

Soul Miner



A short story by
Mary Wildfire

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In a large cavern in an immense canyon on the small planet Yaki, Clay Larsen sat on his backpack while he waited to be tested for “soul.” At least, he thought “soul” was the best translation of what the neltong had said. What they meant by it he’d soon find out—that is, *if* they decided he had it and thus let him stay here in the Restcave with them through the seven weeks of Coldrest.

If they were going to reject him, Clay hoped they’d do it quickly, while he could still radio the helicopter pilot to return for him. He looked out the thick glass window at the snow, falling so heavily now that he could no longer see the far wall of the canyon barely a kilometer away. The pilot had said it was not a blizzard, but it looked enough like one to Clay. And it would be dark soon, too—only two hours of full light now, and it would be even less at the solstice. Fortunately, Yaki’s year was only eight Earth-months long, or the extreme axial tilt would be unbearable. What a world!

And what a people the neltong were. Supposedly as intelligent as humans, with such human hands and eyes and voices—and fur coats in shades of silver and brown, four hooves, and those tall ears—like a donkey’s, only wider and set farther apart. And those big

leathery tails.

Here they came now, three of them.

"Clay-human," said the old brown one in greeting. This was the same one he'd spoken to outside the Restcave...the *cloco*. He'd learned a little of the customs of the neltong from the sleeplearn program in their language which he'd taken on the spaceship. Each clan had a *cloco*, who was something like a storyteller with religious duties, and a *sem*, a doctor who was also responsible for the emotional health of her people. The *cloco* was always male, the *sem* was always female, and jointly the pair ruled the clan.

"I am Rigger. I am the *cloco*," said the old brown one. "This is my trainee, Ngist." Ngist was the darkest neltong in the clan, probably, nearly black, and had the sleek fur and bright eyes of the young.

"This is the *sem*, Flix." Flix had an ordinary silvery coat, but Clay would be able to recognize her because she wore two woven pouches; most females didn't use even one, using their marsupial pouches instead.

"This is Clay, a human who wishes to stay with us during Coldrest, that he may bring our stories to his people." They were all dipping

their ears at him, a gesture of respect. A return was mandatory, Clay knew, but how could he perform it? He put his hands to his head and bent them in a mimicking fashion, feeling extremely silly, but apparently they accepted it. At least they didn't laugh.

"We will now touch our hands together," said Rigger. Ngist the trainee stepped back to watch. Rigger and Flix put their palms together on one side and reached a hand each toward Clay. He placed a palm against each of theirs. So this was the soul test. It reminded Clay of a children's game; he had the urge to laugh. But he also felt adrenaline coursing through his arms as he wondered if he would be exposed. If anyone had soul, surely it was not he who thought of himself as a "soul miner," working for the Golden Fox. Not that he ever used that term aloud; his official title was "Cultural Data Collector." But what he did was collect the soul of a primitive people, to hand over to the Fox—who used this raw data to create the virtual reality epics (the term "artificial experience" was discouraged in the business) that had made him a media star famous throughout the solar system and beyond. Primitive cultures had something special, it seemed, something that briefly filled the endless hunger in modern

humanity... that jaded emptiness never satisfied long by the endless succession of material goods, emotional and physical stimulations, mental titillations...a hunger that had made the Golden Fox rich.

Clay felt a strange sensation. Some kind of energy seemed to be surging through him—he had the distinct impression that it came from Rigger and then went out through Flix. At first he thought he was imagining it. When he realized he was not, he felt a moment's fear—but surely this was supposed to happen? He relaxed and let it flow. When his resistance dropped, the flow increased in speed and strength. Clay cooperated when the others changed the direction of the flow. A moment later, Flix and Rigger dropped their hands.

“Welcome to our Restcave, and to the Seventh Clan, Clay. I must go to help my trainee with a sick child.” With that, Flix left.

“You have passed the test, and may remain with us through Coldrest,” said Rigger the cloco. “Let us now find you a room.” Clay felt relief as he followed Rigger and Ngist out of the room, but it was strongly tinged with the sourness of disappointment. So they thought he had soul, did they? If they were so easily

fooled, then they must not have it themselves-
-whatever "soul" was. No doubt he'd still find something here the Fox could use, but some part of him had been hoping, he realized, for a key to filling his own emptiness. He was, after all, a child of his age: he'd been a drug addict, then he'd kicked that and had a stint as a follower of Majurama, followed by a period of asceticism, followed in turn by a period of hedonism...none had helped for long.

So, giving up on happiness, he'd returned to college for an anthropology degree. This he had used, together with the eidetic memory with which his parents had had him genetically programmed, to get a job with the Fox. Only people with perfect memory were hired as data collectors. Tape recorders were more intrusive, and they could be stolen.

Clay struggled to keep up in the dark passage, following a dark neltong. Obviously the neltong have better eyes for dim light.

On his first big job, recording the myths and customs of the Hopi in Arizona, Clay had caught a glimpse of what was missing from modern life. The Hopis within the Enclave still had a genuine, intact culture, with meaningful roles for everyone, and beliefs that explained

the world. Theirs was a restricted world, but they were happy. He had envied them, but was not foolish enough to imagine that he could graft himself artificially onto a culture he'd not had the luck to be born into. Besides, he was a modern American. Could he have put up with the lack of freedom and the prudery of the Hopi—or of the Quakers he'd studied more peripherally during his trial period with the Fox? There might be a hole in the center of his life, but at least he had freedom.

“Are you having a problem, Clay?” It was Rigger’s voice---by now Clay really couldn’t see at all. “I have heard that humans are dependent on sight—is this true? Perhaps we had better give you the room with light.”

Clay rubbed a bruise on his hip. “How are you managing to find your way so quickly in the dark?” he asked.

“Why, there are different herbs hung from the ceilings of each room. Can you not smell them?”

“I can smell them, but it is not enough to guide me.” An arm found him in the darkness and led him back the way they had come.

“I’m not used to thinking of myself as old

and weak,” said Clay the next morning. “First you had to give me the only small room with a window, which should have gone to the oldest person as a matter of honor—”

“But she said she didn’t mind,” interrupted Ngist. “It’s no disgrace. It’s just that humans have to have light.”

“And now I have to ask you to help me weave an old person’s sleeping mat.”

“That also has nothing to do with age or weakness. You have no fur, except that little patch on your head. It must have been very uncomfortable on an ordinary mat.”

“It was awful. I hardly slept,” Clay admitted.

“But I am delighted to show you how to weave,” replied Ngist, handing Clay another swatch of his own dark fur to incorporate into the mat for softness. “It gives me a chance to find out about humans, and Earth. I am very curious. Will you teach me English?”

Clay hesitated. He liked Ngist very much—but what would this interest lead to? He’d told himself many times that there was nothing wrong with “soul mining,” that taking a piece of primitive culture left no less for the primitives and might help his own people. What

hurt the primitives was the intrusion of modern culture, especially materialism. Thus, he need not feel guilty about soul mining as long as he *didn't* pay for what he took.

"I will ask Rigger about teaching you English," he said.

"You ate very nicely, without instruction," remarked Ngist.

"Yes. The food was good. It was easy, you use spoons for utensils and bowls for dishes. It was harder to learn proper table manners in Japan, another part of Earth." And he'd get used to eating just once a day. He only hoped he'd get used to the evacuation tube, which fit human anatomy so poorly it was painful to use. It was all right when he had to pee—and he'd get better at that—but trying to situate himself to take a crap into that thing...

"Tell me about Japan," said Ngist, but then they heard the sound of a flute. This was the signal for the first round of storytelling. Ngist helped Clay secure the end of his weaving and led him through the dark corridors to the big room in which the whole clan met. This big room, plus another one in which they ate, and the one little personal room which Clay was using, all had glass windows facing the giant

canyon. At the moment, the sun was shining between clouds, turning the snowy landscape a brilliant white.

Rigger waited for Ngist and Clay at the far end of the room, on a sort of raised dais. Rigger and Ngist would take turns telling the stories, and if Ngist made any mistakes, Rigger would correct him. A fully trained cloco was expected to know all the tales word-for-word, enough to fill five weeks.

Clay chose a place near the front and settled himself on the dirt floor, smiling at the neltong who eyed him curiously. Some still moved around talking to friends or hushing children, but most were now sitting back on those fat, heavy tails, looking attentively at Rigger. A sweet smell drew Clay's eyes upward. He couldn't clearly see the herbs that gave this room its smell of—maple syrup? Almond extract? They looked like clumps of round leaves.

Rigger blew a note on the bone flute. The room quieted. "Welcome to the first gathering of the year 14,778," he said.

"It is 14, 778," the people intoned, all except the alien.

Rigger let a silence settle, and then he

began. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earths. Creating the stars, She flung them through the void; speaking a word, She set all things in motion. Greater and lesser, female and male, water and earth—with one hand She created them and with the other She regulated them, for the first times, for these times, and for all times to come."

Clay listened carefully. As long as he paid attention, he would remember every word. He looked out the window, where a few snowflakes were swirling in a darkening sky.

Rigger settled himself into the steaming water with a sigh. The worst thing about old age, he thought, was the ache in the bones, especially during Coldrest. But a dip in the hot spring brought near-perfect relief. He closed his eyes in pleasure.

His nose quivered; he was not alone. No light entered the hot water room, but his nose identified his companion. "Hello, Flix."

"How are you, Rigger?"

"Fine, now. Hot water cures all."

"Maybe not *all*."

"My dear, I don't mean to question your effectiveness! Certainly there are ailments that

need your herbs or songs or manipulations. But hot water cures all that ails *me* right now.”

“I feel pretty good too,” replied the sem. “Are you happier with your trainee? He seems to be settling down a little.”

“Well, he’s getting older. I suppose he’s as calm as can be expected in a seven-year old. I think Ovver was calmer when he was seven, but I’m not sure; I suppose when you lose a trainee to a lorash, you remember him as better than he really was. Anyway, Ngist is the best of the young, so I must be satisfied. At least he has a good memory, which is the most important thing in a cloco.”

A sly note entered Flix’s voice as she asked, “And what about your other trainee?”

“What? Oh, you mean the human? He told me he has perfect recall, a result of actions taken by his parents before he was born. I don’t see how such a thing can be, but nothing seems to be impossible for humans.”

“They are so strong and so sad.”

“Yes,” Rigger agreed, “including this Clay. Though he has a strong soul, he is troubled. I don’t think the humans have very good sems. He needs some kind of healing, not of the body.”

"I think you're right, Rigger, but what can I do? I know nothing of the human mind."

They were silent for awhile, and Rigger let his mind rest, floating in the hot water with his body.

"Do you still think they're dangerous?" Flix's question brought him back, and Rigger sat up, hot water streaming through his fur.

"Yes. They are half lorash, you know. Well, not lorash, there are no lorash on Earth. But this "ape" they claim as the other half of their ancestry, the half they don't share with us, must be a vicious creature no less than the lorash. I asked Clay about the "war" thing, and he said it's perfectly true. He told me some appalling stories. Clay himself seems peaceable, but I worry about what his people will do to our world."

"Perhaps Yaki will do them some good. Their home world is so gentle that they have no time of rest. No wonder they run around so frantically all the time. They have no history; they don't even remember the visit of the gods to their world."

Rigger moved closer to Flix so that he could rub the spot on her back that often ached. "Yes," he said. "I believe they do suffer

from lack of reflection. I'm coming to think they have forgotten how to touch the world, and this creates in them a blind hunger, which drives them to foolish action. But as to Yaki helping them, there are so many humans on Earth that Yaki can be of little help."

"Perhaps when Clay gives them our stories it will help them all."

"I hope so."

"Do you think..." Flix hesitated. "I wonder if Clay should make a pilgrimage to the Sacred Mountain."

Rigger sighed. "I have thought much on that. If he were a neltong, yes, certainly. But he's human, and the gods gave the Sacred Mountain to us, not to the humans. I don't know whether it would be appropriate or not. I have decided I will not suggest it. If he asks, I think it would be best to consult the other clocosem before we decide. What do you think?"

"I concur."

Coldrest was over. The tales were all told, even the clan history which touched the high points of the lives of a hundred generations; in this way the neltong believed they could pass

on the wisdom gained by individuals.

There had been weekly visits outside even during the heart of Coldrest, so that all could “touch the world.” Now everyone was going out for longer periods each day. On the first sunny day of Snowmelt, Clay prepared to leave with considerable eagerness. He had enjoyed getting to know the nelotong, but he was tired of being cooped up in darkness, sick of the evacuation tube, and lonely for human company.

Also, he was eager to experiment with touching Yaki more fully. Why had it never occurred to him before that all the human cultures he admired had this in common with the nelotong—they all had land, they all got their living from it, they all touched and celebrated the Earth. Not so easy to do on Earth these days, unfortunately, with seven billion humans, but for him it would be feasible. Here was a use for all that credit he got working for the Golden Fox; when he returned to Earth, he could buy wilderness permits. He could even buy land. Maybe he’d find that being part of a community was not vital, as long as he had the Earth itself...and a woman, maybe. He’d been thinking about that, too, these long dark nights.

Tucking his beard into his snowsuit and sealing it up, Clay thought again about which wilderness to visit first. Maybe the Mojave or the Grand Canyon? Or maybe someplace less like Yaki...maybe the Appalachian Preserve.

"Are you ready, Clay?" Ngist asked the question in English, which he was learning rapidly. He would be accompanying Clay as far as the Sacred Mountain.

Clay finished fastening a snowshoe and hoisted his pack onto his shoulders. "Ready when you are." He could have radioed the helicopter, assuming weather conditions were right between here and New Terra, but he wanted to walk. He wanted to really touch Yaki before he left. He had barely a week left. And Yaki was not his world, but it *was* dramatically beautiful... all canyons and mountains, with swift turns of bitter winters and baking summers, with a flash of glorious spring and sweet bountiful fall in between. Or so everyone said. He had seen only winter, and would not be here for spring.

The two climbed a trail out of the canyon with little conversation. It was single-file, careful walking here, with a steep drop to their right. The air held the thin cries of birdlike

things wheeling near the far rim, and the closer crunching sound of their snowshoes. Those things were not birds, Clay recalled, but something more like insects. Their calls sounded like silver bells—or was that an association with Christmas, because of this landscape?

The man and the young neltong stopped to rest near a frozen creek some distance beyond the canyon rim. Clay nibbled a dried fruit snack, admiring the shining curls of ice in the creek. Ngist walked to the edge of a nearby grove of twist trees, about fifteen of them a few feet apart. All but the youngest stood six meters tall, a little over a foot wide, and one inch thick. They were as green as a slice of lime and translucent, casting green shadows onto the snow.

“Do you know why these are called twist trees, Clay?”

“Why?”

“Because they twist to follow or flee the sun. Now, at the ebb of the year, they move little. The sun is mostly to the south. When spring comes, they’ll twist to keep their broad side to the sun all day. Then, in the great heat of summer, they’ll turn the narrow side to the

sun.”

A sensible plant. And an arrangement which caused them all to orient themselves identically, which was part of the striking visual effect.

Ngist was quiet and calm, taking in the beauty of the world. In the still, cold, thin air the cries of the insect-birds in the canyon could still be heard.

After this rest they walked uphill again, to the pass through which the Sacred Mountain would be visible. There Ngist would turn back. He could not set foot on the Mountain today; his coming-of-age pilgrimage had been two years ago and he would not be allowed to make another till his fertile years were over.

Clay would be walking well after sunset, but tonight Yaki's two moons would give plenty of light. There was no true darkness on Yaki, except in that dratted cave. What a relief to be out stretching his muscles, breathing fresh air! It was hard to keep up with the youngster, though.

“It isn't fair, Ngist! You have four legs and I have only two. Besides, your snowshoes are better. One of mine keeps getting loose.”

Ngist's response was to take Clay's pack.

Nonetheless, Clay was breathing hard as they rounded a rocky hillside to see a chain of mountains, peak beyond peak stretching away forever on the right, while to the left they gentled into foothills. Beyond those foothills lay New Terra.

"There it is," said Ngist, a slight tremble in his voice, a rare solemnity in his manner. He pointed to the Sacred Mountain, a cone-shaped peak which, though no taller than its neighbors, stood out because of its shape.

"*That* is the Sacred Mountain? The cone-shaped one?"

"Yes," replied the neltong, surprise in his voice. "Does it disappoint you?"

"No—it's not that—but that's the mountain we call Lodestone. The helicopter pilot showed it to me on the way to your Restcave. It contains more corannium than...corannium is the fuel we use in our spaceships...it's very rare, at least in our solar system..." Clay's explanations faltered as the implications hit him. "They plan to mine it."

"What does this mean?"

"It means big equipment coming to tear holes in the mountain, digging out the ore. It means—"

“Such a thing cannot be!” Ngist’s ears were stiff with horror. “That is the Sacred Mountain! It is the Footstool of the Gods and the Umbilical Cord to Heaven!” Ngist was not speaking English now.

“I know, Ngist. I understand, after hearing all your stories. I just never suspected that the Sacred Mountain was Lodestone.” He sighed. “What it means is, this isn’t the day for a nature walk after all. They plan to start mining this spring. I’d better go tell them right away.” He begun digging in his pack for his radio transmitter.

Ngist clutched at his elbow. “What will happen, Clay? Will they stop the idea of mining when you tell them that is the Sacred Mountain?”

Clay hesitated. He thought about the legal rights of indigenous peoples. He thought about the sanctity of religion. Then he thought about the jubilation over “the largest store of corannium ever found.” The beautiful face of the Governor here, whose nickname was Steel Bar, came to mind. And the fifteen years of real time it took to make a roundtrip to Earth.

“I’m not really sure, Ngist. I’ll do my best. If there’s corannium in that mountain,

there must be more around. We'll just have to get it elsewhere." He pressed the button. "Calling New Terra."

Elena Craghead, governor of the human colony on Yaki, made a final check in the mirror before her appointment with the man who worked for the Golden Fox. She believed that appearance was crucial for a leader. Though nearly fifty, she looked thirty, and her clothes were always carefully chosen. She bounced a wave of brunette hair, showing no grey and perfect curl. There. She went back to her desk and pressed the "admit" button, glancing at her screen for the man's name: Clay Larsen.

He was a tall man about thirty, with blond hair and a reddish beard, wearing a sky blue suit that struck Elena as silly—though it did go well with his coloring.

"Have a seat, Mr. Larsen, she said, indicating a soft blue chair. "Now what is it that's so very urgent?" She smiled.

"Thank you, Governor. What's so urgent is that we have to stop the plans to mine Lodestone. It's the neltong's Sacred Mountain."

"Oh, dear, how unfortunate. But I'm afraid we can't just stop the mining. We need

that corannium.”

“Can’t we get it elsewhere? If it’s in that mountain, there must be more elsewhere. Why don’t you do a geological survey, or whatever you call it here, and find another source?”

“We have already surveyed this entire planet, Mr. Larsen. There is no other corannium on it, except for traces at the south pole, inaccessible.”

The man appeared stymied for a moment. She hoped he wouldn’t turn out to be some sort of nut. One of the best things about governing a colony was the rarity of nuts.

“What about the rest of this solar system? Has it been explored?”

“Not thoroughly. But it will be, in a few years.”

He leaned forward. “It should be done sooner. We cannot dig up that mountain. I don’t know if I can explain this adequately...I have just spent all of Coldrest with the neltong, recording their stories, their culture...they aren’t allowed to walk on that mountain to gather food, or even to just walk. In a lifetime, each neltong makes two pilgrimages, alone, to the peak, where they may spend just one night. They think of it as the Footstool of the

Gods—you know, those beings who mixed their genes with those of apes to create us, and with the centauris to create the nelotong, and presumably others...their name for this world is Nineteen. They believe that this was the nineteenth world visited by those beings.”

“I know all about this theory, Mr. Larsen. I won’t argue about our semi-siblinghood with the nelotong. Really, I don’t see that it matters where the—the *gods* touched down on this world. It is as simple as this: we need that corannium.” She frowned. “This world is nothing but mountains. Why do they have to call *that* one sacred? Can’t we persuade them to shift to another one?” His expression told her this would be no solution. A nut, all right. A nut bringing a very real problem. Just what she didn’t need today, with all the preparations for the shuttle from the *Adam and Eve*, already in orbit around Yaki; and the need to discreetly find out where her miserable teenage daughter was hiding this time. But she would not let this man hear her sigh, nor would she stray from politeness.

An idea struck her. “What if we came in from the far side? Certainly we’ll stick to a policy of Least Harm...Least Harm to the environment, of course, as always, but also in

this case least harm to our relations with the natives.”

But he was shaking his head and looking angry. “They range all around that mountain—it’s sacred to all the clans. We can’t hide our desecration—we just have to not do it. Why can’t we hold off on this mining until the rest of this solar system is explored? Is that too much to ask?”

“Mr. Larsen, the equipment is already on its way to the mining site. In three days, the shuttle will be in from the *Adam and Eve*, bearing a cargo of goods for us, as well as another thousand colonists. We must pay for those goods. It’s my intention that the first small load of coranium be shipped out on the *Adam and Eve*.”

“But surely you can’t start mining that soon! It’s winter!”

“Modern mining equipment is very tough, Mr. Larsen, and fully automatic. No one will have to go out in the cold. Anyway, spring is right around the corner, and it moves like lightning on Yaki. You can’t imagine, being fresh from Earth.” One last try to get him tamed.

“Mr. Larsen, you could be a real help to us. Probably no one knows the natives better than

you do now. To leave all that corannium in the ground because of some primitive religion is not a realistic option; if you think calmly about it you'll see that. The question is, how can we make it easiest on the nelong? Certainly we can pay them for the corannium—the value of those deposits is enormous. And needless to say, we'll reclaim the mountain after we're done. We should be able to make it look just like it was."

"What about indigenous rights? What about the legal sanctity of religion?"

She gave up. "Feel free to consult a lawyer, Mr. Larsen."

He got up and left abruptly. Oh, well, she hadn't expected to win him over. Elena rubbed her eyes wearily, there being no one around to see the inelegant gesture. Trouble, always more trouble. But perhaps not too much. The mining would start in two days, leaving the question moot. Meanwhile this Larsen would run around squawking, getting very little sympathy from Yakian colonists, of necessity a practical lot. Maybe he would go to a lawyer—meaning that stubby little Irish girl, Cecelia McDonald. The only other lawyer was Elena's husband. She reached for the phone.

The only good thing about the next three days was Clay's new friendship with the lawyer. Her tiny apt had been their headquarters as she tried to get an injunction to stop the mining from Yaki's only judge—but as she had predicted, he refused to issue it.

"He knows I'm in the right legally," she told Clay. "But he also knows that I have to go to Earth to appeal, and it's a fifteen year roundtrip. By then the mountain will be long gone."

Meanwhile Clay went to the media station to try to stir up opposition to the mining. The hostility he met with there was reflected in most of the random individuals with whom he tried to discuss the issue.

"I think I hate these colonists, Celia!" he exclaimed afterward. "You are the only one who hasn't looked at me like I've been out in the ultraviolet too long when I suggest that we don't have the right to tear apart the holiest place on this world, no matter how much corannium is there. Likely you're right that the gods chose the Sacred Mountain because they mined the corannium themselves, for their own starships—it doesn't matter. For eight

thousand years the neltong have centered their culture, their religion, around that mountain. Destroying it would damage their culture worse than anything done to the Native Americans, which everyone is so sorry about now, after six hundred years!”

“That’s a good analogy, Clay. Because Yakian colonists fancy themselves as cowboys. It’s the one thing I don’t like about living here.”

Clay slammed his fist into his hand in frustration. “Well, if we can’t get legal help soon enough to matter, and we can’t get the public on our side, there’s just one thing left to—”

“Clay Larsen, you get that glint out of your eye right now, and don’t say what you’re thinking. I *know* the governor and her cronies are having us watched. Why spend years in jail for sabotage when you won’t succeed in it?”

He slumped into the bland, standard-issue couch. “So I just have to walk back there tomorrow to tell them I failed. And that their mountain will be destroyed.”

“I’m sorry, Clay. Do you think I like the idea of giving up my life here for fifteen years realtime, knowing that by the time I get back the mountain will be gone, and that the damages I might win will only harm their

culture more if I'm to believe you, which I do? So all I can do is try to see that the guilty are punished adequately to deter some—"

Celia was interrupted by a knock at the door. She opened it, and Clay heard a familiar, heavily accented voice say, "Hello. A man said the man Clay Larsen be here. Do you know where he is?"

Clay sprang to the door. "Ngist!" Another, unfamiliar neltong stood beside Ngist. "Come in," said Clay, though it wasn't his apt. The neltong entered, and Celia shut the door behind them.

"I was going to come and talk to you again," said Clay, performing the "eardip" with his hands. "I have bad news, I'm afraid. I have been unable to stop the mining. I was going to come and tell you that tomorrow."

Ngist sat back on his tail and touched the carpet. Was he trying to "touch the earth" as neltong did to calm themselves? He did seem agitated. His companion held one of his hands, clearly a comforting gesture.

"I am very afraid of humans," said Ngist in a strained voice. Did he mean Celia? This wasn't like Ngist!

"Let me introduce you. This is Celia

McDonald, who has been helping me try to stop the mining.” He realized he was speaking the neltong language, of which Celia spoke very little. Ngist spoke fair English, but the other neltong surely spoke none. “Celia,” he continued in English, “this is Ngist, the cloco trainee from the seventh clan. And...”

Ngist took over. “This is Molo,” he said in English. He is from the second clan.”

“Ngist, I have found no way to stop the mining. They plan to start the day after tomorrow. Celia and I—”

“They started yesterday,” replied Ngist.

“What?”

“Yesterday, in the afternoon, came a great wind and loud noise that left the peak of the Sacred Mountain in the valley below. It tore the Umbilical Cord to Heaven. It killed all the clocos.”

“Ngist, what are you saying?” Ngist was trembling. Clay turned to Celia with a translation. “He says they started the mining yesterday. It sounds like they used dynamite.”

“What did you mean,” Clay asked, “about the clocos?”

“When we saw the machines coming, they went up to the top of the Sacred Mountain

All the clocos, and all the eldest trainees, up to the sacred number, nineteen. They went to the Footstool of the Gods to pray, to try to save the mountain. I went to watch from below, and I saw the top of the mountain come off. One of the sems went up there and found parts of some of the clocos, but there were none that survived." In a whisper, he added, "it is a holy place to die."

"My God!" All that automatic mining equipment, unaware of the sentient beings nearby; the neltong, unaware of the existence of dynamite...feeling ill, Clay sat down on the floor. He looked up to explain to Celia, whose look of anger changed to horror when she understood what had happened.

"Now we have no cloco who knows all the stories, none who are trained any better than I am," said Ngist. "Unless we count you. You have the perfect memory, Clay, You know all the stories, as well as the lesser stories of the seventh clan. Will you come and train us? I said you would. I know you want to go home now, but we need the stories, even if we have lost the Mountain. Flix said you would do it, too."

As Ngist paused, the idea began to sink in: *not* to go home to Earth in a few days...

the next ship wouldn't arrive for at least half a Yastian year, maybe a whole one.

"Many of the other clans didn't want you at first," Ngist continued, "because you're human after all. But Flix said you're different from other humans, because you have a strong soul. She said that Rigger had said so, also.

"Some didn't believe that you could remember every word of the stories after hearing them just once, but I said you had proved it to me. And it is true, isn't it? That you know all the sacred stories, and also the history of the seventh clan, which is the only complete one we have now? Every word?"

"Yes." Clay buried his head in his arms for a minute, absorbing all these losses. Temporary loss of the home world he was eager to appreciate fully for the first time...his new friendship with Celia, which he had begun to hope might develop into something more... permanent loss of Rigger, and of the cultural integrity of the nelton, so soon after he contacted them...

"The sems are choosing trainees for most of the clans now," said Ngist, "but I am the trainee for the seventh clan, because Rigger chose me." His hairy ears curled tightly with

grief at the mention of Rigger.

Clay sat in a field of the early blue flowers, feeling the dawn wind stirring his hair. The governor had been right about the advance of spring; already he could sit comfortably without a hat. He eyed the field, almost completely covered with these blue flowers, just the shade of the clear sky. Ngist had explained that this was a trick to discourage visits from non-pollinating insects crawling up from the ground. The pollinators were all winged, and had no troubling seeing the blue flowers against a background of brown dirt. Clay could not make out the horizon from his viewpoint on this knoll. It seemed the sky climbed down into the field, only to resolve into flowers all around him.

Celia and two brave neltong had taken off in the *Adam and Eve* the previous afternoon, ready to fight for a permanent stop to the mining, and some mechanism to prevent this kind of abuse in the future. Judge Nakimura had decided it would be prudent, in light of the accident, to issue a temporary injunction against it, and the machines were now idle. While they were on Earth, the companions

would also try to put a stop to the talk of “correcting” Yaki’s axial tilt. The nelotong did not want an earthlike world, and Yaki was their world, wasn’t it? On Earth, the rights of the nelotong would be treated with respect.

Clay closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the cold, thin air. Between rough grasslike plants, his fingers felt the soil of Yaki, cold and sandy. He concentrated on letting all his tensions and distracted concerns pass out through his fingertips and into the great stone substance of Yaki. Though he was alien, this world could ground even him. What his own world could do, he would have to wait to discover. Now was the time for him to repay the nelotong for all they’d given him—and they had given much. He hoped, when he got back to Earth, that he would be able to transform his relationship with the Fox so that he could use that connection to pass on these gifts, and not mere entertainment, to his troubled people.

He opened his eyes to see that the nineteen trainees had gathered around him and were sitting back on their tails. They were ready, and now, so was he.

“It is the year 14,778,” said Clay.

“It is 14,778.”

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earths,” began Clay. “Creating the stars, She flung them through the void; speaking a word, She set all things in motion. Greater and lesser, female and male, water and earth: with one hand She created them and with the other She regulated them, for the first times, for these times, and for all times to come.”