

Choosing Names

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The light in this room was redder than Sol's, more like the light of his own world, or of the Kzin homeworld which he had never seen. Creditor's Telepath found it friendly. The room's other occupant was behind a wall of armor glass. He sat in darkness. The kzin could make out his posture a little, but not the set of his face. It didn't matter.

The kzin said, "I can read minds."

The previous dose of *Sthondat* gland extract was wearing off. Creditor's Telepath would retain traces of his peculiar talent for another few hours, no more. He could taste a bit of the other's thoughts. His interrogator was wary; distrustful.

Creditor's Telepath asked, "Do you see the implications? I have been among your enemies. I know their thoughts, their plans, hopes, fears, goals."

"That could be very valuable."

"My price is high. I want a name."

He sensed his interrogator's amusement. Rage rose in him; he quelled it. He was skilled at that. "Our lower ranks are named for what we do," he said, "but any may aspire to gain a name, a rank. Our lowest are named for what we are. Cowards, mutants, cripples, or telepaths. I am Creditor's Telepath. I would be the first in living memory to have a name."

The other shifted his weight behind the protective glass. He had seen what an addiction could do to his kind. This kzin wasn't just scrawny and undersized, he was warped. Creditor's Telepath made him uneasy.

He asked, "Who have you been among? Did they know anything worth knowing? Do you?"

"You shall judge," Telepath said. "Our ship was *Creditor*, with a crew of eleven and space for sixteen, mountings for two plasma cannon but only one mounted. We lofted in haste when the news came. We told each other that our lower mass would bring us to loot

faster than vessels with full crew and armaments. We were in the forefront, ahead of other ships our size, avoiding notice of the battleships, when Gutfoot's Horde plunged into Sol-System.

"It was great fun. The fusion reaction motors used by humans leave a hot ionized wake, a line that shouts in X-rays. We found such a line, aimed for the converging point of it, popped up next to a ship, and shot off the drive module. We invaded the shell, took four cringing humans—the first we'd seen, much smaller than we'd supposed from the messages alone. Took what else we wanted most, marked the shell as our own property, and went off to do it again.

"It worked once.

"Then, moving at a few hundred clicks per second, *Creditor* ran through a stream of pebbles. Humans have been defending their turf with all manner of reaction motor. This was an electromagnetic accelerator, part of an asteroid mining concern. Humans take the metal and use the slag for reaction mass, and they sprayed us with that. *Creditor* was shredded. My companions fought the invaders and died. I hid, but in a pressure suit I was too bulky.

"They found me with our human prizes, all battered but safe in the shielded room we use for hiding and for a pantry. For sparing their lives I may have been given better treatment.

"For a time they kept me in a small dome, in free-fall. Later, here on a little moon of a gas giant planet. But they didn't know what I was!"

This burst forth in a shout, for the surprise had never left *Creditor's* Telepath. He sensed his listener's startlement. "I felt their fear. At first I didn't understand it. I was the last of my crew, and the first kzint they had ever seen. There were no other kzinti about. In this system-wide series of battles there have been other captive Heroes, but my own captors saw us only on screens. They did not see that I am stunted. I mass three or four times what they do, though I'm half the mass of a Hero.

"They did not understand my addiction, either. They did see that I was sick and growing sicker. They blamed it on my smashed ribs and a dietary imbalance. It concerned them. Humans come near being herd animals, and my pain distressed them. They tried to do something about it.

“Their doctor machines adjust for their own biochemical imbalances. They fiddled and adjusted until I was getting nourishment to keep me healthy, and if I never quite recovered they were sure they hadn’t quite got it right.

“Though some nourishment reached me through tubes and some as food, I was still starving! They offered no live prey. I ate worse than I had aboard *Creditor!* But every telepath is addicted to *Sthondat* lymph, and my stock is lost. Of course I was sick.

“Without periodic injections I would have trouble reading even another bin. I picked up almost nothing from the dozen humans who were my guards and doctors. But that little made all the difference. I survived because I could feel their fear. They perceived me as a return of terror and Old Night into what had been their paradise. I was a looming nightmare of fangs and claws.” Again he felt his interrogator’s amusement. He shouted, “I had their respect!”

More calmly, then, “Before they brought in more prisoners, something else was happening to me. One like myself loses his sense of self very easily. Can you understand this? The Keepers do not inject us until we are old enough to breed. We must not breed, but we must develop a sense of who we are, while we can, before the flow of others’ thoughts us can drown us. Truly, for our own defense, telepaths should always have had names!”

His listener shrugged. He didn’t care.

That galled Telepath. He said, “I have told you nothing yet that can help you. Will you give me a name?”

“Certainly.”

So easy? But within his murky thoughts he seemed to mean it. Telepath said, “Well, then. Locked within my mind, somewhat protected from the physical horror of withdrawal, I came to know myself. To know that there is a self in here.” The kzin thumped his ribs above the liver. It seemed his listener understood.

“The next attack on Sol System was by another bandit group on the Patriarchs borders. I think Pareet’s Pride learned nothing from Gutfoot’s Horde, if any of us escaped to tell tales at all. Pareet’s fleet plunged into Sol System just as we did. Like us they found industrial lasers and flying slag where their telepaths, and ours, had found slothful minds at peace with each other and themselves. To the moon came four Heroes, variously injured.

“Understand, to be captured and imprisoned alive was the earmark of these four. I call them Heroes, but they were not. Neither were they telepaths nor users of *Sthondat* lymph. They outmassed me by nearly double.

“I was not to mingle with them. Our human captors feared we would share secrets. A double wall of iron bars set an eight-meter gap between us. We must gesticulate and shout at each other, so that our words and posture-language may be recorded against a time when our speech will be known.

“Of course I shouted greeting. For a quarter-year I was closed within my mind, knowing myself, doubting the reality of anything else. Now kzinti had come, but I couldn’t penetrate their skulls! I shouted, and they didn’t answer.

“One rarely moved and never spoke. The human doctors took better care of him than his companions did. In the end he died. One had lost most of his left leg, and he didn’t move much even in the low gravity. One, big and burly and belligerent, had no ears at all. The last battle had flayed him; he was pink skin over half his body. He stood at the bars and glared hate at me. The fourth bore a broad slash of white fur around the eyes. He looked healthy, and he studied me, though our captors would not have noticed.

A mealtime passed before he spoke. ‘I am White Mask, rank of Strategist. I have what you need.’

“They knew me for what I was, of course. I need not ask what he meant. I asked, ‘How?’

“‘I only had an instant,’ he said. ‘I took what was close at hand.’ There was nothing in his hands except steel bars, and I wondered where he could have concealed any tool at all. ‘We know too little of these prey-who-would-fight. One of your kind could tell us more of them, if he does not die! So, I have what will heal you, and be glad we came in time!’

“In time? Eleven years taking *Sthondat* extract, then a quarter-year without! I’d be dead without my captors’ medical machines. Now my body was beginning to recover from eleven years of abuse!

“But I said only, ‘We are observed,’ and then, ‘We are studied.’

“White Mask turned to the earless one and rasped a command.

“Earless screamed and lashed out. The one-legged one snatched at the dying one’s ankle and scuttled backward on all threes while the others fought.

Those two were clumsy, unused to low gravity. They fought more in the air than on the ground, and every blow threw them apart. Earless was massive and powerful, but twice White Mask trapped him in the air and battered him like a slashball. A flurry of blow-and-kick put them between the windows and One Leg, and that was when One Leg threw something to me.

“It was what I expected, a small zip bag, half empty. We had no pouches, of course, so I hid it in my mouth, betting that it was watertight. I waited for feeding time.

“Food arrived in pouches; bowls were not suited for the moon’s low gravity. The pouches came on a conveyer line. No human would come near any kzin without a good deal of care. I positioned my dinner pouch to hide the zip bag, looked in and found *Sthondat* lymph preparation. I swallowed less than a normal dose, then lay down. After so long I didn’t know how it might affect me.

“The thoughts of the others flowed into me, intrusive, disorienting. No human was near me, not yet, but I shared my mind with four warriors. They were not of rank to be given names, and they had fallen away from using military designations. They had been humiliated in battle, and here in their presence was a smaller, weaker kzin.

“White Mask had learned strategy as a child, in role-playing games, and won adolescent *fights* by forethought more than strength. He saw that I was a tool they might use to free themselves, and he tried to force that view on the others. They had worked this out together, the fight to cover a thrown package. But Ear Eater kept forgetting.

“Ear Eater had made his reputation before a victim’s father beat him and chewed off his ears. He wanted only to reach me. His claws would tear his lost pride out of my liver. He might have to kill White Mask first. And Stumpy.

“Stumpy outranked the rest. He had been Captain’s Voice, but of course he couldn’t fight with one leg gone. He thought Ear Eater might be more malleable if he could kill something that fought back. The humans served our meat dead.

“Toolmaster was dying. He had neither speech nor lucid thought. Vacuum had torn his throat and lungs. Toolmaster’s mind felt my touch and welcomed the company. He didn’t want to die without passing on a lifetime of knowledge... nothing of any great use, as it turned out. How a *kood* hides... a creature of a world I’ve never seen, imported to Shasht, another world I’ve never seen... how it is found, how it wriggles, how it dies, its taste. The ecstasy and terror of mating with a stronger male’s *kzinrett*, the terror and ecstasy of outrunning him. Swimming. Not one in a thousand kzinti can swim, but Toolmaster could. The attack on Sol System. I sensed what was coming and tried to pull loose.

“The gravity generator is gone and everything is falling, falling. A rolling dive across the command room while breathing—air shrieks through a ripped wall. That wonderful instant when my arms and legs close around my pressure suit. Zippers open, legs in first, keep it graceful, arms, torso zip seal, I’m going to live! The helmet is suddenly a cloud of high-velocity splinters. My neck and head are wet and chill with boiling/freezing blood, and it all fades... and I was curled in a ball, sweating fear, while the others watched me through the bars.

“To them I was only Telepath.

“Telepaths can’t hurt their tormentors without feeling the hurt. Every child knows what it is to win a fight, but we know only through another mind. A telepath will do anything for the *Sthondat* preparation. Knowing these things about me, they knew everything they cared to, just as if they could read my mind.

“White Mask didn’t wonder if I had taken the stuff. A telepath would. When the doctors netted me and took me away bound, White Mask was trying so hard not to watch that his eyes hurt.

“The doctors hooked me to their machine doctor. I smelled the other kzinti’s scent: they had been brought here before they reached the pen.

“I felt the doctors’ complacent pleasure: I was healthy, strong. They couldn’t know how my strength was growing as I recovered from *Sthondat* addiction. Another thing pleased them: my heart rate showed that the calming chemistry was working, too. Humans dose each other, sometimes, to keep each other docile, and they’d found

similar stuff for me. It was the first time I had sensed this. For just that instant I would have killed them all.”

“Why didn’t you?”

An odd question; or was it? Telepath said, “I suppress such thoughts as a conditioned reflex. Do you think I *offered* to take my first dose of *Sthondat* lymph? I was born with a knack for reading minds, but others made me Telepath. What if I tried to kill each of them? I would have died over and over.”

“Did you get a chance to talk to the other kzinti?”

“Yes. After they examined me, the doctors asked me to do that, to reassure the other prisoners. ‘For you, the war is over,’ they said, ‘tell them that.’ Magic words to make an enemy docile. For us, no war is over,” Creditor’s Telepath said. “I was told that I would not be let into their compound. That suited me well. I did not want to be in reach of Ear Eater.

“So, back in our cages, we shouted at each other. The first thing I shouted was, ‘They don’t know the Heroes’ Tongue!’ It was almost true. Humans had learned a dozen words, and I had learned many more.

“I tried to describe how we stood. The pen, the hospital, humans on site, humans visiting. Weapons:

I’d seen almost nothing. Air, water, food supplies. The great bubble of greenhouse perched above us on the crater wall. A pinprick would burst it. They saw that and believed me when I told them that humans had put away war—told each other they had outgrown war—before we came:

“I told them what the doctors knew of the war, which was little. They told me of the second attack. They knew nothing of the *first*; but they had come in haste, with little preparation, because word of Sol system was already flowing at lightspeed toward the Patriarchy. Larger, stronger hordes would follow.”

The interrogator asked, “Flowing from what point? Where was the ship when it sent these messages? We need their transit time. Can you show me on a star map?”

“Yes. Now?”

“No, go on.”

“Near sunset White Mask told me, ‘We need to break free. Have you given any thought to escape?’

“I said, ‘Vacuum surrounds us. Stealing pressure suits wouldn’t be useful. They’ve got some of ours, but those went off to be studied. Once free, I can’t lead you to spacecraft or a spaceport. They had me in a windowless box when they brought me.’

“‘They must have pressurized vehicles,’ White Mask said.

“I arrived in one,” I said, “a box with rockets—”

“If we can take a ship and an alien pilot, can you read the pilot’s mind? Well enough to fly the ship?”

I said, “I’ve seen their input keyboards. Our fingers aren’t small enough.” I saw his thought, *Telepath will try to talk us into sloth and cowardice*. I said, “Take two of their writing sticks, one in each fist, and you could punch commands on their keys. But you need a pilot, not just some random prey. I’ll have to find one for you.”

“Await word,” White Mask said.

“That night I listened to them working up an escape plan. They needn’t shout at me; I heard their thoughts. A working spacecraft would be ideal, but a damaged or empty ship might still send a message, and a mindtaster could tell them how to do that too. They had to integrate Creditor’s Telepath into any plans at all.

“I saw their image of me every time my designation was spoken: *Remember he can’t fight. He has to live until we’re in free space, and that means we move fast. We must be loose before that evil goop he uses runs out, or else we’re here for keeps. Why didn’t you snatch a full pouch? Because our own crazy Telepath, shredded when a patch of hull turned to flying shards, let the flack shred his carry-pouch tool* White Mask’s memory forced upon me a diminishing radio howl from within a globe of bloody froth, frozen at the surface, lobes of fluid breaking through as blood boiled and froze and expanded.

“In the morning White Mask called to me. ‘Talk to them. Give them a reason to move us out of this box! If we were inside together we could do something. Not you, Telepath. stay where you are. We’ll free you after.’

“I had been thinking, too. I said, ‘Toolmaster is dying. I can feel him disappearing into dreams, and even the dreams are fading. Tell the humans. They will by to save him.’

“I felt how that startled Stumpy. He shouted, ‘They have four. Why strain to keep a damaged fifth?’ I felt his fear that they would

not keep a damaged fourth, either, on this airless moon where every breath must be made or imported.

“I tried to answer him. ‘These are not quite single entities,’ I said. ‘To be complete they need a community. Isolated humans turn strange. Partly they live for each other. They imagine they feel each other’s fear, lust, agony, rage.’

‘I was speaking a truth that I could feel and taste, and in that instant I knew I was describing myself. I had to force myself to go on. ‘Their instinct will be to care for any injured creature, a weakling human, an animal, even an enemy, even an alien. Tell them that Toolmaster needs his companions about him and they will believe. They will take you all inside. I can’t guess what precautions they will take first.’

“White Mask’s scream of triumph rang through his head and mine. In his throat it was only a strangled squeak. ‘Tell them, then! Get us inside and we will do the rest!’ He stooped over Toolmaster. ‘Of course he’s dying. Is he dead already?’

“I reached for Toolmaster’s mind. ‘He lives. Let me guide you now and I’ll get you in. Huddle around Toolmaster. Ear Eater, imagine how his posture might be more comfortable, and move him. White Mask, talk to him.’

“ ‘Saying what?’

“ ‘Does it matter? Speak, listen, speak again.’ I could feel Toolmaster’s remote agony lessen: he could just barely sense the attention, and he liked it. ‘Now, White Mask, go to the window and shout. Wave your arms at the doctors. Stumpy, you join him. Ear Eater, you stay with Toolmaster. Lift his head a little and slide that flat rock under it for support. Gently! Good.’

Toolmaster felt the motion and was soothed.

Doctors massed on the other side of the window. The merest touch of their minds gave me their thrill of anthropomorphic empathy, as that scarred monster showed such tenderness to his fallen fellow. I called, ‘Now, White Mask, shout at me! Your friend is sick and you don’t speak human language, so tell me, instead! They don’t know I can read minds—’

“He came to the bars and shook them and shouted, ‘Did you think I’d forgotten, you fool?’ Stumpy had got the idea: he was beside White Mask shouting poetry we’d all learned from the Keepers as

children. And the doctors came running to my window, the window to my pen, and listened as I shouted at them in their language. In the midst of all that I felt Toolmaster die.

“So here I am.”

The interrogator nodded behind the glass. “So here you are. But you weren’t saying what your companions thought you were saying. I take it you do not advise us to take them out of their cage.”

“I do not,” Telepath said. “You might bear in mind that they know what I told them of you. They should not run loose to shout their news. They should not even be brought near another telepath.”

“Uh-huh.”

Telepath said, “I caught something in your mind. A large ship, drive shredded, survivors—?”

“Yes, we believe we found females of your species.”

“Dead, though. You found an Admiral’s harem.”

“If you want to mate—”

“Yes! But you don’t have that to offer.”

“There will be a next time, a chance to capture female warcats. We can bargain. But as for your name, take that as a gift. Would you like Selig? Or Aycharaych? Or Greenberg?”

Mind-readers out of humans’ classic fiction, Telepath saw. “Better some ancient warrior’s name,” he said, and reached for what surfaced. “Ronreagan. Call me Ronreagan.”

“So be it. Ronreagan, it’s feeding time, and if you’re not hungry I am.” I saw him for an instant as meat, prey, and he sensed that somehow, and it amused him. “But then I want you to tell me every last thing you know about, what did you call—”

“Patriarchy.”

“About the Patriarchy. And gravity generators! Can you tell us how to build one of those?”

“When you capture a warcat female, find me an Engineer, too.”