

GIFTS OF PROMETHEUS

Out of the frying pan, into the fire.

BY ALEX SHVARTSMAN

I should've recognized it as an ill omen that the first meeting between Human and Klln ended in violence and death.

I crash-landed my ship far away from their larger colonies, intending to make repairs and leave before encountering the planet's dominant species, but the damage was worse than I'd suspected, so it would be a long time before I could leave. This world was promising; there were edible plants and the water was drinkable after minor chemical treatment. I was foraging when I came under attack.

Charging Klln were a fearsome sight. Dozens of insectoids, each the size of a cocker spaniel, advanced on me. Their pincers clicked rapidly. They emitted sounds akin to thousands of fingernails scraping down a blackboard. I couldn't outrun them back to the ship so I fired twice into the air, hoping the noise would deter them. No such luck. They approached fast. Panicked, I fired into the swarm. Bullets ripped through their bodies, killing several of the creatures. Impossibly, the swarm halted. They examined their dead, then retreated to a safe distance.

Afterwards, a few Klln always watched from afar whenever I dared to leave the ship. I was shaken, but resolved to continue my work. One day, the Klln brought me an offering. A pair of them approached the crash site, moving slowly as if to give me ample warning. They carried a handful of edible plants they had previously observed me collecting. The Klln placed their gifts by the airlock and departed.

This went on for some time until I gathered the courage to meet them. When I approached, the Klln chattered excitedly, repeating the same pattern of sounds over and over again. I was shocked to realize it was speech.

Using the ship's computer, I was soon able to communicate with the insectoids. I learnt that they called themselves Klln. Their species was on the brink of the Stone Age: they were learning to use tools and their language evolved quickly, incorporating new ideas and embracing the concept of abstract thought.

They allowed me full access to their colony and whatever assistance they could offer procuring raw materials for my repairs. I couldn't help but return the favour.

I offered suggestions to improve their farming and taught them to hunt with spears specially designed to be held firm in their

fought to the last warrior. In every Klln battle I witnessed, individual life had little value and no one ever retreated. No quarter was given and no prisoners taken. In a matter of hours, the entire colony I'd befriended was eradicated.

In retrospect, how could it be that these fearless creatures were scared off by a few gun shots? I came to understand it wasn't their fear that saved my life, but rather their self-interest. They'd realized that I possessed tools and knowledge that they did not, and was therefore more useful to them alive. That they could reason this out and act on such logic in the heat of the hunt was further proof of their remarkable intelligence.

The victorious colony remained tolerant of my presence in exchange for more knowledge, and in my incredible hubris I gave it to them. Within two years, Klln went from Stone Age to Industrial Age. They had perfected metallurgy and — without any help from me — invented gunpowder. Like Prometheus chained to his rock, I remained a helpless observer as the Klln civilization flourished around me. My conservative estimate is that they will launch their first starship in another 20 years.

Every night I wake up in a cold sweat. My dreams are haunted by vicious, methodical and super-intelligent bugs unleashed upon the Universe, thanks to my meddling. Owing to the unforgiving nature of time dilation, long before my beamed warnings reach the nearest human colonies, the Klln will have escaped their home world. I was so enamoured with the idea of playing a gift-dispensing deity to their species that I may have brought doom upon my own.

There's still a chance to avert disaster. I continue to feed them select bits of human science that might focus their efforts on other disciplines and maybe keep them from developing flight a little longer. In a matter of years they'll be capable of creating chemical and biological weapons that, if luck would have it, might wipe out their species before they figure out a way to leave this planet.

Until then and towards that goal, this Prometheus will continue dispensing gifts. ■

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ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

pincers. Then there was the wheel. It took the colony mere days to adapt new technology and concepts that humans might have struggled with for generations. I felt proud to play a small part in their blossoming civilization. Would they retain some vague memory of my visit thousands of years later? Was that how the myths of Prometheus and Quetzlcoatl originated on Earth?

Four months later there was a war. One of the largest colonies I'd observed before landing expanded onto this part of the continent. Hundreds of thousands of Klln flooded the area, annihilating the smaller colonies that had settled here. The local Klln had learnt to use tools and thus were able to put up a real fight despite being badly outnumbered. I hid inside the ship and watched horrified via surveillance drones as Klln battled each other with a viciousness and savagery unmatched by anything in my experience.

The invaders took heavy losses but immediately adapted to their enemies' tactics. They picked up the spears and sharpened stones of fallen Klln, eliminating the defenders' only advantage. Still, the defenders