anything of value at all, but especially try to *accurately* discover evidence that the sluice was encountering value-butter⁶⁷. A river like *The Lame Rhino* always had flakes of mica and pyrite⁶⁸ and these had to be distinguished from value-butter. If even only a flake or two was seen and confidently identified (Gog was always working on an accurate read of 'confident' with these most unsophisticated Workers. It was an ongoing dance.) a number of things were to happen with purposefulness and promptness.

First, the river was diverted to a degree, depending on urgency, second, the sluice was stopped.

⁶³About three weeks

⁶⁴"Rock-Lookers" before the adjustments.

⁶⁵TBD, Appendix

⁶⁶Who somehow ended up with the "cavepeople problems."

⁶⁷Gold

⁶⁸Which they had names for

They were trained to not only use the special resources and keen vision that they as cavechildren naturally had, they also were trained to use two polished obsidian mirrors⁶⁹, one in each hand, to scan the now clearing water, using an extra couple of doses of sunlight. With practice, the beams could be crossed underwater to make a sort of ball of intense light that they could deftly control. Most fell into a rhythm; and just zig-zagged across the river looking intently. A prize, whose value seemed to always be just more than the one before, was granted to the first child to halt the works for the discovery of any significant quantity of value-butter.

The sluice was "disarmed", as they termed it, first by a shout to the spillway Unit-Leader, high up on the platform built around the poplar to service this bit of the works.

The Unit-Leader would then turn, nod to his subordinate Workers, and unfold his arms to make a vague "get on with it" gesture. The Workers would place a smartly shaped rock called a "boar" in the spillway feeding the sluice and the incoming water, moving at about two man per drop-stone, would hit this specially shaped stone, causing it to create a great "fan" of water, mostly in the vertical direction but slightly off-center. Modern readers who have seen a snowplow will have a good mental starting point.

By the time the water came back down to the level of the spillway, after shooting up (mostly) it was about as destructive as a thrice-in-life very heavy rain. By the time it got down to the great pylons supporting the raised spillway, it was pretty much like a five-year strong afternoon summertime sky-draining. The youngest and least employed played wildly under the heavy, cold shower. Small-ones⁷⁰ usually outnumbered the older, working people. Some of them were there with mother or father. Some of them just showed up, and sometimes even spoke fluently in an unknown tongue and no other. In the latter case, they would usually disappear after all-finger day or so, but the stock would replenish. They were pretty mysterious and impish, thought most of the Crec. *But children are children*, they thought.

Today however, it was 'quiet', as the mine goes. The sluice, while destructive, made no more noise than the surrounding river system. The sluice continued to unload its column of vast weight into the cold river.

Grav had decided, and Gog had not objected, to leave the sluice running while the site was unattended. This would keep the wood wet, and not cause undue wear to the spillway trestle work that surely will add up one day, given enough overuse of the boar. This required someone to remember to stop the advance of the sluice at about one palm from quitting time and let the various lookers and feelers do their work, with increasingly less excitement, until there was enough agreement that nothing more was going to be stirred up. If they were in a hurry

⁶⁹Experimentation continues on the best kind of reflective stone for this, as value-butter has a distinct color different from even that of the best impostors, if one looked closely.

⁷⁰Toddlers. Contrast "quiet-ones"

(everyone had a schedule) they might back up the sluice instead. This practice vaguely irked the two men.

Grav and Gog made it into the first clearing of the site, stopping from what had become a near sprint; the obstacles to forward progress haven gotten scarce in the last boulder-door men⁷¹. They were winded but not yet out of breath.

Panting, Gog said, "Let's put in a short day, eh? We'll sit in our office⁷² and plan a bit more."

"Well, let's get there first so I can both sit down and also hear myself think, if for no other reason." Grav complained a lot about distractions (what other people called "noise".)

The two men headed down a path that most expediently took them to an area that is 1) far from the river and 2) dense with lush, pleasant jungle. Their office was a clearing in such a place, and given the possibly overly enthusiastic effort by both to find the densest jungle, the office had a roof! The jungle was more 'carved' here, in three dimensions.

After knocking out a lot of growth they were pleased to find that they had a dappling of sunlight for most of the day provided by a mesh above of healthy⁷³ variegated, fat, yellow-green leaves sprouting from a cobweb of very determined vine whose corresponding anchoring to the ground was hopelessly undeterminable. It was like a fabric woven of living vine, truly.

Not telling Gog, Grav would occasionally find an interesting stem to clip near the ground just to admire the unpredictable lightning bolt path the murdered vine would trace out along the walls and ceiling after shriveling and browning for a few days. Gog was irked, Grav got some fun out of it. The vines would more than grow back either way.

Gog eventually got determined and after a lot of spying eventually found a cleanly snapped vine near the ground, one or two man into the thick web of vine at the base of a wall, which is a trick to do if your goal is to not kill anything else. Gog was still considering what to do with this evidence.

Grav took to his ham-stone and propped his bare, black feet up on the sand-draw table, that had various important-looking writings on it that each man simply assumed was important, written by the other, and therefore not subject to erasure.

⁷¹A caveperson's capacity to run through any kind of terrain, keeping the fastest pace allowed by circumstances is practically limitless. The idea was to keep up speed, unless there is a reason not to. There are always rests, but if you *can* run fast you *do* run fast (unless there is a reason not to.)

⁷²This word is chosen because G&G's 'office' was a particular place with a particular purpose and so isn't just some rock next to a tree. They would say 'office' if they could.

⁷³G&G had a Worker dedicated to caring for what they called their 'office-plants', which in this case called for some engineering experience with 'live loads' as well.

"Oh, I forgot to mention. Father-Brother Verk said that if I found a three deer carcass value-stone, I could skip club-drill.

He looked at his left nipple, wrinkling his chin with his determination to get a better look. Gog looked back without being seen.

"I, uh, said I'd bring him such a stone and *also* attend drill."

"You fallen-goat! Why the cursed After-Die-World would not just say nothing at all and just *nod*? Child. Do you realize that you immediately took away literally all of your bargaining power in a drop-stone and now you literally have to do exactly that? I mean, *both* the definitely achievable goal of showing up, **and** finding such a value-stone, which I would imagine I'm going to have to help you with? You prolapsed-rectum!

Why in the goat-sack would you do that? You... Thanks, brother. A squirrel-horde⁷⁴."

"Let's get to work", Grav said.

Gog threw a rotted gourd and squarely struck Grav in the back of the head as he walked away. Grav stopped.

Gog was making the hedonistic honk-and-wheeze laugh he makes when the truly funny strikes him. Grav angrily thought about having a talk with the cleaning crew.

"I'm sorry brother! I didn't know that it was both thoroughly rotten and *hard*. We should figure out how to *make those*!!"

Since both men knew the objective and neither was happy about the circumstances, they got to work, mostly in silence.

"You could have gotten *me* out also, you know?", snarled Gog.

"Oh, you would have stood and negotiated with Verk, huh? Toes to toes?"

"Uuuuuugh!⁷⁵", Gog moaned. "Of course I see your side of it. It's... like we were talking about earlier regarding control and such. It's the *could-be-is-not*⁷⁶ aspect of it. In *could-be* you could have negotiated and promised maybe a better stone. Maybe. I donno. Ender-Of-Questions be **mounted!**"

Grav grinned at his friend's enthusiastic use of all manner banana-words. He could be creative, go way outside the standard rotation, and still somehow communicate exactly the nuances of whatever outrage he was in the middle of experiencing. And it was instinctual, like those intricate, hierarchical drum rhythms used by the Balrag.

⁷⁴The Crec, *especially* Grav and Gog, have roughly the same talent for and perception of sarcasm as you.

⁷⁵A surprising amount of their grunts overlap with ours.

⁷⁶Hypothetical

As both men thought of this as "just the first morning's work", they were taking turns diving at the base of the now relatively calm gouge that the floating-slucice had made since the last workday. They had moved the slucice back in order to have a relatively calm workspace.

The slucice would gouge out another half man of depth overnight, depending on conditions, and often enough, something worth examining would be uncovered, sometimes protruding out of the silt like great crocodile eggs⁷⁷. Each man would dive, feel around a bit, emerge take a small break and repeat, for hours as it turned out because this particular gouge was laden with quite a few frustratingly marginal stones, which, 'marginal' notwithstanding, had to be hauled out to be examined *at all*.

The two men were exhausted and both thinking it was time to move on to other schemes. There were still a few down there and near the center was the one that both had independently discovered, made mental note of, and didn't discuss until now.

"That one in the middle is especially big.", said Gog.

"Yeah. That contraption we were thinking on to vine those out could stand to be ready about now. That's bigger than the one that inspired us!", said Grav.

"Which, you might add, took four of our biggest Feelers, plus us to haul out. We paid Drih an extra one part of all-finger all-finger gourd[fn:: A gourd is *approximately* one pound of mass. All of the finger math works out to: 1/1000. So this means "one thousandths of a pound of gold", which works out to 0.016 modern gold ounces. Workers wages were always paid in gold. G&G had to pretty much invent the idea of value in order to pay the Workers, and value-butter (gold) was the least ambiguous thing to use, as almost any other thing they could think of had value that was abstract and negotiable. Paying in value-stone would have been like paying modern workers in fine paintings; yes, they have value, but its hard to know just how much without haggling with each and every Worker on payday (or pay *days*, as payment was cleverly staggered.)

Grav had begun to think about two different *kinds* of value: The kind that is unambiguous, universally agreed-upon, and easily calculated (like gold), which he called 'fungal' (as it can spread and is uniform, like a fungus.) The other kind is subject to haggling and may vary from one person to the other (like paintings or gems). He called this kind of value 'not-fungal!'] to smash it to pieces over the course of a whole day, only to find a *couple* of uvula⁷⁸" Gog added after some genuine thought, "I *think... maybe!*"

"Welp!", said Grav.

"This looks like a job for the reflect-soul⁷⁹. Shall we lay about in on the rocks?"

⁷⁷there has got to be some wild uses for actual crocodile eggs.

⁷⁸This is the closest and most familiar thing 'pea sized' (and shaped) that the Crav are ever likely to encounter.

⁷⁹mind

"After you. I am made of liver.⁸⁰", said Grav.

The two men lounged with a clean soul. They already had their day's workout in; sprinting through a 3D maze for the first half, and almost drowning during the second half of the morning. And now they had eaten some of the dried and pressed ambling-feast liver pucks. With sated bellies, they both lounged facing skyward, topping off their philosopher's tans ⁸¹.

"If we can swing the sluice back and forth at the right speed, we can make the rock sway back and forth in time ever harder⁸². It's too bad we can't rope it up and. . ."

"Wait. . . how can we be made of liver when liver is the thing that gives us the most power?"

Gog stared.

"If our flesh becomes liver, why would we not use that as power?"

"Do you think we actually become liver?", said Gog.

Despite having clever minds, the two men had ideas that were just as firmly implanted as say "God" is in some modern humans. There is no source in shame if you are late in realizing that some things are less literal than other things. Some things went directly from an angry "must not be challenged" to a collaborative "must not be discussed" rather quickly, as this was the only way of handling these things.

The obviousness of it occurred to Gog immediately and he felt ashamed at his naïveté.

"Eee..heh. Every now and then one of those pops up late in life for you and you are just so saddened by your reflect-soul."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure I'll top you one day.", assuaged Gog, reluctantly.

"Great Questions!", exclaimed Grav.

"What?"

"We could roll stones down the sluice and hammer it with them. There's enough strength in the water to push some big stones. Maybe even boulders⁸³. We know how to easily pick nice heavy, useless ones. They're all over the place. There's even a good pile of especially big ones near the spillway feed tower."

⁸⁰Very tired.

⁸¹Having a uniform facial tan, without any lightening under your eyelids or beneath your nose or chin, is a sign of confident accomplishment, and having serenity of mind. "Upper class" only in that it has a distinguished look, like a neatly shaved face. In a way it means, 'I do not have to work because I am smart.'

⁸²The men called this technique 'self-shake-rhythm'.

⁸³Their reckoning was about 273 millimeters, ours is 256.

"Hmmm... ", deeply pondered Gog. "Oh, we could also divert at the falls upriver like last time we had to bring the water down. Most of that is still there... obviously. We might be able to get rock-on-rock without any water in the way."

"Ooo. I like!⁸⁴"

Grav and Gog had clambered up to the falls where a dam had been constructed to divert most of the river several months ago.

Just after this damn had been constructed, tested, and then disabled, the twin of a small-one thought to be owned by a Worker interrupted a planning meeting in a panic insisting that his brother was pinned under a boulder. After lots of very focused, serious questioning, the boy said this was about two boulder-door men⁸⁵ downstream where the river pinched and became more rapid.

The whole mine had come together to rapidly re-enable the dam to send the river on a different (as of then, virgin) course. The dam consisted of a number of cleverly-fitting pieces, mostly boulders, and could be opened and closed in a short time with enough caveman power. There was lowering the river, and then there was "stopping" the river. There were a few dams. The stated goal of this one was the latter.

They happened to also be shorthanded that day and so worked frantically, if only to recover a body. The men who went and returned from downstream said it was too deep and strong to safely explore possible boulders, of which there were many. The one the boy pointed to was impossible. The best that might be done is to dislodge the body with a long tree trunk handled by many men.

The dam-building was completed in about 45 minutes, with only the powerful spray between boulders feeding the Natural river. And a hungry torrent heading roughly at a right angle to the river's original course soon took out trees and made a gorge that would surely need a name eventually.

A chain of men, headed out when it was only just marginal, long enough to peek, peek again, and if possible feel under several boulders, including the prime candidate. The river was also noticeably clearer now, which helped.

An older man who was doing his best to be helpful with suggestions and the general dissemination of information to those who could use it approached the boy. "Now, goat-calf, so you think these men have checked under all of the likely boulders? Could it maybe be the one behind the big one?"

The boy stared at the man and wrung his fists nervously. "I am sorry, sir, I don't know anything about this."

Being struck by the child's answer, the man scanned the river bank to see if anyone else heard or could decipher what the child meant.

⁸⁴The literal pronunciation of this expression was 'mi-gewstaah', which overlaps a modern language pretty closely in both pronunciation and nuance, surprisingly.

⁸⁵About 600 meters.

As his eyes scanned the nearby Forest, he saw another, rather identical boy with one eye visible in the crook of a forked tree, and the lower half of him clearly visible.

"You!", he pointed directly at the boy. "Come here to me right now!"

With the casual affectation that only guilty children have, he sauntered to the old man's feet, standing next to his brother.

"Is this the brother that drown?", he asked. "Are there only **two of you**?"

"I'm sorry, sir. He said he was going to play downstream. I thought he said 'swim' downstream. I think he threw something big in the river and when I looked, I only saw the splash and kept looking for him to come up.

We cleared all this up just now."

"All-Questions! You troublesome boy. If we ever figure out who you are here with, we are going to ask them never to bring you again."

Both boys ran into the woods and it would turn out, never be seen again by anyone with any confidence⁸⁶.

On this occasion, the men used the same dam but with some pieces missing. The work was exhausting and they needn't overdo things. The men spent quite a while heaving the boulders into position, each rocking and threatening to topple at any time, and then hopefully being stabilized. Behind this, they put several layers of sturdy woven bamboo screens⁸⁷.

Once complete, the large boulder in the center of the gouge was not exposed but had only about a palm of muddy water rushing over it. It would do.

As today's boulder was more or less in the center of the gouge, the river-fist landed more or less directly on its top. Having to discover by trial that rocks would take a shorter path than the water, they lengthened the sluice a bit until the smaller trial boulders, heaved as far up the sluice as could be thrown, were knocking on the large boulder's top squarely.

There were no good places to just pick up mighty boulders and drop them in the sluice. The only option was hauling the biggest boulders they could carry up the zig-zag of ladders to the top of the sluice where it's fed by the spillway. This they did, and after an infuriating walk or two down to adjust the sluice, they had a reliable way to konk the large, intriguing boulder right on its head, over and over, with the biggest boulders they care to carry one half of one boulder-door⁸⁸

⁸⁶This was speculated upon and discussed by all for nearly a moon, when work was conducive to idle speculation and clay-talk. A few, but only a few called the mystery 'the twins paradox'.

⁸⁷In contrast to bamboo *fiber* screens, these were literally woven of wrist-thick bamboo, which could be accomplished only with a lot of steam and a crafted strategical lack of perfectionism. *Behind this* the screen featured finer bamboo-fiber mesh, with the forward-most (downstream direction) layer of actual woven bamboo providing the strength required by so much powerfully moving water.

⁸⁸50

men up a series of ladders that verged on stairs but definitely were not stairs and definitely were a series of ladders for boulder-hauling purposes.

The heavy boulders caused the sluice to bounce as they went down, usually not destructively but enough to affect accuracy, and so one man would carry boulders and the other would fine-tune the sluice, carrying boulders to the base of the trestle if the sluice could be left alone for a while.

Gog, while jogging around below, noticed that the sluice looked like a great trunk-harp⁸⁹ string in bright, dusty sunlight, even having different "notes". Not being able to see the boulders from below, he had a hunch it had to do with boulder size.

Grav, now genuinely trembling with exhaustion as only a caveman can, felt some frustration at having to send down a promising boulder or two. In theory, the gouge would be littered with conveniently smashed rock. He wondered if they'd be at that large boulder for a while. If it was promising... why not? Maybe do more of this. Maybe the great boulder's real value would be in that of a smashing device for *other* more interesting rocks.

Having moved the sluice downstream, and with the river still rather low, they reclined productively on the sides of the gouge, each man alternately slipping and scurrying back up the muddy sides, as he did his best to examine pieces of stone found during all the scurrying. The rejects they both wisely decided they should throw in a "smart" direction and so agreed on a certain spot over the berm where the bank (of *some* river) was closest.

"I've seen a few. You know where I'm tossing them.", said Gog.

"Yep.", said Grav, still exhausted and not recovering much.

"So... it's not a failed-hunt and we found some good stuff.", said Gog.

"Yeeah, but there is 'no get out of club-drill' sized value-stone like we'd hoped."

"Nope.", said Gog.

"Nope."

Grav and Gog got their gear together, knowing that this was enough for one day. It was only one-palm-after-noon or so but they hadn't intended to make a full day out of only this, and Gog hadn't expected to get drug into a greased-

⁸⁹Some strong, dried sinew tied on one end to a hopefully-hollow trunk, and to a bit of the same tree's root (usually excavated for) on the other end, with a sort of pedal (stick, about 1/2 man long) whose one end was put on the nearby ground and the other against the sinew, near the bottom, that can be pressed variously by a foot to produce different tightness (notes) in the string. Others would strike, slap, rub with smooth honey-tackeyed sticks, dampen, punch, glance with arrows, beat with one's spear or one of your enemy's arms... whatever the trance called for. Glancing the string just right with the fingertips of a human arm made an astonishingly beautiful harp sound that was in great demand. It's quite an instrument given that it can be put together in about a minute.

obsidian-hatchling chase⁹⁰. On some days, the exhaustion told you it was time to quit before the sun did.

They passed through the "interesting pile" and toed around as they always do out of habit. Gog, with his toe, not bothering to bend down, pushed around some head-sized rocks to see underneath, as a strategy for maximizing rocks-inspected for given effort. He could indeed "toe" entire torso sized boulder, to an extent, having an intimate understanding of rock dynamics and legs that were made out of iron-tree⁹¹.

One rock that he had only touched with his toe, and then reconsidered, moving on to others made a sharp "click"⁹².

"What the sew?", said Gog, who was the only one able to connect the sound with the cleanly split rock just next to his foot. Grav turned and followed Gog's gaze, instantly making a face to match his; one of wonderment.

The oddly uniform, oddly oval, oddly beautiful-on-its own stone had been split in two by a perfectly flat planar separation that Gog had to repeatedly swear there was no hint of before the audible crack.

Already the two men knew they were the caretakers of one of the most wondrous objects anyone had ever seen⁹³. From each side, both of them scuttled downward along the slight grade toward the stone and knelt on one knee to look.

The inside was just visible and it was apparent that it was as uniform, smooth, and shiny as a puddle on a very still and quiet morning⁹⁴.

They beheld a smooth, uniform, gray egg-shaped stone about 3 pinkie-thumb on its longest axis, split longways, exactly.

"It did that a good five drop-stone after I just *touched* it with my toe. It's like it was already under some force and was just waiting for someone to just touch it and set it off.", said Gog.

"Amazing.", Grav said at a whisper, not even aware he was responding, and still staring.

⁹⁰A 'wild goose chase'. The greased hatchling chase was a drunken, sadistic mob activity that for some reason also involved much more butt-slapping than is normally observed. This was neither acknowledged nor understood by the Crec. The 'grease' came from the mother, which had been eaten. If there was a sufficiently feisty, scruffy, angry chick hopping around screeching as the men ate leisurely, they would, given enough end-of-the-hunt juff and spirit, catch and chuck the bird into its mother's self-made frying oil, where it would immediately hop out, now bald, greasy, furious and in pain, and having no more interest in anything but escape, would bolt into the woods. If a man caught it, he was permitted one copulation with the wife of his choosing, from any of the men.

⁹¹Yes, the very same tree with the very same name.

⁹²The two men had a more or less modern-human ear. The majority of this 'click', while still sharp and clear to the men, was in the ultrasonic range and caused two incongruous bats cruising the bright blue morning sky to make a u-turn.

⁹³They would have sought traffic cones and bright black-yellow tape if they knew of such.

⁹⁴Ideal to check your teeth for signs of breakfast.

Peering inside, between the gap, to see exactly what was there was frustratingly hard, as the crack was no more than a few leaves in breadth. A nearby hand mirror helped some with the light, but it glittered so loudly on the inside that the line made by the crack was more or less just a whiteish-blue and solid glow when lit, and black when not.

"We *have* to pick this thing up and somehow check it out, but I am terrified that we'll break something inside that is likely to be a once-in-life find.", Grav said while thinking. "You know... that thing is *heavy* I remember it specifically, admiring how smooth and perfect it is. I had to give it an extra good heave, as you'd guess, but it managed to fly a bit high, despite my instincts and landed here with a very solid 'crack'. And *that* didn't do this. Your *toe* did? I was sure I'd have to scurry out and throw it the rest of the way. It was like it had wings."

"We should maybe start by removing some silt? Maybe pour a few gourd of water on it while we work? Go get some, would ya? Our drinking gourds are just upstream. I mean, yeah... I'm like you; the suspense is killing me.", said Gog.

Grav returned with the two gourds⁹⁵ filled with water which he gently poured over the rock while Gog cleared the silt. They both knew that, whatever's inside, it's not going to be bothered by some water. Nothing that has spent the whole before-and-after-questions in the earth was bothered much by water. They repeated this with an all-finger or so of trips to fetch more water.

Another thing a rock of any kind can tolerate is some gentle nudging with a green twig. Grav explored the perimeter of the crack making mental notes. "I'm going to say it: It's exactly like there is a yolk in there."

"Yum!", said Gog. "Maybe we should just secure it in this position and take it back to the office."

"I suppose. Some bump or disappointment or other is inevitable. Let's do that and knock out some of the ceiling. I think it's worth it for this.", said Grav.

"I reluctantly agree with you.", said Gog.

Having gently wedged in some green, spongy twigs into the gap and wrapped the whole "egg" with twist-vine, they used yet more twist-vine to lash the stone to a couple of poles to make a kind of litter.

They both raised the stone to hip height slowly, expecting another strange surprise underneath. It turned out to be just more stone and mud, unsurprisingly, as this was not its birthplace, so to speak.

They worked their way up and down slopes, trying to keep things gentle and smooth, if not always level.

⁹⁵Their combined capacity was more like 7 gourd. Do you wonder why a drinking gourd would be three and a half standard gourds in capacity? They were inconsistent, what can one say?

Midway through the clearing between the closest of the worked river basin and the beginning of their office entrance way⁹⁶, both sticks suddenly and unexpectedly snapped where they came closest to the rock. The precious bundle was allowed to fall a good half-man onto an inconveniently placed sharp rock (which was probably not even necessary.)

There was no longer any need to discuss how to get the thing open and which long and painful protocols to follow. The great stone egg gave up its secrets right there on the muddy clearing, both halves rocking almost mockingly for a bit with the "yolk" sliding back and forth on the smooth inner surface, free from its perfect cradle, refusing to fall back in place, or over the verge.

The two men, useless sticks in hand, stared silently as the two halves came to a standstill.

They stared some more.

"It looks like a rock-stick.", said Gog, with an involuntary vomiting guffaw that made a fart sound.

"Uhhm. . . Yeah. Like, a lot.", said Grav under his breath.

They continued to stand there looking at the strange scene before them, shaking their heads⁹⁷.

And for a while, after the rocking stopped they took turns making the involuntary, soft, high gurgle of the dumbfounded.

"Now, this creates at least one serious dilemma.", said Gog. Grav watched him as he spoke with a face that said, 'I know, I know'. "This is, as hoped for, the biggest value-stone that we or possibly. . . probably anyone has ever seen. And yet, it looks like a big, fat boulder-stump."

Grav snorted despite the unreal circumstances. Neither having seen anything remotely like this in either size or character; character carrying a lot of the weight in this case.

"Now see, if we show this. . ."

"Obviously I know, Gog."

"Maybe if we just play dumb? Maybe if we dress it up?"

"Do you want to put a ceremonial palm-skirt on it?"

⁹⁶which was 15 man long and had a side passage or two along the way: Office supplies, miscellaneous.

⁹⁷It meant "disbelief" and it involved moving the head, but it's not your head movement gesture. This was like the gentle head bob of an unaware game bird on the lookout for beetles and mates but otherwise without any kind of agenda for the time being. It also meant 'yes', which is a gesture easily picked up by children as these kind of birds were always around settled places, despite their eggs being stolen and getting killed violently at random. 'Yes, yes. All is good for *now*', the birds seemed to always think when not in a panic, which was their only other state.

Both men laughed.

Grav was holding it in his hand in the least sexual way he could manage, inspecting it with wonder. It was a scapolite⁹⁸... penis, about one and one half of one pinkie-thumb long that, for the less banana-minded, might pass for something else. It was almost a kind of purity test in its ambiguity.

It was something that *might* be benign looking enough to show grandmother, if you coyly avoided her eye for the first few drop-stone after revelation, looking at your fingernails, say.

It was a kind of crypto-stick, for it did lack rocks. And was blunt at the "bottom", as though this was exactly what this particular unlikely combination of crystals did: Form a big human penis, and then stop abruptly when the penis part was obviously over with.

Its enclosing "egg" was a sort of geode that was a semi-transparent dark blue crystal with sparkling silver veins running from the void at its center, outward to the edge of the stone as though "radiating" from the middle; like the penis had a kind of starburst of patterns emanating from it that could only be vaguely glimpsed by breaking the stone, which had been done already by Nature. All who saw it decided it needed no more exploratory cracks.

Being wet and muddy as described, it fell and stuck halfway into the mud when Grav made the mistake of trying to hold it by its "base" and relying only on his vice-like grip on muddy stone. This could have been seen as a kind of warning to future handlers.

"Stupid-ham, you're going to break it.", said Gog.

"Somehow I get the idea this doesn't break easily.", said Grav.

"Yeah. It's taken a beating already. Did you notice its little 'cubby' is shaped, like, I mean *exactly* right? It's like implausibly-unreal⁹⁹. It's a zero-allowability fit."

"What the Afterlife, brother. I am legitimately weirded out by this thing.", worried Grav aloud.

"Well," Gog said, "I am just going to follow a kind of crazy-benefit-think predict-tool here. Criticize not my hurried handy-work¹⁰⁰. What if we just totally play dumb, all day, every day¹⁰¹ and never let on.

So we found a lifetime value-stone. So what? Do you expect Father-Brother-Wife Kham to say to us, *Hey, boys, don't you think this looks like a big, rigid stone-branch?*"

⁹⁸They call this iris-stone, as it sometimes looks in color and richness like the medium-brown iris that is universal among Crec eyes, except for the cursed.

⁹⁹Magic.

¹⁰⁰Don't judge.

¹⁰¹Pronounced 'dakom!'

"Heh, that's just crazy enough to work, brother.", said Grav.

"Exactly!"

They decided that lining the cradle with two of the thinnest leaves they could find and packing the whole thing as it was found, more or less, was the safest way for it to travel. After lightly scrubbing the triune of mysterious stone with the finest silt they could find, applied with a handful of soft, green leaves, they rinsed all in a clean part of the river and let the pieces dry on the open floor for a palm or two and talked.

"Let's just decide right here and now that neither of us are going to crack. It's like a secret you're sworn to keep, except in this case you are obliged to always keep up an act: We have no idea it looks like the massive, fully grown caveman's throbbing pebble-twig. We think it looks more like a kind of fish we saw once; exactly like that kind of fish!

We're hopelessly biased in that direction. We are deaf to the innuendos of even our closest-circle.", said Gog with some certainty.

"That will be difficult." Grav said, watching Gog bob his head up and down, making a sadist's smile. "I mean with, say Father-Brother Verk, that's easy, but with those all-finger-and¹⁰² boys that like to ask for feedback on their banana-language that often corner us just out of town¹⁰³. They're always guffawing and, despite myself, I find myself wanting to one-up them with the banana-juggling¹⁰⁴. I can't see myself not cracking."

"Yep, including them!", Gog said, demanding total surrender to the plan.

"You scat-pile on it too?¹⁰⁵"

"Yep. I'm in. I think it's fun to mount human behavior just for the colliding-stamped aspect of it¹⁰⁶. Is any of this *wrong*? I mean, I don't think for a second that it is. How, omitting our opinion about what something might look like? We cannot decide not to take sides? Maybe we begrudgingly see a similarity but lots of things in the Forest have that shape."

Gog: "Yep."

¹⁰²"Tween"

¹⁰³The Crec's concept of 'town' was any place where you stopped seeing occupied caves for a bit. When you suddenly realized this, you were out-of-town. It's a concept that has the subconscious as part of its definition.

¹⁰⁴Shit talk, smack talk, clay-talk but nastier. See the appendix about 'yo mama' jokes.

¹⁰⁵Nearly all boys, and almost always only boys, at some point would encounter the solemn scat-pile ritual. It's like a pinkie promise except, to signal the gravity of your oath, the boy subject to the oath would shit on top of a freshly laid shit made by the other boy. This was a symbolic way of saying, we are together in this dangerous world and 'I promise'. Scat, human or otherwise, has an intimate part to play in the predator-pray dynamic. *Your* scat, all by itself, even if long behind you, is always an invitation for a predator to follow. It has its parallels in our world. Among men this was said with a twist of mirth but at the same time seen as a legitimate promise, as all promises made by true cavemen are actual, legitimate promises, rituals or irony aside.

¹⁰⁶It's fun to fuck with people, even if only for the train wreck angle.

"So, as absurd as everything that has happened in the last 10 palms is, I think we need to focus, as I assume we are carrying that sinful bulk back with us.", said Grav.

The two men carefully packed the bundle as described, then wrapped the assembled "egg" in alternating layers of dense, soft leaves and twist-vine, resulting in a safe, padded ball. It was still deeply perplexing that the whole bundle had fallen apart seemingly spontaneously.

They then made several man of heavier twist-vine, with which they used to suspend the bundle¹⁰⁷ from a sturdy, springy aspen trunk.

The men compared mental checklists before leaving, as was their practice, and hurried off toward Bhorv Zolk, leaving whatever they could behind.

Upon arriving, thoroughly in need of rest and food, they decided to stash it nearby in one of their plentiful "perfect" locations and spend as much time as was necessary discussing plans and minutiae, knowing that any whiff of an open attempt to humiliate Verk would probably mean unspeakable torture both physical and "social" to a degree that both had seen only once or twice, but understood to be about the worst fate a living person can have by any Crec, including them.

And so they did. The entire next day was spent trading and criticizing aspects of all of the aspects of this weird *thing* they were doing. In their optimism, they decided that, while they may not be able to skip club-drill, they could milk this "penis"¹⁰⁸ thing in ways that more than made up for it.

As for practicalities, they of course continued to agree to abide by the mutual decision to play it coy. This was not hard to do, it turned out. Those that "saw it" were shocked into sick-monkey mode, forbidding all of their being from acknowledging the now obvious. Even in front of a couple of cut-ups like Grav and Gog.

They also agreed to just lay the pieces together, on its side with the top stone naturally pressing things together, and let Verk, do the official revealing, an invitation which Verk literally could not conceive of declining.

There was no mention from Verk about any possible excused absences from drill for anyone.

Verk had gathered a medium-sized crowd into the ancient-speak burrow. The soon-to-be-revealed mineral wonder that the men had to ensure Verk was really there was still awaiting revelation. Verk wanted his own surprise to be genuine and so went along with the men's enthusiasm in describing the find, knowing that

¹⁰⁷The technique they and everyone else they knew used for something like this is what is more or less now known as "macrame".

¹⁰⁸Only you will be able to appreciate this bit of the author's humor. The Crec had no saying that is adaptable to precisely this joke.

over-selling a thing that turned out to be a disappointment for him is something the two boys would include in their calculations.

On the off chance that this was to be underwhelming, Verk tempered his urge to invite the whole clan. He could always claim that, *While exciting, we needn't trouble the children with the overwhelming wonders of science*¹⁰⁹ *until a group of distinguished adults had a good examination of it first.*

All invited were present, introductory remarks made, grateful nods made towards Grav and Gog throughout. The quiet chatter among the adults, some giddy, had died down rapidly with an expert cue from Vert; only a small change in his stance and facial expression.

"It is time, my fellow cavemen! I sure hope you brought us something grand, Grav and Gog, and we thank you for having the heart to make a gift of this mysterious find to the treasury of *The Forest Heroes' Fallen Fund*¹¹⁰."

Grav and Gog stood smiling awkwardly. The crowd was too small and close for there to be any idea which direction to face. They felt on display as well, with Verk maybe doling out a bit too much praise to keep the boys' sense of obligation sharp.

Verk did a triple-take with a broad, yellow smile for the clan portraitist and anyone else with a keen memory. He pried the two halves apart with a fine, glittering Sky Clam half¹¹¹ and a healthy-looking, tough, thick, velvety leaf which he used to protect the perimeter of the mirror-stone-like finish he had been assured he would find, among other wonders that he insisted remain a surprise.

The two men had never felt this kind of intense, surreal terror before. Either their predict-thought was correct, and Verk would not *see* what was there, or he would immediately see a fine, sparkling, extra-large false-rock-stick that would, should such a thing even exist outside of caveboy talk, be hidden carefully under feet of bat-scat in the very back of one's cave¹¹².

Verk grunted the desperate grunt of the soon-dying and heaved the top half upward, balancing it on the opposite, thick end of the "egg". The top half slid slightly to warn of its instability.

Gog and Grav each picked up the fatter, heavier end, one on each side, softly grunting in sympathy. The three men walked the top half over to one side, flipped it slowly and set its rounded, dull-gray side on a blanket of fresh leaves. Gog could see the revealed form laying in the bottom half. Grav was walking his share along with his head turned away, but both men felt the same hopeless terror combined with an oddly sweet giddiness.

¹⁰⁹For most Crec, science just meant 'pretty cool, but in a smart way.'

¹¹⁰This is a fund enjoyable only by Forest military veterans to help with the care (or funeral, as appropriate), should any of their offspring be injured or killed in a fall, which happened very regularly of course.

¹¹¹These were found on the top of nearby *Mnt. Fishes*. No one knew how or why.

¹¹²which kept it quite warm.

"My sweet Ender-Of-Questions, in its hammock above!", Verk covered his open mouth with the fingertips of both hands in a somewhat dainty gesture and smiled warmly. "It is *astonishing*.", stretching the syllables.

The men watched Verk shake his head slowly¹¹³ as they wondered which way this was going.

"It's *beautiful!*" Verk paced slowly in a semi-circle as the small crowd, also gazing and cooing, made room for him.

Verk lifted the smooth, clean, glittering brown crystal from its perfect den and held it up with wonder, letting the soft orange of the late afternoon sun coming from the nearby cave opening reveal all of the object's beautiful, strictly bilateral symmetry with the contrasting powers of well-oriented, bright sun.

"It looks like *something*...", wondered Verk aloud. "It cannot be other than a message. To comprehend what Ender's-Nature-Force¹¹⁴ has revealed to us is of the utmost importance. It is a message to us, to the Crec, straight from Its Mouth¹¹⁵."

"Indeed Grav and I thought the same thing.", offered Gog.

Verk turned to Gog, "Young buck you may be wise yet.", and smiled with a wink. This was a cue for all present to appreciate Verk's dry wit, which they did with apparent sincerity.

"Let us pass it around the room! Us Under-Men¹¹⁶ are thirsting of curiosity.", an anonymous voice said.

The small crowd of men in the large burrow took turns handling, admiring, indeed caressing the object. There was many quizzical raised eyebrows¹¹⁷, asking 'What can we learn from this?'

Some of the men, while holding it, managed to quickly have something to say to their neighbor, causing them to just as quickly pass it along. Some made

¹¹³Again, more 'bobbed'.

¹¹⁴Roughly, 'fate'.

¹¹⁵"God" was a more abstract being to the Crec than ours is to modern people. Referring to their 'god' as 'it' is in no way a kind of sacrilege. It is the pronoun to be used. For, Kug, Great Diviner of Recent Messages said in his youth, 'The Crec God has no rock-stick!'. In other words Ender-of-Questions was genderless and what is more, not thought of as 'caveperson-like' in the least. They would find the idea so humorous that, should you someday be able to inquire about theirs, offering a description of your god's nature in exchange, a revealing conversation would likely not be possible. Ender-Of-Questions *does* have a mouth, however. These kinds of things changed in a surprisingly short period of time, though. "Recorded" history had barely begun. The mutation rate was rather high in the Crec's religious world. And religion for them was more a continuum than an on/off as it is for us. *Leave Doubt For Nature's Sake!* was a customary admonishment for the overly-rational.

¹¹⁶An near analog of the modern Japanese 'kouhai', one's social inferior in some given context, in this particular case the speaker was thinking in terms of their shared military experience and shared love of knowledge.

¹¹⁷Being mostly 'biological hardware' in origin, this gesture means the same to pretty much all of humanity and their cousins.

an admiring smile and gave a sideways nod, with raised eyebrows. Those who decided they had something to contribute to the discussion sometimes missed a beat or two in the animated group conversation's rhythm, and stepping in at not quite the right time, said things like. . .

"Could it be just the front one part of four of a kind of viper, perhaps?"

"I have seen weapons much like this!"

Kin, a caveman that the Crec would say is *Married To The Forest* said, "Are these not gills, Kvred? Could it be a fish? For it has a kind of small mouth. I have seen a kind of dart-fish that has pronounced ventral muscles producing a thick, vein-like structure along the bottom, here.", at which Kvred looked nonplussed as if to say 'why are you asking me?'

This contributor, smiling and not looking at the crystal, ran his fingers "down" the "bottom" of the object; some others noticing his unkempt fingernail as it glided slowly along the crystal's surface to point out this feature.

"Does it not look incomplete to anyone else?"

"Things in Nature do not have abrupt, sharp ends like we see here." (pointing)
"Unless it is cleanly cut by a blade, like the discarded arms we see when battle turns justly."

The group of men mostly looked at the floor and seemed to be pondering this remark further.

At all this, the amount of apparent blindness to the obvious may be striking to you. After all, the Crec were naked an *awful* lot of the time, seemingly without shame. Some keen students of humanity see this kind of dissonance all the time, even in their own cultures. What one does with this kind of observation is what's important. Rarely is it pointed out recklessly. The sick-monkey way in which humans reinforce this kind of willful social blindness "at all costs" can result in literally violent reactions from anyone forced to see what they *need* to remain hidden forever.

"Father-Brother Verk, what shall we do with it?", asked one of Verk's Under-Men.

"First, it needs a name.", said Verk. "Kin, I believe you likened it to a weapon."

Kin, knowing that he had not smiled broadly.

"I shall call it, *Ender's-Sword*, for it is mighty and surely will find its use in making the Crec Forest mightier yet!" Verk had his head tilted slightly back. His closed eyelids were twitching as though fighting to remain open.

There was a gently, admiring applause and periodic tugging of noses from the audience.

"As a gift to one of the Elder-Quorum's finer charities, it will of course make its way eventually to the Hard-Guard-Cave, but tonight it goes home with me,

so I may talk with The-Ender and try in my humility to divine its message. Made-Boy-Wife-of-Verk¹¹⁸ and I will ensure it encounters no ill-treatment."

"Very good, Father-Brother Verk! Gog and I will package it in the manner in which we did for its movement from the mine. We encountered problems with our first attempt. It seems to have some tricks up its sleeve¹¹⁹."

"You are a fine help.", said Verk, his face expressionless.

The two men, having most materials already handy, re-secured the egg and its yolk, hanging it from the same well-suited springy aspen sapling. Hoisting the burden over to two of Verk's Under-Men's shoulders who, watching Verk's retreat towards the exit, set off in a trot towards the nearby guest hill¹²⁰ Verk occupied, passing Verk as he stopped and turned at the exit.

"Oh, boys", Verk said with one foot still pointed at the cave's exit. "See you at club-drill day after tomorrow?" He smiled, showing apparent warmth, pressing his hand against the springy mat of white hair covering his heart, and pausing for an answer.

"Oh, yes Father-Brother Verk. Grav and I will be there one palm sharp!"

The two men saluted by grabbing their left ankle with their right hand, locking their right knee, straightening and looking straight ahead at infinity with their shoulders square. "With the mind of a rutting ambling-feast, in a great blizzard, our Upper-Brother leader Father-Brother Verk! We will be there!"

Gog said this alone as Grav did his best to make broad, sincere eyes. The men had not yet mastered speaking-as-one-in-battle¹²¹, which is a practice soldiers of at least mid-rank were expected to do spontaneously, at times that to Grav seemed to have no pattern.

Verk squinted and stepped out into the pink late afternoon.

"Farewell for now, boys!" Verk strutted out of the cave with, as Grav observed, *that energetic walking uphill look, that unmentionably fat cavemen have.*

¹¹⁸See Appendix: 'Language and Naming Surrounding Women'.

¹¹⁹Not having shirt sleeves, the Crec actually use a similar expression that roughly means, 'magic in its garments'.

¹²⁰Kuh' Sitah

¹²¹The meaning is obvious if you think in terms of the need for soldiers to not only act as one, but to literally think as one. This is a resource that modern humans are almost entirely without. A fierce sense of personal sovereignty that exists, even in remote, simpler communities of any left-over bit of 'primitive' culture still present in our world, in all modern humans has been a kind of wrench in the works of humanity, but also a great blessing. Humanity took a kind of fork in the cultural progression road, some time long ago. With practice the Crec, any Crec and most tribes known by them at the time could, when under extreme duress where lives or maybe whole cultures are at stake, literally respond as one to their superiors, so thorough was military training. One helpful factor, in your defense is that battle lacks a lot of nuance and the overall tasks are few.

Thag

Club-drill was excruciating to the Grav and Gog in ways that they couldn't manage to communicate to others. It was mostly about being told what to do and being criticized by the ignorant and linear thinkers that were inevitably the "top bronze"; often criticized for doing exactly what you were told to do.

Another concept they wouldn't be able to explain or even be aware exists was "selection bias". It's a subtle idea. It would be a while before that one got identified and tagged.

In words that a Crec might understand: The cavemen who made their way to the top in the hierarchy were the type who really liked bossing people about. They were cavemen who were violently uninterested in the wisdom of their plans for *you*.

Given enough cavemen, you will find some outliers. You may not know anyone who likes to give orders, doesn't like to be questioned, and doesn't care whether they are "right" by *your* definition, but how many CO's¹²² does one need? Not many. And being the scrappy sort they will, in stages, work their way toward their dream job. Everyone should. Recruiting was no small part of the Armed-Forest. Outreach, recruitment and other kinds of advertising paid off in their growth, and in the recruitment of many particular *types* to fill corresponding *roles*.

As a Crec you could and probably would someday be drafted. But to make a career out of it was a different tack. If drafted and not a CO, you pretty much spent all your time either killing, being killed, or learning to kill. CO's were more the managerial type.

And since your fate was to be involved in all this anyway, *completely voluntary* "club-drills" were regularly held in locations around the Forest. If bloody combat was going to inevitably happen, one may as well be among the best-prepared.

You may have stopped and wondered yourself: What was it like to be among a sea of men on opposing "teams", all literally in a life-or-death fight with both sharp and blunt weapons of war, *right there in front of you*, wanting to kill you. And you wanting to kill *them* because of that fact. It's an unimaginably frightening thought when it's both real and likely. Try and touch that kind of terror in yourself. See if you can imagine yourself in that terrifying bloody mess: This is what motivated Grav and Gog to trek all this way, all-too-regularly.

The clubbing-camps were usually overseen by some Great Bear war hero. "Choh-Ov", the camp nearest Bhovr Zolk was run by Verk. The title of this role, the camp head, was Mother Bear¹²³. Verk was Choh-Ov's Mother Bear.

¹²²Cave Officer

¹²³Absolutely no one saw a hint of humor or absurdity in this title. Yes, it was well known that mother bears are female, but mother bears were and are fierce as monkey-business.

Fayt-Caves, which entirely surrounded Choh-Ov, was a shanty town, but carved out of rock, which really looks nicer than shanty any way you cut it. Fayt-Caves was seedy, crime-ridden, full of loud parties on an ongoing basis, had an entire district devoted to hire-baby-makers and their trade. Choh-Ov was more or less the yolk of this sad, desperate fried egg.

And it was small-knowledge¹²⁴ that this was the norm: Surrounding more or less every clubbing-camp in the Forest and its protectorates was a 'bad neighborhood' by most definitions. No one thought this amiss. It was never questioned¹²⁵.

Grav and Gog had decided to leave the day after the revelation of Ender's-Sword, giving them the opportunity to take make a leisurely day of it. They only needed to cover one and one half of one all-finger palm¹²⁶ of pretty standard jungle, woods, and scrubby savanna; the way well-traveled and therefore clearly marked, well serviced by vendors, and safe-with-many. They had even let themselves sleep in a bit¹²⁷. Since the final part of the journey crossed a wide, flat, scrubby plain and the moon was sufficiently bright, they would be able to travel for hours after dark set in.

In the worst case, they planned to bivouac one night, wake up early and arrive at Choh-Ov before conch.

As Bhorv Zolk faded into the distance, the path to the morning-sun-left-back-side¹²⁸ was gently rolling hills and low shrubs for a palm or more. Bhorv Zolk could be seen fading into the distance, which was a nice way to say goodbye to home. One got a feeling that it was very big, being visible from all this way, and would therefore surely be there when you got back¹²⁹.

Gog hummed, whistled, yipped, and struck various parts of his body, making a sort of improvised song.

"Feedback" of any kind between the two men usually took the form of cutting, merciless criticism from one toward the other. In a way, it was their stick¹³⁰. Grav withheld his commentary on Gog's music. Grav would never say such out loud, but Gog was definitely quite talented as a song-maker.

¹²⁴'small-one-knowledge', 'small-knowledge': common sense, widely known.

¹²⁵This effect was also seen surrounding Crec's very few places of high learning, 'scratching-camps'

¹²⁶About 30 'imperial' miles.

¹²⁷With rare exception, all cavepeople woke at dawn, even on deeply overcast days. Another palm of sleep more, if you found a place dark enough, was considered decadent.

¹²⁸Northwest.

¹²⁹And coming back was also a nice, slow 'hello'. You felt 'home' many palm before you actually were.

¹³⁰While "comedy" in Crec was not recognized as an art form, much less a profession, certain people were marked as cut-ups and some were clearly gifted in the art of inducing laughter. To the extent that it existed, comedy in Crec was always of the physical sort and therefore often employed a stick. One could use a stick to rap another over the head, as a way to punctuate observations about their ineptness. One could use a stick to trip another, causing an often bloody spill that was sure to snare onlookers into laughter. Therefore, one's "signature" in a comedy sense was referred to as one's "stick".

He'd tried working on convincing Gog to have a visit with Snogny-Dodk, the music-scratcher nearest Bhorv Zolk. Business was good, and all manner of copy-protection¹³¹ schemes were the key to success, Snogny-Dodk knew¹³². He had a regular rotation of all-finger-and throat-and-drum-choirs that would snare¹³³ his most profitable demographic: all-finger-and boys trying to woo their crush by performing some music or other, using *his* scratching standards and training system.

Selling the materials needed to perform a cover of the latest hit was really all there was in the music business, outside of performing of course, for which you would need security and acoustical expertise.

Knowing that he would get no movement from Gog, who liked to play friendly-decorator-bird¹³⁴, Grav decided to just enjoy the well-selected traveling music and think a squirrel-hoard about how to best navigate the next few days. This was just baseline thinking-ahead for him. Nothing was worrying him in particular.

Would word about their find have made its way yet? Not feeling any particular need to be there, Verk, whose methods were not questioned, would not be at the camp. He would make his way back eventually, at his own pace, likely after Grav and Gog had gone. Verk, retinue, and Under-Men would not have returned to Fayt-Caves yet.

Verk could easily send a message. He probably had, given that he was now, to none of their surprise, going to wrap himself all the way around this¹³⁵.

And even if none of that, there was a regular flow of traffic to and from Fayt-Caves; men attending club-drill, general commerce, or newly-married baby-makers relocating to their new home¹³⁶. The traffic was always "very light". You might see three or four other parties over two nights. The parties might be of size one or all-finger all-finger. In certain seasons, you might encounter no one.

It was hard to say, in other words.

A few palm outside of Fayt-Caves, Verk owned what would be considered a castle almost universally; a point that the men would pass late that evening, if they kept their pace.

¹³¹Appendix: Snogny-Dodk Copy-Protection Technology

¹³²But would not share.

¹³³As in the impromptu bush trap. Their word for "kill at" or "really make a killing".

¹³⁴False-modesty.

¹³⁵'Take credit for'. If you are 'half wrapped around' you are taking half credit. If you are 'wrapped all the way around', you are taking full credit. The "unearned" part is always implied.

¹³⁶This journey, no matter how long, was always made alone. Crec Cavewomen were nearly universally safe from abuse at the hands of men, but that was not the only risk that women uniquely share as a group. Survival of any but the hardest among women was legitimately at risk on any lone trek that took more than one day. Of course, each additional night added to the risk. Everyone was at risk at all times, but more so at night. For men, this risk was thought to be "manageable". It was markedly greater for any lone women. It was considered bad form to approach a women while on her selection-journey. A pious caveman would politely ignore a women being mauled by a tooth-cat for example.

"Would word of the Ender's-Sword have made it to Choh-Ov?", Grav wondered allowed.

Without breaking his stride, Gog abruptly stopped his music and looked at Grav, possibly thinking, or possibly for superb comedic timing.

"You mean Ender's-Stump?"

Grav's run became a staggering, rhythmic stomp as he laughed maniacally while continuing to run. He eventually gave up on that and let himself fall into an enormous dark-purple heather shrub. He continued to laugh face-down at the dirt and detritus at the ancient shrub's base. Through his teary eyes, he noticed an earthworm escaping downwards, away from him.

He eventually righted himself, making a lot of noise as he pushed himself up, snapping small branches and spitting out a sparse cloud of tiny purple petal glitter and twigs that had ended up in his open mouth.

"Scout¹³⁷, you need to lay off of that stuff! Not everyone is as mirth-filled as us, you know. The Forest Executioners are not known for their stoatishness¹³⁸.", said Grav.

"Eegh. I'm tired of worrying about it, to be frank." Gog was such an artist with his banana-language that he was no longer entertained by it, and so was laughing not at all. It seemed like he just thought of it as his 'job'; trudging through another day of saying things that caused others to nearly have a stroke with hilarity. "You know either of us could be dead tomorrow."

"Yeah, but probably not *from torture*.", reasoned Gog.

"I mean, yeah, of course I will always take reasonable precautions. But mount it, it becomes so much of a drain on me to constantly have to edit my words, that I'm willing to be a bit 'strategically reckless' in order to just relax for a *sewing* change!!" Gog seemed to be shaking his head in disgust. "Also, always feeling like I want to live another day so that I can say as much banana as I want is its own kind of motivation to not get cheeped on¹³⁹."

"There's some motivation.", pondered Grav.

"And they *are* just words, aren't they?", he continued, now sharing some of Gog's annoyance at the arbitrariness of it all, though he was not yet an angry rebel like Gog. "It angers me too. Some things are at the same time both infuriatingly stupid and unjust, while at the same time being completely small-knowledge to seemingly everyone. Everyone gets so clubby¹⁴⁰ about *language*."

¹³⁷"Dude!!"

¹³⁸Silliness

¹³⁹'Snitched on', 'told on'. It was the the onomatopoetic word for the sounds a baby bird makes, like in many languages, 'cheep'. So to 'cheep' on someone was to cry to mamma bird, in essence.

¹⁴⁰'On edge'.

Grav continued. "Did you know that in Douks you can have three toenails pulled out for underpaying your take-value? Regardless of circumstances? At least the Crec haven't gone that crazy.

If you find something in the jungle of any value at all, the Douks Forest has a 'claim' on half of it, without any kind of justification. It's just *theirs* and that's that!

How would you take-value half of one Ender's-Stump?"

Gog's cheeks tightened with the suppression of a smile.

"What has that got to do with what we're talking about?", asked Gog.

"Strain is strain, whether it's about taking value or removing freedom.

In a way, they're similar things; freedom and value. You can use your freedom to get value. Taking away your freedom is like taking value you don't yet have, because 'they' have wrecked your plans. Maybe *you* want to be a professional banana-talker and charge value for your performances...!"

Both men snickered cynically while also thinking, *that'd be a cool job!*

Gog answered with a question while smirking gratefully. "Are we really gonna trek it out the whole way through, without a bivouac?"

"Why not? So long as we hit Snare Plains by maybe one palm after sundown, we'll be set like a murderous monkey¹⁴¹."

"That's three palm of walking in the dark in Small Woods."¹⁴²

"Less than *one and one half* of one palm, and *running!*", corrected Grav helpfully.

Much later, it getting dark and their nearing the end of Small Woods, they encountered a forest-child¹⁴³ whose path was intersecting with the only established trail for several palm, as seems always to be the case with the forest-children, and only in the Forest; *any* Forest, really, but not on a plain for example.

"Greetings cheerful fellow traveler!", said Grav loudly, there never having been any sense of fear about them from anyone that he could recall, and Grav anticipating a reliably predictable sequence of events to follow.

Grav knew his opening comment would be ignored for signs of "foreignness", far from having fact that they were speaking separate languages considered, and also knowing he would not be able to make anything of the traveler's response.

¹⁴¹A strange expression that means something like 'in like Flynn'. It comes from the observation that a monkey that has killed one of its own kind and is relaxing in its nest eating the corpse has a look of complete contentment, as though knowing this once-in-life indulgence may or may not shortly cost him *his* life, or maybe ostracization, sometimes even with a bloody smile that humans easily pick up on. 'Get while the getting is good!', the monkey might say, smacking the words with blood.

¹⁴²The triviality of this observation did not occur to Gog.

¹⁴³Appendix: forest-child

The bulk of these encounters were eerily similar to one another, and each time it seemed they had to build their pantomime vocabulary with them from scratch. But they were practiced, and both men knew in any case, they'd have to get through the first, rather long part where the forest-child is unaware they do not understand.

And for all anyone could tell, a forest-child *was* a child. It was astonishing. No matter how hard anyone had tried, they couldn't make out any dwarfish features. Other than often being scarred and every so often missing fingers, teeth, eyes, or limbs, and but for the toned muscles under leathery, tough skin, they were what we moderns would call "toddlers".

They did not know Crecspeak or anything remotely like it but were evidently fluent in some kind of language. The small boy¹⁴⁴ slouched in a way that a very relaxed, fit, successful older caveman would; a standing slouch that said he could take them or leave them. Or possibly even kill them. But he showed no sense of fear or hatred, just casual toddlerliness. They smoked a pipe in about half the cases. This one was not a partaker¹⁴⁵. He currently stood with the sole of one foot resting on the calf of the other leg, with an all-wood spear, at least three times his height stuck in the ground and currently serving as just a staff to lean on, ever casually.

And predictably, from appearances, the toddler had not yet considered that the two men might not understand his language. He paused very briefly on occasion in a way that suggested he was baffled by the lack of a response but continued on just the same.

After an especially baffling non-response, Grav took the initiative to blow away his new friend with some casual, pithy, fluently spoken Crec utterances¹⁴⁶; asking all kinds of questions about who cleaned him after scat time, where was this crazy toddler kingdom located, did he live in a mushroom, and aside from one's thumb, what kind of things were out there in the woods to suck on for an active baby like himself.

The light of understanding, forgiveness, and kindness toward new friends dawned

¹⁴⁴No one had ever seen a female, and anyway it was always apparent the present company was male in gender.

¹⁴⁵The ones that smoked, really smoked, and somehow seemed to reeked of whatever weed they smoke even upwind. There were other ever-present "base tones" that they all had. They carried along with them a sort of weather system of gnats, flies and stink. An observation that might have been helpful for the non-smokers, if it could ever be conveyed was, the smokers had noticeably fewer flying pests.

¹⁴⁶It had been observed that trying to speak to them clearly and slowly only resulted in them usually thinking you were an especially hard-to-understand individual, maybe with a jaw injury, which was common among primates of all sorts, or a head injury which is maybe even more likely. The secret was to make it clear that you were rapidly saying a whole bunch of complicated stuff, only *in another language*. Humans of all kinds have a remarkable ability to identify *fakers*; speaking rapidly in an impromptu, made-up language (conveying no information) is something distinguishable from *the actual conveyance of information* in a real language, even if an unknown language. This trick reliably brought any forest-child right out of their fog.

on the toddler's honest face. He bowed slightly, showing who-knows-what to the woods behind him.

He made a lot of "we friends" gestures with his hands, his heart, and his mostly toothless smile. Grav and Gog mimicked the ones they felt pretty sure about.

Grav turned to Gog. "How is your forest-child-babble?"

Gog said, "More importantly what do we want to ask him. He's full of helpful answers, all written in High Ancient Balrag. What can we get out of him?—then maybe see if he jumps for joy at a polished uvula."

Grav looked at the sky through the canopy and thought for a considerable while.

"Ok. Translator, ask him if he would chance the remainder of the Little Woods at a leisurely walk on our way to Snare Plain, or would he run like scat?", Grav said to Gog.

"Oh. Thanks for starting with an easy one."

The woods, especially near the plains were a lively hunting ground just as soon as it was dark enough; for all kinds of big, bigger-than-you things made from muscle, teeth, and claws. The plain, being a safer place at night, generally, only required you keep a speedy pace and make a lot of noise at intervals. This done, you rarely got messed with.

"Don't you think that'd be handy to know?"

"If we were that worried, we'd be running right now."

While the men were talking, the forest-child made a series of gestures. "Warning" and "no" and "great death" could be seen on his countenance as he made his interpretive dance.

"Flying?", Gog thought he had picked up.

"Mouth? Beak?", Grav tried to help, in this elite version of Pictionary, where the audience is more or less dumb, at least from the forest-child's perspective.

"Is that a tail? Egg?"

"Lizard-bird?", asked Grav.

"I'm pretty sure he is saying lizard-bird something. Egg... Could it be eating for two and therefore especially hungry?", Gog asked Grav while making intense, questioning eye contact with the forest-child.

His feedback from the toddler was a shrug. Grav made a "big eat-y beak" gesture with his two outstretched arms, perhaps with fingers playing the roll of some hooked teeth at the tips.

The toddler's eyes made saucers. He pointed at Grav and jumped rapidly with bent knees, his torso more or less stationary as one might at the height of a Pictionary nail-biter.

Lizard-bird could and would kill men. There was no *scoop 'em up with the beak and swallow whole*. No, that would be a better fate. Someone from their and most others' childhood shared experience was quite impactful in their respect for lizard-bird.

Both men fondly recalled this cheerful caveman as they independently began formulating plans.

Caveman Thag

One rare survivor of a lizard-bird attack was widely known for his story and also for his love of life. He labored at sharing his tale in all its horror for the greater good of the Forest¹⁴⁷.

He was known as Caveman Thag and he had been on a continuous speaking tour for generations.¹⁴⁸ He had a very scripted and well-polished show.

Stay Low to Scrub and its rejoinder, shouted by his audience, *Stay Low to Mud* were the two catchy phrases by which he was known. In other words: Hide! Get out of the way [of the stalking lizard-bird]!

Thag could not speak in a way that would be practical for audiences or scratchers-of-new-things¹⁴⁹. He could make himself understood to the empathetic and patient, of whom he wished he had a few more.

In his place a man gifted with a loud, engaging, homely voice, who was made as invisible as possible and standing in the most inconspicuous place possible, would make the theater thunder with the confidence of sound lessons learned.

Thag made no effort to move his mouth. He just stood there and made himself heard as if by magic, effortlessly. He would perform very regular, practiced motions at certain points in the long monologue. He was always on-cue and practiced at making listeners believe that he was doing the talking, so well-timed and smooth was his pantomime.

He would tour any demographic that would benefit, which would most of all be children. They would gather around him as he stood center stage, or whatever served in its place.

He would scare kids straight about lizard-bird awareness.

¹⁴⁷But most especially for the cavechildren.

¹⁴⁸Thag was 67 years old at the time. That was astonishingly old for a caveman. Thag was cared for at first only by a loving and tight-knit, but heartbroken family. As his fame grew, his circle of caretakers grew wider. Thag himself was only just barely able to speak in a comprehensible manner, even allowing for his slowness at finding words and distance, for he had to be observed closely to catch it all. He could make a word here and there. Crecspeak had an incredible number of words composed of only unvoiced consonants and clicks. With practice, choosing his words carefully allowed him to communicate ever more. Of course, there was a growing vocabulary of signs, but it was all so frustratingly limited. As such, Thag felt in a few cases that he was being growingly surrounded by people who didn't always go to a lot of trouble to *fully* understand what he was trying to say.

¹⁴⁹Journalists, of a sort.

Once at a typical outreach event, the voice of Thag began:

Kids, as you know, my name is Thagalinenus, Son of Rejenold, but you kids know me as Caveman Thag!

And I am so happy to be here. I want to tell you kids about how to be safe, and what to look out for when being lizard-bird-aware!

The kids shout aimlessly but with enthusiasm.

Many of you know some of my story, but I'm going to lay it *aall* out right here, like a slain lizard-bird, so you can learn from me. Okaay!?

The kids shout again, and Thag points to the ground with his only arm on which there are really only two *sorts* of fingers.

More or less appropriate, but sometimes vague gestures came from Thag in time with certain parts of the story.

I say 'Stay Low to Scrub', and *you* say...

"Stay! Low! to! Mud!"

Thag smiled with satisfaction which, with his lower lip missing, was quite a smile indeed.

Thag's thunderous borrowed voice continued as Thag made a kind of one-armed shrug.

Well... I was walk home from J'anz-Caves along the path that many of you know well. It's not close to here, but it's close enough. Many of you have seen it in person. It was along The Great Hummingbird Trail, which connects J'anz-Caves, the starting point of my trek to Prominence-Caves, where my parents and I lived at the time. As you know, this is all way down at the far morning-sun-right-side of our Forest.

We have Balrag for neighbors, so we know a lot about getting along and also about surviving. They're good cavepeople.

The children did not yet know that they should sneer at this. Some adults snickered, approving the implied nod to small-knowledge.

I was minding my own business. I was on my third night, about halfway through, as I had to go all that way to make it home after The Season of Industry¹⁵⁰.

It was not especially bright out that night, as there was only a sliver of moon. The stars were bright where they shone, but there was as

¹⁵⁰The audience understood two things from this: 1. Thag was working in J'anz-Caves during the foraging off-season for his family's value needs, and 2. It was wintertime, as this is the season's name.

much cloudy sky as not; lots of burrows of sky for a big, mean bird to stay out of view just until the last moment...

Thag made a slow sweeping gesture with his one arm.

The children said little but some seemed to be crawling backward using their arms as they sat on the floor; some able to hover their folded legs along like an accomplished yogi.

I knew that a lizard-bird included this bit of path in its territory. Stories had been going around both caves¹⁵¹. And, remember this, in a woods thick enough to block the sky, a lizard-bird is always scanning the openings.

In the case of the Crec Forest Roads that make use of so many straight paths, a bird can choose to fly along a straight course, scanning for snacks, for palm at a time, without having to change course. For a lizard-bird, this is a kind of rest. Know that your attacker will have been fully rested.

By the way, you my little ones are just about snacked sized.

Thag made violent swatting motions with his one arm towards random slices of audience, this being the best 'great lunging beak' he could muster.

Involuntarily jiggling finger-stumps, while not adding any 'realness', did add to the overall horror of the gesture.

Calling it quits at this point, a quiet-one stomped all over the neighbors behind her: faces, groins, wherever her powerful little hard feet landed, after which she sprinted out of the theater.

Her brother, having been priming her with fear for days knew just how to nudge her over into mindless, frantic flight. In this case it was with a well-timed jab to the ribs.

Most boys laughed. Otherwise, there was not much of a ruckus this scare around.

It was known then, and it is known still that these places are the most hazardous. As cloud cover can give you a false set of ease, which we now know is completely unjustified!¹⁵² I was quite at ease, and walking in the middle of the path. I was sick-monkey by the straightness of the long road and by fatigue.

¹⁵¹Here the word is used to refer to the two villages, his origin and destination.

¹⁵²Having experimented extensively, employing tethered goats and lots of boulder-constructed "hides", the Crec were now entirely sure that the lizard-bird was bothered very little by clouds. How they would be able to "see through" clouds was something about which no one could even present a theory. But clear day or not, someone would eventually witness the bleating goat get violently tackled by a bomb dropping out of the sky, which was especially dramatic on overcast days when it was entirely unknown whether there was even a bird up there. Many uneventful overcast days would go by when suddenly, one day an audible crash would startle the observer into attention. The goat was often dead before one's eyes could finish focusing.

Kids, I was counting on the clouds to protect me, although I didn't think of it that way at the time! We know that's wrong. What do we say about clouds and lizard-bird safety?

This time, the knowing audience chanted along with Thag as he waived out the syllables.

"Don't Let Clouds Fool Ya!"

It was simple and memorable. That was the point. *Some of the adults in the audience have difficulty with much simpler concepts*, thought Thag.

Thag's voice made a practiced, convincing lizard-bird screech¹⁵³.

As was always the case with large, temperamental crowds of human children, some added to the known scat-zones, crawling away unembarrassed. The loud, stunning screech was a crowd-pleaser. The scat-er was immediately giggling and dancing soon enough. As the performance went on, feces became ever less of a concern for this enraptured Caveman Thag audience.

Children were hopeless in communicating something like what they had just experienced.

They could excitedly talk to their friends in other parts, relaying the excitement, pandemonium, the once-in-life experiences like seeing a living man so deformed as Thag, and on rare occasions, they might share an important lesson learned.

Children frequently got a wave of buzz ahead of Thag's visits. But no one was ever prepared for the first screech.

Even if the message could be made clearly and plainly enough, the recipient, also but a child would never consider the warning.

This was always a genuine surprise and Thag loved it. Thag worried about everyone's loyalty and intentions, but Voice-Maker Jurd was a value-stone in the value he brought. Thag had to admit, Jurd would be hard to replace, and surely with disappointing results if it ever came to that. He had both the booming voice of authority and the screech of crazed terror.

I would only very rarely think about danger. I'd walk to the side under the canopy, or maybe turn my head and look on rare occasion.

But I was not usually even this careful.

Jurd knew to watch Thag carefully at this point, using his master's subtle cues to decide when to resume, beginning the real drama in Thag's story.

¹⁵³A call absolutely never used by the bird itself while on the hunt, where it was as silent as a massive owl might be. The sound was however *exactly* like one of the well-known lizard-bird sounds and equally loud. Thag had endless practice at *performing* the screech. The sound could not be credited to him, but Thag knew there was a sort of "symphony" taking place; plenty of talented cavepeople involved at all levels. And in any case, even perceptive adults just all-finger rows back were unsure where the voice came from.

Thag's voice began again in what stood in for a "quiet" voice in the enormous hillside theater. Jurd was skilled at the seemingly impossible: whispering such that it could be heard one half of one palm away.

And then she came.

There was a random unaccountable snicker toward the back of the theater.

I am unable to puzzle together any of what took place behind me of course, as I was walking in my own little world at night in the woods, lost in thought; an older all-finger-and boy who could kick some ham on the monkey-ground¹⁵⁴, but was no match for a lizard-bird.

Thag always had legitimate lament he could tap into at any time to bring the mood of the house back down to "somber". It was actually something that could be "tapped" in kind of the same way a keg of champagne can be: Carefully; sometimes, often, disastrously. You could end up with more champagne than you anticipated. At this he was truly practiced, for if his cues changed in ways that were hard for Jurd to read, the performance suffered.

But it was true that Thag was afraid of lizard-bird still in a way that makes garden variety arachnophobia seem well-considered and rational.

This time too, Thag had to snap out of it and continue his outreach in the most productive way possible, as always.

I was tackled. It felt like being stabbed from behind by seven or eight blunt but sharp obsidian blades somehow wielded by a massive speeding boulder of warmth, muscle, and sparse, downy feathers; this only the beginning of its horrors.

She rode me like a hill-sled for probably four man; talons squeezing as we slid. By the time we stopped, I felt like I had been wrapped in obsidian-vine¹⁵⁵, with several powerful men wrapping it ever-tighter around me. You don't know what it feels like to be mercilessly *squeezed* by something so terrible...

Thag trailed off, eyes empty¹⁵⁶. This was an impressive piece of seemingly impromptu emoting by the duo. The children continued to watch until he shook himself and the voice continued.

¹⁵⁴Playground. More, any place where play takes place.

¹⁵⁵A vine that grows throughout the Crec realm. If carefully removed and uncoiled (which was obviously a dangerous art) from its host trees, which may be many, and then lightly fire-hardened. It could become a kind of barbed wire. But with pinkie-thumb sized, needle-pointed barbs.

¹⁵⁶Thag was missing both eyes and had only rather smooth and neat-looking skin-lined sockets. Being covered with scars and sometimes-open wounds required lots of thoughtful, tender skincare, of which he got plenty. Most of his eye-socket skin had the look of exquisite kid leather. He had a retinue of assistants to meet every one of his needs. Modern readers will be interested in noting that, due to the shape of Thag's face, the eyes had a marked "hollow face" effect: If you were not expecting it, and in the right lighting, he sometimes had the look of someone with two enormous pupils following you with their gaze as you move about.

She was standing on top of me. And she was *heavy*; at least a good-sized hyena's weight. As I struggled in a way only one in that situation can truly struggle, it would lift me about a palm with its wings, and then *slam* me against the ground with all of its weight, making the talons as secure as possible... *in me!*

The speaker paused only briefly this time.

Once it was sure it had a good hold of me, I guess it wanted to make sure I was as dead as possible so I wouldn't be much trouble on the flight home, wherever that was. To this end she pecked me in the head repeatedly. I turned my head so she would be unable to peck the same place twice, if possible, and twisted all around to try and keep the blows from landing as much as possible.

And indeed that's where the first gap in my memory lives, although I'm able to fill it with all kinds of nightmares, and sometimes do. Don't lament small game¹⁵⁷, kids.

When I came back around the first time, it was because she was slowing her flight to set me on her perch. It was a scat and bone covered fortress of sorts. It was clear that she¹⁵⁸ and she alone lived there. It was literally in the clouds so I only had the slightest idea, at least initially, of where I was and what was going on any more than all-finger man away.

She started eating me at this point.

The children's only reaction to this was to stare.

Birds naturally go after the softer parts first. And since all of my might was tied up in protecting my eyes, she had mostly free reign over my groin parts.

The children didn't move, especially the boys.

I switched from protecting my eyes to protecting my groin as fast as I was able, but the bird had every possible advantage over me.

At length, I was too exhausted to keep up and upon my surrendering, she took up *all* of my parts and then some, squeezed with her mighty beak and pulled. Of course, she had flipped me over by this point and was putting new holes in my front half.

For her all this was truly effortless. The shock and horror I was experiencing at the moment was a kind of protection for me. I don't know how the reflect-soul works, but I can recall no pain at all.

¹⁵⁷Don't sweat the small stuff. Don't cry over spilled milk.

¹⁵⁸Appendix: lizard-bird, genders.

I just remember how effortlessly she tore off what to me was the most important part of my body at the time. It was like the meat had been scored deeply in advance. It just came right off and went down her throat; her making a whole-body bob as she tossed it down her own throat.

The wet sound of her feeding is something that stays with me. You don't think of what it might sound like. You don't get a chance to find out, unless you are unlucky-lucky¹⁵⁹ like me.

I could hear important parts of me going down her throat with a gulp.

The parts you see missing here are the parts she took.

Thag took some time in relishing another of his popular theatrics. He raised his one arm and blindly hopped in a circle, one of his thighs being about half as big around as the other. One ham mostly missing, and a dripping mess of leisurely, gravity-fed feces downward from where his anus used to be. Although no one ever made the connection and Thag was definitely not always a mess like this, in this case like in many other cases, Jurd had done the lizard-bird cry in the same way he had done literally thousands of times, and this time too, Jurd scared the scat out of him with just a small tweak of timing.

He completed his circle and made another famous Caveman Thag smile.

Those in the first few rows could see tears coming from the outside of one of his empty eye sockets, the only bit of tear ductwork to survive intact. The dripping had little correlation with Thad's mood. No one including himself knew the why or when of his tears.

Some children giggled. With a swing of his arm Thag made a vague grabbing motion with his finger parts in the sound's direction; a sort of friendly and oddly raptor-like wave, to a perfectly normal child from a disfigured, ancient man.

I had accepted that sometime soon, I would fall asleep from all the blood loss and soon after die. It would be peaceful enough an end. I was unable to feel any pain at the time and felt like all this was happening to someone else.

Just then there was a "whoosh" like a cold wave of wind coming down a long, flat slope, along with a slight flash of gray over the whole rocky cliffside. At this point, I must have had some amount of vision still. Nothing I saw seemed to match up with the way I thought my head was facing. I suspect that my remaining eye was just hanging by its connective vine.

¹⁵⁹Crec used this compound to mean, 'Something terrible happened but something miraculous saved me.'

The sight of that great shadow flashing by is among my last visual memories.

Precious sight...

Thag's head and shoulders sank dramatically.

I could tell it was something fast and enormous and of course I was right in guessing that it was another lizard-bird wanting to steal a fresh, juicy, living prize away from its tormentor.

I knew it was just making a first pass. This could only improve my situation, but in my hopelessness, I was unable to feel anything in an emotional way.

That was the only exploratory pass it was to make. In the middle of my hazy awareness on this hazy mountain, I was suddenly flung, like a rock from a sling.

What I think had happened is this fast, competing bird had more or less tackled the one that was in the middle of eating me, causing it to tumble, whereupon it released me on the upswing, mid-tumble.

I feel like I floated in the air for palm. When I finally landed, it was with a gentle "puff" rather than a jarring splat like I had expected, though not expected to notice.

I had landed in a man-deep, ancient bed of scab-moss that had been accumulating on that misty hillside probably for all-finger all-finger all-finger years.

The children, knowing a thing or two about cave medicine, gave a tempered cheer, for they knew of the healing properties of scab-moss, and it was just the thing for such injuries¹⁶⁰.

No one, myself included could make any kind of meaningful guess as to how long I lay there. I of course was not there to count the suns.

I will say that when I was finally found, *before* the many moons of rest with the tender care of my made-me mother, I had been gone for all-finger and seven days. I had met a fellow boy from my village and talked with him briefly the day before the attack. I don't remember meeting him, but he's sure about where in my journey we had met and from that, we could deduce the time.

The parts that I can remember probably only add up to a few days. I suspect it had just rained and misted so much up there where that soggy mass of moss still lives, that I drank up moisture through my skin and so did not develop a thirst.

¹⁶⁰Even so, Thag's survival was definitely considered a miracle, as in his case one part in four of the man's body had been eaten and the rest run through with talon repeatedly.

I had to have been there, slowly recovering in that massive bed of moss for five or seven days, with no food, drink, or awareness.

And it was cold. Never freezing, but cold. I believe my body was also preserved because the cold slowed down its corruption, like when fresh meat is found under the snow in early spring.

I was very much in a state of haze and confusion at the time, but I can recall encountering a variety of animal bones and other cast-off parts on my way down, all nested in the moss.

There was at least one clearly human skull with absolutely no flesh, and one fairly fresh, cold, stiff, and remarkably whole corpse that I believe was a gorilla. Of course, I had nothing in the way of eyes and only my mangled hand and arm to feel with.

I was just a hopeless husk of a caveman.

At length, I reached the bottom of the moss bed and was able to start my descent, using only down-power and a lot of wiggling. I was existing as a beetle exists¹⁶¹. I was just mindlessly surviving.

At some point, I was lucky enough to wiggle my way into a brook that I had heard getting nearer for many palm. I fell face first and immediately began to slurp. I slurped until I was full, and then slurped some more. I would sometimes throw up half of what I drank, but would just start drinking again right away out of necessity, for blood comes from water and I had lost most.

Gritty survival like that is something that surely all of you will eventually experience in your life. It is an inevitability. But it needn't be encountered aimlessly. Learn from me, children.

Thag's tale continued with mood-lightening material and some mostly unproductive question and answer time at the very end: Jurd would answer as he *thought* Thag might answer, but he made some real blunders occasionally and Thag was always on the verge of re-working the "Q&A segment".

He had worked his way down the mountainside, for it was a very high mountain, and going wherever down-power took him, he eventually encountered people, or more accurately, people encountered him. He was what we moderns would call comatose. These people nursed him for many moon, all the while being unable to communicate with him, and his family having no idea what had happened to their Thag all the while.

Thereafter you already know the story.

This is how Thag and Jurd ended today's telling:

¹⁶¹Not self-aware.

Children, I feel I have been blessed by The Ender-of-Questions in a way that is so direct and obvious to me, I feel its will has been clearly revealed.

My purpose in life is to protect children from danger, and because this burden was forced upon me, I *know* lizard-bird. I know them. I want you to make sure that you *learn* something today. Don't be afraid, but don't be foolish!

And *Stay low to Scrub!*

"*Stay Low to Mud!!*"

Kids, don't forget to pick up your free toys and ask as many questions you like of our volunteers!!

Thag made his most enthusiastic wave goodbye. His one arm being a disproportionate part of his body's mass when compared to most, he almost made the flippy-flop of an unstrung bow, with both the upper and lower halves moving more or less equally, all the while grinning ghoulishly.

Getting to Know Baby

Grav and Gog were faced with spending the night, barring a miracle, in the most dangerous place possible, only because a much greater danger had recently moved into the area like bad weather, but worse.

This was part of the life-long education the men had about lizard-birds: The woods were safer but not safe. It also was the only reasonable choice with a lizard-bird in the area, most of all at night.

This was definitely toward the end of the curriculum, but they both knew the approximate odds of either choice and chose the least bad: They would be spending the night on the edge of Small Woods, somehow or other.

The forest-child stood and stared at the two who were both lost in thought.

He made the eyes-widening, brow-rising, cock to the head "*well?!*" expression that all humans know.

"He seems to be 'asking' us.", said Gog.

"Yes.", agreed Grav. Then after a pause, "What is he asking us?"

The forest-child made a mock jog in the direction he had been heading and then again, "*Well?*"

Grav and Gog looked at each other. Not having a preference for *where* along the margin of the dangerous woods they would sleep, at least generally, they gave in and mimed that they would go with him. "After you, sir", was their chosen gesture of response.

They followed the stinking baby at a right angle to the trail. As mentioned, forest-children tend to travel as though "everywhere" was an established trail. They could travel the path of a bird, but projected onto the ground. For them, the shortest path between two points was shorter than it is for most.

In the growth strata of most jungle or woods, there was a fairly consistently unoccupied bit of vertical real estate near the floor.

There were juicy, mostly edible or at least useful ferns and broad-leafed weeds up to about a pinkie-thumb from the floor. The next-tallest "layer" was probably about nipple height for an adult Crec.

But a *baby* could trek along unbothered by anything other than what for *him* would be light knee-high, dewy, soft green leaves, with the next layer of green being, again for him, one or two heads above. This is a good thing as this was also the first strata featuring wide use of sharp spines and poison.

For the men, this meant a walk through thick, chest-high bush that all seemed to be painful in some way or other. In addition to the irritable plant life, not a few cantankerously deadly fauna lived in this layer too. This was the whole reason for established paths after all!

A Crec ecology textbook could easily have used a picture of this bit of woods to illustrate these concepts.

The men, their spears now being employed as brush clearing blades¹⁶², at which they were barely more useful than any other stick, were swatting away face-sized, fat spiders; small, green vipers; and the occasional poisonous frog or centipede¹⁶³. The brush was a secondary concern here. They had to compromise comfort to a degree, given the more important preservation of life.

Bringing a spearhead down flat and sharply on top of some of the bigger spiders would make an audible "pop", with a spray of spider guts. The men would sometimes try to get each other with a shower of spider guts, using an expertly angled swat of the spearhead¹⁶⁴. It was a kind of game they had.

It occurred to them both that if they were the size of a baby, they too would do as forest-children do. They could both see that the baby was having no trouble at all. He was currently dragging his long spear behind him, his hand around its tip, his thumb checking the point for sharpness at intervals¹⁶⁵.

Though he had a mostly normal speaking voice, if a bit high-pitched, his singing brought out more usual-sounding baby noises. He was singing softly in his language, presumably, punctuating his song with rhythmic coos, murmurs, and occasionally a delighted squeal.

This did nothing to take away from the uncanniness of this swaggering baby.

It was getting dark but was not yet killing-palm. The forest-child seemed unbothered and was now making occasional tight turns, as though the party had switched to surface streets and was almost home; there seemed to be a *destination* coming up.

Revealed slowly as they rounded a larger low tree, they could see a sort of hide that was clearly not natural in origin but was just as clearly very old.

It was made out of stone that had been squared. The stones were faceted with flat surfaces cut to meet those of adjoining stones. The patterns made by these joints on the outer walls were irregular. The walls were nonetheless very flat both inside and out.

Any roundness found in the stones appeared to be from erosion of some kind. One could imagine it being *quite* square in the past. It had a look that the men

¹⁶²They did have great knives of bronze capable for example stabbing a person clean through or slicing off a thumb, but as the spines and tougher leaves employed a lot of silica, the edge was quickly worn. Also if clearing a one-time path through the woods involves a lot of cutting, you're doing it wrong.

¹⁶³And the pretenders of these, who they could immediately identify as harmless, even at this pace, and would try not to wantonly kill.

¹⁶⁴In the modern game of golf, this is known as a 'chip'.

¹⁶⁵This is a nervous habit that is frowned upon by the Crec. They call it 'worrying your point' and it's used metaphorically to mean 'getting worked up over nothing'. This *will* dull a fire-hardened spear point on the scale of days.

would both have described as "Unnatural"¹⁶⁶.

The fine but irregular joints between the stones gave the impression that the creators had balanced finding appropriately-shaped stones with the trouble of removing material to create a finer fit.

The joints between the stones did not make a regular, geometric pattern like one would see in modern block construction. The lines between the stones were more jagged and irregular, but in a pleasing way, and all with but fine lines to describe the places where the stones met, except where erosion had widened these.

The Crec did not have a word for this shape. It was a nearly perfect cube.

They had surely traveled four palm off the established trail to get here and it was in an anonymous-looking, not terribly useful part of Small Woods. Neither had seen nor heard of anything like this but would be sure to ask around. Maybe *others* had been seen, if not this one. Any cavepeople capable of creating this would surely have had no trouble building many more.

It was an astonishing structure, mostly in the seemingly wasted time that must have gone into making it so *perfect*.

As the front of the hide came into view, they could see that some rather sophisticated modern construction had been done too: There was a sort of wood entrance-way constructed around the opening. The stone was clearly many rotting-ages¹⁶⁷ old. The wood was comparatively new.

It was not a particularly inviting entrance. This structure was solely for the purpose of protecting the occupants.

This was a low, two man long sort of arched hallway made from woven and somewhat living vine. The entire archway was lined with sharpened, springy saplings all anchored at their base to the wall, hanging at lazy angles near the wall and all pointing outward.

This is a contrivance that the men were familiar with. Something like this was used sometimes to protect the opening of a cave from anything big enough to be a threat to humans.

Looking inward one's eyes were met by the tips of many, usually all-finger all-finger or more fire-hardened points made from fist-diameter, half-man long saplings chosen for their stiffness, making entrance impossible for a crazed predator but still allowing a human to enter, patiently move spikes out of the way, using arms and legs to retain the ones already past, going slowly and

¹⁶⁶This had a distinctly positive connotation. It had the sense of 'made by skilled cavepeople for utility and comfort.'

¹⁶⁷A 'rotting-age' is reckoned to be the time required for a fallen tree to rot completely back into soil. The Crec knew this was an imprecise unit of time. Part of the point was: It's such a long time that one needn't nit-pick about whether the tree was "fully rotted" by this point or the other. We might say 'eons'.

patiently. A human could get in with some strategy and patience. Nothing dumber could make it through, generally.

This was referred to in standard Crecspeak as a spear-guard. It was known to Grav and Gog as a "porcupine-pussy"¹⁶⁸.

A typical Crec spear-guard had all sorts of clever latches and vine catches that would make getting *in* much easier than it was in this case, where they were both struggling, helping one another with a stab here or a smack there, say from the poorly timed release of a branch helpfully bent out of the way by another.

The baby gave them exasperated but patient looks as he stopped repeatedly to press back some of the more troublesome spears at their base and wait for the two enormous people to ease past all their "pain points".

This was a hide that the forest-child somehow knew about in advance. The plains were not an option this evening, as the forest-child's message was ultimately pretty clear: There would be a lizard-bird hunting this night along the nearby plains¹⁶⁹.

One might ask, "Hey, why not build the hide on the plains where it's safer?" This is because 1. Both the Crec and the forest-children would be hopeless at building something particularly *like* this, 2. The plains aren't exactly a safe place to bivouac, unless far away from any patch of woodsy Forest, and then only with some strict protocols, and never alone, and 3. Once on the ground, fending off a lizard-bird trying to get into the hide would be no different from the things they would encounter in the woods, and odds were good the lizard-bird would find them, even in a stone hide.

And this particular hide was a perfect solution to their predicament. They would likely just enjoy a night of periodic but contained terror as they get sniffed out and then mercilessly charged by an animal that gets bloodier and angrier with every failed attack. All three having spears, they might even possibly enjoy the pleasure of mortally wounding a tooth-cat with a satisfying stab down its throat¹⁷⁰.

For them, it would be a kind of entertainment.

They both noted how some of the living vine of the portico was grown soundly into the stone of the hide. Anything that wanted in, short of an ambling-feast, would need to use the door, which was well protected, as described.

¹⁶⁸They thought this much more descriptive and poetic.

¹⁶⁹This was just another night to the lizard-bird, but they were so rare to the Crec as daily experiences go they hadn't anticipated this particular problem, really. Caveman Thag would have been disappointed.

¹⁷⁰Tooth-cats were *hated* among the Crec. Tooth-cats were for them what wolves are for modern sheep farming settlers. There was a mindless hatred. They would see no downside to all-out extinction. Every Crec was at most two or three relations away from someone who had been killed and eaten by a tooth-cat.

They looked around as best they could in the dark hide. Gog was rustling through his kit, trying to get the ingredients necessary for light.

Soon Gog was making a noise and a sight that instantly got the attention of the other two. In the complete dark of the hide there was a sharp *click* sound accompanied by a bright flash. Under normal circumstances, Grav would be taunting Gog about his fire-making skills, but this time he was wishing him nothing but quick success.

After all-finger or so clicks, there was a blue flash and then a growing flame of warm yellow.

Gog was holding an unfired clay oil lamp with a small, bright, efficient flame at the tip of its sturdy, short nozzle.

This was a kind of travel lamp carried in nearly all kits. Though porous, the outside was waterproofed to the degree possible with pine pitch fixed with a packed layer of soot. This gave the outer surface an asphalt kind of finish that was good for the trail. The finish itself was thick enough to provide some impact protection, which is a big concern for some of the fragile things you drug around the Forest with you. And to whatever extent the pitch soaked into the lamp, it was only so much more fuel once it made its way through to the interior. Old lamps gave off a distinct comforting smell; grandma, warm fires, salad days.

For fuel, you could of course use any one of literally thousands of known flammable oils. One's preferred oil usually came down to which unpleasant characteristics could be endured for the price.

Oil was pretty expensive. Wherever you got it, the person you obtained it from acquired it in the same way you yourself could have. Your time was worth what his was, so you generally considered the cost of most things, including flame-oils to be about what you'd pay yourself to go out and get some; a lot, in other words. But such value could be obtained in completely different ways: Maybe you're a modern stockbroker. Maybe you mine gems with your bare hands.

Of course, they had the nicest oil. It also happened to be rather a cheap one as luck would have it. Most considered its smell to be a downside. They thought just the opposite. The lightly refined turpentine¹⁷¹ they preferred burned predictably, gave little smoke, had a bright, well-colored flame, and smelled to them like an exhausting day productively working with lumber. It was a nice, crafty kind of smell.

The worst part of the night, they were sure, was going to be sharing a small burrow with a reeking baby who also happened to be a very poor conversationalist.

In the cheerful glow¹⁷² of the lamp, the two men scanned the walls for anything

¹⁷¹More or less.

¹⁷²For that is what it was.

bit-y. There was an especially hideous land-crab¹⁷³ and a few centipede that one would not want to touch¹⁷⁴.

And right in the middle was a pile of burnt bones and cold coals. This was as expected. Though out of the way, this completely sheltered hide would surely have occasional visitors such as themselves and it was apparently known to the forest-children.

Having gotten snugly into their hide-burrow and it now being properly dark, as best they could tell in the dark wood, Grav and Gog talked at length about their predicament and plans.

For one, they would have to awake and get running dangerously early to beat conch. They would get one lash each for not having shaved¹⁷⁵ and not wearing their rhino-calf training armor, which they could retrieve, but not in time to beat conch.

Missing conch would mean first getting all-finger lashes, then attending CO lectures regarding obedience, duty, and pain, and then finally performing all training exercises that had been scheduled for them that day alone and unsupervised¹⁷⁶ likely until palm past the usual first-night bedtime. This of course resulted in occasional deaths, so it was a kind of 'death penalty lite'.

The last palm of woods would not be entirely quiet even after dawn, there often being predators putting in long nights. They were balancing the various penalties they were facing with their reckoned odds of getting eaten by one thing or another along the way.

It was not unusual for a lizard-bird to continue its hunt until daylight. The men would have clear skies and a sliver of morning-moon in their favor.

Play it by ear; we're safe for now was the unspoken conclusion. There was nothing tangible they could do about any of it at this point.

Grav and Gog's attention went back to the forest-baby.

They had determined as best they could that his name was Oh-Mas, although Grav wondered if *one's name* meant the same thing to the baby as it did to

¹⁷³Crec knew plenty about crabs. They were 'exotic' this far away from any source, but they knew well the body plan, the innards, and the delightful *taste* of crab. The shells were always kept around for some user or other. For most crab shell was acquired via a well-off relation who was willing to let you sift through their garbage. Somewhere far back in the Crecspeak family tree, someone noticed that this spider, the variety they shared the hide with, looked very much like a crab, had a lot of the same kinds of spines, made a similar clicking when crawling along rock, and flavor notwithstanding provided an almost identical eating experience to their "delicacy" cousins. They were more plentiful but tasted distinctly worse than actual crab, so it was more "just a name" except to the very hungry. And they were harmless. Huge, but harmless. And also slow and shy until startled.

¹⁷⁴Nothing capable of spraying or snipping off a finger.

¹⁷⁵Performed with a purpose-made shard of obsidian and of course some lathery soap.

¹⁷⁶The penalty for any kind of shirking was death, so supervision was generally was not required.

them.

He had an idea that *yes*, they had names *of a sort* but *it was complicated*. Just as the instincts that forest-children have about language in general, could be leveraged to get their attention, similarly did Oh-Mas' constant chattering give the impression that there was 'a lot going on there'.

Oh-Mas too was working with fire.

He had packed a large pipe and was lighting a twig to get things going.

There was a lot to know about the smoking of plant matter in the ancient jungle and woods.

Grav and Gog were instantly curious. There were so many plants in Nature, and so little time to experiment that those from strange parts, *even if those parts had all the same plant life* usually had new discoveries to relay, and usually *visa versa*. It took a lot of research. In this, ancient people were experts.

He had no whole leaves that they could inspect. Grav and Gog took small pinches of the dried crumble as specimens and stored them safely in case it turned out there was important medicinal knowledge at stake.

"Gog, I think we need to go easy. There's no judging its power from appearances."

"Sure. We need our wits about us. Let us just calibrate ourselves by supposing it has the force of toad-root."

Grav laughed remembering how sick-monkey and randy-monkey they had become with the Balrag girls.

"Ok. Well, I will take exactly half of that and so will you."

"Agreed."

Oh-Mas had his pipe going by now and had filled the top half of the burrow with laminar green smoke. The appearance of the smoke alone would have been a warning to more experienced reflect-soul-trekkers.

Without ceremony, Gog grabbed the pipe from the baby. For an instant, Oh-Mas made a very baby-like "whaa!" which he clipped sharply. His face returned to its friendly resting state and he made a pantomimed two-handed "release" of the pipe with a smile, though it had already been taken from him.

Neither man ever mistook Oh-Mas for an actual baby again. This was clearly only his 'appearance'. Sometimes there was a restrained civility in the forest-child that made the men wonder if he was always in control of himself.

"I'm. . ." Gog made apologetic gestures to which Oh-Mas gestured 'no bother'.

Gog took a small amount of smoke into his lungs, releasing it immediately.

After watching this and then mindlessly accepting the pipe from Gog, Grav's next recollection was of staring at the ceiling.

He and Gog were laying on the floor face-up, with the tops of their heads a palm apart and each man's feet extending towards the hide's walls.

This put both men's heads squarely in the ash heap of the dead fire pit. They did not appear to mind this.

They were both staring at the ceiling. They had been in a long, convoluted conversation following some of the most inspired trains of thought he could recall when he "came to".

Grav immediately felt the frustration of an interesting dream slipping away as he tried to recall what they had been talking about and as with his dreams, it seemed like the memories were actively running away from him. He had been both exploring his inner mind and having a deep conversation with Gog at the same time, Gog's voice being more or less detached and coming from nowhere. He wasn't aware nor did he really care where Gog 'was'.

The thing that brought his sick-monkey around was Oh-Mas snarling out at the opening, spear at the ready. Between Oh-Mas' snarls, there was a sort of rumbling sound; a more or less normal, though very slow and very loud breathing from something enormous.

And there was a kind of crackling sound. It was like the sound of a far-overloaded hemp basket being lifted by its handles.

They could see the very tip of one claw slipping in and out of the vine-work nearest the stone. The mass of vine was probably three parts of four of one pinkie-thumb in thickness at the least. The claw, whoever's claw, was at least that long.

In the lamplight, they could both see the dust created by the animal's effort to tear away the spear-guard. They could also see the spear-guard itself flexing alarmingly.

The claws, they had seen two at once by this point, belonged to an animal smart enough to start work immediately on tearing the entrance-way away from the hide altogether. The claws were unmistakably those of a tooth-cat.

Were the spear-guard torn away, it would mean sure death for them, as an average adult cat could probably fit a good way into the opening, and its reach was enough to at least mince them up sufficiently for dying.

The gaps between the vine provided enough space for Oh-Mas to jab it a few times pretty good, to which it reacted audibly, which is a good sign.

Grav and Gog went back to staring at the ceiling.

The competing battle cries got intense enough to interest them finally and they rolled on their sides to watch the show.

There would be no more talking for a while.

The animal, initially just hungry was now mad with rage and sought revenge. Having glimpsed the animal inside that was doing all this damage, the cat was also a bit disgusted with himself. *This little animal and any friends it might have in there must die this night. No one must know of this.* the cat may have thought.

Grav and Gog could now clearly see the mad beast at the end of the tunnel, the animal now taking some time to express his rage just in front of the opening and those spikes now appearing hopelessly flimsy from their perspective.

Whatever the danger, the two men were captivated.

The cat's fangs looked like polished tin and seemed to be devoid of defect. The gums anchoring the fangs were not pink but blood red, almost purple. Gog could *feel* how tightly those fangs were held by those gums, which seemed to be made of flexing muscle actively holding, wielding those fangs.

The face-sized symmetrical tongue tucked far back in its throat had spikes on its surface that went from semitransparent crystal where they were rooted in the tongue to shiny black at the sharp tips, like tarantula fangs.

Its "whiskers" were about the thickness of one of Oh-Mas' fingers at their base, where they also had a translucence to them that seemed to refract the starlight, there suddenly seeming to be no moon or clouds, but only Unnaturally intense starlight. The stars felt *closer* more than brighter.

His coat was shades of orange, yellow, and black that, as with a lot of these colors, they could not really describe other than to say they were 'glowing', even the black. The fur seemed to shimmer and flow not with wind but with each of his movements. For some reason, they could not imagine there being any wind out there.

His coat seemed like an eternal windswept prairie of glowing colors.

His still slow, enormous breaths could be felt from within the hide, noticeably increasing the humidity.

As if in place of saliva, the tiger dripped thick, almost undiluted blood from its mouth. It had no apparent wound in its mouth but its throat could have easily been pierced so furious and sure were Oh-Mas' jabs.

To Grav and Gog, the cat simply drooled blood.

In addition to the thick laminar blood, there was bright pink foam coming from the sides of its mouth in pluses; a bit more pushed out with each breath. It fell to the floor in small pink piles. There was no name for this color.

More purple-pink gum would be exposed with every high screech-like roar.

It was pissed.

Crazed, the baby grabbed the lit lamp and smartly slung it hard, connecting with the cat's brow where it shattered, covering the cat with lighted turpentine

from the nearly-full lamp.

This roused the men, both of whom scrambled together in Grav's kit to get his lamp. Gog found it first and Grav hurriedly lit some dry litter from the hide's stone floor with embers from Oh-Mas' pipe, which he set to glowing with a few puffs of breath beforehand.

With a heavier dried leaf from this, he finally lit his lamp. Looking up he realized that light availability was not a problem for the time being.

The cat's front half was fully alight. It had a sort of mane of standing hackles between its shoulder blades made of fire. The liquid ran down his back, over his flanks, and also down the outside of its front legs. And the flame followed.

The cat spent a few drop-stone seemingly calmed by the fire. It was pacing and circling as if thinking of lying down.

But then the cat snapped.

It charged the opening, propelling its whole body with its powerful hind limbs and making synchronized swats with both forelimbs, claws extended. The massive cat was doing a sort of "wheelie", propping up the front half of its body with accelerating rage and creating a spray of leaves and loose dirt behind him.

Its swatting, almost clapping but with paws not quite meeting, got more rapid as he approached¹⁷⁷.

All of this was accompanied by a sound that caused physical pain in their ears; a twinge of which they would feel the next day. Notes of this could be felt distinctly in their chest.

So long as it stayed where it was, all was safe.

Things began to feel unsafe for the men when they looked at its eyes.

To say nothing of the color or patterns in the cat's fist-sized eyes, there was clearly *movement*.

The cat seemed to have swirls of blue-green, glossy black, silver, and colors that they could later recall but did not have words for. These patterns circled together in a kind of whirlpool "draining" into the black void at the center of each eye.

On exceptionally high mountains, on exceptionally cold, crisp winter nights, if you were a caveman blessed with keen eyes and you sat quietly for a palm or more with all fires extinguished, you could see things in the night sky about which no spin-minder had anything but guesses. Enough people had seen these things for there to be little question of their actual existence.

When the night sky is clear, you can see the great-river-bottom¹⁷⁸ from just

¹⁷⁷This can be seen in modern domesticated casts. It's known to some as 'fuck your shit up mode'.

¹⁷⁸The Milky Way

about anywhere. These other higher, fainter shapes in the sky that few had seen first-hand were made from the same kind of pigment. Like the great-river-bottom, they look like they're made from variously colored sand that is rich in mica.

One of these high-night-ghosts¹⁷⁹ was a kind of swirl shape, though one seen at an angle¹⁸⁰ It had been given the name 'Ender's-Sink'.

The cat had distinct, dazzling high-night-ghost swirls for eyes.

A more relatable example to most Crec would be the appearance of a whirlpool going down a natural sink, especially when different kinds of flowering duckweed and floating debris give it some character and shows its "arms".

The tooth-cat had eyes made of impossible colors that swirled down the drains of its eyes.

The men stared into these eyes as the swirling became more intense. Light was *coming* from its eyes.

The cat took on an otherworldly character. The men could sense a kind of phase change in the cat. There was something "there" that was not animal. The kind of sense one got when talking to another person, or looking into a raven's eye.

It spoke. I didn't speak using a voice, but it was clear to them just the same. Its words just *were*.

Do I not suffer too? Behold my fury and my might. Like you, I must eat to live. I am mortal. To kill *you* without mercy is as wrong to me as it is for you to do such to a marmot. You have broken The Order, wise apes.

"He's talking.", said Grav.

"No he's not.", Gog whispered as he continued to stare.

Both stunned by the unreality of what was happening, they watched the enormous animal do a graceful turn-about that seemed to happen in slow motion, with the beast looking over its muscular shoulder as he turned.

This isn't over.

The cat accelerated directly away from the hide, not bothering to alter his course for several arm-thick trees that he snapped easily.

His retreat was completely silent.

His flickering light could be seen peeking through the trees as he climbed the plain, seemingly for the stars.

¹⁷⁹Nebulae

¹⁸⁰Andromeda.

Oh-Mas could be seen shaking his head¹⁸¹ slowly as if out of disgust while he watched the cat's retreat.

He turned to the men and made a "Hummmphf!" that conveyed annoyance more than relief. The baby sat back down on the floor and worked on relighting his pipe.

The next morning had the unfortunate bleary, "all too real" feeling of a night having been overdone, as though reality did in fact have an anchor and this is what finding new anchorage felt like.

The unmistakable scent of barbecued game wafted in the air outside. It had the *smell* of an epic last-night.

Gog had crusty goo surrounding his eyes and what was clearly vomit on his chin stubble. His eyes, while not psychedelic, were quite a sight.

And as Gog could see, such was the case with Grav.

They faced each other and stared.

¹⁸¹In this case, forest-child head gestures are like many modern ones: He was shaking his head in disgust.

Appendix

Crecspeak

Words transliterated from Crecspeak are always hyphenated (or *dashed*), like "father-brother" meaning your father's brother, and not *just* uncle. (The distinction is important to the Crec.)

For the English-speaking audience, we use the closest equivalent in English to determine capitalization. For example, "Do you have a father-brother?" vs "I saw Father-brother Verk".

Be careful not to over-think the meaning, but it should be apparent from context. The words are chosen from English to best convey the meaning. It may sometimes be hard to understand why certain words were chosen. In these cases we are trying to convey the meaning as a Crec would understand it.

Idiomatic Crecspeak

- Those things are being what they are: "It is what it is." Always in the plural for some reason.

Glossary

after-die-monster Their Devil. Just one, like you.

ancient-speak Generally meaning "story-telling", this is analogous to selling a book in our times. It is both 1) revered by default 2) kind of, let's face it, not always going to be a big deal. Times change, pops.

baby-makers Girls. I am sorry. My job is to bring you this story accurately, including look *and* feel. This was their world, sorry. But a Crec, or perhaps even any caveperson would have no less respect for a *mere* baby-maker than you would for say a truck driver or computer technician. It's due its own respect, in their eyes. And everyone gets along, no less than you and your sister did. It's just what's up, that's all.

bachelor-tree A delicate, oddly "chubby" tree with soft lacy leaves that both looks and smells like your wedding night. Small burrowing animals like the bachelor-tree because its soft, incredibly wet flesh makes burrowing quite easy and the natural internal heaving of the tree ensures that it is a snug, sometimes very snug place to burrow, especially in the dry season. It can be problematic for burrowers to breath, because of the snugness and most will usually nest with just their noses sticking out of the opening. Because small tree-dwelling animals are predominately nocturnal, animal burrows in the bachelor-tree are almost always empty at night. This is also a very delicate topic of conversation among the Crec. Sure, the Amish might know what a vagina *is*, but will somehow manage to go a lifetime without saying it out-loud or acknowledging its existence¹⁸² (to reach for a

¹⁸²Ever.

tangible analog you might understand.) [TODO: the complex bachelor-tree reproductive cycle should **depend upon** cavemen.]

Balrag A tribe that borders the large, thinly populated region to the Crec's south. From north to south: Bhorv Zolk -> undesirables -> undesirable's-undesirables -> next tribe over (Balrag). As it was both downhill and a good bit south, it was noticeably steamier. Gog or Grav would struggle for something meaning "exotic" to describe the milieu¹⁸³ that was Balrag Culture¹⁸⁴. They had a style of drumming that was considered by most Crec to be a "bit on the carnal side", with rhythms that merged on scandalous. It was known that they rarely scratched any of their drumming down, even if improperly. Their drumming was loud enough to be heard softly but distinctly on a calm, clear, crisp [omg what is "Christmas"?] night... usually long past midnight.

Battle of the Snake-Meal, The Without a doubt the most famous battle from The Great Club War, and its turning point in favor of ultimate victory for the Crec.

between-ham-fire-pebbles Hemorrhoids, piles.

Bhorv Zolk The cave "system" in which the Crec live. Properly, it's the name of the hill that the cave is dug out of, but the two concepts are more or less interchangeable.

bird-scat Used variously for snot, puss, and, if you are a particularly nasty sort of Crec, semen.

boulder-door A quantity. Exactly 100. Reckoned to be the number of boulders to keep handy to barricade the average cave entrance.

boulder-rhino A kind of engine of war that is known by many names in our world. At its simplest (which it usually is), it is a collection of the largest stones that can possibly be hauled to the top of the hill/mountain, restrained by a few smaller rocks that will somehow be swat out of the way at the right time, releasing a thunderous stampede of very big boulders, in the direction of one's enemy, most often.

boulder-stump Here we reach *the* word around which this entire story orbits. You'll figure it out. It's pretty embarrassing after all.

burrow The Crec use this word like we do to mean an animal's dwelling, under the ground or in a rotted tree for example. They also use it to mean "room", "cave" or any other more-or-less person-sized void made in rock or sturdy earth for the purpose of occupying, even if only for a drop-stone.

Choh-Ov Military training camp nearest Bhorv Zolk, in the small settlement of Fayt-Caves.

Clorp [singular and plural] TODO: who are then and what makes them tick. They are the "enemy" of the Crec. And a definition.

club-fight A kind of duel involving some ceremony. There is a regulatory body <why not name it here> that exists to ensure that any two clubs used in a club-fight are recognized as being "fair". The participants, on the other

¹⁸³A meaning they understood, but a word for which they might struggle.

¹⁸⁴They were fans.

hand vary widely. The last rule of club-fight, as it is the most important, is: Someone's got to not be able to walk away.

clubbing-camp training camp.

Crec [singular and plural] The Forest to which the Zog clan both lives and belongs. "Crec" can refer to the Forest or the people who live there.

Douks A Forest bordering the northeast of Crec. The Douks are one of only a very few actual threats to Crec. They are a sophisticated culture, like the Crec, and share a common cultural heritage. But the two are quite different in many ways. They have what might be described as "mutual suspicion with respect", and have an almost civil diplomatic relations. But occasionally have terrible, bloody wars.

down-power Gravity

drop-stone A unit of time; about as long as it takes for a stone to hit the ground when dropped from an outstretched hand, on more or less level ground. They're as tall as you and used to inhibit the same planet. It works out to be a bit over half a second.

elders-quorum This is a sort of "The Senate" of a Forest (in cases where they have bothered). It's just as inept and entertaining as our analogs (diet, soviet, merikin, parliament, Kremlin, house, neighborhood gang. . .)

Ender's-Stump The "joke" name given Ender's-Sword by G&G. They are too contemptuous to go around saying "Ender's-Sword" to each other.

Ender's-Sword The name given to the strange (obscene) gem found by G&G

Ender-Of-All-Questions God. Just one, like you. You will encounter references to "the gods". Rather improbably, this is used exactly as a modern, cynical teenager might use it: ironically. As in, *You are still such a tire-some superstitious moron that you probably believe in multiple gods like back in primitive times.*

father-brother Your father's brother. Your "uncle", but with more information.

Fayt-Caves The charming town surrounding Choh-Ov.

food-clay Shit

force Strain.

forest-child A mysterious people that have the appearance of babies, none of the signs of dwarfism as far as can be determined, but have the "presence" of adults more or less, including callouses, injuries, smoking habits, and general casualness. They never seemed to be surprised to encounter the Crec, often stop to talk (usually monologue) for minutes, apparently sharing relevant trekking tips. None of their language is understood by any Crec. They don't seem to follow paths of any kind and are encountered intersecting established paths at random angles. Every encounter was pretty much the same, indicating that these were the member of a culture or "Forest" of some sort, and no one remembers encountering the same one more than once.

Forest-Deer A political party (same deal) that composes exactly 50% of the Elders-Quorum (You should now be asking if these are the good guys.)

Forest The largest organizing category of people, analogous to a nation.

juff An alcoholic beverage made from fermented coconut flesh, and a polite

quantity of spit from a special, designated virgin baby-maker, who is chosen yearly as the designated provider of spit (A custom that has been known to ruin some plans.)

jump-scare Living in something like a giant ant hill, opportunities to e.g. hide around the corner and scare the food-clay out of someone abound. This is that.

man A unit of measure with an obvious reference object. If you just assumed "six feet", you would be within 0.4%, just by "coincidence". Like all units of measure, but especially with 'length', the Crec are fastidious and follow a badger's warren of different ideas to further add precision. In conversation, like us, units of measure are imprecise. And unavoidably, things like time its daughter units, like speed are trickier, but there are always a few learned men to lower the precision bar ever more. BTW, it is never "men". As a unit of measure: one man, two man, three man.

mouse-spawn Exactly 500. The term comes from the number of mice believed to result from putting one mating pair of mice in an unoccupied one-family cave in the course of four moons. Which is also roughly the amount of time required to make the Unkempt-Loud-Suffering Pilgrimage from The Forest of Crec and back.

palm A unit of time. It also has two meanings with reference to distance/length.

predict-tool Probably a good start on the idea of "a hypothesis".

quiet-one A small, quiet, demure baby-maker between 7 and 11 years old. This term *is* specific to that, even though it sounds like it could be generalized and understood. Girls of this demeanor and age were considered very precious, lovable, and pure. This is the phase in a baby-maker's life that is considered good for *molding* by encouraging innocence, purity, during this stage when it becomes more susceptible to feedback.

relax-marks Everyone sits on rocks. Some rocks get a lot of mileage. Inevitably there are brown, burnished areas that repel liquids well and indicate a sweet rock to sit on. So there is some tension: On the one hand they are a mark of shame, sloth and bad housekeeping, but on the other hand everyone likes a good sit.

rhino-calf It means literally that but is also a term of endearment that you can still say without being too creepy. Like "dear".

rhino-scat Mostly known as being the name of a certain hill that was central to the events of The Battle of the Snake Meal during The Great Club War. Actual rhino scat has a certain look. The famous hill has that same look.

rock-stick Referring to the cavemen sex organs, it has a slightly less "rude" sense than do other profanities. It's equivalent to the modern (circa 2021) English "weener" or "peener" or "willy" or "pee-pee" or "jiggly bits" or "hookie" or "wee-wee" or "peter".

all-finger A quantity of something. It is exactly 10; the number of fingers you have. Like "dozen" but two less.

sit-ham-stone Chair

sit-ham Butt-cheek

Small Woods The more woodsy part of the trek from Bhorv Zolk, just before

reaching Snare Plains. The transition is rather sudden: One goes from shady canopy to open sky in only a few steps. The boundary looks like a green, tumbling ocean meeting a dusty, scrubby continent, with the overhanging trees looking like frozen waves about to crash.

snake-meal A "bump", "lump", "protuberance", "hump", or area of fattening. Also used in the way we say, "love handles".

Snare Plains The plains/savanna met just before Fayt-Caves when traveling from Bhorv Zolk.

soot-palette Wherever fire has deposited soot on an area of stone that has been used for writing, if you write in it, it becomes a "soot-palette". It's as common as and thought of like billboards, but are not thought of as owned, so it's acceptable for someone to write something (proper) on such a sooted stone surface. Trespassing is still a thing, though.

squirrel-hoard An abstract quantity meaning "a lot", if you thought "a whole bunch of" you'd be close.

strength "Force", in the way used in physics.

take-part-value A tax.

take-value Shorthand for take-part-value. Take-value also means "robbery" or "mugging", but the Crec universally do not make the connection.

value-stone A unique, hopefully big, visually appealing gem or mineral (there are many sources.) They are the currency, but their relative value is determined at haggling time, which makes for double the arguments.

Wolf-Sleep To meditate peacefully by actively observing all of one's sensory input, minus vision. Learning to actively monitor every inch of your skin, every sound you hear, perhaps the taste of a recent meal, one can paradoxically become quite calm and contented. Importantly, one does not "analyze" the input. This leads to the kind of *thinking* that is to be quieted. This is called Wolf-Sleep, because once the trick is mastered, practitioners, always observing their breath, from throat outward, would be able to jump into this relaxed, serene state with ever more ease, which reliably made their third, fourth of fifth breath a big, relaxed, satisfying, full-body "hmufffffff..." that observers of wolves and modern dog owners are familiar with. The most elite practitioners, those who understood this as more than just a way to relax, were able to endure most any sensation with genuine enjoyment, so long as it did not pose a threat. For example, a raw, bloody scrape on your leg will be crawling with gnats and flies in a matter of minutes. While this *is* a kind of threat, and the Crec know it, one only needs to rinse the wound in a clean river and scrub it with light sand from time to time. Knowing that this sensation is no real threat it goes right to the "observe" category; not dwell upon, or worry about, just "observe", like all other input. These many hundred legs provided an enormous amount of "input" for the skilled wolf-sleeper to make a practice of trying to absorb ever more detail about this bit of sensory input. Some claimed to be able to note every bug's footfall and every prodding with mouth-parts; knowing usually which direction any of his visitors might be facing.

Workers The "Workers" describe normal people doing normal things. They are distinguished from others only in that they 'sense they are part of something'. They're OK. They're surly but unsure of themselves. They become agreeable and polite when there is talk of any kind of increase in their pay. Grav thinks these people could just choose to focus on other things.

Cardinal and Ordinal Directions

Directions are always with respect to the "morning-sun", meaning: The observer faces East to orient¹⁸⁵ themselves and all other directions are relative to East.

Picture yourself facing East (morning-sun) and pointing in the direction that follows.

[Facing East] morning-sun- [the direction to the left] left-side [is North]

- morning-sun-left-side: North
- morning-sun: East
- morning-sun-back-side: West
- morning-sun-right-side: South
- morning-sun-left-back-side: North West (etc...)

Language and Naming Surrounding Women

Promised but not yet delivered.

Abundance of Human Predators and Other Dangers

Someone needs to explain why folks would not just simply off themselves if found in a world where fecking gigantic cats and goat-sized flying predators are watching you *every now and then*. I mean, it'd be pretty terrifying, no? But the abundance of predators and the seemingly impossibly non-stop live-or-die struggles with this and other annoyances would be a real bummer (they were).

Explain yourself!

Numbers and Reckoning

Whole Numbers

- all-finger: 10
- boulder-door: 100
- mouse-spawn: 500
- squirrel-hoard: "a bunch", "a lot"

¹⁸⁵See? They're not the only ones.

Not that all-finger can be repeated for additional "powers of ten"

- all-finger all-finger: 100
- all-finger all-finger all-finger: 1000

Negative Numbers (and friends)

No such luck.

Fractions

Fractions are sounded out by the Crec in a logical way that would to us seem overly wordy. An attempt is made to preserve this post-translation because it gives modern readers a better sense of how the Crec see abstract numbers as novel and worthy of slowing down for.

1. Examples

- one and one half of one $\rightarrow 1 + 1/2$
- two and two thirds of one $\rightarrow 2 + 2/3$
- three and four fifths of one $\rightarrow 3 + 4/5$
- N and X Ys of one $\rightarrow N + X/Y$

Abstract Ratios

When not referring to a portion of a "thing" but instead referring to an abstract ratio (say the rate of climb of a bird or the slope of a hill), the Crec just plug in the word "part" for the abstract quantity unit that gets canceled out (which they mostly have observed). Half of a rock and a 100%¹⁸⁶ grade are two things that do not directly relate, according to their way of thought.

1. Examples

- one part of four $\rightarrow 1:4$
- one part down for each one half of one boulder-door part over $\rightarrow 1:50$
- one part up for each one half of one boulder-door part over $\rightarrow 1:50$ ¹⁸⁷

Angles

Angles are thought of by the Crec as simply a fraction of a whole circle. And again, the connection to related concepts like "portion of something" or "how steep?" are to them still out of reach, although practitioners of Foundational-Nature-Reckoning¹⁸⁸ are closing in.

In fact, the Crec quite literally are thinking "a part of a circle", the way to cut the circle being obvious to them.

¹⁸⁶For the unfamiliar, this is a 45-degree grade, which goes to show.

¹⁸⁷In a way 'up' verses 'down' is also irrelevant as either way, the meaning is usually obvious from context.

¹⁸⁸Mathematics

1. Examples

- one quarter of one circle: 90-deg
- one twentieth of one circle: 18-deg
- two of one circle: 720-deg (which they might say to mean "I turned around twice")

Time

- [sun-]palm: About 38 minutes. The amount of time it takes for the sun to pass the width of one palm at arm's length. For example, if you want to know what-in-the-morning it is, hold your right arm out straight, rotate your upturned hand counterclockwise 90 degrees so that your fingers are pointing to your left, the distance from top of your hand (the outer [upper-most] part of the first knuckle of the pinkie) to the bottom of your hand (the outer [lower-most] part of the first knuckle of your index finger) is the unit you use to measure the height of the sun. A Crec will say, "It's 7 palm after dawn, get a move on!"
- drop-stone: Just over 0.5s [a 5ft drop in a vacuum with standard gravity is 0.5575s]
- moon: (lunar) month [around 29.5 days]
- sun: day
- year: year

Mass

- gourd: about one pound

Volume

- gourd: about half a liter

Length/Distance

- bowstring-finger-knuckle: about 2cm (the distance from the tip of an average adult male's index finger to the first knuckle)
- drop-stone: 189 meters (approximately 100 man) – the distance *sound* travels in one drop-stone (just over half a second). This sounds like a preposterous concept for a caveman's reckoning of distance. It is not! The idea is very simple: One person makes a **sound** whose occurrence is obvious **visually**; for example, hitting a large skin drum with a large, conspicuous [drum]stick. The drum can be heard literally for miles. One can see the drummer *striking* the drum, for a very long way on flat, level ground [as will be the case for this procedure, usually]. Another person will adjust their distance, by gradually backing away, such that, if the stone is dropped from shoulder-height when the drumbeat is *seen* and hits the ground when the sound arrives, the two cavepersons can be said to be

"one drop-stone away from each other. Adoption of this was slow, as it was difficult to convince the average caveperson that sound travels at a *constant* speed (obviously!) In modern visual arts, the clapperboard has a similar function.

- man: about 6 feet ("you?")
- palm (1): The distance one *walks* in a single palm (of time) – about two miles.
- palm (2): The width of the palm. From one outer side of a flat hand to the other, not including the thumb. About 0.5 pinkie-thumb.
- pinkie-thumb: Stretch the tips of your thumb and pinkie as far apart as you can; that's a pinkie-thumb. It's about two palm (the short version).

Speed

The Crec will try to decipher any "distance per time" units given, with varying degrees of struggle, just as you might if someone quoted speed to you in say "ångstrom per millennium" or "centimeters per year". There's no judgment about this among the Crec. They are always thinking of the best combination to express an idea. As their units of time are few and imprecise, there are correspondingly fewer combinations to use for speed and the appropriate choice is usually obvious. Man-per-dropstone and man-per-palm are popular combinations. Most often, a familiar analog will be used: as fast as a saber-tooth tiger.