

New Talk

by

Richard Harland

What had happened? What had he said? Cria stared at the strange being in silvery fabric who stood facing her, barely four paces away.

She had crept up for a look at the long-legged sky-craft, never imagining that any of the *silvers* remained inside. They were all supposed to be at a meeting with the males of her tribe. When one descended the ladder from the oval doorway, she had been paralyzed with shock and fear. He had caught sight of her, had approached and spoken to her in an alien language. He was about to speak to her again!

But someone else spoke first. A hoarse shout in her own language.

'Cria! Come away!'

She spun around and saw Gleb, his face peering out from the bushes. He must have been following her! He looked appalled, aggressive, frightened, all at the same time. He hadn't even channelled!

But now he did. He stepped out onto the path and made the gesture of opening the airway with his arms. Channelling speech from him to her.

'Forbidden! Come away!'

Although Gleb had neither seniority nor special authority in her family, it was unthinkable for Cria to disobey the direct order of a male. She hung her head and retraced her steps along the path. She passed Gleb, who then walked behind as though to protect her from the silver. She didn't look back, but her ears told her that the strange being had made no move to follow. He hadn't spoken again either.

What unbelievable bad luck, for Gleb to have spotted her! She had been in trouble before, but never so bad as this. She had actually made Gleb call out her name. How he would have hated that! He must have been desperate when the silver spoke those incomprehensible syllables.

Incomprehensible syllables . . . but there was no time to think about them now. Gleb was driving her faster and faster, almost treading on her heels. She knew without asking that they were heading home to the tribal shelter. Her proper place, where she should have remained with other females . . .

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The tribal shelter was an immense spreading gamba-tree, whose broad leaves had been sewn together to create a waterproof canopy. Under the canopy, five family grounds were marked off with low sills of earth, which were understood to act as walls. The common ground was in the center, where the headmen of the five families met for Big Talk.

None of the other males had yet returned from the meeting. The women and children were busy with their daily duties, either inside the shelter or not far away. When they realized that Cria was in trouble, they averted their eyes.

Gleb directed Cria back to their particular family ground. She gestured with her arms, trying to open a channel to him. Although she couldn't stop him reporting on her, perhaps she could persuade him to soften the details. If he could present her behavior as the thoughtlessness of a sixteen year old, rather than a deliberate act of defiance?

But Gleb lifted his hand and refused to accept the channelling. He moved his palm from side to side, closing off the airway. Then he turned and sat in the doorway to their family ground, like a guard in the space between the sills.

Cria went to sit further back. Her mother, grandmother and six female cousins were all in the family ground, but they didn't dare look at her. She began tidying one of the sills, patting down the ridge that separated them from the next family. It was a task that always needed doing. The women on the other side of the sill hardly existed for her.

She'd been tidying a sill when she'd first overheard the headmen talking about the sky-craft. If only she'd never listened in to their plans! She'd been working next to the common ground while Big Talk was going on.

As always, it had been a laborious discussion. First, the headmen had needed to settle terms. They agreed that the visitors should be called *silvers*, on account of their metallic clothing. Then followed a long debate about other words that could be appropriately applied to them. In the end, they accepted 'long arms', 'white faces' and 'round heads', while 'living in the sky' was set aside for later consideration.

Then, most amazingly of all, they began to plan for a meeting. It seemed that the silvers had indicated a desire to exchange talk. The headmen decided how it should be done, dividing the tribe into three parts. Only the headmen would speak, while senior males of heed and restraint would be present without speaking. Junior males would stand guard out of sight around the meeting ground. There was no mention of women or children, who would obviously remain at home. The discussion concluded with agreement on a term for the meeting itself, which was to be called *New Talk*. A New Talk with silvers.

Looking back now, Cria saw how she'd miscalculated the position of the junior males. She'd assumed they'd be keeping just out of sight, encircling the meeting ground. Whereas in fact they'd spread far more widely all around. She hadn't made enough of a detour on her way to the sky-craft – which was why Gleb had caught sight of her.

But it was too late to curse her own curiosity. What would her punishment be? She hoped for a quick beating rather than a long period of isolation.

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By the time the males came back from the New Talk, the usual afternoon rain shower had begun. It pattered down on the canopy of leaves, a gentle enveloping sound. The males were wet and grinning with triumph. They shook drops of water from their hair, beards and gunnycloths.

Except for the headmen, they went immediately to their separate family grounds. While the headmen began Big Talk in the common ground, the males of Cria's family sat down for Little Talk.

She knew that Gleb wouldn't be able to report on her at once. He would have to wait until the senior males allowed him to speak in Little Talk. The senior males would want to discuss her behavior at length. Then they too would have to wait for an opportunity to address the headmen in Big Talk. It might take ages.

Cria didn't want to follow the progress of her inevitable punishment. Better to listen in to what the headmen were saying about the silvers. Still patting and tidying, she worked her way around the sill until she turned a corner and came next to the common ground. The headmen were counting up their gains and losses from the meeting.

She focussed on their voices above the sound of the rain overhead. It was the very opposite of what she had been trained to do. If words weren't channelled to you, you were supposed to blank them out, so that all you heard was a kind of background noise. Cria knew how to do it, but she'd long stopped practising it.

The headmen were glowing with success. Even Nawk, who was renowned for his heed and restraint, kept slipping into wide-speak and addressing everyone simultaneously.

It seemed that the silvers had been very free and foolish in their talk. They had actually wanted to give meanings away, not only pointing but drawing pictures. They had repeated their alien syllables many times over for the headmen to imitate.

'Space suit.'

'Plas-tic.'

'Glass-ss.'

'Friend-ship.'

'Pla-net.'

'Grav-i-ty.'

'Ree-search.'

'In-form-a-tion.'

The headmen recited the sounds again now, counting off their new acquisitions until they ran out of fingers. Then they turned to examine their own side of the exchange.

They had been very clever and careful. When they'd pointed to themselves, they hadn't spoken their names, only the word *us*. When they'd pointed to the sun, they'd only said *bright*. When they'd pointed to nearby trees and bushes, they'd only said *this plant* or *that plant*. Without actual dishonesty, they'd managed to make a minimal return. The tribe had received ten times more than it had given away. So much for so little! The headmen couldn't stop gloating.

But the mood changed when three members of Cria's family appeared on the edge of the common ground: Gleb, her grandfather and her eldest uncle. She was amazed that discussion in Little Talk had finished so quickly.

The look on the three faces was a portent of disaster. Cria didn't stay goggling for long. When her grandfather's gaze flicked warningly towards her, she dropped her eyes and became very busy with her work on the sill. She reversed direction, away from the common ground.

Her family didn't trust her, and soon the headmen wouldn't trust her. It was obvious she wouldn't be able to listen in when they started talking about her.

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The headmen began a discussion after hearing the report. First, though, they ordered Cria's grandfather, uncle and Gleb to sit in a row and form a screen. A screen between their family ground and the common ground – a screen against Cria herself!

A buzz ran round the families in the shelter. The females continued with their work, but now moving very quietly and apprehensively. A tense uneasy tone came into the Little Talk of the males. Everyone was waiting.

Then something even more extraordinary happened. When they had completed their discussion, the headmen rose and stepped across to the doorways of the family grounds. Gesturing wide-talk, they instructed all women above childbearing age to bring flails and assemble in the center of the shelter.

Cria was starting to get frightened. She had done wrong, she knew she would be punished. But beatings were always carried out by members of one's own family. This was beyond anything she could ever remember.

The flails were lengths of leather and wood, used to separate the grains from the husk of the segum plant. Each carrying a flail, the women went out into the common ground, all except Cria. Nawk addressed them in a low voice.

What was he saying? He spoke for a long time, but Cria caught only a few words: 'unnatural', 'destroy', 'get rid of it'. The women nodded.

Then Nawk drew back and signalled to Cria's grandfather, uncle and Gleb. The three males re-entered the family ground and began clapping their hands at Cria. They were shooing her out like a chicken!

She stared at them in surprise. Their expressions were less angry than horrified, less stern than fearful. The other males and children also began clapping and shooing. She jumped to her feet and rushed out into the common ground.

The women seized her by the elbows and threw her down flat on her back. They clustered around, flails raised as if for threshing. Her mother knelt over her, pulled back the gunnycloth to expose her belly.

'Scream,' she whispered. 'Loud as you can.'

Cria could hardly believe it. Never in her life had she heard her mother speak without channelling!

The flails descended – *swack! swack! swack! swack!* They were aimed towards her belly, yet without hitting her. The women deliberately directed the full force of their blows into the ground! *Swack! Swack! Swack! Swack!*

Cria couldn't understand. The blows continued to rain down. Then another woman knelt by her head – old Shess, from the Hrotr family.

'Make a noise,' she hissed. 'As though you're hurting.'

But Cria was dazed with wonder. 'Why this?' she asked. 'Why my belly?'

'Because you're with child.'

'No.'

'Yes. From the silver.'

'He never touched me.'

'The men know that. But he spoke to you. Nawk says it's enough. You let the silver put his words inside you. You received his alien seed, you'll give birth to an alien child. The men want it destroyed.'

'But that's –'

'And we don't. Now *scream*.'

Cria's head was in a whirl. She couldn't have been impregnated! There had been no penetration, no entering. It hadn't been like that, not inwards at all. How had it been?

She forgot to scream. The women started screaming for her, shrill anguished sounds as they whacked their flails on the ground. They formed a tight circle, shoulder to shoulder, so that the men couldn't see what was going on.

Cria tried to recall the moment when she had stood facing the silver on the path. She had seen his thin arched eyebrows, his grey eyes, his sharply delineated mouth. Then his mouth had moved to produce alien syllables, full of 't' and 'k' and 's' sounds. But although she could remember all of those details, her own experience was elusive, like a dream that had faded and sunk . . . just out of reach . . .

A harsh male voice broke in on her thoughts. She swivelled her eyes and saw Nawk's face peering in through the ring of women. He must have pushed forward to inspect. Now he was pointing at her scarcely marked belly. He was doing wide-speak to the women, ordering them to hit harder.

Cria had never heard him roar so furiously before. Not authority, only fury. It was obvious he intended to stay and watch the job done properly.

She closed her eyes and held her breath. The next blow landed in a white-hot stripe across her belly. Then another and another, crisscross, merging to a continuous rhythm of pain. She whimpered but didn't cry out. Tears seeped from under her eyelids.

Only pain, she told herself, it's only pain. They couldn't destroy her baby, because she wasn't with child. When the pain was over, she would be exactly the same as ever.

The pain even seemed to be fading. She was detaching herself from her body, as though the burning beaten flesh belonged to someone else. In a strange floating state, she cast back to what she'd been thinking before the pain. What had she been trying to remember?

Suddenly it returned, the experience with the silver. When she'd stood watching his face, listening to his alien syllables, full of 't' and 'k' and 's' sounds. She hadn't understood a thing – and yet, in another way, she had.

It was a different kind of meaning. Not contained in a word like a nut in a shell, in the way she'd always known, but spreading around the words like a cloud. And the meaning around the words was the place where his language came from.

Yes, a different kind of meaning . . . Pictures had formed in her head, pictures of many many people, all talking, laughing, chattering. A world of colorfully dressed people moving around, meeting up, talking together all the time. A world where everyone could speak to everyone without heed or restraint! Even female to female! An ocean of speech, lapping back and forth in a million tiny currents! So light, so fluent, so free!

Dimly, she recognized that the blows were still falling. But the pain was a long way away, while the experience in her memory was clear and vivid. In her mind she drifted in that glorious ocean, feeling the lap of the waves. She was on the verge of passing out.

It was then that she became aware of something inside herself. Something *other*, something from the silver. A not-self that she was harboring, sheltering, growing within. And they couldn't destroy it! They couldn't even reach it, they didn't know where to look!

She smiled at the thought.

You'll be safe, never fear. She spoke to it in her mind, so warm and close. *Your time will come. Never fear.*

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