

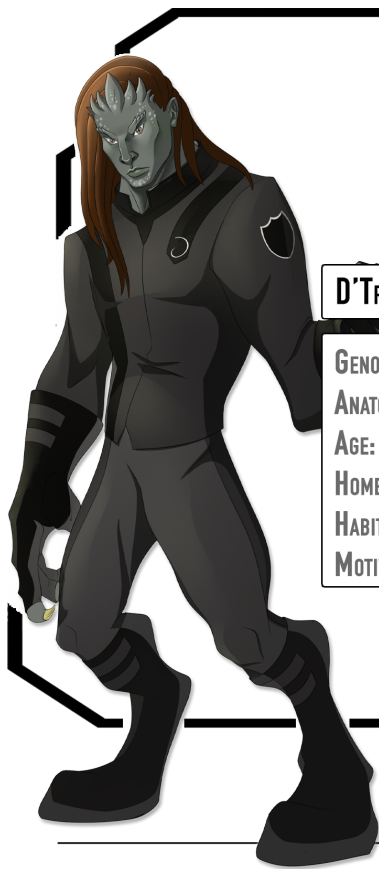
# Galactic *Overtures*

a Living Starship Prelude

D'TREKS  
TAREE

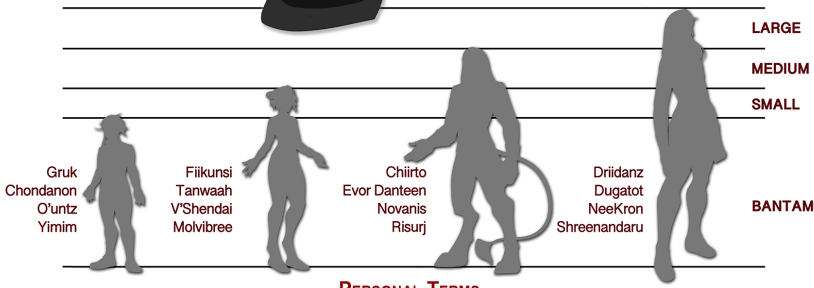


Layman Kingsford



**D'TREKS TAREE**      **PRONOUNCED:**  
**[d-Trex] • Tar-ee**

**GENOME:** NeeKron    **CULTURE:** Hunter (citizen)  
**ANATOMY:** Ungulate  
**AGE:** 24 (Galactic Standard Cycles)  
**HOME:** NeeKur Raba (planet)  
**HABITAT:** Tundra (wilderness)  
**MOTIVATION:** Benevolence



**PERSONAL TERMS**

**Genome or Species** is the term used in place of **RACE**  
**Hominid(s)/Hominidity** is the term used in place of **HUMAN(s)/HUMANITY**  
**Culture or Ethnicity** are terms referring to groups of people sharing common lifestyle or background

**REPRODUCTIVE ANATOMY**

- Insem:** has only a penis (derived from *inseminator*)
- Jestat:** has only a uterus/vagina (derived from *gestator*)
- Amalgron:** has both Jestat & Insem parts (derived from *amalgamation*)
- Androjin:** has neither Jestat nor Insem parts (derived from *androgynous*)

**PRONOUNS IN LANGUAGE**

- They/Them/Their** = singular individual
- Theyz/Themz/Theirz** = multiple people

**PHYSICAL ANATOMY**

- Ungulate:** evolved from gazelles • have 3 fingers + thumb, hooves, reverse-articulated legs
- Primate:** evolved from monkeys • have 4 fingers + thumb, toed feet, forward-articulated legs
- Aggregate:** has qualities of both Ungulates & Primates
- Quadragon:** 4 fingers • hooves and/or reverse-articulated legs
- Tripagon:** 3 fingers • toed feet and/or forward-articulated legs

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# LINGUISTIC NOTES

Two of the major aspirations I hold for the Living Saga (comprised of the high fantasy **Living Empires**, the super-heroic **Living Metropolis** and the space opera **Living Starship**) is to realize a truly POST-GENDER fictional setting where culture and society did not develop in any way influenced by a person's reproductive biology. Gender and gender expression therefor do not exist.

To that end, the English language needs some adjustment. In the Living Starship series I have chosen exclusively to use THEY/THEM/THEIR as singular pronouns. I have codified THEYZ/THEMZ/THEIRZ as exclusive plural pronouns. *This also means that YOU/YOUR is singular and YOUZ/YOURZ is plural.*

I am also experimenting with my own version of phonetic English. I am assembling an alphabet where every letter has ONE and only one sound. This means, for example, that the letter "C" has been excised completely since "K" and "S" cover the same sounds. You will also notice a lot of double vowels. These represent the traditional *long* sound of each vowel.

There are a number of other changes which you can peruse, if interested, on the Cheeky Dingo website (Living Starship Stories section - [Language Primer](#)). These new linguistic rules only apply to proper names of characters, locations, space stations, and starships.

In the manuscript some words or names are called out (in **blue**) as terms detailed in the glossary at the end of the story.

# ZOOLOGY CLASS 1.01



The lab was filled with a cacophony of hoots, hisses, barks and chirps. The smells inundating D'Treks's nostrils were simultaneously pungent, musky and sweet.

*What animal could be making that sweet smell?* D'Treks wondered. *It smells like those candies from the promenade shops where Dalas and Mreenu were eating yesterday. Is there an animal that naturally makes that scent? Could those candies have been made from it?* D'Treks had foolishly eaten one without finding out if it was [geneComp](#) with their physiology.

"And this is why I want to work with flowers. Theyz smell nice," pronounced Dalas as they pinched their long [Chondanon](#) nose while waving their three-fingered hand in front of their face vainly trying to disperse the aromas of the Zoology lab.

Mreenu put hands on hips as they bent slightly backwards stretching their long spine and letting out a sigh. Four other cadets jostled theirz way past them forcing Mreenu to straighten up. The other cadets were blithely chatting away as theyz headed to the front of the gathering,

probably in the hopes of garnering special attention from Major Liiooulaa.

D'Treks and their two friends, though the cadet-officer was supposed to think of themz as their subordinates in these mixed enlisted-commissioned exercises, slowly made theirz way to the open area in the middle of the animal enclosures. *I have never seen so many creatures all in one place before. I've read about most of these but to be so near themz - and not hunting themz - is exciting. I hope I do well in this class, especially if I'm given command again. I'm pretty sure theyz were impressed with how I handled gravity combat training so theyz probably will assign me a squad today to see if I can prove my worth in more cerebral situations. I really hope theyz don't just see me as a big brute suitable only for the war front.*

The other twenty-two cadets were chatting among themzelves and were pointing at some of the larger animals nearby. The equines and raptor-avians seemed to garner the most attention, probably because theyz were making the most noise.

Mreenu took a deep breath. "I thought last week's [mareendoo](#) combat training was scary. I had never held, let alone fired, a weapon in my life. Now I think I'm MORE scared of all these animals. I've never been around a live animal in my life....ever!"

"Not even a pet dog or anything?" Dalas queried.

“No. No one in my neighborhood had enough food allowance left over for feeding a pet, or willingness to spend recreation allowance to acquire one in the first place,” Mreenu answered.

“Did you have any pets, *ser*?” Dalas asked of D'Treks.

D'Treks grunted and looked down at their much shorter friend. “I’ve asked you not to address me as ‘*ser*’. I’m not an officer yet, I’m just a cadet just like you. And no, my people don’t usually keep pets, especially those who live planet-side on Neekur Raba. Animals are for eating. We hunt themz.”

“But don’t you want to be a zoologist?” Mreenu asked.

D'Treks grunted softly again. “Yeah. I *would* rather study animals rather than hunting them. There are a limited number of genotypes that live in my native tundra. I’m hoping to do well enough in this class that I get assigned to the Zoology department when we graduate.”

Mreenu opened their mouth to say something but a klaxon whistled the cadets to attention as Major Liiooulaa entered the room. The major did not set the cadets to ease, but instead left themz at rigid attention as they made a show of surveying each of theirz faces.

D'Treks followed the major with their eyes wondering if they had drawn any undue attention. They felt safe

breaking protocol in this small way as the major was only a third their height and thus less likely to notice such surreptitious eye behavior. D'Treks imagined what their own uniform would look like with gloves, boots and jacket stripe illumined in Health Division amethyst. The major wore the black vest and purple sleeves of a warrant officer but had a white collar and double white bars on boots and gloves. The major was not only a Zoology professor but the Academy station's Zoology Department Director! Theyz were in luck to have such an august instructor for this introductory class.

"Ug, enlisted," one of the other officer cadets hissed in a whisper. D'Treks's keen ears had no problem picking up the epithet. They hoped that the major's hearing wasn't as sharp. The major looked to be of Gruk genome-ology, small and semi-aquatic. That they were an enlisted officer working as a department head was quite rare indeed.

"Puh-rade rest!" the Major commanded in a sharp, clear voice that carried over the feral noises of the lab.

The cadets, in crisp unison, took shoulder-wide stances and crossed theirz hands behind theirz backs. Theyz all kept theirz eyes carefully focused forward.

"Today, cadets, is your first day of Health Division training. You will be learning about some of the fauna of our galaxy. Not only do animals provide vital sustenance to our diets, but theyz serve critical roles in the bioshpere stability



of our terraformed planets.” The major stood perfectly still in front of the class giving off an air of confidence in their authority.

“As prospective officers and [crewpers](#) in [SitFleet](#), you will be expected to be familiar with the classification of animals - theirz species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, branch and [kinset](#).” The major rattled off the classification terminology with the familiarity of a lover’s name.

“Furthermore, you will be exposed to handling and interacting with live creatures on both the macro- and micro-scales. Microbial organisms are vital components in starship technology and macrobial organisms are fundamental to hominid survival and planetary stability.”

D'Treks imagined that Mreenu was making pithy comments in their head about learning the animal classifications. This class of cadets had only been together for four weeks, and there were thirty-six more to go, but D'Treks had come to like Mreenu, a tall Ved'Onrek [jestat](#) with a dry sense of humor. D'Treks was sure that Mreenu was less interested in animal labeling and more eager to memorize star cluster terminology for Astronomy class tomorrow afternoon.

The major continued their explanation. “In today’s exercise, we will be releasing a selection of heterotrophs into an enclosed ecosystem. That means these are animals that survive by consuming other organisms. You are being

afforded the chance to encounter various species of herbivores, omnivores and at least one apex carnivore. You will need to find, at minimum, one sample of each and catalog it. Sounds easy, right?"

"YES, SER!" the entire class responded in sonorous unison.

D'Treks thought they heard a soft chuckle from the major.

"As with all your Academy and Boot Camp training," the major continued, "the [dataCalcs](#) built into your uniforms are set to basic interface only. That means you will have no logic-algorithmic assistance in determining information. You will have to specifically input your gathered data in order to receive accurate answers to your queries.

"But...", and here the major held up a three-fingered, webbed hand with one digit raised, "...the trick in today's assignment is that not all animals in this station's constructed ecosystem are kinset-compatible. You will need to ensure that you find one sample of each of the three heterotrophs that *ARE* direct kinsets, not just close kinsets, but exact matches. Any questions?"

The gathered cadets all held their silence. They had already learned in last week's mareendoo training that some instructors solicited questions fully intending that there be none. D'Treks supposed that was, in part, to see which

cadets were brave (or foolish) enough speak out to their superiors. Some instructors expected the cadets to understand everything after one explanation while others legitimately wanted to make sure that everyone accurately grasped the provided information.

When no one spoke up, the major continued to issue additional instructions as well as team assignments. As one of the cadet officers, D'Treks was, thankfully, assigned command over their two friends along with two additional enlisted cadets. The other two - Cadet Bemen, a [Molvibree](#), and Cadet Tilalaw, a [Shree'Nondarü](#) - had yet to express any friendliness towards D'Treks. In fact, D'Treks had not been sure of their names until the information appeared on D'Treks's left sleeve data screen display.

Each team was then issued a pistol and a container of scanner darts as ammunition.

"I'm sure you'll be handling the gun, ser," Cadet Bemen said with barely-disguised disdain. "What with you being 'officer ' in charge."

"And from a *wilderness* world," chimed Tilalaw, snickering softly. "That is if it fits your hand....ser."

D'Treks looked up their team member's stats garnered from previous training using their dataCalc. They found that Bemen had scored the highest in target accuracy in last week's mareendoo gun training. "Cadet Bemen, you

will be responsible for using the gun on our prey, I mean subjects. Be mindful of our limited ammo.” D'Treks handed the gun to the cadet whose hand size looked to be a good fit for the pistol's grip. D'Treks's huge clawed fingers were unlikely to get even the first knuckle through the gun's trigger ring.

D'Treks handed the ammo kit to Mreenu. “I will take point on tracking the animals and Cadet Bemen will keep to my hip. The rest of you strive to move as quietly as possible at a 10 meter distance behind.”

“Yes, ser!” the four enlisted recited in unison.

When all the assembled teams signaled their readiness, the massive cargo doors on one wall of the lab started to part on quiet servo motors. Bright faux-sunshine poured into the lab and a wash of hot dry air blew over the assembled cadets. Theyz could see a broad vista of rust and tan-colored dirt, shallow gorges where the flow of “seasonal” water had cut miniature canyons in the arid landscape. Vegetation was sparse though there were isolated clumps of low trees and shrubs dotting the land.

*Hmm, desert, D'Treks noted. I marvel at how theyz fit such a large habitat inside this station. I cannot even see the other side. I smell sage, juniper and various weeds. There is very little moisture in the air. Dryness and sparse flora I am used to, but desert biomes are new to me.*

Major Liiooulaa called themz back to attention. "You have four hours to complete this assignment and I expect superior results. Go!"

The cadets, now organized in teams of five, set out in orderly fashion. Each team headed in slightly different directions. D'Treks took their team to the far left and kept, for a short while, to the hologram-covered wall designed to make the desert look as if it continued in every direction.

D'Treks and Bemen pulled ahead of the rest of theirz team. Bemen was affecting a slightly hunched posture which only made them look like a bad actor in a schlocky survival [simDiv](#).

Theyz soon lost sight of the other teams as the landscape had greater variation in elevation than it first appeared. D'Treks took their team into one of the dry washes noting that water had likely not flowed through this channel in months, but there were sparse shrubs and even a couple ground flowers peaking out of small cracks in the earth here and there.

It took nearly half an hour, but theyz finally rounded a bend and spotted three fowl pecking at the dirt around a patch of weeds. D'Treks made the hand gesture for stillness that theyz had learned in mareendoo training. Theyz all dropped into a crouch.

Cadet Bemen knelt beside D'Treks and was already raising the pistol to take aim at the chickens. The other three cadets had knelt a few meters behind themz even though theyz were not in sight of the animals yet.

D'Treks put their large hand in front of Bemen's face and motioned for them to wait. The Shree'Nondarü's multi-slitted ear lobes wagged in what D'Treks assumed was their cultural body language for irritation. D'Treks quickly typed the words **ANIMALS SPOTTED** onto their sleeve and sent the message to the three cadets behind themz.

D'Treks saw Dalas read it and then type a response. The commanding cadet glanced at their sleeve again and read: **DON'T FORGET TO PRIME THE DART**. D'Treks angled their arm so that Bemen could read the message. The cadet looked perplexed.

D'Treks put their hand out, palm up, and motioned to take the gun. Bemen's ears flapped again and this time there was an accompanying eye roll. D'Treks chose to ignore the enlisted's attitude and removed the dart cartridge from the pistol's ammo chamber.

They input a few quick commands on their sleeve calling up biological calibrations for blood sampling and added it to the dart's data matrix. D'Treks noted that the small dart was not equipped with a self-propulsion engine or guidance software so Bemen's aim was going to need to be precise.

When they were done setting the scan parameters they tapped the dart against the top bar of their glove and saw a tiny indicator light blink on the back end of the projectile indicating its readiness. D'Treks was thankful there was no beep to go along with the notification, though they doubted the chicken's hearing was keen enough at this distance to cause themz to startle at such a slight sound.

D'Treks reloaded the pistol with the programmed dart and handed it back to Bemen. They gave the cadet the signal to go ahead and take the shot.

Bemen aimed carefully and squeezed the trigger. The dart silently ejected from the gun striking the nearest of the three birds. It released a sharp cluck and jumped off the ground with wild flapping of its flightless wings. The other two chickens raised theirz heads from pecking at the dirt and peered about in vapid ignorance.

The shot chicken danced about for half a minute continuing to flap its wings. Dust puffed up from the ground around its clawed feet. Its non-stop clucking was almost comical; it sounded as if a pebble were stuck in its throat. D'Treks hoped it wasn't actually choking.

They looked back at their sleeve and saw that the dart was already transmitting genetic scans to theirz dataCalcs. D'Treks sent instructions for Mreenu, Dalas and Tilalaw to start running analysis computations.

D'Treks stood up and motioned for Bemen to follow. The chickens finally noticed the presence of people, but theyz simply watched the two cadets retreat until theyz were out of sight.

The Shree'Nondarü cadet appeared to be walking with a hint of swagger as they rejoined their teammates. "Did you see that?" Bemen boasted to Tilalaw. "I'm a crack shot. Tactical Division, here I come!"

Tilalaw slapped their friend on the shoulder. "You're gonna make Infiltration Department for sure. And you know I'll be keeping you linked from Coms Department all the way."

Dalas shook their head causing their reflective hair to gleam iridescently in the bright false sunlight. They looked up from their sleeve screen where they had been swiping away at the data collected from the chicken. "Ser, it looks as if these chickens are Shree'Nondarü. They are classified as omnivores, so we're one-third of the way to completing the assignment."

"Hah!" Bemen brandished the pistol over their head. "If this were a real gun, I could shoot us some chicken dinner."

"That means you and me could eat, my friend, but...", Tilalaw made quick reference with their own sleeve screen, "...not any of you. Sorry." Tilalaw tilted their head



with false sympathy at D'Treks and the other two cadets. "Too bad you three aren't genetically compatible with Shree'Nondarü food."

Bemen pouted their lower lip. "Aaaww, y'all might get sick from our food. Guess you'd go hungry. Everything else we hunt now has to be Shree'Nondarü, too."

"Good thing this is not a bio-chem cooking class then," Mreenu commented without looking up from their sleeve. "I doubt you two know how to make anything edible."

"I doubt you've ever actually hunted anything," Dalas retorted childishly.

"Enough," D'Treks grunted. "We need to get moving and find more samples to tag. Anyone have any idea how to tell Shree'Nondarü animals from others. Those chickens looked exactly like NeeKron chickens. Same coloring, size and everything." D'Treks was met with silence from the team.

With a shrug, D'Tres got the team walking once more with themselves and Bemen back in the lead. Over the next hour theyz came across three more clusters of chickens with only one being of the same Shree'Nondarü kinset as the first. Theyz had yet to find any herbivores or an apex carnivore, though theyz did cross paths with one other team of cadets as theyz emerged from an arroyo.

"I thought our esteemed cadet-officer was supposed to be a great hunter," Bemen whispered loudly to Tilalaw during one of theirz rest breaks.

D'Treks continued to ignore the two cadets' persistent contempt. *I wonder if theirz attitude has to do with me being a citizen and themz civilians? Maybe theyz just have some sort of cultural bias against NeeKron? Or against wilderness folk in general? At least theyz are following orders. So far.*

"What sort of herbivore do you suppose we should be looking for?" Tilalaw asked of no one.

Bemen shrugged. "I dunno, maybe a rodent?"

"Many rodents are omnivores like the chickens, not herbivores," D'Treks said.

"I think we should keep an eye out for other birds, like quail, maybe?" Dalas suggested. "And an apex predator could be a raptor bird, such as a hawk or something."

"I think I saw feline tracks, some sort of big cat," Tilalaw proclaimed.

"No, you didn't," D'Treks corrected. "Those tracks were from a canine. What makes you think we're only looking for mammals and avians?" They reached down and turned over a hand-sized rock where the soil was slightly darkened by the moisture trapped underneath. Several

small insects scurried about due to the sudden exposure to air and light. Theyz disappeared down tiny holes in the dirt.

D'Treks used the sharp claw of their index finger to dig gently into the damp dirt. They retrieved one of the tiny bugs pinched between the claw tips of index finger and thumb. D'Treks held it up to their compatriots. Dalas and Mreenu gathered in closely to get a better look at the small black insect. The bug had rolled up into a perfect globe the size of a pea. Its entire body was hidden inside a slate-colored exoskeleton.

Dalas seemed particularly interested in the insect. D'Treks said, "We have these in the tundra where I grew up. We call themz rolee-polees, but ours are four times the size and have yellow stripes. Theyz are plant eaters and will totally ruin a garden if left unchecked. Maybe these are the same?"

Mreenu was already entering queries into their dataCalc while Bemen stared off into the distance. "Bugs are boring," the Shree'Nondarü said. "I want to shoot something else."

"How can we test that little pill bug anyway," Tilalaw asked, disregarding Bemen's violent sentiment. "The scan dart is too big. It'd squish the little critter."

Dalas handed the container of darts to D'Treks and then offered a lofty roll of their mirror-like eyes to Tilalaw. "If

you had bothered to examine the equipment we've been provided, you'd notice there are several replacement tips of varying sizes in the dart box. All we have to do is switch 'em out."

D'Treks watched with some admiration as Dalas' small fingers deftly exchanged the standard dart tip with a miniscule one. Everything about the Chondanon cadet was tiny which made D'Treks feel awkwardly proportioned. D'Treks's heavy bone structure made them appear clunky in comparison and each of their large hooves was nearly the size of Dalas' head.

"You could have pointed out the bugs a while ago," Bemen bemoaned, uttering a quick "Ser" as an afterthought.

Dalas handed the dart to D'Treks. "No, you'd better do it," D'Treks said hoping they did not sound as chagrined as they felt. "My hands are too big. You'll be better at it."

"Yes, ser," Dalas said. They tapped the dart against their uniform sleeve interface to activate it. Mreenu readied their dataCalc sleeve display to organize the incoming data. Dalas leaned in toward D'Treks's large hand where the cadet-officer was still holding the rolled up bug between two claw tips.

After a couple tentative attempts, Dalas let out a sigh. "I can't find a gap in its shell. I'm afraid I'm going to hurt it."

"Here, hand it to me," Tilalaw cockily said as they held out their hand. "My people have extremely good myopic vision."

"Or you could just use your uniform hood's optic enhancers," Mreenu suggested drily before Tilalaw could take the dart.

Dalas looked up with a big smile and a glint in their eye reminiscent of the sun-gleam in their hair. "Of course! I'm so silly for not thinking of that myself." Instead of handing over the dart, Dalas tapped a command on their glove and triggered the deployment sequence for the hood of their uniform.

With a soft whisper the techno-organic fabric in their collar slithered up and around their head. A transparent film fanned out from the hood to completely cover their face. It did not automatically vacuum seal as it would had the uniform detected a lack of atmosphere. The others would still be able to hear Dalas's natural voice rather than having to use audio coms, albeit a tad muffled.

Just as Dalas was opening their mouth to say something, a startling cacophony of howls, barks and canine shrieks erupted from somewhere nearby. Everyone in the

squad except D'Treks jumped in surprise. Dalas made a squeaking sound flailing their arm hard enough to knock the rolled-up bug out of D'Treks's grasp.

Everyone's dataCalc chirped with a bright pink alarm icon and Major Liiooulaa's face appeared on each of their screens. "Be aware! One of the squads has agitated a wolf pack. There are injuries to both the cadets and the animals. Cadet Officer D'Treks, be advised that it appears the pack is heading your direction. Evacuate your squad immediately."

"Yes, ser!" D'Treks responded crisply. "Alright team, let's make for the exit. Head that way." They pointed toward the distant wall of the holograph-infused enclosure. D'Treks estimated the dash could be executed in three or four minutes had they all been NeeKron, but Dalas's and Tilalaw's short legs would severely curtail the squad's speed.

"That's not the right way to the exit!" Bemen declared in a pugnacious tone. "It's the other way entirely." Bemen and Tilalaw turned to head in the opposite direction that D'Treks was indicating. That direction would take themz further toward the center of the room but, at least, still perpendicular to the incoming wolf pack, judging by the increased volume of barking.

"You can clearly see the holo-shimmer of the wall that way," D'Treks countered. A small piece of their mind noted that they should have ignored the cadet's proclamation and

simply over-ridden them with an order instead of engaging in a debate.

Mreenu was hastily trying to gather up all the loose bits belonging to the dart kit. D'Treks took a fast, deep breath, "Leave the gear, let's move! Now!"

Bemen and Tilalaw were not even looking as D'Treks issued the order and theyz were already running the wrong way. D'Treks growled loudly, revealing sharp teeth and brandishing clawed fingers. Mreenu looked scared.

"You two run, as fast as you can, but keep together," D'Treks said. "I'll go get those two rubes." D'Treks watched to make sure their friends got going and took a quick listen to gauge how near the wolves might be and how fast theyz were approaching.

Factoring in that there was no wind in the room to distort how the howls traveled, D'Treks figured theyz had less than 30 seconds before the wolves crested the rise and came in sight. Bemen and Tilalaw were already out of visual range around the curve of the arroyo. D'Treks dashed after the two renegade cadets, their powerful legs moving them at a speed few other species could match. Dust from their massive hooves puffed into the air leaving a cloudy trail behind them. They caught up to the two enlisted cadets in moments, but the howling of the the wolves had already changed direction. It sounded like theyz had entered the ravine and were heading directly toward themz.

“Turn and climb up the side of the ditch!” D'Treks shouted in a booming voice. “The wolves are coming! Theyz can't go up the steep sides.”

Bemen and Tilalaw stopped in theirz tracks. Bemen was frozen with indecision but Tilalaw grabbed their friend's sleeve and hauled them toward the steep arroyo wall. The dust from D'Treks's dash was wafting across all three of themz. Bemen started coughing as they scrambled up the loose dirt ravine wall dislodging even more rust-colored dust. Bemen tried to grab a twiggy, sage-like plant to help haul them further up the side but the small shrub pulled straight out of the dry, loose dirt. Bemen cursed and tossed the plant over their shoulder.

D'Treks turned, crouching low just as the wolves rounded the bend. The canines fell silent, panting heavily from theirz own dash across the dusty landscape. There were six of themz, though one at the back of the pack was awkwardly trying to bite at a sampler dart lodged squarely in its shoulder. The other five slowly started to fan out to surround the NeeKron cadet.

D'Treks was unsure whether the canines would actually attack. The tundra wolves back home were exceedingly cautious of people, even if the pack was large. Theyz would keep theirz distance but these animals were not likely acclimated to being on the receiving end of violence, so theirz behavior might be entirely different.



D'Treks certainly didn't want to injure or kill any of themz, that might get them in trouble with the Zoology department. So they decided to hold their ground, wait for their subordinates to scramble to the top of the arroyo and give themz a few moments' head start. This replicated land of dirt and scattered shrubs at least provided plenty of unobstructed maneuvering room.

Before they could give it any further consideration, there was a shout from the top of the ravine. Bemen and Tilalaw had made it out of the gorge. D'Treks broke eye contact with the wolves just long enough to glance up at the enlisted cadets. Both were flushed from exertion and coated in enough dirt for it to be visible on theirz dark uniforms.

The wolves took that brief moment of lapsed attention to lunge at theirz prey. Hunter instincts took over and D'Treks hunched, angling their heavy right shoulder with sharp elbow leading and launched forward using their planted left leg.

The NeeKron's powerful leg muscles provided tremendous momentum. That, combined with thick musculature, hard, bony skeletal protrusions and a life spent living off the land made the immense grey-skinned cadet capable of great brutality.

D'Treks collided mid air with the snapping jaws of the lead wolf who had leaped for their throat. The NeeKron's massive left hand clamped around the wolf's

neck, claws sinking through its dense fur to puncture flesh. D'Treks's forward momentum continued as they outweighed the wolf. They used the wolf's own forward trajectory against them and sent them sailing past, D'Treks's claws releasing as their broad hooves made contact with the ground again. They bent their knees instantly stabilizing in preparation for impact from the other wolves.

Two of the predators had already closed and were snapping at the cadet's hocks, attempting to hamstring them. The durable fabric of the Fleet uniform should prove resistant to theirz teeth, but the pain inflicted by theirz strong jaws was unavoidable. D'Treks kept their hooves planted and spent a moment assessing the body language of the remaining wolves. The one with the dart in its shoulder had not even joined the fray.

The other two appeared to be in a holding pattern so D'Treks reached down and grabbed the biting wolves by theirz scruff, dead-lifted themz off the ground and tossed themz aside as if theyz were sacks of grain. The canines impacted the walls on opposite sides of the ravine with piercing yelps. Theyz lowered theirz heads and began to slink away.

D'Treks took in a massive breath and let out a leonine roar while crouching once again to spring at the remaining wolves. Whether it was the startling volume of the wild outcry or that the wolves were smart enough to recognize

theyz were outmatched, all six of themz trotted away, three in each direction of the arroyo leaving the dirty NeeKron standing in the middle. The wolves would rendezvous and regroup sometime later, D'Treks was sure. The one they had wounded with their claws shouldn't be too gravely injured, D'Treks hoped, and would likely be tranquilized and treated by the zoological staff once all the cadets were safely out of the bio-habitat.

Adrenaline still pounding in their system, D'Treks bounded to the top of the ravine in three quick strides and made their way at a full dash toward the exit, hoping that Bemen and Tilalaw had found safety.

# Graduation Epilogue

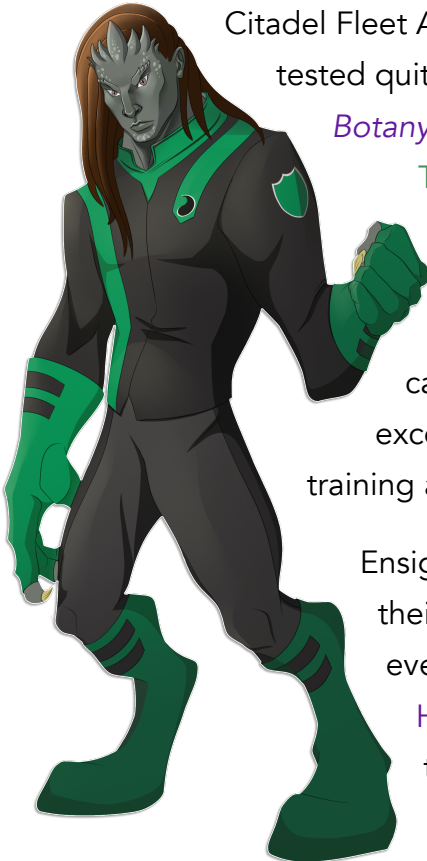


D'Treks was not punished for injuring the wolf and was awarded a leadership commendation for their quick thinking and willingness to put themselves in danger to protect their subordinates.

Upon graduating as a full ensign from the Citadel Fleet Academy, though having tested quite highly in both *Zoology* and *Botany*, D'Treks was assigned to

*Tactical* Division as a *Mareendoo* specialist. Likely their upbringing as a hunter and their natural physical capabilities in conjunction with excellent test scores in combat training accounted for the assignment.

Ensign D'Treks plans to continue their zoological training and eventually get transferred to *Health* Division, ideally before they get killed in the line of duty fighting the alien Krukari.



# GLOSSARY

**Chondanon:** bantam-sized, tripagon species with reflective hair and mirror-like eyes.

**Crewper:** abbreviation for crew person

**DataCalc:** abbreviation for data calculator (i.e. computer)

**GeneComp:** term for genetically-compatible, such as food

**Jestat:** term for a hominid or animal with only vagina/uterus reproductive biology

**Kinset:** term for everything biological (flora, fauna and hominid) genetically compatible with one specific species

**Mareendoo:** a combination term of Marine+Commando; name for the Fleet Division of trained soldiers.

**Molvibree:** small primate species with keen up-close vision

**Ser:** abbreviation for the phonetic spelling of officer (*ofiser*)

**Shree'Nondarü:** large-sized tripagon species

**SimDiv:** abbreviation for simulated diversion (entertainment)

**SitFleet:** abbreviation for Situdel Fleet



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Layman Kingsford grew up in New Mexico and now lives in Denver, Colorado. He has a BFA in music and creative writing but spent much of his adult life as a professional ballroom dancer (one-time US Champion). He has had stints as a professional trombone player and also as Brock N. Alnite, a drag performer and cofounder of Haus Alnite.

He currently spends his time writing Living Saga stories and novels while designing/publishing tabletop games - some of which are also related to aspects of the Living Saga.