

K. D. WENTWORTH

TALL ONE

K. D. Wentworth lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with a large dog and numerous finches. She is often drawn to religious themes in her writing; last Christmas, you may recall, she gave us a decidedly different view of holy days in "'Tis the Season." Now she takes us to the stars with a more serious and rather luminous story of missionaries among an alien race.

Father Johannes knelt beside the grave, his cassock bunched to protect his knees. The cold, too-thin air of Sheah Four wheezed through his straining chest. He bowed his head in prayer, then hoisted the final rock to the top of the cairn. Sitting back on his heels, he ached for his native Alps, for stately old Luzem poised like a cut jewel on its shimmering blue ice-melt lake, the pristine swans that drifted across the mirrored surface like angels. When he closed his eyes, he could smell the water lapping against wet stone, see the boxes of red and pink and white flowers crowding every window.

He shuddered. When he qualified for the two-man missionary post here, he had thought the mountains rearing up into the violet-tinged sky would feel like home; he'd imagined small faces turned up to him, not human, of course, but recognizably innocent and trusting, waiting for the gifts of love and salvation he brought. Nothing in his training at the seminary had prepared him for a malevolent yellow-white sun that burned his fair skin a leathery walnut-brown, or dry, oxygen-poor air that made his chest ache all the time. And no one had really explained about the khe. He lurched heavily to his feet and saw one of the beasts sitting on its haunches behind him, its green eyes wide, neckfrill spread to catch the sun, a study in kheish patience. Its satiny black skin crawled with photobiotic green fire in the sunlight.

The young priest's hands trembled as he picked up the simple cross he had crafted from native wood. Just being near one of these heathen creatures still made him break out in a cold sweat. The blunt, lipless snout, the earless skull, the long sinuous body, every part of it screamed serpent.

He stared at it. At this time of day, it should be perched on a rock somewhere, soaking up the sun. What did it want? Surely not salvation. In the eight months since he and Father Gareth had arrived, he had realized at least that much. The khe were filthy beasts, barely sentient, uninterested in artifice or artifacts, having nothing in common with humanity. And yet, as Father Gareth had frequently reminded him, the Lord God had made them as surely as He had made everything else, and therefore how could Johannes not love them?

He wedged the cross into a crevice between the stones and anchored it with gravel. He coughed, then coughed again, a hard wracking spasm that could only be controlled, not cured. His throat was continually raw, his cells slowly starving, a condition that had weakened Father Gareth and ultimately killed him.

"The oxygen content there is marginal," the Placement Office had said, "but man can survive."

But was mere survival the same as living? Johannes knew now it was not. Despite the rigorous selection process, they had sent the wrong man. Sheah Four brought out faults in him that he had never suspected; he was a weak vessel, even base. Without Father Gareth's experience and gentle guidance, he would never be able to carry on the Lord's work here.

Behind him, the khe's clawed fingers scritch over the rubble.

He steeled himself, then turned to meet the poisonous green eyes. The beast was full grown, its head reaching his shoulder as it sat on all fours. "What -- does one want?" he whistled in the stilted kheish grammar that knew nothing of personal names and permitted only the present tense.

The khe's muzzle wove from side to side, black tongue flickering like summer lightning. "Speak of one under rocks."

Johannes blanched. He wanted to say a funeral mass over the grave, speak the ancient words meant to give comfort to those left behind and find serenity in the familiar motions in this hellish place so far from home, but he knew what Father Gareth would have done. He closed his eyes, praying for guidance. He had tried to communicate with the primitives many times without success. These creatures had no word for God, no word for affection or love. How could he even begin to explain that Father Gareth had gone to his Maker?

"Tall one goes to live with its parent," he said in the barbarous whistlespeech.

"Not lives -- dies!" The khe scabbled forward, snout raised, and curled three sinuous fingers around his wrist. Its flesh clung to his skin like warm plastic.

Johannes stiffened, his heart racing sickly. He could not bear these creatures to touch him. Gritting his teeth, he tried to think of some way to explain. "Tall one walks this earth no more, but -- walks in another place with -- parent." He tried to ease away from its grip, but it held on.

The slitted eyes were glittering wells of emerald. "Another place?"

Did it understand? "Yes."

The black tongue darted out-in. "Where?"

"Place where -- one goes when one dies." In spite of the chill, sweat beaded the priest's brow. He mopped his forehead with his sleeve.

The khe sidled closer until he could feel its breath on his face, hot and feathery, musky. "One who dies goes to mountain."

Johannes grimaced. The khe exposed their dead high up on the side of the

mountain where predators and scavengers feasted on the remains, a heathenish, disgusting custom. "One's body goes to mountain, but one's --" He shuddered as it pressed closer. Its neckfrill was in his face now. The photobiotic iridescence was more noticeable there, green splotches and lines that separated, then ran together like a map of some distant place he'd never been. "One's --" he tried again, then finally gave in and used the human term, even though it was just meaningless sounds to the khe. "One's spirit, what is inside, goes back to parent."

The khe whistled something shrill and incomprehensible and pushed him away, bathing him in a smoldering green gaze before it wandered into the surrounding purple-gray scrub. He stared after it, rubbing his wrist, then sank to his knees on the rocks before the crude wooden cross and gripped his hands in prayer until his knuckles shone white. The chill thin air dried the tears on his cheeks almost as fast as they fell.

He didn't return to the rectory until the yellow-white sun hung low in the sky, already half-observed by the mountains. He limped along the mossy bluff overlooking the stream, his knees bruised and aching, passing khe after khe stretched out in the sun like sleek black plants, soaking up radiant energy. He had to hurry. When the sun sank behind the mountains, the khe would stir themselves and hunt until twilight deepened into darkness. He found their cheerful slaughter at that time of day even more disturbing than watching them like this.

Their photobiotic cells provided a large portion of their daily energy intake, perhaps as much as fifty percent, according to the exobiologists who had catalogued Sheah Four several decades ago, but for the rest of their energy needs, as well as trace elements and certain vital nutrients, the khe hunted small insects and animals, consuming them in a brief feeding frenzy during the hours when the light was no longer direct enough to fully stimulate their photobiotic cells, but darkness had not yet rendered them torpid.

He passed the rows of straggly peas and green beans in Father Gareth's tiny kitchen garden, remembering the tall, patient blond man. From the moment he had first set foot in this shimmering silver and violet valley, Father Gareth had loved the khe, ministering to them tenderly, anointing the soft-skinned, playful pups with holy water and baptizing them one and all in the name of the Lord. "It doesn't matter that they don't understand," he'd said. "In time they will, and the Lord wants them now."

Johannes couldn't repress a shudder. "They look like snakes."

Father Gareth's mild blue eyes narrowed. "Rather more like salamanders, I should think, if you must speak of Earth, but they are not of Earth. They are themselves, beautiful in their own right, holy in their perfection as God's creatures."

Holy.... Johannes shivered and entered the prefabricated one-room bungalow he had shared with the older priest.

After a miserable dinner of warmed-over beans and rice, he sat down before the tiny scribe's screen and tried to complete Father Gareth's reports. The ship would return with two replacements in eighteen months and they would expect to see figures -- so many baptized, so many converted, so much of the Bible translated and preached to the khe. If Father Gareth had lived, it might have all happened. As it was...

He crossed his arms on the keyboard and rested his forehead against them. They would find Father Gareth dead and his mission dead along with him, no converts, no church, no alliance with the khe. His eyelids drooped.

"Son, you can't give up," Father Gareth's voice whispered suddenly, but Johannes lacked the energy to look up. "You have to make them understand."

"But --" Johannes fought to open his leaden eyes. He seemed to feel warm fingers rest upon his head in benediction.

"Go out among them and minister. Feed my flock."

He started, sat up, blinking, heart pounding. He was alone, of course, the only light the screen's pale luminescence. Outside, the sun had dipped behind the mountains, casting the valley into darkness. The unceasing wind howled around the tiny building. Minister to the khe? He shook his head. They were the most self-sufficient creatures he had ever known, needing neither garments or housing, tools with which to cultivate or weapons to hunt. And as for their spiritual needs, as far as he and Father Gareth had been able to ascertain, they'd never conceived of God in any form, however primitive. What could Johannes offer them that they could possibly need?

He pulled on his heavy coat, pocketed the stunner and picked up the freshly charged cold-lantern. He had seldom gone out at night himself, but he knew that, after dark, the khe sought out small depressions of rock and huddled together in a half-conscious torpor caused by ebbing energy levels which made them vulnerable to nighttime attack.

He stepped out into a singing darkness that was more a shade of deep purple than black, his ears instantly numbed by the fierce wind. He pulled his hood up and switched on the lantern. Overhead, the stars continued their slow eternal dance, dazzling and indifferent. He shivered and picked his way through clumps of scrubby silver-sage toward the nearest rocky rise that had shown signs of khe habitation.

The lantern caught a mass of supple black bodies threaded with green fire that blazed under the intense white light. Hot liquid-jade eyes slitted open. Johannes's mouth moved, but he suddenly felt ridiculous. What could he say?

Minister to them. Father Gareth whispered inside his head.

He cleared his throat nervously. "Does -- one need anything?"

The black tangle quivered, then a khe separated itself and slunk toward him, belly pressed to the rock-strewn ground. "Light," it whistled. "Light-that-moves!" It touched its snout to his boots.

The others surged forward then and enclosed him in a warm press of lithe bodies, staring expectantly up at his face. He shifted his weight uncomfortably.

"Tall one comes back," a khe whistled softly, "from under rocks." He flinched. They were confusing him with Father Gareth, who had often come out in the night like this. "No," he answered, then squatted down, even though the touch of their satiny hides made him want to run. The breath shuddered in and out of his lungs as he set the cold-lantern on the ground. "But once many suns ago in this one's place--" He hesitated, trying to frame the familiar old story in the khe's restrictive present tense grammar. "Once one dies and comes back after three suns."

A khe gripped his leg, lightly, almost like a caress. "Tall one?"

"A tall one." He tried to meet the bottomless green eyes without looking away. "One comes and speaks of--" This was the point at which he always failed. He knew the kheish word for physical joining for the purpose of procreation, but had never found any word to express love or reverence. "Speaks of liking for parent, for sibling, for offspring." He hesitated, watching their attentive ebony faces. "One has a sound for this liking?"

The khe were statues focused on the light.

"One has this same liking for these, for all tall ones." He touched his chest, feeling the pounding of his heart within. Was he finally going to make them understand? "The one who comes back has this liking for all khe too."

"Where is this one?" The khe, still holding his leg, cocked its head. Johannes's chest ached. "Outside."

"Where?" The khe's digits tightened until its claws pierced the coarse fabric of his cassock.

"Outside sky, mountains, outside -- everything," he faltered.

The khe released him. Its eyes narrowed, baffled, unbelieving. Johannes sighed and picked up the lantern. They surged around him, snuffling, whining in the backs of their throats, plucking at the lantern with anxious digits.

"Light!" they whistled softly, then louder, more boldly. "Light-thatmoves!"

His skin crawling, Johannes shoved past them, tripping over their legs, bouncing off smooth sides, and fled back to the rectory, slamming the door behind him and throwing the bolt.

Late into the night, as he hunched on his cot in the dark and stared at the invisible ceiling, he heard the whisper of bodies against the door, the skritch of claws on the roof.

They were still there when he emerged the next morning, twenty or more, arrayed in a scattered semicircle, neckfrills already spread to catch the first slanting rays of the rising sun. He hesitated in the doorway, his fingers gripping the frame. Uncertain of their mood, he made himself cross the threshold.

A khe raised its muzzle. "Tall one comes back from rocks."

"No." Johannes swallowed hard. They were still confusing him with Father Gareth. "Tall one does not come back. Tall one is dead." He touched his own chest. "This one Father Johannes." Whistletalk did not permit true reproduction of human speech phonemes, but he used the rhythm of the syllables while assigning them tones.

The rows of khe stared at him in stony silence. He knew they didn't use personal names, and yet, why not? They understood the concept of nouns, and how could he explain about God and Jesus and the saints if he could never refer to them by name? Just because the khe had no names now didn't mean they couldn't learn. "Father Johannes," he whistled again, pointing at himself. "You make same sound."

The only movement was the nervous dance of paper-thin tongues, then, one by one, they turned their green eyes away and drifted into the feathery silver-sage. His hands clenched as he watched them glide away. Not now, not when he was so close! He could feel they were on the very edge of comprehension. Just a few minutes more and he might be able to at least begin to lead them to God.

"Wait!" he whistled and ran to block one's path. He touched his chest. "Make sound -- Father Johannes, Father Johannes!"

The khe hissed and drew back, its head weaving in confusion, its black tongue flickering. "Light," it said. "This one go light."

"One time!" Gasping in the too-thin air, Johannes stepped in front of it again as it tried to slither around him. "Make sound!"

The startled khe fastened needle-teeth in his upper arm and tossed him aside with one shake of its muscular neck. His head struck the rectory steps with a sharp burst of pain, and then a black nothingness swallowed him.

His head throbbed and sharp edges bit into his flesh, weighing him down, making it even more difficult to breathe than usual. His eyes opened, but he saw only a faint grayness.

Where was he? Panic surged through him. He couldn't breathe. He had to get up! He struggled to move his arms, his legs. Finally, with a grating rattle, his right leg moved a few inches and whatever was holding him down rolled away,

partially freeing his right arm as well. He wriggled and squirmed and more weight slid away until he finally could sit up.

Rocks surrounded him, covering his torso and left leg, ranging in size from pebbles to fist-sized stones. He stared numbly. The khe must have thought he was dead and buried him in a shallow layer of rubble in the same way he had covered Father Gareth's grave yesterday.

He had a marble-sized knot on the back of his head and was scraped from head to toe. His left arm ached fiercely where the khe's bite had broken the skin. He bent forward and rested his throbbing forehead against his knees, seeking the strength to get up and go inside the rectory before the khe came back and finished the job.

He had been so stupid, losing control and frightening them. His cheeks burned as he remembered how Father Gareth had been the very soul of patience and understanding with these primitive creatures. Now they would never listen to him. He would never lead them to God.

At dusk, the khe gathered outside the rectory, whistling in a low chorus that harmonized in a minor key. His heart pounded as he cracked the door. Above the mountains, the gathering night was a deep purple contrasting with paler mauve in the west. A mass of black bodies waited, more than had come that morning, more than he had ever seen at the same time since he and Father Gareth had arrived, possibly the entire khe population of the valley.

A large beast stepped forward, its body alive with iridescent photobiotic fire, its simmering green eyes focused on his face. "One comes back from under rocks."

He pocketed the stunner before opening the door further and easing down the steps. The temperature had already dropped below freezing and his breath plumed white in the growing dimness. He smelled the dank muskiness of their bodies. "You cover one with rocks, but this one not dead."

"Tall one comes back!" it insisted shrilly.

Several khe filtered through the assembled ranks and dropped small gray lumps in the silvery moss at his feet. Without taking his eyes off the khe, he bent his knees and fumbled for one of the lumps. His fingers closed around a small furry beast, punctured by khe tooth-marks, still faintly writhing. Warm blood seeped over his hand.

He shuddered and held it out. "What is this for?"

The large khe nosed the animal in his hand. "Eat, then one makes light."

So they had brought him food, probably a good sign. He stroked the tiny rodent-like creature's silken fur, regretting its pain. Perhaps the khe were sorry too for hurting him earlier. Perhaps they did have the capacity for a conscience, a potential for recognizing and avoiding sin.

"Wait." He ducked back inside and laid the suffering creature on Father Gareth's cot. He put on his coat, then took the cold-lantern outside and set it on the ground, the white bulb cutting through the darkness like a beacon. The khe whistled softly and surged forward, neckfrills raised as though it were full daylight.

He sat on the rock-strewn ground beside the lantern, aching all over, especially in his wounded arm. His throat was dry. "This one does not come back." He pointed to himself. "But once one does."

A khe nosed the lantern. "One comes back, makes light?"

"No." Johannes rubbed his throbbing forehead and frowned. No matter how hard he tried, things always seemed to get mixed up. "This one different. This one --" He concentrated, trying to get the best approximation of the human phonemes in whistletalk. "This one Jesus."

The khe were creeping closer, curling themselves around the well of cool white light until sleek black bodies laced with iridescent green enclosed him on every side. Their watching eyes were hot pools of melted emeralds.

He resisted the claustrophobic urge to push them back. "Jesus dies, then comes back after three suns, has much liking for khe."

A smaller khe scabbled up and over the backs of the ones blocking it from the light and plopped down in front. The others hissed at it, shifting their three-toed forelegs restlessly.

"This one, Jesus, says khe must like each one, each khe, and --" Another young beast climbed the black wall of bodies, slid down to the front and knocked the lantern over with its splayed claws. Johannes hastily shoved the beast back and righted the lantern. "And each khe must like this one, this Jesus."

One of the larger adults seized the young interloper by the ruff and, with a powerful twist of its neck, tossed it back into the crowd. A fight erupted as it landed halfway back and the khe became a whirling mass of bodies that clawed and bit. Some retreated, but others, jostled or struck by accident, leaped into the fray until it was a full-blown riot.

Appalled, Johannes scrambled to his feet as they rolled toward him. The khe had never once shown aggression toward each other in all the cultural studies done in the early survey. That was one of the primary reasons the Church had thought them promising enough to establish a mission here.

"Stop!" he whistled. "One must stop this now!"

The squirming, clawing creatures bowled into the lantern and knocked it over. This time the light flickered and failed. The fighting lasted a few more seconds, then sputtered out in the darkness. All sound died away except for the



hiss of labored breathing.

Johannes fumbled for the lantern and hugged it to his chest. Blood thundered in his ears. Khe snuffled at his heels as he edged toward the rectory, one arm extended to find his way in the darkness.

"Light," it whistled mournfully.

Then another took up the chorus, "Light-that-moves!"

His groping hand found the door and keyed it open with his palmprint. It slid aside and a tall rectangle of yellow light spilled out onto the mossy ground outside. He looked back and saw green eyes staring at him hungrily.

The rodent-creature died twitching in his hands later in the night. Johannes wrapped the soft gray-furred body in one of Father Gareth's shirts. No doubt they hadn't meant to be cruel, any more than they had meant to hurt him, or each other. They were savages, unenlightened. They needed the Word more than any primitives he had ever worked with back on Earth.

But whistletalk was so limited. If only Father Gareth were with him. Kneeling beside the cot, he buried his face in his hands and prayed for guidance. All he wanted was to do good here, make their pathetic lives fuller, give them a possibility of salvation and grace. If only the Lord would show him the way.

At dawn, he fell into an exhausted sleep filled with angry khe that snapped and hissed, and Father's Gareth's craggy, disappointed face. There was something the older priest wanted him to do, something he couldn't quite grasp. It glittered above his head in purest blues and reds and yellows like the immense stained glass rose window he had seen once in Notre Dame, beautiful and utterly out of reach.

He awoke with a start, his head pillowed on his outstretched arms on his cot, his back stiff, a hot dryness behind his eyes. Something was scratching at the door, rhythmical and insistent. He glanced at his watch -- eight o'clock local time, well after dark. He rose to his feet unsteadily and picked up the stunner before he slivered the door open.

A scattering of stars glittered down from the purple-black sky. The valley's complement of khe sat on their haunches, waiting, little more than sleek black lumps in the faint glimmer of starlight. "Light," one whistled, then the rest took up the refrain. "Light-that-moves! Light!"

"No!" Johannes stepped outside and pulled the door closed to help his eyes adjust in the dimness. "No light! Go away!"

They quieted gradually, but did not move. Johannes shivered as the frigid night wind shrilled around the rectory. "Go now," he said. "One talks in sun."

"One comes back from under rocks," a front khe said. Four or five beasts surged

forward, dragging something long and heavy between them, much larger than the rodent-creatures they had brought the night before.

He stared down at the dark shape, but could make nothing out. Finally, he slipped back into the rectory. The bulb in the cold-lantern was cracked from the night before so he changed it, then took it outside. The khe stood back from their offering as he squatted down to illuminate it.

Pallid white skin reflected the lantern light, bloodless lips drawn back over teeth, dull blond hair, sunken sightless eyes -- it was Father Gareth.

Johannes's mouth fell open in a soundless cry of shock.

A large khe nosed the body. "One comes back."

"Don't touch him!" Johannes shoved the beast back, then raised the stunner. "Go away!" He fired into the air. The charge crackled like lightning dissipating harmlessly above his head. The khe stirred, whistling among themselves, staring at the cold-lantern with hungry eyes.

Shaking he thumbed the setting to its lowest level which would only shock. Hot tears welled in his eyes as he fired at the nearest beast. It squealed as its muscles spasmed, then recovered and limped off into the darkness. Sobs wracked him as he fired again and again until the pack dispersed.

His head rang and the flat taste of ozone from the weapon's discharge filled the chili air. He knelt at Father Gareth's side and hesitantly crossed the battered arms over the corpse's chest, then sat back on his heels, hugging himself and rocking. All the sun-filled days in Switzerland amidst the polished wood and ancient stone of the seminary, all those hours of discussing the joy of bringing the lost to God, none of it had ever prepared him for this place and these disgusting creatures. And, worst of all was the knowledge that this obscene misunderstanding must be his fault; he had failed to tell the story in a way the khe could understand.

He didn't know what to do. If he buried Father Gareth again, they would undoubtedly just dig the corpse up and tote it back. Perhaps if he took the body up into the mountains and exposed it, then they would understand.... But no, he couldn't allow his mentor and brother priest to be treated like a piece of meat. There had to be another way, something cleaner, more dignified, something the khe could not undo.

Finally he decided on fire, not the Church's preferred method, but allowable and at least final. He took the cold-lantern down to the stream and searched for driftwood as the wind gusted and the night-hunters cried out in the surrounding hills. The breath wheezed through his chest in the chill, oxygen-poor night air. When he finally had enough wood for a pyre, he laid Father Gareth's body atop the crooked stack and lit a layer of silvermoss around the edges with a lighter.

The flames started slowly, almost reluctantly, but eventually gained strength

until they roared and glowing sparks drifted up into the darkness. He kept watch through the night, adding more wood as needed.

Hot green eyes followed him everywhere, keeping pace when he left to search for wood, then returning, sitting just outside the circle of light, waiting, waiting for something. He was afraid to think about what.

By morning, the ashes still steamed and the scent of wood smoke hung low over the valley. The khe had slunk off to their favorite sunning rocks with the first rays of dawn. Church doctrine demanded the ashes be collected and interred together, but that would have to wait until later in the day when they had cooled. He made his way to the rectory on leaden feet and tumbled onto his cot, drawn down into a whirling, exhausted sleep.

He woke at dusk, his eyes swollen from tears shed in his sleep, his face wet and raw. He washed and changed his smoky cassock for a clean one, choked down a few bites of a nutrition concentrate, then found an empty equipment box and went outside to complete Father Gareth's last rites.

The khe surrounded the silvery ashes, solemn and silent. They closed in behind him as he pushed past their lithe black bodies, the stunner ready in his fist. His legs felt distant and clumsy, like lifeless stumps he had only borrowed. He placed the box on the ground and opened the lid. "Go away," he told the front row of khe.

"Tall one comes back," one of the beasts whistled. "Becomes light."

Johannes's eyes flicked toward the silver-black ashes. "No, tall one is dead."

"Tall one becomes light, fills darkness like sun!" The khe's green eyes were round and earnest. "This one sees."

The surrounding khe hissed in assent. Their satiny black muzzles wove from side to side. Their clawed toes curled.

Why did it always come down to light, he asked himself. Then he looked down at the khe with their neckfrills raised to catch the last rays of the setting sun. Light gave them life and movement, provided raw energy for their cells. Light was a pleasure as much as eating was to a starving human, the fulfilling of a basic physical need, the cessation of hunger. Pagan creatures that they were, they saw light as the source of life, not understanding that all light, as part of Creation, comes from God.

He sank to his knees and bowed his head, praying for forgiveness. Did not the Bible say, "God is light, and in him is no Darkness at all." He had been foolish and short-sighted, but perhaps there was a way to bring them the Word.

After he buried Father Gareth's ashes in the struggling garden, he ranged far downstream and gathered as much driftwood as he could find before dark. When the sun had fallen behind the purple-gray mountains, he brought out the cold-lantern

and waited.

The khe appeared in groups of twos and threes, their tongues sampling the night air, their eyes questioning. He sat on the ground before the pile of wood with a Bible in his hands. When the sleek black backs surrounded him on every side and he could see expectant green eyes watching from far out in the darkness, he opened the Bible to the first page. "In the beginning, One makes the sky and the ground," he read, paraphrasing the verses into whistletalk. "And darkness is everywhere."

The khe shifted restlessly. A medium-sized adult at his feet said plaintively, "One comes back?"

"Darkness is everywhere," Johannes repeated and stared meaningfully up into the black night sky. "And One says let there be light and there is light." He pointed at the lantern.

The khe edged forward, raising its neckfrill, its eyes unblinking.

"This One makes light, this one God." He picked up the lantern. "You make sound -- God."

The restless khe nosed one another, clawed the silver-sage, snuffled softly.

He turned the lantern off and heard the uneasy shuffle of their bodies. "God makes light. You say God!"

"Light!" a khe whimpered. The others took up its refrain, echoing it far back into the darkness. "Light! Light-that-moves!"

"No!" Johannes lurched to his feet. "God! God makes light!" He held the dark lantern above his head. "Say God!"

The khe crawled through the darkness to touch their noses to his feet, pull at his upraised arm. He could feel their distress like a deepening pool around him, black as the night, twice as bitter. "Say God!"

"God," one whistled brokenly, and then another, and another.

He turned the lantern on and let the cool white light flood down as the khe sat back on their haunches and stared. "God likes khe, all khe," he said, his heart pounding with elation. "God makes light for khe."

They were solemn and unmoving as he set the lantern down and reached for the lighter in his pocket. He needed more light, something bigger that would really impress them. He held the lighter to a wad of silver-moss packed around the edge of the wood and watched the stringy strands curl into flame.

As the wood caught fire, the khe began to whistle an eerie chorus that, as far as he could tell, held no meaning, just sound. The fire reached high into the

sky, eating into the darkness. Much later, when the khe finally finished their song, they pressed forward. He held his arms out to them, overcome with the emotion of the moment. They knew God's name now, had finally recognized Him as the Creator of all things, after all these unnumbered millennia. At last the khe could take their place at God's feet, singing His praises with the rest of the universe.

"Light," a front beast whistled. "Tall one is light!" It charged Johannes and butted him into the bonfire.

He sprawled on his back, his arms still outstretched in welcome. His clothing smoldered as he scrambled out into the dirt and rolled. His eyes smarted from the smoke and the seared flesh on his back burned. He hunched over, coughing.

The khe backed away, their eyes trained reverently on his face. The logs shifted and sparks rained outward as his heart sped into a new, feral rhythm that had nothing to do with Earth.

"Light!" The khe's muzzles wove back and forth as they crooned a new litany above the whip-crackle of the flames. "Tall one is light! God makes light! Tall one comes back!"

Johannes glanced back into the flames and seemed to see something, or rather someone, a body outlined in living fire, holding out a hand to him, its face, infinitely patient, topped by fiery hair and a firm mouth of red coals. His vision swam. "Father Gareth!" Waves of pain swept through his burned back and shoulders, and his tongue seemed three sizes too big. "What -- ?"

The apparition swept its hand toward the waiting khe, its eyes flaming holes into another universe. For now and all the rest of your days, you must tend these, God's children. Guard them well, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

"But -- they don't understand!" Johannes sank to his knees. "And they never will. Their language is too primitive, their intelligence too different, too -- limited, and there is nothing I or anyone else can do."

You have brought them this far, Father Gareth said in a spray of fiery red sparks. God never sets your hand to a task beyond your strength. You must try harder. There is a way, and you must try until you find it.

Johannes sat on the edge of the bed, dabbing cool antibiotic cream on his bums. Feverish thoughts raced through his head; the khe only understood what they could see and feel and smell, what could be presented before their stubby black noses, so the main impediment to their conversion was that the story of Christ's sacrifice was rooted in the past, nonexistent as far as the khe's eternal now was concerned. The story had to be brought forward and invested with meaning in the present to make it accessible.

The cream soothed his burns. He drank a glass of tepid water and stretched out on his side, thinking... What had men known of salvation and redemption before

Christ had come to show them the way? What would they know even now if He had not given His life for their sins?

It was a troubling question that had no answer.

Over the next months, he fell into the pattern of sleeping most of the day and then walking the night, either carrying the cold lantern, or building a bonfire when he could find enough wood. Each evening, as he emerged from the rectory, the khe greeted him with the same joyful words, "Tall one comes back!"

And he answered, "Yes, tall one always comes back." They gathered around the light to hear him painstakingly paraphrase another page or two of the Bible, rendering the verses in terms they might understand. They listened, neckfrills spread to the light, immobile as a legion of black statues until dawn. Though his strength steadily waned and his oxygenstarved body was often ill, he used his meager supply of medicines to doctor their minor injuries and ignored his own needs.

His lungs burned constantly now so that breathing was an effort. He coughed up blood and often woke from his fitful daytime sleep, gasping for air, knowing his abused body, unsupervised by consciousness, had simply abandoned the overwhelming straggle needed to keep on breathing.

But his mind refused to give up. He had so much more to accomplish. The khe were poised on the very edge of comprehension and faith; he sensed it. They could repeat a few of the translated verses now, and sometimes asked for certain stories they liked, such as Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac to the flames. What they needed at this point to transport them into a state of grace was no more or less than man had needed himself --a miracle, and though he earnestly prayed, he was well aware that miracles were not available upon demand.

On a fine, clear night somewhere in the twenty-fifth month of his posting, too weak to hike, he sat on his heels on the cold rocky soil, tending his bonfire and studying the stars, scattered like a handful of diamonds across the deep-purple sky. The khe had arranged themselves in surrounding rows, their green eyes reflecting the flames.

A persistent fever had dried his mouth and worsened his breathing until the effort to move or speak was almost beyond him. He tucked his chilled hands under his armpits and huddled over the ever-present hollow ache within, remembering Father Gareth in this same condition at the end, admitting finally to himself that he wasn't going to survive the twenty days left until the supply ship returned with his replacements. He was going to die with this vital work left undone; then someone else would have to start all over again, would have to suffer the same failures and misunderstandings, perhaps never even succeed as far as he had himself. And all the time, there would be the khe, trapped outside the Kingdom of God, his responsibility and his failure, a final stain upon his soul.

He dragged himself to his feet and cast another armful of driftwood onto the

fire. The effort send him into a coughing fit as the flames roared above his head, extravagant and wasteful. The khe whistled appreciatively at the size of the fire and edged closer. He turned and waited until the spasm had passed. "Tall one goes to its parent, to God."

"Goes?" a particularly large khe asked plaintively. "What parent? Where?"

Gravity seemed to shift ninety degrees. He fell to his knees and caught himself on his hands, his heart hammering as he threw all his will into the effort to draw another breath, and then another. "When tall one goes," he wheezed, fighting the terrible urge to cough, "the khe must remember the stories it has told of the other tall one who comes back."

The large khe blinked and tilted its head in what Johannes had come to recognize as a posture of uncertainty.

"Though this tall one must go," he said numbly, "the one who comes back never leaves. That tall one is always, always with the khe."

"Where?" The khe's head twisted. A whistle of distress rustled through the other beasts and they too craned their necks to see what wasn't there.

He sagged. It was not enough. Their minds were too literal, trapped in an ever-present now without the possibility of history or a future. They would never understand unless they saw the story played out before their very eyes. They had to experience Christ, had to touch the nail holes in his palms, see him die and then rise again as man had, but God had not seen fit to send His son to this forsaken place. Pain knifed through him and he felt a liquid bubbling deep within his lungs.

A smaller khe, barely half grown, broke from the ranks and scrambled up the rectory steps. "Tall one!" It scabbled at the door. "One who makes light!"

Although khe could not recognize his face, it obviously still remembered when there had been more than one man here. Humans were interchangeable, faceless units only notable in their usefulness. He meant nothing to them as an individual, and the new priests on their way would mean no more....

He stiffened, arms braced around his chest against the pain. Through the red haze behind his eyes, he sensed the glimmering of an understanding that had eluded him for months. Khe could not tell one human from another, and so, no matter how many individual priests came here over the years, in a sense they would all be Father Gareth, the tall one who comes back, a host of Christs risen from the tomb.

At last, he knew what to do and staggered to his feet. "Tall one goes to its parent now, to God," he rasped, "but comes back in twenty suns." He ran his fingers over the satiny hide of the nearest beast. It was warm and smooth, like the skin of a woman or a young child. He was surprised now that he had ever found it hideous. "The khe must watch for this one and greet it upon its

return," he said, then was doubled over by a terrible fit of coughing. He gritted his teeth and waited for it to end.

"Tall one always comes back," he forced out finally. The khe stared at him, waiting as always, his spiritual children, on the brink of understanding. He made the sign of the cross over his chest, then lurched headfirst into the bonfire before he could change his mind. For a second, the flames licked his clothing and boots and hair without effect. The khe's hot green eyes followed him.

It was all right, he told himself, as his cassock burst into ruddy flame. This was not suicide, but sacrifice, freely given in the oldest of ways, out of love. God understood. The stench of his burning flesh permeated the smoky air, then the burning wood collapsed under his weight, pitching him into the bed of red-hot coals.

"Light!" the khe chorused. "Tall one is light! Tall one comes back!" And he would -- in about twenty days, Johannes thought as a roaring crimson darkness swept him away. As long as men roamed the stars, tall one would always come back.