

# The Word for World is Forest



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF URSULA K. LE GUIN

Ursula K. Le Guin was born in Berkeley, California, to anthropologist parents. After studying at Radcliffe College (present-day Harvard University) and Columbia University, she worked as a secretary and a French teacher and eventually as a full-time writer of science fiction. Although she was known throughout her life as “America’s greatest living science fiction writer,” she balked at being put in a box as a sci-fi writer and preferred to be known simply as a novelist. Nevertheless, her enduring influence on the genre inspired writers like David Mitchell (*Cloud Atlas*), Neil Gaiman (*American Gods*; *The Sandman*), Kelly Link (*Magic for Beginners*), and Jeff VanderMeer (*Annihilation*). Le Guin was responsible for revolutionizing the genre by incorporating literary, lyrical prose; Taoist influences; and themes of feminism, anarchism, and environmentalism into her many works. Today, her name is synonymous with using the “safe, sterile laboratory” of the future and fictional world in order to examine the nature of reality; the issues at the heart of the human condition; and the possibilities and dangers that humanity faces as it expands, changes, and seeks to spread its own influence.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although *The Word for World is Forest* is science fiction, Ursula K. Le Guin was inspired to write the novella because of the then-ongoing Vietnam War, which ended in 1975. Le Guin was upset by the United States’ intervention in Vietnam, and the colonists in *The Word for World is Forest* were partly inspired by U.S. soldiers. For instance, the colonists’ drug use throughout the novella, which disturbs the Athshean people, is a direct parallel to U.S. soldiers’ drug use during the Vietnam War, and the deforestation in Athshe parallels the deforestation in Vietnam (which was caused in part by Agent Orange, a chemical used by the U.S. military to clear vegetation for military operations). Le Guin was also deeply concerned with ecology, environmental issues, and ecofeminism during her lifetime. The state of Earth in *The Word for World is Forest* reflects Le Guin’s own concerns about the future of the planet, as Earth’s natural resources have been depleted, and species like deer are extinct.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*The Word for World is Forest* is part of Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Hainish Cycle,” a series of novels, novellas and short stories set in an alternate future where an interplanetary government

exists, which includes Terra (Earth). Guiding this new government is Hain, a peaceful human world; Le Guin’s work posits that human evolution on Earth was the result of Hain’s own colonization of Earth years before. (Le Guin herself denied the existence of a “cycle” of novels, since the stories don’t form a singular history of the world, but readers and critics link them due to their similar settings and themes). Other works within Le Guin’s Hainish cycle include *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Dispossessed* (1974), *Rocannon’s World* (1966), *Planet of Exile* (1966), and *City of Illusions* (1967). Le Guin’s literary influences included J.R.R. Tolkien, Victor Hugo, and Philip K. Dick—and, in turn, Le Guin influenced novelists such as Neil Gaiman and Margaret Atwood.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Word for World is Forest
- **Where Written:** Berkeley, California
- **When Published:** March 17, 1972
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Science Fiction Novella
- **Setting:** The fictional planet of Athshe (known to humans as World 41 and New Tahiti)
- **Climax:** Selver’s final confrontation with Captain Davidson
- **Antagonist:** Don Davidson
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Alien Encounters.** *The Word for World is Forest* was originally entitled “Little Green Men,” referencing the stereotypical portrayal of aliens in science fiction.

**Show Business.** Many have noted the similarities between *The Word for World is Forest* and the 2009 film *Avatar*. Le Guin later expressed her disdain for *Avatar*, as she believed that it “reversed” the novella’s premise by suggesting that violence and militarism was a solution rather than a problem.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Captain Don Davidson, the human leader of the Smith Camp on the “New Tahiti” colony—also known as the planet Athshe—starts his day thinking about a shipment of women coming to Centralville (New Tahiti’s headquarters) from planet Earth. He’s excited to “tame” New Tahiti, including its “creechie” (otherwise known as Athshean) natives, who work in the planet’s logging camps as slaves. Before heading to Central,

Davidson speaks with the ecologist Kees Van Sten, who's worried that the colonists' poaching will cause the planet to turn into Earth (also known as Terra), which is all cement now. Davidson also chats with the camp's foreman, Ok, who complains about how lazy the planet's three-foot-tall, furry "creechies" are. Davidson agrees: the creechies should be wiped out. He tells Ok about a creechie that attacked him in Central and wouldn't let up even as Davidson beat him.

Davidson visits Central, and when he returns to Smith via helicopter, he sees that the camp is burned and deserted. He runs into a group of creechies, including the creechie who attacked him. Claiming responsibility for the massacre, that creechie pins Davidson down, steals his **gun**, and bizarrely sings over him. He then lets Davidson escape to his helicopter, and Davidson drops bombs on Smith before returning to Central.

The Athshean who attacked Davidson, Selver, walks through the forest alone before running into a sleeping Athshean man, Coro Mena, who's called "Great Dreamer." Coro Mena sees Selver in his dream and takes him to his village, Cadast, where Selver shares his story: he was previously enslaved by the humans, and Davidson raped Selver's wife, Thele, who died during the assault. Selver tried to kill Davidson before the human Raj Lyubov broke up the fight. Selver later burned Smith and killed the humans there. When he saw Davidson again, he sang over him and let him go.

Coro Mena enters a dream-state to verify this information. His role as Great Dreamer is to translate what he sees in his dreams into reality, as the Athsheans live both in dream-time and world-time. The village's women then act on his observations. Coro Mena pronounces that Selver is a god, as he now knows what death is. Selver decides to gather other Athsheans to drive the humans out of their world. Lyubov taught Selver human ways, but Selver still doesn't know whether the "yumens" are even men, since they kill one another. Coro Mena sends Selver off, telling him that he saw Selver in his dreams prior to Selver's arrival, and that Selver will change their world.

Meanwhile, the anthropologist Raj Lyubov has a stress-induced migraine. He's been researching the Athsheans and believed they were nonviolent, but the attack at Smith proves him wrong. Commander Yung, a Terran leader who originally traveled to Athshe to transport the women, calls a meeting at Centralville to discuss the Smith massacre. Yung brings along two non-Terran humans: a Hainishman, Mr. Lepennon, and a Hairy Cetian, Mr. Or. Yung, Lepennon, and Or ask Davidson questions about the attack, and Lepennon and Or discover that the Athsheans are enslaved rather than voluntary laborers.

Lyubov speculates that the reason Selver attacked Davidson was personal—Davidson killed Selver's wife—and that the reason he let Davidson go this time was because Davidson laid in a position the Athsheans would see as surrender. The reason Selver sang is that this is a combat substitute for the

Athsheans. Yung then reveals that Lepennon and Or have decided to give the colony on Athshe an **ansible**, a new transmitter for instant communication between planets that will force the humans on Athshe (also known as World 41) to have oversight from Earth. This ansible comes from the League of Worlds, a new interstellar government; Lepennon and Or are emissaries. Yung tells the colonists that his ship will return in three years to pick them up, as World 41's colony status is in flux. Lyubov argues that the Athsheans can't last that long, as the natives are in danger and overlogging has damaged the planet. Before the meeting ends, Lyubov quietly asks Lepennon to tell the League to save the Athsheans.

As punishment for bombing the Athsheans immediately after the Smith attack, Davidson's superior, Colonel Dongh, sends Davidson to work at New Java Camp under Major Muhamed's supervision. Davidson is appalled at the fact that the men are following the new orders from the ansible, which include letting the Athsheans go. Planning to take over New Java from the by-the-book Muhamed, Davidson begins convincing the loggers that the creechies are dangerous, and a group of his converts help him to secretly carry out a raid on a creechie town.

On Colonel Dongh's orders, Lyubov goes to visit an Athshean village to ensure that the Athsheans aren't planning another attack. The Athsheans in the village treat Lyubov coldly, and he runs into Selver, who warns him to leave Central in two days. One of the Athsheans tells a distressed Lyubov that Selver is a god now.

Lyubov reminisces on his friendship with Selver, which began while Selver was a slave for Central's officers and an anthropological informant for Lyubov. Lyubov wanted to help Selver escape, but Selver couldn't leave his wife, so Lyubov arranged meetings between Selver and Thele instead. Davidson saw Thele leaving one night, which led to her assault. After Selver attacked Davidson, Lyubov stopped Davidson from killing him and dropped Selver off in another part of Athshe. Lyubov wonders what Selver's new god status means; he assumes it implies that Selver can introduce new information, such as murder, into his people's dreams. Lyubov chooses not to disclose any of his concerns in his report to Dongh, and two nights later, he wakes up to see Central on fire, including HQ (where the ansible was). His lack of surprise makes him realize that he's a traitor. He attempts to save a human woman from a burning building, but a wood beam knocks him down, and an Athshean slits the woman's throat. Wandering through the city, Selver finds a dying Lyubov, who tells Selver that the killing has to stop.

The Athsheans leave the male humans in Central alive and hold them prisoner. Selver meets with the ecologist Gosse and tells him that the attack on Smith was in retaliation for a recent raid on an Athshean village (Davidson's secret attack). Selver says that he'll free the humans if they agree to live in their logging camps until their ship brings them back to Terra in three years.

Gosse berates Selver for killing the human women, and Selver tells him that this was intentional: now, the humans can't breed. The next day, a bewildered Dongh meets with Selver and agrees to his terms.

Shortly after this meeting, Davidson goes rogue in New Java. After the humans agreed to surrender to the creechies, Davidson killed Muhamed and other traitorous loggers, and he's now defying orders to return to Central, as he hopes to wipe out the creechies himself. One night, a large army of creechies attack Davidson's camp, and Davidson escapes in a helicopter with his right-hand men, Aabi and Post. When Aabi insists on returning to Central, Davidson threatens him and causes Aabi to crash the helicopter in the forest. Creechies, including Selver, discover Davidson, and he assumes the surrender position. Selver tells him that he plans to isolate Davidson on an island, which is what Athsheans do when one of their own goes insane. He and Davidson are both gods, Selver says: Davidson taught Selver to kill, and Selver will teach him the opposite.

Three years later, Commander Yung's ship returns to Athshe, and he tells Selver that the humans will leave the planet and never return. Selver gives Lyubov's research to Lepennon, who asks Selver whether the Athsheans have stopped killing entirely—specifically, he wants to know whether the Athsheans are now killing one another. Selver tells him that sometimes gods change the way things are, and that there's no point in pretending that the Athsheans don't know how to murder now. The world may return to how it was before the humans came, but Selver doesn't think it will.

soldiers. His theory is that men aren't men unless they murder others, and he acts on this code by constantly beating up Athsheans. After the colonists on World 41 agree to peace with the Athsheans, Davidson goes rogue, isolating himself and a handful of (mostly white) men and burning Athshean towns. The Athsheans attack Davidson's settlement in retaliation, and although Davidson and a few others make it out on helicopter, Davidson's helicopter crashes and he once again comes face-to-face with Selver. Selver credits Davidson with teaching him how to kill and says that in return, he'll teach Davidson how *not* to kill—instead of murdering Davidson, Selver isolates him on an over-logged island. Even as the Athsheans lead Davidson away by force, he imagines that he could hurt them if he wanted, suggesting that his violent feelings toward the Athsheans haven't changed. In fact, Davidson's fear of the Athsheans only increases his deep hatred, which suggests that violence and prejudice don't solve anything—they only cause more of the same.

**Selver Thele** – Selver Thele is a native inhabitant of Athshe, a former friend of Raj Lyubov, and an enemy of Don Davidson. After humans overtake his village, three officers (including Benton) enslave Selver, renaming him Sam. He adapts to the human workday more easily than his peers, as Athsheans typically dream throughout the day and Selver is able to stop dreaming temporarily. One night, Davidson rapes Selver's wife, Thele. Thele dies during this assault, and Selver attacks Davidson to get revenge, intending to kill him. This is the first time any Athshean attacks a human, as the Athsheans are a nonviolent species. Lyubov—who became friends with Selver after Selver helped him with his anthropological research—prevents Davidson and Selver from killing each other and drops Selver off with relatives. But Selver eventually returns to his village with an army of Athsheans, burning the camp and killing every human but Davidson, who had left the village. When Davidson comes back, Selver steals his **gun** and lets him escape. Selver then returns to his people, who tell him that he's become a god, as he's introduced killing to the Athshean people. No longer able to dream, and deeply unhappy, Selver decides that the humans have to be driven out of Athshe, or else they'll wipe out Selver's people and destroy their forests. The Athsheans attack another human camp, this time killing women as well as men in order to prevent the colonists from breeding. The humans later blame Selver for this atrocity, which also led to Lyubov's death, but Selver can't understand guilt and believes he acted realistically. In this way, his character represents the idea that violence can be both morally wrong and practically necessary at the same time. After Davidson continues to attack the Athsheans, Selver's people burn Davidson's camp as well. Selver confronts Davidson one final time, refusing to kill Davidson as Davidson wants him to. Throughout the novella, Selver proves himself to be empathetic but also deeply pragmatic. He doesn't enjoy hurting humans, apart from Davidson, but he knows that doing so is necessary



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Don Davidson** – Don Davidson is an army captain stationed on World 41, or “New Tahiti.” He's the enemy of Selver Thele, a native Athshean (or “creechie”), and the owner of Ben, an enslaved Athshean. Davidson, the novella's central antagonist, believes that creechies are an abomination and hopes to wipe them out, a sentiment he shares with fellow soldiers like Colonel Dongh, even though Davidson's methods are far more violent. Davidson has a long history with Selver: Davidson killed Selver's wife, Thele, while raping her, and afterward, Selver attempted to kill Davidson, going against his people's code of nonviolence. Raj Lyubov broke up the fight, which caused a permanent rift between Davidson and Lyubov, who doesn't agree with Davidson's anti-creechie sentiments. Davidson later reencounters Selver when Selver's people burn Davidson's camp—but although Selver steals Davidson's **gun**, he allows Davidson to escape unharmed. Throughout the novella, Davidson prides himself on his staunch masculinity and his whiteness, frequently demeaning both women and non-white

to the survival of his people. However, he later states that his world will never be the same as a result of this violence, something that clearly saddens him.

**Raj Lyubov** – Raj Lyubov is an anthropologist stationed on World 41, a former friend of Selver Thele, and an enemy of Don Davidson. Unlike other humans, Lyubov is sympathetic to the Athsheans' plight and wants to save their species from the humans' enslavement and over-use of natural resources. He eventually becomes friends with the enslaved Selver Thele and arranges meetings between Selver and Selver's wife, Thele. However, Davidson sexually assaults Thele, which kills her, leading to a confrontation between Selver and Davidson. Lyubov prevents Davidson from killing Selver, and Davidson resents him for this. Lyubov is later caught in the crossfire between humans and Athsheans, as the humans blame Lyubov for the Athsheans' attacks (Lyubov's research on the Athsheans claimed that they were nonviolent). Lyubov sacrifices his credibility to continue standing up for the Athsheans, a decision that gives him migraines, which hint at his guilt and inner conflict. Lyubov is concerned both about the Athsheans' survival and about what murder will do to Athshean society, as most Athsheans have never killed before. He's one of very few humans to see the Athsheans as men, but he also realizes that this makes their society vulnerable to the same vices as his own. After the humans free the Athsheans they've enslaved, Lyubov wants things to return to normal with Selver but finds that they can't—when the two of them reencounter each other, Selver warns Lyubov to leave the human headquarters. Lyubov elects not to tell the humans about Selver's coldness, and as a result, the humans are unprepared for the Athsheans' next attack on their camp. Though Selver told his people to avoid burning Lyubov's bungalow, Lyubov is injured during this attack. Selver finds him just before he dies, and Lyubov tells Selver that the Athsheans must stop killing. His spirit later appears in Selver's dreams, still complaining of migraines, which implies that his concern about the Athsheans hasn't abated. Selver saves Lyubov's work and gives it to the humans to preserve as they return to Earth, but he notes at the end of the novella that Lyubov's spirit will always remain with him, just like the Athsheans' capacity for murder will remain with them.

**Mr. Lepennon** – Mr. Lepennon is a Hainishman, which is a form of non-Terran (non-Earth-based) human. Along with Mr. Or, he is an emissary for the newly-formed League of Worlds and becomes an acquaintance of Raj Lyubov during his time on World 41, which he visits on Commander Yung's ship. Lepennon has white skin, and he's deeply "civilized" and clean-cut; the novella implies that this dignity is characteristic of the Hainish. Lepennon respects Lyubov's anthropological research and is excited to learn more about the native Athsheans, which puts him at odds with the human colonists, who largely dislike the Athshean people. Indeed, human colonists like Davidson seem to distrust Lepennon and Or for their "humanoid" status.

Lepennon is horrified to learn that the humans have enslaved the Athsheans, which demonstrates his empathy, though he doesn't interfere directly with the events on World 41 and his interest seems to be largely scientific. Lepennon and Or decide to give the colony on World 41 an **ansible** to communicate directly with their government, which is a choice they make partly due to their distrust of the colonists. At one point, Lyubov directly asks Lepennon to convince the League of Worlds to help the Athsheans. While Lepennon doesn't respond directly, the novella implies that he takes some action, as World 41 eventually loses its colony status. At the end of the novella, Selver gives Lyubov's research to Lepennon, and Lepennon speaks with Selver about the Athsheans' new capacity for violence, urging Selver not to let his people become killers. Like Lyubov, Lepennon is kind to the Athsheans, but his kindness only unsettles Selver.

**Colonel Dongh** – Colonel Dongh is the leader of the human colony in World 41 (or New Tahiti) and Don Davidson's direct superior. Colonel Dongh doesn't like the native Athsheans, believing that they're inferior to humans and undeserving of respect. As a result, he allows his men to enslave Athsheans, claiming that the Athsheans are a volunteer labor force. But although Dongh might bend the rules, and although he's suspicious of the League of Worlds, he accepts the new orders from Terra (Earth) to release the Athshean people and to avoid any counterattack. After the Athsheans take over Centralville, Dongh also accepts Selver's neutrality terms, even as he grows steadily weaker in the Athsheans' custody. While Dongh is clearly unhappy that the humans have to surrender their weapons to the Athsheans, he also proves himself to be pragmatic, as he knows that the humans are outnumbered by the Athsheans. This angers Davidson, who sees Dongh's capitulation as weak, and leads to a split between the two of them. Dongh eventually tells the Athsheans that he bears no responsibility for Davidson's actions, which leads the Athsheans to capture Davidson and isolate him.

**Mr. Or** – Mr. Or is a Hairy Cetian, a form of non-Terran (or Earth-based) human that is characteristically gray and stocky-looking. Along with Mr. Lepennon, Mr. Or is an emissary for the League of Worlds, and Commander Yung brings him to a meeting to discuss World 41's colony status and the massacre at Smith Camp. Lyubov speculates that Yung may not want Or and Lepennon at this meeting, as Or is especially concerned about the treatment of the Athshean natives. Or is shown to be dry-witted, confrontational, and "sour," a sharp contrast to Lepennon's polite pleasantness, and he even goes so far as to insult the colonists by implying that they haven't thought through their relationship to the Athsheans. Raj Lyubov notes that this is the greatest insult for a Cetian, as they are a deeply analytical and careful people. Lepennon and Or decide to leave their **ansible**, or transmitter, on World 41 in part due to their mounting distrust of the colonists.

**Commander Yung** – Commander Yung is the superior of the colonists on World 41 and the leader of the *Shackleton* spaceship, which makes the long journey from Earth to World 41 immediately before the massacre at Smith Camp. Raj Lyubov speculates about Yung’s intentions during a meeting, as Yung brings two League of Worlds emissaries with him, and Lyubov wonders whether Yung wanted them to be there or was forced to bring them. Yung’s intentions toward Terra’s (Earth’s) colonies are somewhat unclear, as Lyubov notes that Yung has witnessed the “creechie-pens” where native Athsheans are held captive, yet Yung also discusses the possibility of the colonists leaving World 41 entirely. Later in the novella, the colonists do leave, and Commander Yung speaks directly to Selver about this decision. Yung appears empathetic to Selver and interested in Selver’s status among the Athsheans, but it remains unclear whether or not Yung played a direct role in ending World 41’s colonization.

**Gosse** – Gosse is an ecologist working on World 41 and living in Centralville. He and Raj Lyubov work closely together but eventually develop an antagonistic relationship, as Gosse doesn’t see the same danger in overlogging that Lyubov does, nor does he believe that the Athsheans need to be saved from extinction. At one point, Gosse berates Lyubov for helping Selver and tells him that it’s human nature to destroy other worlds. He then wonders why Lyubov came to World 41 at all if he wasn’t prepared to see the Athsheans wiped out. This leads Lyubov to distrust Gosse, something that hurts Gosse’s feelings, as he’d wanted to be a “father-figure” to Lyubov. After the massacre at Central, Gosse speaks on behalf of an injured Colonel Dongh and interacts directly with Selver, whom he blames for the deaths of Central’s men and women. Gosse is terse with Selver and clearly distrusts the Athsheans, though his hatred isn’t as deep as Don Davidson’s or even Dongh’s.

**Coro Mena** – Coro Mena is an elderly Athshean, Ebor Dendep’s brother, and a “Great Dreamer” who lives in the village of Cadast. He welcomes Selver to Cadast after the massacre at Smith Camp. When Coro Mena first meets Selver, he claims to have previously met him in dreams. Later, Selver reveals what happened at Smith Camp and the circumstances of the Athsheans’ enslavement, and Coro Mena is one of few Athsheans to understand both that he’s telling the truth and that the planet will never be the same as a result. Coro Mena tells Selver that Selver did what was necessary by killing the humans and freeing the slaves; but it was also the wrong thing to do, since it involved murder. Acting in his role as Great Dreamer, which involves interpreting dreams, Coro Mena pronounces that Selver is now a god unlike any other because he has experienced death. Coro Mena later walks Selver out of Cadast to begin his journey back to Central, and he tells Selver that Selver’s interactions with the humans will fundamentally change things for the Athsheans. Coro Mena cares deeply for Selver and appears clear-headed about the danger humans

pose to Athshe.

**Ebor Dendep** – Ebor Dendep is an Athshean, Coro Mena’s sister, and the Headwoman of Cadast, the village that Selver stays in after the Smith Camp massacre. Ebor Dendep is extremely practical, and after Selver’s arrival, she expresses concern that Selver was followed by humans. Ebor Dendep’s character demonstrates the role of women in Athshean society, which is vastly different from the role of women in human society. As Headwoman, it’s Ebor Dendep’s responsibility to decide whether the pronouncements of “Great Dreamers” (Athshean men who interpret dreams) should be carried out. After Coro Mena pronounces that Selver is now a god, Ebor Dendep immediately acts on this information: she gets the village ready to evacuate, sends Athsheans to monitor human activity, and sends messengers to spread Selver’s story. When Selver tells Ebor Dendep that the humans have not yet sent all their women to World 41, as they’re waiting for the world to be comfortable for them, Ebor Dendep scoffs and says that it would have been better if they’d sent the women first. The novella implies that role of women in human society is much more subservient, whereas Ebor Dendep acts as an important political figure in Athshean society.

**Juju Sereng** – Juju Sereng is a human colonist and engineer who works at World 41’s HQ in Centralville and is friends with Don Davidson. Given his engineering background, Sereng is interested in the workings of the **ansible** that Mr. Lepennon and Mr. Or bring to World 41. After Davidson goes rogue and isolates himself and a handful of men on New Java, Juju is the one to communicate directly with Davidson over the radio. He expresses a disdain for the native Athsheans, which Davidson shares, but also suggests that Davidson is creating danger for the colonists by refusing to comply with the Athsheans’ neutrality terms. Juju does not agree with Davidson when Davidson suggests that he and his men can take on the Athsheans singlehandedly, suggesting that Juju is a reasonable man. Davidson’s decision ultimately leads to his own capture and imprisonment on Dump Island, and Juju likely remains in Centralville until the *Shackleton* returns to pick up the colonists.

**Ben** – Ben is a native Athshean and was formerly enslaved by Don Davidson. Davidson guesses that Ben is older than other “creechies” due to his white fur (as Athsheans are normally green). Ben is lethargic in Davidson’s presence, which readers later learn is due to the Athsheans’ need to dream throughout the day, something Davidson knows nothing about. Davidson treats Ben disrespectfully, though he’s given up on trying to “break” Ben in. Eventually, Ben helps Selver and his fellow Athsheans burn Davidson’s camp with the intention of killing Davidson as well. When Davidson returns to camp, he’s confronted by a group of Athsheans that includes Selver and Ben.

**Thele** – Thele was a native Athshean and Selver’s wife; she was enslaved in Centralville. Before the start of the novella, Don

Davidson raped Thele, and she died during the assault; the novella suggests that she either died due to the size difference between her and Davidson, or she simply chose to stop living, something Athsheans have the ability do. Prior to the assault, Selver had remained enslaved at Smith so that he could stay close to Thele, whom Lyubov couldn't manage to free. Thele's death serves as the impetus for the novella's events, because after Thele dies, Selver attacks Davidson, intending to kill him. This is the first act of violence an Athshean commits against a human, and Selver's later attack on Smith camp is also an act of revenge, as Selver tells Davidson that Thele told him to burn the camp (implying that Selver saw Thele in his dreams). Selver continues to dream of Thele at the end of the novella, but these dreams are pleasant rather than violent.

**Major Muhamed** – Major Muhamed runs New Java camp, the colony outpost that Don Davidson is sent to as punishment after his unauthorized air raid on the Athsheans. Davidson describes Muhamed as a by-the-book leader, and his camp is well-organized with regulated logging—a sharp contrast to Davidson's own camp, Smith, which flouted rules and was eventually burned by the Athsheans. Davidson notes that Muhamed doesn't like the new orders from HQ, which include a policy of nonviolence against the Athsheans, but he follows them to the letter and expects those in New Java to do the same. Davidson dislikes him due to his strictness, his distrust of Davidson (whom he sees as unreliable), and his race. (Davidson distrusts all non-white soldiers and Muhamed is an “asiatiform,” meaning he's of Asian descent). Davidson begins to carry out raids on Athsheans unbeknownst to Muhamed, and he eventually commandeers New Java camp and kills Muhamed and the other non-white soldiers. The novella implies that Muhamed's organization of New Java was part of what allowed Davidson to take command easily, as he was able to sow distrust of Muhamed and the Athsheans among all levels of Muhamed's operation.

**Benton** – Benton is an officer on World 41 and was one of three officers who previously enslaved Selver. Benton is hot-headed and hates the native Athsheans—when he and Selver reencounter each other after the massacre at Centralville, Selver notes that the Athsheans are frightened to be around Benton because he used to publicly castrate them as punishment. Benton is one of the humans involved in the final peace talk with Selver, but Colonel Dongh refuses to let Benton speak on his behalf due to his coarseness. Benton is angry that the Athsheans are asking the humans to surrender their helicopters and weapons, and he accuses Raj Lyubov (who is already dead) of betraying the humans. However, Benton eventually goes along with Colonel Dongh's decision to surrender the weapons to the Athsheans, unlike Don Davidson, who hates the Athsheans just as much as Benton but chooses to go rogue and fight them rather than surrender.

**Aabi** – Aabi is one of the humans working at New Java Camp,

and after Don Davidson goes rogue and takes over New Java, Aabi assists him by building landmines to keep the native Athsheans out. Although Aabi is loyal to Davidson and presumably dislikes the Athsheans, he also questions Davidson's rasher decisions, such as his decision to steal Centralville's helicopters. Aabi seems to want to return to the men at Central, and the novella implies that Davidson isn't sharing his full intentions with Aabi and his other loyal men, including Post. After the Athsheans attack New Java, Aabi attempts to fly Davidson and Post back to Central in a helicopter, but Davidson threatens him with a gun and forces him to circle around New Java instead. Davidson also wants Aabi to bomb New Java as they fly, but Aabi refuses, as some of their own men could be prisoners. Davidson then switches off the hopper's lights and Aabi loses control of the helicopter, causing it to plunge into the trees. Aabi dies, likely due to falling out of the hopper (or in an unseen confrontation with an Athshean).

**Post** – Post is a logging-crew foreman working at New Java Camp and remains loyal to Don Davidson after Davidson takes over New Java. Post doesn't openly question Davidson as much as Aabi, Davidson's other right-hand man, does. However, after Athsheans attack New Java and Aabi, Post, and Davidson are in a helicopter together, Post agrees with Aabi that the three of them should return to Central. Davidson knocks Post out with his gun in retaliation for ganging up on him, and Post likely dies when the helicopter crashes.

**Sherrar** – Sherrar is the Athshean cousin of the headwoman in Tuntar, the village that Raj Lyubov visits after the Athsheans' attack on Smith Camp. Lyubov had visited the village previously and met Sherrar then, but she's unaccommodating during his final visit and tries to distract him from the goings-on at the Men's Lodge by offering to take him to see the fishing nets. After Lyubov runs into Selver at Tuntar, Sherrar reveals that Selver is now a god. When Lyubov leaves Tuntar, Sherrar is visibly glad to be rid of him, and Lyubov reflects on how funny-looking she appears as she runs away. Readers later discover that the Athsheans were planning an attack on Centralville at this time, which was likely why Sherrar wanted to keep Lyubov away from the Lodge.

**Reswan** – Reswan is a native Athshean and one of Selver's fellow leaders during the attack on Centralville. Reswan is a pragmatic person and ensures that the humans' radios are destroyed after the attack so that they can't communicate with their fellow colonists, as he's particularly worried about aerial attacks. Reswan can't speak much English and communicates with the humans using words he picked up from them. He eventually lets the human prisoners keep a radio dropped by parachute after confirming that it isn't a weapon.

**Tubab** – Tubab, also known as “Old Tubab,” is an Athshean and a “Great Dreamer” of Tuntar, the village that Raj Lyubov visits after the massacre at Smith Camp. Tubab had previously been

an anthropological informant of Lyubov's, but when Lyubov visits Tuntar after the massacre, Tubab does not speak with him or even greet him. Readers later learn that at the time, the Athsheans were planning another attack, this time on Central, which explains Tubab's cold reception of Lyubov. Tubab speaks to Selver after this attack and after Selver negotiates with the humans, telling Selver that the humans appear insane to him. He also tells Selver that the reason Selver can no longer dream effectively is that he went without dreams for too long.

**Torber** – Torber is an Athshean healer who lives in the forest village of Cadast, where Selver stays after the Athshean attack on Smith Camp. Torber works closely with Coro Mena at the village's Lodge, and both of them are confused by Selver's disheveled appearance and by Don Davidson's **gun**, which Selver carries with him. Torber helps to heal the injured Selver and seems distressed by his story about the humans, insisting that such horrible things don't happen in real life (a notion that Coro Mena contradicts).

**Kees Van Sten** – Kees Van Sten is an ecologist working in Smith Camp prior to its collapse; he greatly dislikes Don Davidson. At the start of the novella, Kees speaks to Davidson and expresses frustration at the fact that the colonists are hunting red deer, which is forbidden under martial law. Davidson doesn't see the point in enforcing this rule, as he believes that the colonists need hobbies, but Kees insists that deer are endangered—in fact, there are no deer left on Earth. Deeply concerned about World 41's ecological future, Kees threatens to report Davidson, which doesn't ruffle Davidson at all. Kees also expresses concern that World 41 will turn into another version of Earth, which is all cement. Not long after this conversation, Kees dies during the Athsheans' attack on Smith Camp.

**Oknanawi Nabo** – Oknanawi Nabo, whom Don Davidson refers to as "Ok," is a dark-skinned officer working as a foreman in Smith Camp prior to the Athsheans' attack on Smith. Ok is in charge of the Athshean slaves in the mill, and in a conversation with Davidson, Ok expresses his frustration with the Athshean work ethic. Davidson realizes that Ok does not want to hurt the native Athsheans because they're much smaller than him, which demonstrates that Ok might have slightly more empathy than some of his fellow colonists. However, Ok does dislike the Athsheans, as they creep him out. The Athsheans kill Ok during their attack on Smith, and Davidson later notes that Ok's body had an arrow in each eye.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Temba** One of Captain Davidson's right-hand men.

## TERMS

**Asiatiform** – Asiatiform is a term used to refer to humans of Asian descent. Because **Don Davidson** (who's known for

discriminating against other races and species) is the only human to use this term, the novella implies that it's derogatory.

**Athshe/World 41/New Tahiti** – Athshe is the name of the planet that Terran colonists inhabit for the duration of the novella. Its native inhabitants are the Athsheans. Human colonists refer to the planet either as "World 41," which is its officially designated name, or as "New Tahiti," which the novella implies is an informal and derogatory designation. Most of Athshe is in forest, and the rest of the planet is water interspersed with isolated islands.

**Athshean** – Athshean is the official name for the inhabitants of Athshe. This term is used by the anthropologist **Raj Lyubov**, whereas other colonists disrespectfully refer to the Athsheans as "creechies."

**Cetian** – Cetian is a term used to refer to a race of non-Terran humans. In the novella, **Mr. Or** is Cetian and accompanies **Mr. Lepennon** to oversee the colony on World 41. Cetians resemble Terran humans but are stockier and have gray skin. The novella suggests that the Cetians are less polite than the Hainish and are also skilled inventors, responsible for the creation of the **ansible**.

**Creechie** – Creechie is a derogatory term for the native inhabitants of Athshe, who are otherwise known as Athsheans. The slur is largely used by human soldiers like **Don Davidson**, who dislike the Athsheans and want to harm them.

**Euraf** – Euraf is a term used to refer to humans of European descent. This term is mostly used by **Don Davidson**, who often derides non-white soldiers.

**Hainish/Hainishman** – Hainish is a term used to refer to a human from Hain. In the novella, **Mr. Lepennon** is Hainish and comes to oversee the colony on World 41. The novella implies that the Hainish are refined and civilized, and that their civilization is an old one—apparently, they once colonized Earth. In Ursula Le Guin's "Hainish Cycle" (an unofficial book series that includes *The Word for World is Forest*), the Hainish have colonized most other planets and now oversee an "interstellar supergovernment." The Hainish somewhat resemble Terran humans in appearance, but they have white skin.

**Terra** – Terra is another term for planet Earth. Humans from Terra are called Terrans.

**Terran** – Terran is a term for humans from Terra (Earth), while humans from other planets are non-Terran humans.

**Yumen** – Yumen is the Athsheans' word for "human."



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have

a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## VIOLENCE, WAR, AND COLONIZATION

*The Word for World is Forest* is set in a future in which Terra (planet Earth) has colonized various planets to mine their natural resources. On World 41, known to Terrans (Earth-based humans) as New Tahiti, the Terrans have enslaved native inhabitants called Athsheans and forced them to log wood. But eventually, the Athsheans—who were previously a nonviolent species—fight back against the colonists by destroying their weaponry and killing both men and women. The Athsheans succeed in driving out the Terrans, a retaliation that’s necessary for the Athsheans’ survival but also damaging for them—it means that the Athsheans now know how to hurt one another, and their people can no longer remain nonviolent. By presenting this complicated outcome, the novella suggests that violence and war are zero-sum games. Furthermore, the existence of violence always generates more violence, whether it’s justified or not.

From the start, the novella demonstrates that the humans’ violence is what forces the Athsheans to become violent. The Athsheans are ordinarily a nonviolent species with substitutes for physical combat, and the novella implies that violence against one another is unfathomable to them—in fact, if any member of society *does* become violent, they’re immediately isolated on an island. However, the Athsheans are *capable* of violence, as young Athsheans sometimes wrestle before learning alternatives. This implies that the reason the Athsheans are peaceful isn’t because they’re fundamentally different from humans in this way, but because they’ve made a conscious decision to form a nonviolent society. Eventually, one of the humans on New Tahiti, Captain Davidson, models violence for the Athsheans when he rapes and kills an Athshean woman named Thele. Although the humans were violent toward the Athsheans before Thele’s death, this especially egregious act of violence prompts Thele’s husband, Selver, to try to kill Davidson. In this way, Davidson’s violence against Thele directly causes Selver’s violence against Davidson, which the novella implies is the first Athshean attack on a human. The Athsheans’ violence toward humans continues after Selver’s first attack on Davidson, as the Athsheans want to drive the humans out of World 41. But even though the Athsheans have a specific goal, their attacks are usually retaliation rather than blind aggression. For instance, the Athsheans burn down Centralville, the human city, after Davidson goes rogue and raids an Athshean village, and they attack Davidson’s later hideout, New Java, after Davidson bombs their forest. In both of these cases, Davidson’s attacks are what prompt the Athsheans’ attacks—their violence is modeled on his.

The Athsheans’ violence is ultimately successful, which proves that it was necessary—their goal of driving out the humans

couldn’t have been accomplished in any other way. Raj Lyubov, a human anthropologist living on New Tahiti, frequently spoke out against the humans’ treatment of the Athsheans before the Athsheans became violent. Not only did no one listen to his protests, but his written documentation of the Athsheans’ enslavement never even reached planet Earth. Clearly, the humans were never planning to let the enslaved Athshean go, and no diplomacy would convince them. In the end, the humans only remove their weaponry, let their slaves go, and isolate themselves from the Athsheans after they see the damage that the Athsheans can do. The humans always knew that they were outnumbered by the Athsheans, but they never thought of the Athsheans as a threat until they realized they were capable of mass violence.

However, the Athsheans’ violence is also permanently damaging to their society, even though it was necessary because of the humans’ violence. The Athsheans spend large chunks of their time in dream states, and their dreams are often shared across large distances. After the attacks on humans begin, Selver guesses that many of his people are dreaming of burning cities and won’t be able to stop until the humans leave the planet. Meanwhile, Selver himself can’t control his dreams anymore (which the Athsheans can normally do), as many of his dreams are violent fantasies. Coro Mena, an elderly Athshean who’s referred to as “Great Dreamer,” tells Selver that this damage could be permanent. The humans’ violence—and the Athsheans’ violence in response—will forever change Athshean society. He tells Selver that Selver did what he *had* to do by attacking the humans, but Coro Mena also notes that it was the *wrong* thing to do, since it involved murder. In other words, Selver’s violence was necessary, but that necessity doesn’t make it morally right, and his choice will have lasting consequences. At the end of the novella, the humans are preparing to leave World 41 and head back to Terra after three years of neutrality with the Athsheans. Lepennon, a non-Terran human, asks Selver whether the Athsheans have begun to hurt and kill one another, even though they stopped killing humans. Though Selver doesn’t answer Lepennon directly, he tells him that the Athsheans’ world won’t return to what it was—implying that the Athsheans *have* become violent. Much like the humans’ violence initially spurred the Athsheans to attack, the Athsheans’ violence continues to generate more violence. This suggests that even when necessary, violence and war are cyclical and produce no clear winners.



## NATURE AND ECOLOGY

In *The World for World is Forest*, Terrans (Earth-based humans) have colonized various planets to exploit their natural resources. On World 41 (known as Athshe to its native population, the Athsheans), Terrans are logging the forests for wood to send back to Earth. Despite the fact that wood no longer exists on Terra (Earth),



presumably due to over-logging, most of the humans on World 41—even the ecologists—believe that World 41’s natural resources are expendable. But to the Athsheans, the forest is not a resource but a home and way of life: their society lives in and around trees, and their culture and customs are often compared to tree growth. Humans in the novella believe that they can separate themselves from nature and treat natural resources as disposable, but the Athsheans’ existence proves that this isn’t true. Rather, the book suggests that nature is not an expendable resource, and that the destruction of nature is detrimental to people.

At first, most humans in the novella believe both that nature is a commodity separate from their own identity, and that nature is something to tame rather than respect. For instance, hunting has been banned on Athshe and isn’t necessary for the humans’ survival on the planet, but loggers in Captain Davidson’s camp continue to hunt deer for sport. Even though deer are already extinct on Terra, the humans refuse to respect the wildlife in Athshe. In fact, Davidson goes so far as to refer to hunting as a necessary “hobby” for his bored men. The humans also over-log Athshe for financial gain. At the start of the novella, one of the planet’s islands, which the humans call “Dump Island,” has eroded due to over-logging—wanting maximum wood, the humans didn’t leave enough trees standing, which would have been necessary to maintain the land. But even after this erosion, one of the colony’s ecologists, Gosse, insists that the humans’ logging plan is a sound one and shouldn’t be rethought. Meanwhile, humans like Captain Davidson view the landscape in Athshe as a hindrance. Davidson frequently comments on the fact that the wild nature in Athshe slows men’s reflexes by distracting them, and he also notes that the planet has to be “tamed.” Rather than respecting the wildness of Athshe, Davidson wants to control it, and his people view that control as beneficial to them.

But the Athsheans’ existence proves that nature directly impacts people, regardless of their species. The Athsheans live in harmony with the forest, and their lives are inextricable from the nature that surrounds them: Athshean homes are built into the roots of trees, and their people are defined by the trees in their area. (Selver, one of the novella’s protagonists, belongs to the “Ash” people.) At one point, the human anthropologist Raj Lyubov reveals that the Athshean word for “world” is also their word for “forest” (hence the title of the novella), which speaks to the interconnectedness of Athshean society and nature. Beyond their society’s structure, Athsheans’ customs and culture are also tied to nature. They spend large chunks of their day in a dream state, and their dreaming is frequently compared to tree growth. When Selver became unable to dream after experiencing violence, he worries that he was “cut off from his roots”—and after Selver introduces this violence to his people, Lyubov notes that Selver has changed “from the root.” In other words, Athsheans’ lives are so intertwined with

the forest that any violence against them is likened to violence against nature.

Ultimately, the humans’ insistence on treating nature as a harvestable resource proves self-destructive, both on Terra and on Athshe. Athshe’s future is foretold at the very start of the novella, as an angry ecologist, Kees Van Sten, chastises Davidson for helping to turn Athshe into another planet Earth, which is now a “desert of cement.” This comment suggests that Earth’s ecosystem has been destroyed not due to any natural disaster but rather because of human greed—the same greed that now encroaches on Athshe and causes humans to over-log the planet. Ultimately, the humans’ greed in Athshe leads to the Athsheans’ retaliation against them. Even after the humans free the Athsheans whom they’ve enslaved, Selver continues to attack their camps, partly because he’s afraid they’ll wipe out the Athsheans and partly because he’s afraid they’ll cut down all the trees. Ironically, the contrast between the Athsheans’ keen understanding of their land and the humans’ comparative cluelessness is what enables the Athsheans to attack the humans more effectively. After Davidson goes rogue and isolates himself in New Java Camp, an army of Athsheans reaches New Java’s perimeter unseen, likely because they’re able to camouflage within trees. At the end of the novella, the humans are left to stew in their own ecological destruction: the majority of humans are isolated in their logging camp, and Davidson is exiled to the eroded Dump Island. The novella invites readers to view these endings as a fitting punishment, as the humans are literally surrounded by the consequences of their own greed and disrespect for nature.



## COMMUNICATION AND TRANSLATION

Despite the fact that both the Terrans (Earth-based humans) and Athsheans are people, they speak different languages and have different customs.

This means that most of the time, they can’t or won’t communicate. But two characters—the formerly enslaved Athshean Selver Thele and the Terran anthropologist Raj Lyubov—are able to share their cultures with each other and translate their respective languages. Later in the novella, Selver’s people declare that he’s a god, which in Athshean culture means that Selver has introduced new ideas into his otherwise-stable society, a process the Athsheans view as a form of translation. In this case, Selver has “translated” the humans’ violence in order to teach the Athsheans how to kill humans. This process has consequences, as Selver grows isolated from his society. And while Lyubov’s ties to the Athsheans are crucial for the Athsheans’ survival, they also lead other humans to ostracize him and eventually cause the humans’ downfall. With these outcomes, the novella suggests that genuine communication between people is necessary but demands sacrifice, as the process of “translating” another culture can isolate someone from their own.

From the start of the novella, Lyubov and Selver's communication is shown to be necessary in order to alter their stagnant societies. While Selver is enslaved by humans, he works as Lyubov's anthropological informant, teaching Lyubov about Athshean sleeping patterns and culture. Lyubov's unique understanding of Athshean society leads him to become an advocate for the Athsheans. While Lyubov's defense of the Athsheans doesn't have any short-term effects, the novella suggests that it may be part of what leads the interstellar government, or "League of Worlds," to remove the human colony from the Athsheans' planet, Athshe. Meanwhile, Selver's communication with Lyubov helps him understand both who the humans are and why they're on Athshe, which none of the Athsheans previously understood. Selver knows that the humans want Athshe's wood, which leads Selver and his normally nonviolent people to retaliate violently against the humans, fearful that the planet's forest life will otherwise disappear. If Selver didn't understand the humans' goals because of Lyubov, he might not have introduced violence to his nonviolent society, which was necessary for the Athsheans to defend themselves.

However, Selver and Lyubov's communication also has demonstrable consequences for Selver and the Athsheans, no matter how necessary that communication is. For instance, Selver's sense of self is fundamentally altered by his knowledge of human society and humans' violence, and he's no longer able to dream in the same way other Athsheans do. Eventually, Selver tells Lyubov that he wishes they'd never known each other, demonstrating the impact Selver's friendship with Lyubov had on Selver's selfhood. More broadly, Athshean society is also impacted by Selver's connection with Lyubov. Selver's decision to retaliate against the humans (which Lyubov's information partly prompted) transforms the Athsheans into a violent people. Lyubov later worries that Selver has translated the worst parts of human society for his people and has learned to speak the humans' figurative "language" of violence rather than his own.

Lyubov is also irrevocably altered by his ability to communicate with Selver, which directly affects human society. Lyubov is isolated from his own people due to his connection with Selver, as his research previously showed that the Athsheans were nonviolent. When Selver convinces his people to attack the humans, the human soldiers come to distrust Lyubov, as this attack disproves his research. Ironically, Lyubov's research is incorrect partly because of his communication with Selver, which prompted Selver to continue his attacks against the humans. Lyubov's unique knowledge of the Athsheans also gives him key insight into their plans and isolates him further from human society. For instance, after the Athsheans attack humans for the first time, Lyubov visits an Athshean village and immediately sees that the Athsheans haven't forgiven the humans and are likely planning another attack. However,

Lyubov's friendship with Selver prevents him from sharing that information with his superiors, which leads most of the human women to die in a surprise attack. Lyubov's friendship with Selver indirectly harms his people, as he chooses not to warn them about the Athsheans. During this attack, Lyubov himself dies—but before he does, he warns Selver that the Athsheans have to stop killing. And given that Selver only decided that killing was necessary after communicating with Lyubov, Lyubov essentially confirms that their communication negatively impacted both the humans and the Athsheans, even though it was necessary for both of their societies.

Ultimately, Lyubov and Selver's sacrifices lead to the Athsheans' safety but also to their own isolation. They remain the only members of their societies who were willing to communicate with each other, and this solitary communication has lasting effects, as Lyubov's spirit remains in Selver's dreams at the end of the novella, demonstrating the permanent impact Lyubov had on Selver. The novella implies that while Selver and Lyubov's communication was necessary, it also demanded steep sacrifices.



## GENDER AND MASCULINITY

Human society in *The Word for World is Forest* is male-dominated, as women are sent from Earth to planetary colonies solely to serve as sexual partners for men and to populate those planets with children. As a result, soldiers prize their masculinity above all else. In contrast, the Athshean society on World 41 (a planet that Terrans, humans from Earth, have colonized) is more balanced, as men act as decision-makers while women act as politicians. In the end, Athshean society remains relatively intact while World 41's human society crumbles. By presenting an alternative that outlasts the Terrans' patriarchal society, the novella suggests that overvaluing masculinity can contribute to societal collapse.

The Terran colony on World 41 is a patriarchal society that values men over women. At first, there are no women permanently stationed on World 41, but at the start of the novella, a ship from Terra (Earth) brings a large group of women. These women fall into two categories: "Colony Brides," who are meant to bear children to populate the planet, and "Recreation Staff," who are available for casual sex with men. While the women may or may not have chosen these roles (something the novella never clarifies), their purpose in the colony always centers around men, and none of the women have any real agency of their own. Moreover, none of them have any say in the decisions the colony makes—for instance, there are no women present at a crucial meeting in the colonists' headquarters, where the male colonists discuss the future of World 41. Maybe because of this unequal arrangement, masculinity is highly prized on World 41. Captain Davidson, the leader of a logging camp known as Smith,

frequently touts his own virility and strength (stereotypically masculine qualities), and he and the other men objectify the women who are shipped to the colony. This appears to be routine, and while human society on World 41 is distinctly unequal, it nevertheless functions stably and without any apparent unrest.

However, patriarchal human society is later contrasted with Athshean society, which treats men and women as relative equals. Male and female Athsheans still have separate roles in society, but these roles are equally important. Men are “Great Dreamers,” who interpret information from their dreams, and women decide whether or not to act on their interpretations. This means that women often function as politicians, interacting directly with their society while the men focus on dreams. Because the women’s role is crucial to a functioning society, Athshean women (and especially older women) are valued more in their society than human women are in theirs. The human anthropologist Raj Lyubov later comments that if the humans had old women on World 41, they might not make such rash choices. In fact, Athshean women are baffled at the limited role of women in human society. At one point, the Athshean woman Ebor Dendep notes that the humans should have sent the women to World 41 first, as they might have been able to dream in ways that human men can’t. The concept of a patriarchal society is alien to the Athsheans, whose men and women live on equal terms.

In the end, the patriarchal nature of human society is part of what leads to that society’s collapse, while Athshean society remains standing. The Athsheans eventually attack the humans’ city, and their attack is specifically designed to target the human women, as the Athsheans murder the women and take many of the men prisoner. The Athsheans’ leader, Selver, notes that the Athsheans killed the women to sterilize the men, because otherwise, the human population on World 41 would have continued to grow. In other words, the women were murdered in part because of their designated role in human society—Selver is right that they would have increased the population, since they were brought to World 41 to breed. Furthermore, the women had no way to defend themselves against the Athsheans, as they were never considered soldiers and instead depended on the men’s protection. Meanwhile, Athshean society is structurally unchanged after the Athsheans succeed in shutting down the humans’ logging camps. Although the novella implies that the Athsheans are a different, more violent people after their encounter with the humans, their societal structure seems to remain stable, as the women help Selver negotiate with the humans. This comparative stability suggests that the Athsheans’ system of governance, which values both men and women, is far more stable than the humans’ strict patriarchy.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### DAVIDSON’S GUN

Captain Don Davidson’s gun represents human violence, as well as the Athsheans’ transformation from a peaceful society to a violent one when they encounter this violence. During the massacre at Smith Camp, Davidson confronts a group of four Athsheans, including Selver, and threatens them with a gun. Selver takes this gun from Davidson before pinning him down. After this encounter, he takes Davidson’s gun with him as he travels away from Smith, and the machinery confuses other Athsheans, who have never seen anything like it before. The Athsheans are a nonviolent species by choice, and although they decide to violently retaliate against the human colonists, they initially fight them with bows, arrows, and fire. The introduction of Davidson’s far more sophisticated weapon to Athshean society demonstrates a fundamental shift, as the Athsheans now have the same ability to kill as humans do and can accomplish that killing in the same way.

Selver begins to dream about shooting Davidson with this gun, but when he fires in the dream, nothing comes out. This foreshadows Selver’s ultimate decision to let Davidson live at the end of the novella, even though Davidson asks Selver to kill him. Yet even though Selver doesn’t kill Davidson, the introduction of human violence—which the gun represents—fundamentally changes Athshean society, as Athsheans now know the many ways they can kill one another.



### THE ANSIBLE

The ansible represents the possibility of a genuinely civilized human race. When Commander Yung visits the human colony on World 41, he brings along an ansible, which is a transmitter that allows people to communicate instantaneously with other planets. Yung was supposed to deliver this ansible to another planet, but Mr. Lepennon and Mr. Or, emissaries to the newly-formed League of Worlds, decide to give it to the colony on World 41. They make this decision so that the government on Terra (Earth) will hold the humans on World 41 accountable for their actions. (The humans on World 41 have enslaved the planet’s native people, the Athsheans, something the League was not previously aware of because many of World 41’s reports have been censored.) The ansible thus represents the possibility of a reformed society in which humans are forced to treat the Athsheans with respect.

Despite the fact that the orders from the ansible are to free the

Athsheans and adopt a policy of nonviolence (even though the Athsheans previously attacked the humans), Captain Don Davidson goes rogue and continues to secretly kill the Athshean people. This leads to another Athshean attack on a human camp, which inadvertently leads to the destruction of the ansible. The ansible's destruction is symbolic: it implies that a civilized, nonviolent human race isn't possible or enforceable within the context of colonialization. Even though the majority of humans agree not to harm the Athsheans after this attack, they can't control Davidson, who continues to hunt Athsheans with a small group of men. The Athsheans must use violence against Davidson to force him to stop, as no human oversight will do this for them.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Tor Books edition of *The Word for World is Forest* published in 1972.

### Chapter One Quotes

Get enough humans here, build machines and robots, make farms and cities, and nobody would need the creechies any more. And a good thing too. For this world, New Tahiti, was literally made for men. Cleaned up and cleaned out, the dark forests cut down for open fields of grain, the primeval murk and savagery and ignorance wiped out, it would be a paradise, a real Eden. A better world than worn-out Earth. And it would be his world. For that's what Don Davidson was, way down deep inside him: a world-tamer. He wasn't a boastful man, but he knew his own size. It just happened to be the way he was made. He knew what he wanted, and how to get it.

**Related Characters:** Don Davidson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 12

#### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which is Davidson's reflection on what it will take to make New Tahiti full inhabitable, takes place just before Davidson heads to Central to see the new shipment of women from Earth. The novella begins to establish Davidson as an antagonist in this passage, as he demonstrates his anger and hatred of the "creechies," or native Athsheans. He wants to see them "wiped out," a desire that will only grow stronger as the novella progresses and the Athsheans begin to retaliate against the humans. In fact, readers later learn that Davidson's use of

the word "creechie" is in and of itself derogatory, as the term is presumably a name the humans came up with in an effort to insult and discriminate against the Athsheans.

Davidson's patriarchal worldview also emerges in this passage, as he clearly overvalues his own masculinity and links that masculinity to violence and warfare. In context, he goes from thinking about the women in Central to deforestation and genocide, which demonstrates his broad desire for dominance and his belief that this dominance is natural, or "the way he was made."

There's some irony in Davidson's belief that if New Tahiti is industrialized—if the humans build "machines," "robots," "farms," and "cities"—it'll end up becoming a biblical "paradise." Readers later learn that Earth is "worn-out" at least in part due to humans' greed and desire to mine the planet's natural resources (including its wildlife), and the humans seem to be making the same mistakes in New Tahiti. Davidson's allusion to the Garden of Eden further heightens this irony—in the Bible, the Garden of Eden is built for Adam and Eve before they're tempted to sin. If New Tahiti is Eden, the humans have already given into temptation and sinned by enslaving the Athsheans, cutting down trees, and attempting to "tame" the planet.

Davidson saw then the telltale tension of the creature's stance, yet it sprang at him so lithe and oblique that his shot missed, burning an arm or shoulder instead of smack between the eyes. And the creechie was on him, half his size and weight yet knocking him right off balance by its onslaught, for he had been relying on the gun and not expecting attack. The thing's arms were thin, tough, coarse-furred in his grip, and as he struggled with it, it sang.

He was down on his back, pinned down, disarmed. [...] He had never looked up into a creechie's face from below. Always down, from above. From on top. He tried not to struggle, for at the moment it was wasted effort. Little as they were, they outnumbered him, and Scarface had his gun.

**Related Characters:** Don Davidson (speaker), Selver Thele

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 29-30

#### Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place after Selver Thele and his fellow

Athsheans burn down Smith Camp while Davidson is at Central. Davidson returns to Smith to find all the humans dead, and he runs into four Athsheans, including Selver. Selver greets Davidson by name and tells Davidson that he was responsible for the wreckage before attacking him.


The full context of this passage isn't clear until later in the novella, when readers learn that by laying on his back, Davidson inadvertently assumed a position the Athsheans see as surrender. Meanwhile, singing is a substitute for combat in Athshean culture, which explains why Selver chose to sing over Davidson. Davidson already disliked the Athsheans prior to this encounter with Selver, but this incident further contributes to his fixation on wiping them out later in the novella. He clearly feels emasculated when forced to view the Athsheans "from below," particularly because he overvalues his own masculinity.

This passage also introduces the symbol of Davidson's gun, which comes to represent humans' innate capacity for violence. Notably, Davidson's particular brand of violence doesn't work against the Athsheans here, as they're too fast for his gunshot. But even though Davidson's violence is ineffectual, the novella doesn't imply that it's obsolete, because the gun passes from Davidson to Selver. This suggests not only that Selver will continue to retaliate against the humans, but that his retaliation will be directly linked to the humans' actions. In other words, Selver learned violence from Davidson and will later enact violence *because* of Davidson, even going so far as to wield Davidson's own weapon.

Readers later learn that humans frequently kill Athsheans even as they beg for mercy, so Selver's mercy toward Davidson is particularly significant and demonstrates that the two of them are not the same, despite the fact that both of them are now responsible for killing others.

Davidson's hands were steady now, his body felt appeased, and he knew he wasn't caught in any dream. He headed back over the Straits, to take the news to Centralville. As he flew he could feel his face relax into its usual calm lines. They couldn't blame the disaster on him, for he hadn't even been there. Maybe they'd see that it was significant that the creechies had struck while he was gone, knowing they'd fail if he was there to organize the defense. And there was one good thing that would come out of this. They'd do like they should have done to start with, and clean up the planet for human occupation. Not even Lyubov could stop them from rubbing out the creechies now, not when they heard it was Lyubov's pet creechie who'd led the massacre! They'd go in for rat-extermination for a while, now; and maybe, just maybe, they'd hand that little job over to him. At that thought he could have smiled.

**Related Characters:** Don Davidson (speaker), Raj Lyubov, Selver Thele

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 32-33

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place after Selver lets Davidson escape the wreckage of Smith Camp and return to Central. Davidson gets in his hopper and drops bombs on the Athsheans prior to returning to Central, even though he wasn't authorized to do so.

Later in the novella, readers learn that Davidson's bombs didn't actually kill any Athsheans, who had long since left the area. But in this passage, he believes he's murdered a significant amount of Athsheans, so it's noteworthy that doing so "appeas[es]" him and makes him feel "calm." Humans in the novella frequently suggest that violence is natural, a belief Davidson adopts in this passage. But ironically, the existence of the Athsheans proves them wrong, since the Athsheans were a nonviolent species before the humans colonized their planet. The equilibrium Davidson finds by killing is therefore of his own making, rather than any natural state of being.


This passage further paints Davidson as an antagonist, because he's planning to be dishonest and to retaliate against the Athsheans despite the fact that they let him live. Selver told Davidson that the Athsheans thought Davidson would be in Smith, so Davidson knows that they didn't really plan their attack around his absence. And Davidson clearly wasn't affected by Selver's mercy, even though Selver could have easily killed him. If anything, Davidson seems glad to have any excuse to "exterminate" the Athsheans, whom he compares to rats.

It's worth noting that Davidson's actions in this passage will have consequences for both him and his fellow humans later on. Because Davidson's retaliation against the Athsheans was unauthorized, he's punished with a position at a different camp, where he drums up his own guerilla army to attack the Athsheans. This leads to the Athsheans once again retaliating against the humans—in this way, Davidson's impulsive actions here cause human deaths later on.

## Chapter Two Quotes

☛ No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest. Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex. Little paths ran under the branches, around the boles, over the roots; they did not go straight, but yielded to every obstacle, devious as nerves. The ground was not dry and solid but damp and rather springy, product of the collaboration of living things with the long, elaborate death of leaves and trees; and from that rich graveyard grew ninety-foot trees, and tiny mushrooms that sprouted in circles half an inch across. The smell of the air was subtle, various, and sweet. The view was never long, unless looking up through the branches you caught sight of the stars. Nothing was pure, dry, arid, plain. Revelation was lacking. There was no seeing everything at once: no certainty.

**Related Characters:** Selver Thele (speaker), Don Davidson

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 35-36

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place after Selver burns Smith Camp, as he walks through the forest and takes note of his surroundings. Notably, this chapter of the novella is the first point-of-view switch, as readers were previously reading events from Davidson's perspective. The contrast between Davidson's view of the forest and Selver's is striking, as Davidson previously discussed wanting to dominate the planet and its lifeforms—in fact, he wants the planet to become “pure, dry, arid, plain” by cutting down its trees. Meanwhile, Selver views the forest with an awed respect.

Selver's view of the forest is likely similar to the rest of the Athsheans', so it's significant that even though the Athsheans live in the forest, they still see it as something fundamentally unknowable. If anyone should be able to claim “certainty” in the forest, it's the Athsheans, who build their homes in tree roots and have developed trade routes

across the planet. The humans view nature as something to profit off of, while the Athsheans view nature as its own entity.

This passage also demonstrates how intertwined all organisms are on Athshe. Elements as disparate as “wind” and “branch[es]” are connected simply because they both exist on the planet. Dead trees feed the ground, which in turn feeds the living trees, and organisms like mushrooms exist solely because of this symbiosis. This depiction of Athshe's forest highlights how horrific the humans' colonization is. Even though the humans are just cutting down trees, doing so impacts not only the Athsheans but every living thing in the forest, as Selver demonstrates here. Meanwhile, roots are likened to “nerves” in this passage, further demonstrating that trees are as living as humans—making the humans' deforestation all the more troubling.

☛ “Before this day the thing we had to do was the right thing to do; the way we had to go was the right way and led us home. Where is our home now? For you've done what you had to do, and it was not right. You have killed men. I saw them, five years ago, in the Lemgan Valley, where they came in a flying ship; I hid and watched the giants, six of them, and saw them speak, and look at rocks and plants, and cook food. They are men.”

**Related Characters:** Coro Mena (speaker), Thele, Don Davidson, Selver Thele

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 44-45

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place after Selver tells the Athsheans gathered in Cadast about the massacre at Smith, about the Athsheans' enslavement, and about what happened to his wife, Thele. Coro Mena asks Selver if the humans are men like the Athsheans, and Selver responds that he doesn't know, because the humans kill one another. Coro Mena then explains that the humans will fundamentally alter the planet.

This passage lays out one of the central problems of the novella: the Athsheans must respond to the humans' violence with violence, despite the fact that they've been a nonviolent society up until this point. Before the humans arrived on Athshe, the Athsheans were able to do the “right

thing” because violence wasn’t necessary. Now, the “right thing” is also the wrong thing, as Coro Mena explains to Selver: the Athsheans had to kill the humans, but killing remains morally wrong, because the humans are men like the Athsheans. The novella doesn’t present a solution to this moral dilemma, nor does it suggest that the Athsheans were wrong to retaliate against the humans, who were killing the Athsheans in high numbers. Instead, the novella suggests that the existence of violence perpetuates itself, so there is no “right” and “wrong,” something that Coro Mena begins to explore here.

The humans in the novella, including Davidson, frequently discuss violence as something that comes naturally to men. In this passage, Coro Mena describes violence as destructive not only for its victims but for its perpetrators, as he suggests that the Athsheans have lost their “home” and sense of self by killing men.

This passage also demonstrates the difference between the Athsheans’ view of the humans and the humans’ view of the Athsheans. Coro Mena insists that the humans and Athsheans are the same, while many of the humans believe that the Athsheans are animals. It would be easier for Coro Mena to view the humans as animals, because the Athsheans are willing to kill deer and other wildlife. The fact that he insists that the Athsheans are men complicates matters, as it makes the Athsheans’ retaliation against the humans—and the humans’ violence against the Athsheans—all the more horrific.

☛ For Ebor Dendep was a practical woman. When a Great Dreamer, her brother, told her that Selver was a god, a changer, a bridge between realities, she believed and acted. It was the Dreamer’s responsibility to be careful, to be certain that his judgment was true. Her responsibility was then to take that judgment and act upon it. He saw what must be done; she saw that it was done.

[...]

As most writing was in this Lodge-tongue, when headwomen sent fleet girls carrying messages, the letters went from Lodge to Lodge, and so were interpreted by the Dreamers to the Old Women, as were other documents, rumors, problems, myths, and dreams. But it was always the Old Women’s choice whether to believe or not.

**Related Characters:** Selver Thele, Coro Mena, Ebor Dendep

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 46-48

### Explanation and Analysis



This passage takes place after Selver tells Coro Mena and Ebor Dendep about the massacre at Smith Camp and about his involvement with the humans. Coro Mena declares that Selver is now a god, and as the headwoman of the village, Ebor Dendep takes in this information and acts on it by preparing the village to evacuate and by sending messages to neighboring villages.


By this point in the novella, readers know that the women in human society are treated as breeding stock. Earth has sent a “shipment” of women to populate the colony, but there are no women in positions of power, nor do the women appear to have agency. Some of them exist to have children, some exist to have casual sex with men, but none have any actual role in the colony’s operations. As this passage demonstrates, the role of Athshean women is different. Headwomen like Ebor Dendep have political roles in Athshean society—they receive information from the male Dreamers, who see visions in their dreams and interpret those dreams’ real-world meaning. The headwomen are then in charge of effectively disseminating that information (by sending “fleet girls” to deliver messages), and the “Old Women” of each village take in *that* information and decide whether or not it’s true.

Each link on this informational chain is equally vital: if the women weren’t able to disseminate and evaluate the men’s information, that information would never make it out of a village and would therefore have no value. In this way, men and women in Athshean society are far more equal than men and women in human society. In fact, Athshean society seems to present an alternative to the strict patriarchy that humans in the novella have established.

☛ He went out to see what kind of trees they were. They all lay broken and uprooted. He picked up the silvery branch of one and a little blood ran out of the broken end. No, not here, not again, Thele, he said: O Thele, come to me before your death! But she did not come. [...] Outside the other door, across the tall room, was the long street of the yumen city Central. Selver had the gun in his belt. If Davidson came, he could shoot him. He waited, just inside the open door, looking out into the sunlight. Davidson came, huge, running so fast that Selver could not keep him in the sights of the gun as he doubled crazily back and forth across the wide street, very fast, always closer. The gun was heavy. Selver fired it but no fire came out of it, and in rage and terror he threw the gun and the dream away.

**Related Characters:** Selver Thele (speaker), Thele, Don Davidson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 48-49

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place while Selver is resting at Cadast. He begins to dream and imagines that he's in a small room, which he leaves to see the trees outside.



The Athsheans' lives are intertwined with nature, and this passage explicitly compares the Athsheans to trees, as Selver imagines a dead tree and connects this tree to his deceased wife, Thele. Within Selver's subconscious, the humans' violence against the planet's trees and ecology is inextricable from their violence against the Athsheans themselves, including Thele, which highlights the horror of the humans' colonization and deforestation.

At this point in the novella, Selver has confronted Davidson twice. The first time, he attempted to kill Davidson and was unsuccessful, and the second time, he had a chance to kill Davidson using Davidson's own gun and chose not to. This passage demonstrates how uncomfortable with violence Selver still is. In his dream, Selver's attempt to shoot Davidson is self-defense rather than a targeted attack. And even in his dream, Selver can't kill Davidson using Davidson's own weapon, proving both that violence doesn't come naturally to Selver and that, despite Selver's personal hatred of Davidson, he doesn't want to have to kill him.

Because the gun symbolizes humans' innate capacity for violence, the fact that Selver can't kill Davidson in his dream is a choice he makes (albeit subconsciously)—one that the humans could also make if they were willing to do so. This choice foreshadows Selver's final confrontation with Davidson at the end of the novella, when he once again chooses to let Davidson go rather than killing him.

“[...] Much of what he told me, I couldn't understand. It wasn't the language that kept me from understanding; I know his tongue, and he learned ours; we made a writing of the two languages together. Yet there were things he said I could never understand. He said the yumens are from outside the forest. That's quite clear. He said they want the forest: the trees for wood, the land to plant grass on.” Selver's voice, though still soft, had taken on resonance; the people among the silver trees listened. “That too is clear, to those of us who've seen them cutting down the world. He said the yumens are men like us, that we're indeed related, as close kin maybe as the Red Deer to the Greybuck. He said that they come from another place which is not the forest; the trees there are all cut down; it has a sun, not our sun, which is a star. All this, as you see, wasn't clear to me. I say his words but don't know what they mean. It does not matter much. It is clear that they want our forest for themselves [...]”

**Related Characters:** Selver Thele (speaker), Raj Lyubov

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 55-56

### Explanation and Analysis

This quotation takes place before Selver leaves Cadast to assemble an army of Athsheans. Here, he explains the humans' motivations to his fellow Athsheans—motivations he learned about from Raj Lyubov during his time as Lyubov's anthropological informant.

Selver's confusion in this passage demonstrates the divide between Athshean and human culture. Despite the fact that Selver and Lyubov learn to speak to one another—which is rare, as most humans speak to Athsheans in broken English and expect them to understand—Selver can't fully understand Lyubov's culture. For instance, Selver can't fathom a world without a forest, because Selver's world is the forest—Athshe is covered by fauna, and the humans were the ones to introduce deforestation. Selver also can't imagine a world beyond the planet, as Athshe isn't part of an interstellar government the way that Earth is. This is the novella's first confirmation that Athsheans and humans are genealogically related, which heightens the horror of the humans enslaving the Athsheans. But the Athsheans are also culturally distinct from humans. Because Selver is narrating the humans' colonization, readers are forced to think about *humans*, rather than the Athsheans, as “aliens.”

It's worth noting that Selver's information is new to his audience. The Athsheans who weren't already slaves in the humans' logging camps might never have understood the humans' motivations for being on Athshe if Selver didn't explain them. And even the Athsheans who were in the



logging camps might not understand the humans' pervasive need for wood—they might believe that the humans' logging is temporary if they didn't know that Earth no longer has trees, which Selver learns from Lyubov.



Selver's connection to Lyubov is therefore invaluable, but it also has consequences. Selver decides that the Athsheans need to drive the humans out of the planet not solely because of the Athsheans' enslavement—which the humans soon discontinue—but because the humans plan to cut down all the trees on the planet.

## Chapter Three Quotes

☞ Every man alive except the Captain. No wonder pills couldn't get at the center of his migraine, for it was on an island two hundred miles away two days ago. Over the hills and far away. Ashes, ashes, all fall down. And among the ashes, all his knowledge of the High Intelligence Life Forms of World 41. Dust, rubbish, a mess of false data and fake hypotheses. Nearly five E-years here, and he had believed the Athsheans to be incapable of killing men, his kind or their kind. He had written long papers to explain how and why they couldn't kill men. All wrong. Dead wrong.

What had he failed to see?

**Related Characters:** Raj Lyubov (speaker), Selver Thele, Don Davidson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 64-65

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is narrated by the anthropologist Raj Lyubov and takes place after the Athsheans' massacre at Smith Camp and before the humans' meeting to discuss the status of their colony on Athshe. Lyubov has a migraine that he can't fix with medication, which is quickly shown to be the product of his own guilt, as his anthropological research is what convinced the humans that the Athsheans wouldn't retaliate against them and left them vulnerable to an attack. In this passage, Lyubov likens the "ashes" of Smith to the figurative "ashes" of his own research, since he considers it worthless now.

At this point in the novella, Lyubov's question of what he "failed to see" is rhetorical. But it's a question that the novella continues to explore, and it ends up having many answers. Crucially, Lyubov was wrong to believe that the Athsheans were "incapable" of murder; instead, they *chose*

not to murder their own kind. They begin to kill the humans because the humans modeled violence, thus permanently introducing murder into Athsheans society. Lyubov's data wasn't "false" as much as it was incomplete—his research may have shown that the Athsheans were nonviolent, but it didn't factor in human interference.

Ironically, another reason the Athsheans retaliated against the humans is because of Lyubov himself. Initially, Selver attacked Captain Davidson because of his personal anger toward him. Because that attack was small-scale, and because Selver let Lyubov escape after the massacre at Smith, it stands to reason that Davidson wasn't the sole motivating factor behind the Athsheans' retaliation. As Selver explains to his people, the Athsheans were concerned by the humans' desire to cut down all of the planets' trees. Selver learned about this motivation from Lyubov, and thus his connection to Lyubov is part of the reason the Athsheans attacked.

Maybe because Lyubov subconsciously understands his own role in the attack, his migraine serves as a physical manifestation of his own guilt, a motif that will recur throughout the novella. Lyubov is isolated from his fellow humans because of his connection to the Athsheans, and his connection to the Athsheans is directly harmful to humans. For Lyubov, this conflict causes internal tension.



☞ "A human society with an effective war-barrier! What's the cost, Dr. Lyubov?"

"I'm not sure, Mr. Lepennon. Perhaps change. They're a static, stable, uniform society. They have no history. Perfectly integrated, and wholly unprogressive. You might say that like the forest they live in, they've attained a climax state. But I don't mean to imply that they're incapable of adaptation."

[...]

"Well, I wonder if they're not proving their adaptability, now. By adapting their behavior to us. To the Earth Colony. For four years they've behaved to us as they do to one another. Despite the physical differences, they recognized us as members of their species, as men. However, we have not responded as members of their species should respond. We have ignored the responses, the rights and obligations of non-violence. We have killed, raped, dispersed, and enslaved the native humans, destroyed their communities, and cut down their forests. It wouldn't be surprising if they'd decided that we are not human."

**Related Characters:** Raj Lyubov, Mr. Lepennon (speaker), Coro Mena, Selver Thele

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 74-75

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a conversation between Mr. Lepennon and Raj Lyubov that takes place during the colony's meeting to discuss the Smith Camp massacre. Lyubov explains that the Athshean people are nonviolent because they've come up with substitutes for combat and because they isolate any violent individuals on islands. This notion excites Lepennon, whose own society is highly civilized.


Once again, the Athsheans are likened to their ecosystem and directly compared to trees. As a result, Lyubov's logic is somewhat flawed. He believes that the Athsheans' inflexibility is a drawback, or something they've exchanged for nonviolence—but if the Athsheans' society is akin to nature, this isn't the case. The Athsheans seem to demonstrate that while they're capable of violence, their natural state is peace. Earth's "progress" has led to warfare and deforestation, while Athsheans society is stable. If that's the case, then their violent "adaptation" to humans is *unnatural*, rather than a natural progression.

Lyubov is also incorrect that the Athsheans have decided to attack the humans because they no longer believe that they're men. Readers already know that Selver and Coro Mena believe that the humans *are* men, albeit violent and unnatural men. If the Athsheans saw the humans as another species, their retaliation would be uncomplicated, particularly because many humans already believe that the Athsheans are animals. Both the humans and the Athsheans would be able to fight one another without guilt if they saw each other as alien, but instead, the Athsheans must reckon with the fact that people like themselves are capable of great violence.

“No,” said the Cetian. “That’s done with. A colony like this had to believe what passing ships and outdated radio-messages told them. Now you don’t. You can verify. We are going to give you the ansible destined for Prestno. We have League authority to do so. Received, of course, by ansible. Your colony here is in a bad way. Worse than I thought from your reports. Your reports are very incomplete; censorship or stupidity have been at work. Now, however, you’ll have the ansible, and can talk with your Terran Administration; you can ask for orders, so you’ll know how to proceed. Given the profound changes that have been occurring in the organization of the Terran Government since we left there, I should recommend that you do so at once. There is no longer any excuse for acting on outdated orders; for ignorance; for irresponsible autonomy.”

**Related Characters:** Mr. Or (speaker), Don Davidson

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 80-81

### Explanation and Analysis

This quotation takes place during the colony's meeting about the Smith massacre. Mr. Or, a non-Terran human, has just explained that there is now an interstellar government known as the League of Worlds and that the League will be giving the colonists an ansible, which is a new transmitter that allows for instant communication between planets. This means that Earth can now directly oversee the colony, something that wasn't possible before, as messages previously had a gap of several decades.

In this passage, the ansible begins to symbolize the possibility of a civilized human society. If the League monitors the colonists via ansible, the colonists won't be able to skirt rules or "censor" their reports, which will force them to treat the Athsheans with respect—notably, the League of Worlds was not previously aware that the humans had enslaved the Athsheans. Furthermore, the humans will no longer be able to interpret their "outdated" orders at will, because they'll receive up-to-date orders and information constantly. As Mr. Or explains, the colonists previously had an "excuse" to breach rules, and with the ansible, no such excuse will exist.


However, the ansible is eventually destroyed during another attack on the humans, which hints that no genuinely civilized human society is possible within the context of colonization. Indeed, while many of the colonists take the ansible's messages seriously, rogue actors like

Davidson go against its orders. The ansible represents oversight for the colonists, but this oversight doesn't prevent violence as Mr. Or hopes that it will.

“[...] We've succeeded, here on Central, by following the Plan: erosion is minimal, and the cleared soil is highly arable. To log off a forest doesn't, after all, mean to make a desert—except perhaps from the point of view of a squirrel. We can't forecast precisely how the native forest life-systems will adapt to a new woodland-prairie-plowland ambiance foreseen in the Development Plan, but we know the chances are good for a large percentage of adaptation and survival.”

“That's what the Bureau of Land Management said about Alaska during the First Famine,” said Lyubov. [...] “How many Sitka spruce have you seen in your lifetime, Gosse? Or snowy owl? or wolf? or Eskimo? The survival percentage of native Alaskan species in habitat, after 15 years of the Development Program, was .3%. It's now zero.—A forest ecology is a delicate one. If the forest perishes, its fauna may go with it. The Athshean word for world is also the word for forest.”

**Related Characters:** Raj Lyubov, Gosse (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 85-86

### Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is a conversation between Gosse, one of the colony's ecologists, and the anthropologist Raj Lyubov. The two of them are at a colony meeting discussing the future of World 41, and Gosse disagrees with Lyubov's concern that the planet's ecology won't survive another three years of logging, despite the fact that one of the planet's islands has recently eroded.

This passage demonstrates the colonists' greed and unwillingness to learn from their past ecological mistakes. Earlier in the novella, another ecologist referred to Earth as a “desert of cement,” so Gosse's comment that overlogging will not create a “desert” rings particularly false. Gosse also doesn't demonstrate any confidence that the ecosystem on Athshe will remain stable, as the “Development Plan” he describes clearly hasn't considered the long-term effects of logging.

This passage also demonstrates that the humans previously believed that Earth would adapt to the same “Development Program,” which ended up killing all of Earth's wildlife. Readers are given very little context for how Earth ended

up as a “cement desert,” but Lyubov's comment suggests that human greed is partly to blame, since he uses Earth as an example of a decimated planet that humans believed they could maintain.

Throughout the novella, humans treat nature as something separate from themselves, although they clearly depend on it—the fact that they're on Athshe to log wood proves this dependence, since there is no more wood on Earth. The Athsheans serve as a contrast to this narrow mindset, as Lyubov explains here that the planet's ecology is quite literally their whole world. The Athsheans obviously can't imagine a “world” without a “forest,” which is why their language combines the two concepts. Humans feel no such loyalty to ecosystems and wildlife, which is why they're repeating their ecological mistakes.

Lyubov sat and took it. Let the men from the ship see them all passing the blame around like a hot brick: all the better. The more dissension they showed, the likelier were these Emissaries to have them checked and watched over. And he was to blame; he had been wrong. To hell with my self-respect so long as the forest people get a chance, Lyubov thought, and so strong a sense of his own humiliation and self-sacrifice came over him that tears rose to his eyes.

**Related Characters:** Raj Lyubov (speaker), Selver Thele, Colonel Dongh, Mr. Or, Mr. Lepennon

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 87

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, narrated by Lyubov, takes place during the colonists' meeting to discuss the future of World 41. Colonel Dongh grows angry at Lyubov's outspoken defense of the Athsheans and suggests that Lyubov has no right to criticize the colony's policies. Lyubov, realizing that the infighting among colonists might make the League of Worlds more likely to save the Athsheans, backs down.

Lyubov's inner conflict is on clear display in this passage, as is his growing isolation from human society. On the one hand, Lyubov considers himself part of the larger group of colonists. He blames himself for the massacre at Smith Camp (since his research previously concluded that the Athsheans were nonviolent), which suggests that he feels loyal to the colony's human men. On the other hand, he's willing to distance himself from those same men to save the Athsheans—his “self-sacrifice” is to be ostracized from

human society, as no one will trust him again.

But this is far from a righteous decision on Lyubov's part, as Lyubov also suggests that he'll lose "self-respect" and will be "humiliate[ed]." His tears in this passage seem to be about that humiliation, rather than about the Athsheans' plight. In other words, Lyubov is upset about his isolation from human society, even though he believes that it's necessary.


Readers already know that Selver feels similarly isolated from Athshean society, as he alone understands the humans' motivations and plans for Athshe. Lyubov and Selver's friendship demands "self-sacrifice" from them both, something Lyubov begins to realize here.

## Chapter Four Quotes

☛☛ That was the gist of all the messages actually, and any fool could tell that that wasn't the Colonial Administration talking. They couldn't have changed that much in thirty years. They were practical, realistic men who knew what life was like on frontier planets. It was clear, to anybody who hadn't gone spla from geoshock, that the 'ansible' messages were phonies. They might be planted right in the machine, a whole set of answers to high-probability questions, computer run. The engineers said they could have spotted that; maybe so. In that case the thing did communicate instantaneously with another world. But that world wasn't Earth. Not by a long long shot!

**Related Characters:** Don Davidson (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 91-92

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, narrated by Davidson, takes place after Davidson has been reassigned to New Java Camp following his unauthorized air raid at Smith Camp. Davidson learns that the colony is now receiving orders from the ansible, and he questions the veracity of those orders, which include freeing all enslaved Athsheans and not retaliating against the Athsheans.

Throughout the novella, the ansible symbolizes the possibility of a civilized human society. If the colonists follow the orders from the ansible, the colony will become a better version of itself, since the colonists were previously skirting rules and regulations. The fact that Davidson dismisses those orders as fraudulent hints that this more civilized



human society might not be possible within the context of colonization. His dismissal also demonstrates his unwillingness to own up to his own mistakes—Davidson would rather blame outsiders and assume that the ansible is being tampered with than accept that his colony has treated the Athsheans poorly.

Interestingly, colonists like Davidson frequently suggest that violence is part of human nature, and that the colonists' violence against the Athsheans was therefore inevitable. This passage hints that this might not be the case—the humans on Earth seem to be against the violence on Athshe, and the colonists' violence is therefore a choice that they're making. All people might be capable of violence, but apparently, violence isn't universal among Earth-based humans.

Davidson's dismissal of the ansible's orders will have consequences later on, as his continued attacks on Athshean villages prompt the Athsheans to retaliate by killing human women. The fact that Davidson's dismissal of the ansible indirectly causes this attack—which ironically leads to the ansible's destruction—is further proof that peace isn't compatible with colonization.

☛☛ The fact is, the only time a man is really and entirely a man is when he's just had a woman or just killed another man. That wasn't original, he'd read it in some old books; but it was true. That was why he liked to imagine scenes like that. Even if the creechies weren't actually men.

**Related Characters:** Don Davidson (speaker), Thele, Selver Thele

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 96

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place after Davidson has decided to ignore orders from the ansible and quietly take over New Java Camp. He begins to feel distrustful of the Colonial Administration and of the creechies with the loggers in the camp, and he plans to attack Athshean villages himself, unbeknownst to his superiors. He then imagines killing the Athsheans in a vivid fantasy.

Davidson's patriarchal worldview is on full display in this passage. His view of "manliness" seems to be about dominance, as he thinks that a man can only call himself a man when he's in control of others. Because women have very little agency in the human society of the novella,

Davidson likely views sex as an act of dominance, in much the same way killing another man would be.


This viewpoint is perhaps why Davidson instigates much of the violence on Athshe. He rapes Selver's wife, which causes Selver to attack him and is eventually part of what spurs Selver to attack the humans on a larger scale. Later, Selver's people attack yet another camp because Davidson attacked one of their villages on a secret raid. But in this passage, Davidson suggests that he learned violence from his society—he implies that his worldview comes from “some old books.” While men might have an innate capacity for violence, this passage hints that that violence is also learned, the same way the Athsheans learn violence from Davidson.


The novella has already established that the Athsheans and humans are genealogically related, and the colony is supposed to consider them people for all intents and purposes. The fact that Davidson refuses to do so reveals his own prejudices, but his insistence that the Athsheans aren't men rings somewhat false here. After all, he wouldn't fantasize about dominating the Athsheans if he didn't believe it proved his own manliness. He may be embarrassed that the Athsheans were able to kill his men so easily, and this could explain why he's unwilling to admit that they're men like him.

## Chapter Five Quotes

☛☛ The townsfolk also knew that the 1200 slaves at Centralville had been freed soon after the Smith Camp massacre, and Lyubov agreed with the Colonel that the natives might take the second event to be a result of the first. That gave what Colonel Dongh would call ‘an erroneous impression,’ but it probably wasn't important. What was important was that the slaves had been freed. Wrongs done could not be righted; but at least they were not still being done. They could start over: the natives without that painful, unanswerable wonder as to why the ‘yumens’ treated men like animals; and he without the burden of explanation and the gnawing of irremediable guilt.

**Related Characters:** Raj Lyubov (speaker), Selver Thele, Don Davidson, Colonel Dongh

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 106-107

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage takes place as Lyubov is visiting Tuntar, a nearby Athshean village. The colonists have new orders from the ansible, which include letting the Athshean slaves go, and Lyubov hopes that this will positively impact his relationship with the Athsheans.


Lyubov's belief that the colonists and Athsheans can “start over” is a misguided one, and it demonstrates his fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of violence in the novella. Lyubov seems to believe that despite the fact that the humans and the Athsheans have acted violently toward one another, that violence can cease at any moment. However, violence in the novella has always generated more violence. Davidson's violence against Selver leads Selver to attack the humans, Selver's attack on the humans leads Davidson to attack the Athsheans, which in turn causes the Athsheans to attack the humans once again. Because the humans introduced violence into Athshean society, that violence is more permanent than Lyubov seems to believe.

Like Lyubov, Dongh doesn't seem to understand the nature of violence. Lyubov and Dongh both believe that the ansible is the sole reason that the enslaved Athsheans were freed (as opposed to the Athsheans' violence forcing the humans' hand). This doesn't seem precisely true, though, since the League of Worlds only gave the colonists the ansible because they were concerned about the colony after the Smith Camp massacre. The Athsheans' violence was necessary in driving the humans out, and the eventual destruction of the ansible only proves its irrelevance to the cycle of violence on Athshe.

Lyubov's belief that he will no longer have to feel “irremediable guilt” now that the slaves are freed is also a misunderstanding of his own position in human society. The connection between Lyubov and Selver is part of what drove Selver to attack Smith Camp, as Lyubov's research convinced him that the humans wouldn't leave the planet without being forced to do so. Later, that same information will prompt Selver to attack Centralville. If Lyubov no longer feels guilt about the Athsheans' situation, he *will* eventually feel guilty about the humans', as his relationship with Selver isolates him from his own society even as it helps the Athsheans survive.

●● And that's one trouble with the colony, he thought as he lifted the hopper and Tuntar vanished beneath the oaks and the leafless orchards. We haven't got any old women. No old men either, except Dongh and he's only about sixty. But old women are different from everybody else, they say what they think. The Athsheans are governed, in so far as they have government, by old women. Intellect to the men, politics to the women, and ethics to the interaction of both: that's their arrangement. It has charm, and it works—for them. I wish the administration had sent out a couple of grannies along with all those nubile fertile high-breasted young women. Now that girl I had over the other night, she's really very nice, and nice in bed, she has a kind heart, but my God it'll be forty years before she'll say anything to a man...

**Related Characters:** Raj Lyubov (speaker), Don Davidson, Colonel Dongh

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 115

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place as Lyubov is leaving a nearby Athshean village, where he ran into Selver and received a cold reception from the local Athsheans. Readers already know that women play a crucial role in Athshean society: the Athshean “arrangement” is that young women disseminate the dreams of men, and old women choose whether or not to take those dreams seriously. In this passage, Lyubov suggests that the human colony could function similarly if Earth sent the colonists old women as well as young women.

Lyubov seems to be unique among the colonists, as he does value women to some degree, unlike officers like Davidson. However, he also seems to forget that young women play just as crucial of a role in Athshean society as old women—without young women, old women would never have any opportunity to “say what they think,” since young women bring information to them.



Even as Lyubov speaks highly of old women, he also dismisses the intellect of the young women in the colony, who don't appear to have any agency. He doesn't consider why the girl he had sex with won't “say anything to a man,” which might make him reevaluate the colony's patriarchal structure (for instance, maybe she's afraid or resentful). Rather, he implies that human women have more value when they're no longer “nubile” or “fertile.” While Lyubov might respect women more than openly misogynistic colonists like Davidson, he still reduces young women to their maternal function—which is the only reason they're on

Athshe.

●● And the translator is the god. Selver had brought a new word into the language of his people. He had done a new deed. The word, the deed, murder. Only a god could lead so great a newcomer as Death across the bridge between the worlds.

But had he learned to kill his fellowmen among his own dreams of outrage and bereavement, or from the undreamed-of-actions of the strangers? Was he speaking his own language, or was he speaking Captain Davidson's? That which seemed to rise from the root of his own suffering and express his own changed being, might in fact be an infection, a foreign plague, which would not make a new people of his race, but would destroy them.

**Related Characters:** Raj Lyubov (speaker), Thele, Don Davidson, Selver Thele

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 124

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, narrated by Lyubov, takes place after Lyubov reencounters Selver at Tuntar and learns that Selver's people now consider him a god. Lyubov realizes that the Athshean word for “god” is also the word for “translator,” and he begins to puzzle out what this might mean for Selver. Because the Athsheans were previously nonviolent, Lyubov gathers that Selver has “translated” violence for the Athsheans and thus made his society capable of murder.

Lyubov's central question in this passage is whether Selver's desire to kill emerged naturally, or whether it was the result of external forces. For instance, Selver might have observed Captain Davidson's violence and is now figuratively “speaking” Davidson's language by acting violently. The novella doesn't directly answer this question, but the novella's events suggest that violence is cyclical and unnatural. After all, Selver would never have felt “outrage” or “bereavement” if Davidson hadn't killed Selver's wife, Thele, so the “undreamed-of-actions of the strangers” and Selver's own feelings are closely linked. In fact, the novella even suggests that *Davidson's* violence isn't wholly natural—instead, he learned it by reading books and by living in a deeply patriarchal society. Because violence is cyclical, Selver's translation *can't* be natural. And by indirectly comparing Selver to a tree (“the root of his own suffering”), the novella suggests that nature and violence


are fundamentally opposed.

This passage also hints at how isolating it must be for Selver to act as a translator for his people. Translating violence fundamentally alters Selver and makes him a “changed being,” which suggests that he can no longer return to the person he once was. Understanding human society and its violence was necessary for the Athsheans’ survival, but it came at a personal cost to Selver’s sense of self.

## Chapter Six Quotes

“They had taken up the fire they feared into their own hands: taken up the mastery over the evil dream: and loosed the death they feared upon their enemy. [...] Selver could scarcely see; he looked up to the east, wondering if it were nearing dawn. Kneeling there in the mud among the dead he thought, This is the dream now, the evil dream. I thought to drive it, but it drives me.”

**Related Characters:** Selver Thele (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 133

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, narrated by Selver, takes place during the Athsheans’ second attack on the humans, which targeted the women in Centralville. After the attack, Selver walks the streets in Central, observing the wreckage. He was able to gather a large number of Athsheans for the attack because the Athsheans have been tormented by “the evil dream” of burning cities—Athshean dreams can be shared across great distances, and Selver’s wish to retaliate against the humans became a shared wish among his people.

Throughout the novella, characters wonder whether violence is innate or a learned behavior. In this passage, Selver suggests that he’s now living out his own violent dream, and that by doing so, that dream is a part of him and “driv[ing] [him].” On the one hand, this passage might suggest that violence is innate—Selver can’t see violence as something separate from the person he is. On the other hand, this passage might instead hint that violence is an unnatural, external force that humans and Athsheans can’t control once they choose to unleash it.

The latter interpretation of Selver’s thoughts foreshadows the novella’s ending, in which Selver explains that the Athsheans can never again become nonviolent. Violence wasn’t an innate part of their culture or biology; instead, it

was a choice Selver had to make. That choice had permanent consequences, as violence isn’t something that Athshean society can turn back from.

“Should we have let them live?” said Selver with vehemence equal to Gosse’s, but softly, his voice singing a little. “To breed like insects in the carcass of the World? To overrun us? We killed them to sterilize you. I know what a realist is, Mr. Gosse. Lyubov and I have talked about these words. A realist is a man who knows both the world and his own dreams. You’re not sane: there’s not one man in a thousand of you who knows how to dream. Not even Lyubov and he was the best among you. You sleep, you wake and forget your dreams, you sleep again and wake again, and so you spend your whole lives, and you think that is being, life, reality! You are not children, you are grown men, but insane. And that’s why we had to kill you, before you drove us mad.”

**Related Characters:** Selver Thele (speaker), Raj Lyubov, Gosse

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 142-143

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, part of a conversation between Selver and Gosse, takes place after the Athsheans attack Centralville and take the human men prisoner. They kill the human women, something that particularly angers Gosse, and Selver responds by telling him why the women had to die.

While the Athsheans’ slaughter of the human women is particularly egregious to Gosse—after all, the women were unarmed and innocent, since none of them have any authority in the colony—Selver is right that the women would have “[bred] like insects.” This is exactly what the shipment of women was brought to the colony to do: while some of the women were meant to have casual sex with the men, most were meant to breed and populate the colony, and this *would* have eventually “overrun” the Athsheans. In a sense, the colonists’ patriarchal society led to their own downfall, as the Athsheans targeted the women because of their designated role in the colony.

Readers already know that the Athsheans and humans speak two different languages, and that Selver and Lyubov learned each other’s. This partially explains why Selver’s definition of a “realist” differs from the traditional definition, as Athshean society (and by extension, the Athsheans’ language) views the world in the context of dreams.

Presumably, there's no perfect translation for the human concept of realism.

But Selver's statement that he's a realist who knows "both the world and his own dreams" is important. In the novella, dreams serve as guidelines for Athshean society: Great Dreamers interpret their dreams, and Athshean women turn those interpretations into policy. Dreams therefore allow the Athsheans to get a broader perspective on the way their society functions, because they essentially take direction from their more spiritual side.

Bearing that in mind, Selver might be implying that because humans can't dream, they can't see beyond their limited worldview. This would certainly fit with the humans' actions in the novella, as they cut down trees without worrying about the planet's ecosystem and enslave Athsheans without worrying about the morality of their actions. Even Lyubov, whom Selver considers the "best" human, couldn't see beyond his own limited perspective, as he hoped that the Athsheans could stop hurting the humans once the humans let their Athshean slaves go. In this passage, Selver suggests that a realist is able to look beyond their narrow mindset and see the bigger picture. For the Athsheans, the bigger picture forced them to kill the humans, as they understood that the humans would otherwise destroy their planet.

## Chapter Seven Quotes

●● The raiding party burned up that warren by hand, and then flying back with a couple of his boys he spotted another, less than four kilos from camp. On that one, just to write his signature real clear and plain for everybody to read, he dropped a bomb. Just a firebomb, not a big one, but baby did it make the green fur fly. It left a big hole in the forest, and the edges of the hole were burning.

Of course that was his real weapon when it actually came to setting up massive retaliation. Forest fire. He could set one of these whole islands on fire, with bombs and firejelly dropped from the hopper. Have to wait a month or two, till the rainy season was over. Should he burn King or Smith or Central? King first, maybe, as a little warning, since there were no humans left there. Then Central, if they didn't get in line.

**Related Characters:** Don Davidson (speaker), Colonel Dongh

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 163-164

## Explanation and Analysis

This passage, narrated by Davidson, takes place after Davidson isolates himself on New Java Camp with a handful of loyal men. Colonel Dongh has ordered Davidson to return to Central, but Davidson decides to wipe out the Athsheans himself with his own guerilla army, and he begins to attack Athshean villages without any authorization.

While none of the humans on Athshe are innocent, their violence against the Athsheans previously served a purpose: they wanted free labor, and they were willing to enslave the Athsheans to get it. By contrast, there's no tactical reason for Davidson to bomb Athshean villages here—and in fact, he seems to be doing so solely to prove that he can. More than likely, Davidson remembers feeling emasculated when Selver attacked him, which is why he leaves his "signature" so that the Athsheans will fear him. Even less logical is Davidson's desire to bomb Central, which is where the remainder of the humans are living. Davidson clearly wants to dominate everyone left on the planet, even though there's no longer a purpose to that dominance.



Davidson's actions in this passage end up having consequences for him, as the Athsheans later attack his makeshift settlement and taking him prisoner. Throughout the novella, the Athsheans' violence against the humans is almost always provoked by Davidson's actions, and this instance is no exception. With this final attack, the novella once again shows how violence is cyclical, in that it always generates more violence. In fact, Davidson seems to willingly encourage cyclical violence here, since his actions serve no purpose and will only end up provoking the Athsheans.

Finally, nature seems to work against Davidson's plans in this passage. It's not clear whether or not he could have caused serious damage if it wasn't Athshe's rainy season, but the fact that the rain prevents Davidson from causing mass destruction is certainly ironic, since he's spent the novella attempting to destroy the planet's ecosystem.



●● No sound, no noise at all, until that screech from the guard; then one gunshot; then an explosion—a land mine going up—and another, one after another, and hundreds and hundreds of torches flaring up lit one from another and being thrown and soaring through the black wet air like rockets, and the walls of the stockade coming alive with creechies, pouring in, pouring over, pushing, swarming, thousands of them. It was like an army of rats Davidson had seen once when he was a little kid, in the last Famine, in the streets of Cleveland, Ohio, where he grew up. Something had driven the rats out of their holes and they had come up in daylight, seething up over the wall, a pulsing blanket of fur and eyes and little hands and teeth, and he had yelled for his mom and run like crazy, or was that only a dream he'd had when he was a kid?

**Related Characters:** Don Davidson (speaker), Selver Thele

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 170

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, narrated by Davidson, takes place after Davidson ignores orders from Central and continues to attack the Athsheans from his settlement in New Java. The Athsheans retaliate and swarm his camp, quickly overrunning Davidson's landmine defenses.

Davidson previously believed that the landmines would keep his camp safe, but this passage hints that the Athsheans were aware of those landmines. Their attack isn't a quiet one but rather an attempt to storm the camp forcibly by "pouring in" en masse, which would presumably be the only way to get past the landmines as a large group (although some Athsheans would be killed in the process). Ironically, Davidson's lack of knowledge about Athshe's ecology and about Athshean society seems to have partly caused his own vulnerability, since he wasn't able to see the Athsheans coming. More than likely, they hid in the trees, which explains why "thousands" of Athsheans were able to enter the area undetected. Davidson's role on Athshe was to cut down those trees, and he never made an effort to understand the Athsheans' link to nature, which means he couldn't have predicted their attack.

Davidson's memory of the rats' attack is significant, particularly because he can't remember whether or not it was a dream. Selver previously stated that the reason the Athsheans distrust the humans is because the humans distinguish between dreams and real life, which causes them to have a narrow worldview. In this passage, Davidson has the opposite problem: he can't distinguish between his dreams and his memories. Selver, too, found himself unable

to distinguish between dreams and reality after he began acting violently. This suggests that violence narrows people's worldviews.

Davidson's dream (or memory) may also suggest that part of the reason why he distrusts the Athsheans instinctually is their link to a traumatic childhood memory (or dream). However, Davidson doesn't use that memory to confront his real-world behavior the way the Athsheans would have. This memory also seems to be a rare example of Davidson's dependence on a woman, which further explains his unwillingness to confront the memory head-on, since he now views women as subordinates.

●● Something stirred down inside him, something almost like laughter. By God they couldn't get him down! If his own men betrayed him, and human intelligence couldn't do any more for him, then he used their own trick against them—played dead like this, and triggered this instinct reflex that kept them from killing anybody who took that position. They just stood around him, muttering at each other. *They couldn't hurt him.* It was as if he was a god.

**Related Characters:** Don Davidson (speaker), Raj Lyubov, Selver Thele

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 178

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, narrated by Davidson, takes place after Davidson attempts to escape the Athsheans' attack on New Java via helicopter. His helicopter crashes, and he runs into a bush to avoid the Athsheans. When they find him anyway, he assumes the surrender position—when Selver attacked him earlier in the novella, he assumed this position inadvertently, but he now knows what he's doing.

Earlier, Lyubov explained to the colonists that the Athsheans wouldn't be able to kill someone in the surrender position. This explanation is likely why Davidson is so smug in this passage—he believes that the Athsheans can't harm him and that he's therefore outmaneuvered them. His logic seems backwards, as he's essentially suggesting that *his* surrender forced the *Athsheans* to surrender.



If anything, this seems to be a way for Davidson to feel in control of a situation that he isn't in control of. Crucially, the novella never suggests that Lyubov is correct that the Athsheans *can't* kill someone who surrenders. After all,

Lyubov once believed that the Athsheans couldn't kill, and they quickly proved him wrong—it was never that they couldn't kill but rather that they chose not to. More than likely, if the Athsheans wanted to kill Davidson, they'd be able to, regardless of his position. That means that their choice not to is an act of mercy.

Davidson also suggests that the Athsheans' choice not to kill him makes him a god, thus implying that godhood involves power or dominance over others. In Athshean culture, this isn't the case. Selver is a god among the Athsheans, and his godhood involves bearing burdens on behalf of his society, explaining new information to them, and sacrificing his own selfhood for the greater good. This once again demonstrates Davidson's narrow worldview and his desire for dominance over all else, since he can't imagine being in a position of power that doesn't allow him to control others.

☝ “Look, Captain Davidson,” the creechie said in that quiet little voice that made Davidson go dizzy and sick, “we’re both gods, you and I. You’re an insane one, and I’m not sure whether I’m sane or not. But we are gods. There will never be another meeting in the forest like this meeting now between us. We bring each other such gifts as gods bring. You gave me a gift, the killing of one’s kind, murder. Now, as well as I can, I give you my people’s gift, which is not killing. I think we each find each other’s gift heavy to carry. However, you must carry it alone. Your people at Ehsen tell me that if I bring you there, they have to make a judgment on you and kill you, it’s their law to do so. So, wishing to give you life, I can’t take you with the other prisoners to Ehsen; and I can’t leave you to wander in the forest, for you do too much harm. So you’ll be treated like one of us when we go mad. You’ll be taken to Rendlep where nobody lives any more, and left there.”

**Related Characters:** Selver Thele (speaker), Don Davidson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 180

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a conversation between Selver and Davidson that takes place after the Athsheans attack Davidson's camp and corner Davidson as he's trying to escape. Selver refuses to kill Davidson, who has laid in the surrender position all night. Instead, he tells Davidson that the Athsheans will bring him to the eroded Dump Island, where he'll live in exile.

Selver and Davidson have already demonstrated that they have vastly different definitions of what it means to be a “god.” Selver's godhood means that he translates information for his people—specifically, he provided them with the tools and motivation they needed to kill the humans. In other words, Selver's godhood is communal and revolves around his people's survival, whereas Davidson only feels like a god when he dominates others. However, Selver recognizes Davidson's power despite the fact that this power doesn't fit with his own definition of “god.” This could be because Davidson has impacted events in the novella as much as Selver has; the two characters both attack each other's species in part due to their mutual hatred of one another. Selver's choice not to kill Davidson breaks this cycle of violence permanently.



Characters in the novella frequently question whether or not violence comes naturally to men or whether it's a choice that men make. This passage suggests that the answer is “both” and “neither”: Selver finds violence “hard to carry,” while Davidson will find nonviolence equally difficult. It's not clear whether either state of being is “natural.” Still, the fact that Selver chooses not to kill Davidson proves that violence is a choice, regardless of whether or not it's instinctual.

Finally, Selver chooses to punish Davidson by isolating him on Rendlep, or Dump Island. There, Davidson will quite literally face the consequences of the humans' deforestation, as the island is entirely eroded. Even worse, Selver makes it clear that this punishment will make Davidson “one of [the Athsheans],” since the Athsheans' insane citizens—presumably their violent ones—are also isolated. Davidson spent the novella attempting to dominate the Athsheans, only to be treated as one by the end, which the novella implies is a fitting punishment.

## Chapter Eight Quotes

☝ “Sometimes a god comes,” Selver said. “He brings a new way to do a thing, or a new thing to be done. A new kind of singing, or a new kind of death. He brings this across the bridge between the dream-time and the world-time. When he has done this, it is done. You cannot take things that exist in the world and try to drive them back into the dream, to hold them inside the dream with walls and pretenses. That is insanity. What is, is. There is no use pretending, now, that we do not know how to kill one another.”

**Related Characters:** Selver Thele (speaker), Don Davidson, Mr. Lepennon

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 188-189

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a conversation between Selver and Mr. Lepennon, three years after Davidson's final attack on the Athsheans. Earth's spaceship returns to the planet to evacuate the colonists, and Lepennon asks Selver whether the Athsheans have begun to kill each other.

Earlier in the novella, Lyubov tried to convince Selver to stop killing, as he worried that continuing to kill would alter Athshean society. This passage proves that Lyubov's fears were correct. Violence in the novella has only generated more violence—and while the Athsheans were a nonviolent species prior to the humans' colonization, the humans' violence influenced Athshean society. Because the Athsheans killed humans, they can never return to

permanent nonviolence. The humans plan to leave Athshe at the end of the novella, but this passage implies that their presence on the planet has long-term consequences.

Throughout the novella, Athsheans discussed the humans' "insanity" and inability to listen to their dreams. In contrast, Athsheans were always able to see the bigger picture. That seems to remain the case, as Selver isn't willing to "pretend" that Athshean society is the same as it once was. Instead, he understands that his society can never return to what it once was.

Finally, this passage demonstrates how lonely Selver's godhood is, as he credits himself with introducing violence to the Athsheans. That means that he bears responsibility for what Athshean society has become. Much like his society can never go back to the way it once was, Selver can never go back to the person he was before he met the humans.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER ONE

When Captain Davidson wakes up, he thinks about two pieces of news, one good and one bad. The good: a shipload of 212 women has just arrived in Centralville. A town on the planet of New Tahiti, Centralville is 27 light-years away from Earth and about four hours by helicopter from Smith Camp, where Davidson lives. The women have been shipped to the New Tahiti Colony to breed.

*Immediately, readers know that Captain Davidson's world isn't like their own, as humans like Davidson are living on distant planets. Because Tahiti is an island on Earth, the fact that Captain Davidson knows his current planet as "New Tahiti" suggests that humans might have named this planet and thus control it. Notably, women don't seem to have much agency in this new world: they're treated as cargo, and their central purpose is to have children.*



The bad news came in a new report from Dump Island: erosion has wiped out the crops. This began happening before Davidson was sent from Dump Island to run Smith Camp. He vividly remembers the bare soil washing into the ocean.

*This passage hints at Captain Davidson's purpose on New Tahiti: the planet is being used for agriculture. But the fact that they refer to one of its islands as "Dump Island" is the novella's first hint that humans don't respect the planet's ecology.*



The erosion apparently means that, on New Tahiti, they need to create farmland around stands of trees. Davidson finds this silly; nobody has to waste valuable acreage on trees back on Earth. But then again, Earth is tame and New Tahiti isn't, which is why he's here—"to tame it." Grinning, Davidson thinks about men like him conquering this planet. He likes a challenge.

*Davidson's dismissal of the planet's need for trees further suggests that he doesn't care about nature, an important character trait that many of the humans in the novella share. This passage suggests that Davidson will be an antagonist, as his desire "to tame" New Tahiti with other men hints that he perhaps overvalues dominance and masculinity. This passage also hints that Earth looks different in this universe—Davidson's surprise at the erosion's cause implies that there aren't many trees left on Earth, which could be why the humans are on New Tahiti.*



Davidson gets out of bed and calls for his crechie, Ben, ordering him to prepare the hot water. After dressing, Davidson exits his hut into the clearing where Ben has heated the water over a fire. Ben seems to be staring vacantly—typical of a crechie—and Davidson orders him to make breakfast.

*Apparently, there are native life forms on New Tahiti, and the humans have enslaved them—Davidson claims ownership over "his" crechie, who is reluctantly doing Davidson's chores. Davidson's desire to "tame" the planet is therefore not just about nature but about other species, too, which implies that he desires violent control over others. Because readers view these events from Davidson's perspective, the novella doesn't explain why Ben stares vacantly. But as readers learn more about the natives, Ben's reaction will become clearer.*



Today, Davidson plans to go to Central and see the shipload of women, who will be distributed among the 2,000 men on New Tahiti. Most are Colony Brides and only 20-30 are Recreation Staff—he wants to claim one of those quickly, as they're "real good greedy girls."

Ben is taking forever to bring breakfast, so Davidson yells again. While Ben is old and "dumb even for a creechie," Davidson knows how to get him to work. He could tame any creechie, but he's excited not to need them anymore once there are enough humans on New Tahiti. This is the planet's destiny—it's been "literally made for men." Once they've cut down forests to make fields and eliminated "savagery and ignorance," it'll be perfect, and it will be *his*. Davidson considers himself a "world-tamer."

Walking through the camp, Davidson runs into Kees Van Sten, who asks him to stop the loggers from hunting red deer. There's a law against hunting red deer, but Davidson doesn't want to enforce it—it's the men who matter, he says, not the animals, and it's fine if "a little extra-legal hunting" helps the men have fun. Kees protests that the men have other hobbies, including movies, drinking, and—for those who don't want to participate in the Army's sanctioned "hygienic homosexuality"—there are the new women in Central. According to Kees, Davidson's "frontier heroes" are spoiled already and shouldn't wipe out rare native species for fun—he'll report Davidson if he doesn't do something.

Davidson calmly condescends to Kees, saying that it's fine to report him, but it's silly to want to preserve and study the planet's forest. Unlike Kees, Davidson puts Earth first; Earth desperately needs wood, so they're here to log New Tahiti. Kees scoffs at the idea of remaking New Tahiti into Earth, which is just cement now.

*Again, women don't have much agency in this human society, and they exist to serve men. Based on Davidson's musings, readers can assume that "Colony Brides" are meant to bear children and that "Recreation Staff" are meant for casual sex with men, which is why Davidson wants to claim a woman from the latter group.*



*Davidson definitively emerges as an antagonist here, as he implies not only that he'd like to deforest the planet but that he'd like to wipe out the native "creechies"—a desire that grows over the course of the novella. Furthermore, Davidson's boast that he can "tame" creechies implies that he has acted and will act violently toward them. The humans seem to be colonists on New Tahiti, so Davidson's belief that the planet is "made for men" is both factually untrue and indicative of the humans' desire for dominance. Davidson's society supports this desire, as human men have power over both women and the natives on New Tahiti.*



*Apparently, Davidson's dismissive attitude toward New Tahiti's wildlife isn't universal among the humans, as Kees Van Sten is more concerned about the deer than he is about the men. Notably, the men don't seem to be hunting the deer for food, and instead, this seems to be another way for them to feel dominant—much like Davidson enjoys feeling dominant over Ben. This passage reveals that Davidson is part of a military complex and hints that while Davidson deeply values his masculinity, this human society doesn't have the same gender and sexual norms as readers' society, as the Army itself apparently facilitates "hygienic homosexuality." While some elements of this human society are recognizable, others are heightened or distorted.*



*Readers learn the colonists' reason for being on New Tahiti in this passage: Earth's natural resources are gone, and they need to mine New Tahiti's. This makes it all the more shocking that Davidson doesn't value the forest as much as Kees does, since Earth has already lost their flora and fauna. Davidson might think that he's putting "Earth first," but clearly the humans weren't always thinking in those terms.*



Kees storms away, and Davidson thinks about deer, which he first saw on New Tahiti—they're amazing animals, especially compared to the "robodeer" on Earth. It's only natural to hunt them, he thinks, since that's what they're for. While Davidson admits that Kees is smart, he's not a realistic thinker; he doesn't see the advantage of siding with mankind, even though Man wins every challenge.

Davidson continues his walk through the logging camp. With their 200 men, they've already tamed a good chunk of wilderness—it was "nothing" before, only trees. New Tahiti is largely water, and the rest is forest. On Earth, wood is more valuable than gold, which is why the men are here: transforming New Tahiti's forest into lumber and then giving the clear-cut land over to farming.

New Tahiti has been colonized previously, about a million years before. Someone—it's not clear who—brought plants and animals from Earth, and Earth and New Tahiti have evolved in parallel over the centuries. The big difference is that humans died out on New Tahiti, and creechies—three-foot-tall descendants of monkeys—have become humanity's closest replacement. They're quite inferior to humans, though.

Someone greets Davidson, and he's a little slow to turn around—this stupid planet makes him daydream. It's Oknanawi Nabo (Ok), a dark-skinned, tough-looking guy. Davidson lights a reefer (his first for today) and admires the scenery as Ok tells him that he wants to let the creechies in the mill go, since he—unlike Davidson—can't get them to work. The history course that Ok took during training warned him that slavery was uneconomical, and Davidson stops him there: this isn't slavery, because creechies aren't human.

*Not only are Earth's trees gone, but their wildlife seems to be gone as well. Deer are likely overpopulated rather than endangered in places where the novella's readers live—so if even deer are extinct and replaced with "robo" versions of themselves in this universe, most other animals must be as well. Davidson seems to view violence as "natural," a belief that the novella will complicate. Finally, this passage introduces the concept of what it means to be "realistic": Davidson's definition of realism seems to be based on the assumption that men are naturally and rightfully dominant over others.*



*Davidson's belief that there was "nothing" on the planet when it was covered by forest is tongue-in-cheek, as there's literally nothing left in the areas that the humans have deforested. This passage also confirms that the colonists are here to take New Tahiti's wood, then farm the land. The fact that the land must be clear in order to farm it suggests that they plan to deforest large swaths of the planet, which will likely be a point of tension between the humans and natives.*



*The origin story of Earth differentiates the novella's version of Earth from readers'. Ursula Le Guin wrote many books that explored this origin story; in her unofficial "Hainish Cycle" (which this novella is part of), a planet called Hain colonized Earth years earlier, which is what Davidson references here. Although Hain also colonized New Tahiti, Earth-based humans are now in charge of that colonization. The fact that "creechies" descended from monkeys suggests that they're genealogically related to humans—a fact that's meant to make readers sympathize with the creechies and question the morality of humans enslaving them.*



*Part of Le Guin's inspiration for the novella came from the Vietnam War, and Davidson's apparently regular use of marijuana seems to be a direct reference to American soldiers in Vietnam. This passage also reveals that, much like Davidson's attitude toward nature, his attitude toward the creechies isn't universal, as some men are uncomfortable with dominating the creechies. Davidson's insistence that the creechies aren't human seems questionable, because again, they're related to humans through a common ancestor.*



Ok argues that the creechies too little and it doesn't work to starve them, but Davidson says that they're tough and don't feel pain. Ok should know this, since he and Davidson have both had sex with the females, who just lay there. Back when Davidson was in Central, a crazy male creechie jumped him, even though creechies supposedly don't fight. Davidson almost killed him, but the creechie kept coming back, like a squashed bug that won't die. Davidson still has a scar. You have to be hard on them, Davidson tells Ok.

Davidson senses that Ok won't hurt creechies due to their small size, so he suggests that Ok threaten them with hallucinogens, which they're afraid of. Davidson then asks if Ok wants to have a Collie Girl set aside for him, and Ok asks Davidson to leave a few for him. They watch creechies pass, and Ok confesses that creechies freak him out. Davidson agrees—if Lyubov wasn't on New Tahiti and Colonel Dongh didn't care about following the Code, Davidson would want the creechies killed instead of sticking with this Voluntary Labor thing. The creechies will be wiped out eventually, anyway, since men can hardly assimilate green monkeys.

Davidson checks out a hopper from HQ, and the guy on duty tells him to bring back a Collie for him. As Davidson flies over camp, he passes by swaths of trees until he gets to Centralville, which looks like a real city. This makes sense, because it was built when the Colony started four years ago. The ship in Central looks huge, even though it's just a launcher. Davidson tears up at seeing the ship—he's not ashamed of being patriotic. Walking down the streets in Central, he passes women and stares at their bodies.

Davidson goes to meet up with a friend (Juju Sereng) at the bar and sees Raj Lyubov there, sitting with some Navy men. Davidson doesn't respect the Navy, since they leave the hard work to the Army, but it's still funny and unusual to see Lyubov getting along with any soldier, since he isn't one. Davidson greets Lyubov, who hates him deeply. This amuses Davidson. Lyubov is probably girly like all other intellectuals; that's why he hates Davidson. Someone brings over some new Collie girls—luckily, these women aren't Brides, but rather the “fruity beauties” on Recreation Staff. Sometimes, the Colonial Administration manages to come through. Davidson happily spends the afternoon with the women.

*Not only have the humans enslaved the creechies, but they also apparently assault the creechie women. Because of this, readers are led to distrust Davidson's assertion that the creechies don't feel pain—it seems likely that the women simply didn't express this pain verbally. Davidson's description of his altercation with a creechie is significant, particularly because he implies that the creechie attacked him unprovoked. Later in the novella, readers will learn that there's more to the story.*



*This passage reveals that the colonists are following a code of conduct, and they've excused their enslavement of the creechies by claiming that the creechies are volunteers. Again, creechies and humans share ancestry, so Davidsons' claim that the creechies can't be assimilated is false—although the creechies apparently look different from humans. Again, Davidson's eagerness to hurt the creechies seems to be greater than other men's, which positions him as an antagonist. It's not yet clear why the creechies are afraid of drugs, but as readers become familiar with the natives' culture, this becomes obvious.*



*In this passage, readers learn that Davidson's desire for dominance is tied to “patriotism”—the novella seems to suggest that the colonists are motivated by nationalism, but nationalism for a planet rather than a country. And again, women clearly don't have a lot of agency in this society, as the men treat them like sexual objects rather than people.*



*Lyubov is an “intellectual,” though it's not yet clear what his job is. Nonetheless, his role on New Tahiti is clearly different from Davidson's military position, which is why Davidson thinks he's “girly.” However, this difference in duties doesn't explain Lyubov's hatred of Davidson, and Davidson doesn't seem to understand this hatred, either—instead, he assumes that Lyubov is threatened by his masculinity. Later in the novella, readers learn that there's more to the story than Davidson discloses here, which suggests that his narration is selective. Once again, women seem to have no agency—these women were supplied by the Administration, suggesting that they don't choose their sexual partners.*



As Davidson is flying back to camp, he notices that there's smoke above it. Flying closer, he can see that everything is burned—the hoppers, the hangar, HQ—but it wasn't a forest fire, because the trees are standing. He touches down and hides behind a shack, but he can't hear anything. The attack must have been either from an enemy camp or another planet, and the latter seems likelier. Maybe it's the humanoids (the Cetians and Hainish), whom Davidson never trusted.

Davidson is about to get to the hopper to send out an alarm when he hears alien voices. As he ducks behind the shack's roof, four creechies pass by, none wearing the shorts and collar that tame creechies wear—the Volunteer creechies must have been killed. Davidson assumes these creechies are spying for the invaders, but then one turns, and he recognizes it as the crazy creechie who attacked him in Central under a year ago and became Lyubov's pet.

Brandishing a **gun**, Davidson jumps out and asks who started the fire. The crazy creechie, who has a scar from Davidson on his face, says that the creechies burned the camp and all its humans are dead. Previously, this camp held 200 men and 90 enslaved creechies, but while Davidson was gone, 900 creechies came from the forest, killed the humans, and burned the camp. The creechie assumed Davidson was dead—he's glad to see him now. But Davidson doesn't believe anything this creechie has said; as a species, creechies never fight back, they certainly don't massacre, and they only have bows, anyway. Davidson asks who told them to do this, and the creechie tells Davidson that the creechie's wife did.

The creechie jumps at Davidson, dodging Davidson's gunshot. He then pins Davidson down, grabs his **gun**, and, bizarrely, begins to sing. The other three creechies smile, which Davidson has never seen. Davidson has also never seen a creechie from above. The crazy creechie—Scarface—points a knife and Davidson's gun at Davidson. He ends his song and then inexplicably tells Davidson that if Davidson can't sing, he can head back to Central to tell the humans what happened.

*Upon seeing the wreckage at Smith, Davidson's automatic instinct is to blame members of what he sees as another species (the "humanoids"). This is another example of planetary nationalism in the novella, which also explains Davidson's open hostility toward the creechies. Readers don't yet know whether or not Davidson is right that the "humanoids" attacked Smith, but it's already clear that his instincts are rooted in his own desire for dominance and superiority over other species.*



*Davidson still sticks with his theory that this attack came from "invaders"—an ironic viewpoint, since the creechies likely view humans as invaders. But the fact that the only people Davidson has seen so far are the creechies, and the fact that Davidson already knows one of these creechies to be violent, pokes holes in his theory and suggests that the attack may not have come from the Hainish. This passage also reveals that the violent creechie is connected to Lyubov, which hints that there's more to Lyubov's hatred of Davidson than just Davidson's masculinity.*



*Because readers have been introduced to some seemingly important humans at Smith, like Kees and Ok, the novella invites readers to be as surprised as Davidson that these characters are dead. Their deaths hint that the story won't be centered on humans and their superiority over other species, as much as characters like Davidson want this to be the case. Obviously, this creechie remembers Davidson as well as Davidson remembers him, and readers now grasp why their first encounter was significant. Apparently, creechies are nonviolent, which means that the creechie's attack on Davidson—and his recent attack on Smith—was out of character. This hints that the attacks were provoked and not random. Readers don't yet know why the creechie brings up his wife, but her involvement in this conflict will later explain the events that have unfolded thus far.*



*Readers are still viewing events from Davidson's perspective, so nothing the creechie does (including singing) makes sense. For now, readers are as disoriented as Davidson, who clearly feels emasculated by his position below the creechies. This passage introduces Davidson's gun as a symbol, which will come to represent humans' innate capacity for violence. The creechie steals this gun from Davidson, so the fact that he doesn't use it on Davidson suggests that he's making a conscious choice to act nonviolently.*





Davidson gets up and notices that another creechie is pointing a gun at him: it's *his* creechie, Ben. Davidson begins walking away, and one of the creechies shoots near him. Scarface tells him to run. Now Davidson remembers that Scarface's name is Selver—they'd called him Sam before Lyubov prevented Davidson from killing him.

*Davidson believed he was in control of Ben, but apparently, Ben was working to bring down Smith the whole time, likely providing inside information to other creechies. In fact, he might be the one to shoot at Davidson here. This passage continues to hint that the reason Lyubov hates Davidson might have something to do with Selver, since Lyubov apparently saved Selver. This passage also demonstrates that most of the humans weren't willing to connect with the creechies, not even bothering to use their names, though they apparently knew them.*



Davidson runs, certain that they can't kill him; it's impossible. He jumps into the hopper and circles around looking for the creechies, but they're gone. Using the hopper's machine guns, he shoots at the ground until the ammo runs out, then he flies back to Central feeling calmer, certain that no one can blame him for what happened. In fact, the creechies clearly waited until he was gone to strike. Now, no one will be able to prevent the humans from clearing the planet of creechies—not even Lyubov, since his pet was at fault for the attack. Maybe Davidson will be put in charge of extermination. This makes him smile.

*Davidson's first instinct after feeling emasculated is to retaliate with violence, which is a character trait that will have consequences later on (particularly because, in this passage, he isn't authorized to drop bombs). Davidson is also willing to lie to save his own skin, because he already knows that the creechies didn't wait for him to leave—Selver was surprised that he was alive. And even though Selver just showed Davidson mercy, Davidson continues to fantasize about dominating the creechies, which demonstrates his narrow worldview and unwavering prejudice.*



## CHAPTER TWO

As Selver Thele walks through the forest, he notices its many colors: rust, brown-red, green. The ground is wet, partly because of living organisms and partly because dead ones fertilize it. Nothing is stable out here; everything in the forest is in constant flux, and no one can notice all of its elements at once. Selver is slowly ambling on a path near a body of water when he sees an old man dreaming near a willow tree. The man, still dreaming, spots Selver inside of his dreams. Selver asks the man if he can come to his Lodge. Selver then squats down, exhausted—he's been walking for five days.

*This passage demonstrates how Selver's people (known among themselves as Athsheans) view the forest, which contrasts with Davidson's view. Selver acknowledges the forest as its own entity that can never be understood, whereas Davidson wants to dominate and kill it. Selver's description of the ecosystem in this passage also demonstrates the harm humans are doing by cutting trees, as every element of the forest fertilizes others—deforestation will have a widespread impact. Finally, this passage introduces the importance of dreaming in Athshean culture: it's something that allows them to live both in dreams and in waking reality.*



The man asks if Selver is from the “dream-time” or the “world-time,” and Selver tells him that he’s from the world-time. Leading Selver further into the grove of trees, the man admits that he at first mistook Selver for a god, since he’s seen Selver in a dream before. Selver replies that he comes from Sornol and is of the Ash people. The man says that this town is Cadast and that his name is Coro Mena. He asks Selver to confirm that he isn’t here looking for a wife, as travelers usually are, and Selver says that his wife is dead.

The two of them arrive at the Men’s Lodge, located inside a tunnel near the base of white oak trees. Upon arrival, Selver immediately collapses and falls asleep. That night, Coro Mena and a healer, Torber, sit near Selver and wonder what could possibly have made him so scarred and wounded, and what could have given him his bizarre arm injury. Selver also has a weird **iron engine** with him.

Coro Mena feels deeply afraid and enters a dream state to figure out why. In the dream, giants walk through the woods among falling trees, with iron machines moving behind them and a bloodied man running away from them, toward the Cadast Lodge. Coro Mena exits his dream state and confirms Selver’s story, which he just saw in his dream. Selver must have come from Sornol, since the “giants” are there. Torber wonders if the giants will follow Selver here.

Coro Mena slips in and out of dreams. Eventually, his sister Ebor Dendep, the Cadast Headwoman, calls him to the Men’s Lodge door and asks if Selver is awake yet—the Cadast people want to hear his story. She won’t insist on entrance to the Lodge, which would offend the Dreamers inside, but she’s worried for her people, since the giants might be following Selver. She asks Coro Mena to wake Selver, and Coro Mena agrees. Ebor Dendep wishes that Selver were a woman—then his story might make sense.

*Apparently, Athshean dream-states are so closely intertwined with reality that Coro Mena can’t tell whether or not he’s dreaming when he meets Selver, especially because he has dreamed about Selver before (though it’s not yet clear why). This passage also demonstrates that the Athsheans’ lives are linked to nature, as Athsheans apparently identify by what trees (like the Ash) are native to their areas—again demonstrating how harmful the colonists’ deforestation is to the Athsheans’ cultures and identities. Because Athshean dreams aren’t the same as human dreams, Selver’s claim that his wife is dead doesn’t conflict with his earlier claim that his wife told him to attack Smith—it’s likely that she visited him in a dream.*



*Readers already know that the Athsheans are nonviolent, so it’s not surprising that they can’t recognize a gun or what is presumably a gunshot. The fact that Selver now carries Davidson’s gun with him is significant, as it suggests that he now bears the burden of violence, which the rest of his people are unfamiliar with.*



*Coro Mena’s dream fleshes out how Athsheans dream: apparently, their dreams aren’t random and instead can provide crucial information about the past. Moreover, the Athsheans can dream at will. Apparently, the humans aren’t everywhere on the planet, because Coro Mena’s people aren’t familiar with them and refer to them as “giants.” This makes Selver all the more unique and isolated in his society, because he has direct experience with humans.*



*Because the Lodge is only for men, who are known as “Dreamers” in Athshean society, readers can infer that Athshean women’s roles are different. However, Ebor Dendep appears to have more authority in her society than the human women have in theirs, since she makes demands of Coro Mena. Her comment regarding Selver’s gender also suggests that in Athshean society, female opinions are valued, which is a sharp contrast to the humans’ colony.*



When Coro Mena returns to the Lodge, Selver is awake and explaining to the group that his city, Eshreth, was destroyed by “yumens” (his people’s name for humans) who cut down the trees there. The yumens enslaved him, and one of them raped his wife, Thele, who died. In retaliation, Selver attacked that yumen, who almost killed Selver, but another yumen intervened before he could do so. Selver then came to the North Isle, but the yumens followed the same path and destroyed more cities along the way.

Selver remained free and would sometimes visit the yumen camps, speaking to the people that the yumens kept in pens. Those people told him that the same yumen Selver had attacked was living in that camp. Selver was going to help his people escape, but the women were shut up in another, more secure area, and the men couldn’t leave them behind. Instead, the men came up with a plan to kill the yumens and burn their city.

The yumen Selver had known initially got away, but then he returned to his camp after they’d burned it. Selver pinned him down and sang to him, but when the yumen wouldn’t sing back, Selver let him escape once again. Then, after this yumen left, a ship came to hunt Selver’s people and set the forest ablaze, but no one was hurt, since Selver’s people had already fled. Selver abandoned the group and continued on alone, since he’s recognizable to yumens and therefore would make the group less safe.

Selver tells Torber that his wound is from the yumen’s **weapon**, which he took and has with him now. Coro Mena asks if Selver was once a Dreamer, and Selver says that he was, but he rarely dreams now, and when he does, he always does so while awake. He can’t always shape his dreams or walk the roads they lay out, which he should be able to do. Selver reassures Coro Mena that the yumens won’t follow him here, as he didn’t leave a trail. That’s not what everyone should be worried about, anyway. They should worry that the yumens will hunt and kill them all in retaliation for what Selver’s people did to the yumens.

*This passage explains why Selver attacked Davidson back in Centralville: Davidson sexually assaulted Selver’s wife, which led to her death. This means that not only was Selver’s violence provoked, but it was the direct result of Davidson’s violence. This idea of violence generating more violence is one that the novella will continue to explore, particularly because the Athsheans were never violent before encountering the humans. It’s not clear whether Davidson genuinely doesn’t know why Selver attacked him, but it does seem plausible that he wouldn’t remember killing Selver’s wife, as he doesn’t value the Athsheans’ lives.*



*While the Athsheans had every reason to retaliate against the humans, it’s unlikely that they would have done so without Selver’s prompting, because the colony began four years ago and the Athsheans never retaliated before. Furthermore, the first mass attack on humans specifically targeted Davidson’s camp. This suggests that the Athsheans’ violence against the humans specifically stems from Selver’s hatred of Davidson, which was prompted by Davidson’s violence against Selver’s wife. Again, the novella suggests that violence is a cycle, even though the humans will likely see the attack on Smith as an unprovoked massacre.*



*This passage still doesn’t explain why Selver sang to Davidson, but Davidson’s refusal to sing back must have been why Selver let him go. Selver’s isolation from his own people is also on clear display in this passage. He’s marked with a scar, which makes him recognizable, and he’s had experience with the humans that none of the other Athsheans have had. His connection to the humans allowed him to free the enslaved Athsheans, but it also separates him from his people.*



*Not only is Selver physically isolated from his people, but he’s also culturally isolated, since he can no longer dream. The reason for this isn’t clear, but it seems likely that it has something to do with Selver’s unique capacity for violence, which is symbolized by the gun’s continued presence. Selver also has a unique understanding of the humans’ capacity for violence, because none of the other Athsheans at the Lodge considered that the humans might retaliate with a massacre. Having already experienced Davidson’s point of view, readers can see the truth of what Selver is saying—wiping out the Athsheans is exactly what Davidson wants.*



Torber insists that such horrible things happen only in fever dreams, but Coro Mena says that the world can always change and adapt. He asks Selver what the yumens are like and whether they're men. Selver doesn't know: they certainly aren't like men he knows, as they kill their own kind and kill Selver's people mercilessly. Coro Mena knows that everyone's dreams will never be the same now that the yumens are here. But he says that Selver did what he had to do by killing men. Unfortunately, it was also the wrong thing to do, since it involved murder.

Coro Mena, who has seen the yumens once and concluded that they appear to be men, asks if yumens dream. Selver says that they dream like kids: only while sleeping and without training. Lyubov taught Selver the yumens' ways, and Lyubov understood how to dream, but even he distinguished between dream-time and world-time as though one is more real than the other. Selver falls back asleep, and Coro Mena tells Torber that Selver is now a god unlike any other. They've all dreamed of him for years, foretelling his approach, but now Selver has left dream-time behind. He's a god who knows what death is, one who "kills and is not himself reborn."

Ebor Dendep acts on Coro Mena's prophecy and gets Cadast ready to evacuate just in case the humans attack. Then, she sends scouts out to monitor yumen activity and has Selver tell his story to everyone else once he regains his strength. Because she's frightened, her people are, too. It's the Dreamer's job to make judgments, and her job to carry them out. Her people have messengers spread information about the attack and about Selver across the land.

Each land (of which there are 40) has a different dialect, and its people have different appearances and customs. But the forest barely changes, and the ocean never does. Selver's people have regular trade-routes that enable them to marry between lands, and the Dreamers speak a pretty consistent language, one women and non-Dreaming men rarely learn. The Dreamers interpret written documents to the Old Women, and the Old Women choose whether or not to believe them.

*Davidson spent much of his time insisting that the Athsheans weren't men, so it's interesting to see that the Athsheans wonder the same thing about the humans. Because the Athsheans are nonviolent, it makes sense that the humans' capacity for violence makes Selver believe that they may not be people at all. Coro Mena's dual approval and condemnation of Selver's actions is the novella's first hint that the Athsheans' violence against the humans was both practically necessary and morally wrong. The Athsheans had no choice but to retaliate against the humans, but they had to kill humans to do so. This raises the complicated ethical dilemma of whether or not violence is ever justified.*



*Again, Davidson and the humans treated the Athsheans as aliens, so it's a significant reversal to see the Athsheans discussing the humans the same way. The difference, of course, is that Coro Mena comes to the conclusion that the humans are men like them. Readers already know that Selver had some connection to Lyubov, and that connection was apparently significant, as Selver learned about humans from Lyubov. Selver is further isolated from his own society in this passage. It's not yet clear what it means that Selver is a god, but his experience with the humans' violence makes him unlike his people—apparently, they believe that beings who die are "reborn," but Selver's experiences make this impossible for him.*



*In Athshean society, the role of women is just as important as the role of men—a sharp contrast to human society in the novella. Women like Ebor Dendep act as political figures, absorbing information that men give them, choosing how to distribute it, and dictating how others will react to it. Without the women, the men's information wouldn't have value or reach.*



*Not only are younger women like Ebor Dendep significant to Athshean society, but Old Women are, too. Apparently, information on the planet comes first from Great Dreamers, who share information both with Headwomen and with Old Women. Headwomen disseminate that information, while Old Women decide its value and importance, which might vary by land. Again, this is a huge contrast to human society, where women are solely meant to breed.*



Still asleep, Selver dreams about being in a room at Eshsen (which is now the human city), which he can't leave or something bad will enter. But he decides to go outside anyway, to see the trees that have been planted. Unfortunately, the trees are all uprooted, and when blood runs out of the end of one of them, he thinks about his wife, Thele. Selver returns to the house and notices that he's near a street in Central, the yumen city.

Anticipating yumen attack, Selver notes that he has a **gun** he can use to shoot Davidson, who does eventually arrive. But when Selver fires the gun, nothing comes out, and he ends the dream in frustration. He's been in Cadast for 15 days and has begun to dream in the correct rhythm, which should happen 10-14 times per day. His dreams are awful, but he welcomes them, since they prove that he can still dream at all.

Selver enters back into his dream state and imagines himself pinning Davidson down again, this time hitting him with a rock and breaking his teeth. It's a familiar wish-fulfillment dream, but he stops it before it can progress further, because he doesn't want to feel relieved right now—he'd rather feel bitter. Instead, he dreams of his encounter with Davidson in Central, when Davidson beat *him*. Back in world-time, Ebor Dendep sits next to Selver in the birch grove, which is at the center of Cadast. There are houses at the roots of trees, and 800 people live there. Now, Cadast is hosting 60 strangers who came to see Selver.

A young girl, Tolbar, comes to tell Ebor Dendep that there's a messenger from the South at the Women's Lodge. Tolbar watches Selver sleep, both fascinated and afraid of him. Two Old Women bring the messenger to Ebor Dendep, and once Selver wakes up, Ebor Dendep invites the messenger to speak. The messenger tells them that she comes from Trethat and has a message for Cadast and Selver specifically: there are "new giants" in Sornol, including females, and all the giants in Sornol know that Selver burned their city. The Great Dreamers elsewhere foresee that eventually there will be more giants than trees. Everyone is silent at this proclamation, and one of the Old Women says that this is a "bad world-time."

*Selver's dream further demonstrates how closely intertwined the Athsheans' lives are with nature. Selver is compelled to see the trees even though doing so will put him in danger. He then imagines the trees—which the humans cut down—as living things with "blood," and he even likens them to his deceased wife. This dream also implies that the Athsheans plant trees regularly, further contrasting them with the humans, who only destroy the forest.*



*Earlier, Selver noted that he can no longer control his dreams the way Athsheans should be able to. But the fact that he's now easing back into dreaming suggests that he should be redeveloping this control, so his inability to shoot Davidson with Davidson's gun is significant. Although Selver has the ability to kill Davidson, he seems to subconsciously resist doing so, again suggesting that violence is something unnatural for the Athsheans. This choice not to kill Davidson, even in his dream, also mimics Selver's earlier choice not to kill Davidson in reality—a choice that will remain a point of tension throughout the novella.*



*Because the novella has hinted that violence always generates more violence in a cyclical fashion, Selver's choice to fixate on Davidson's violence against him rather than his ability to hurt Davidson makes sense. Davidson's violence is what motivates Selver's violence, and Selver needs to feel motivated if he wants to further retaliate against the humans. The structure of Athshean society once again demonstrates the Athsheans' close ties to nature, as they rely on roots for shelter. When the humans cut trees down, they disrupt Athshean society.*



*Once again, Selver is clearly isolated from his society—his unique relationship with the humans leads people to either treat him as holy or fear him, as demonstrated here. Readers already know the information that the messenger shares in this passage; Davidson was going to Central to see these "new giants" himself, as the messenger is referencing the shipment of women. But hearing it from the Athsheans' perspective puts it in a new context, as the Athsheans are clearly afraid that more humans arrive on the planet means more danger.*



As they all sit there, Selver tells Ebor Dendep about Lyubov, who saved and freed him. Lyubov told Selver that half of his race is women, but the men were waiting to summon women to the Forty Lands until it was comfortable for them. Ebor Dendep scoffs at this—their men want to create “dry beaches” (her language doesn’t have a word for “desert”), and yet they call this comfort. They should’ve sent women first—maybe in their culture, women are the ones who dream. Ebor Dendep believes that the yumens are insane, since they “only dream in sleep,” but Selver insists that a whole people can’t be insane.

Ebor Dendep doesn’t agree: these people are mad, unable to distinguish dream-time from world-time. They must think that if they kill a tree it’ll come back. But Selver shakes his head. The yumens understand death, he says. In fact, Selver is the one who didn’t understand a lot of what Lyubov told him, though this confusion wasn’t because of a language barrier—Lyubov and Selver learned each other’s languages. Lyubov told Selver that the men want wood and land, and that the yumens are men, just like Selver.

The yumens come from a place that has no forest, something that Selver can’t understand. But it doesn’t matter. The yumens want the forest, they have weapons, and their women will bear children, which means that their population will grow. They kill without mercy. They can’t sing “in contest,” they take poisons to make them dream, and those poisons make them drunk. The yumens may be insane, but it’s irrelevant—they have to leave the forest either way. If Selver’s people wait to get rid of them, they’re the ones who will die.

*Again, this passage demonstrates the different roles of women in human and Athshean society. Athshean women like Ebor Dendep seem to value human women more than human men do, as Ebor Dendep suggests that the human women might have a broader worldview than the men (or they would if they were able to dream). This suggests that the Athsheans can’t imagine the inequality of human society. And the fact that the Athsheans don’t have a word for “desert” again demonstrates how important nature is to their lives, as they can’t conceive of a place without abundant greenery and wildlife.*



*Because the Athsheans use dreaming to make major decisions, it makes sense that they can’t understand the humans’ limited mindset—essentially, Ebor Dendep is accusing the humans of having a narrow worldview, which is true for characters like Davidson. This passage also demonstrates how vital the connection between Lyubov and Selver was, because Athsheans like Ebor Dendep don’t understand anything about the humans, including their motivations for being on the planet. Since Selver connected with Lyubov, he can provide that information.*



*Some of the information Selver provides here comes from his own experience as an enslaved Athshean, but some of it also comes from Lyubov—for instance, Selver wouldn’t otherwise understand the purpose of the humans’ drugs, and he certainly wouldn’t understand that wood is the humans’ focus. Again, Selver’s connection to Lyubov is vital, as it helps to convince him that the humans have to be driven off the planet. Incidentally, this passage also explains why the Athsheans are afraid of hallucinogens, something that confused Ok: the Athsheans see drugs as a forced dream state, which would presumably interfere with their own dreaming. This passage also explains why Selver sang to Davidson after pinning him down: singing is a nonviolent “contest” for Athsheans.*



Selver once saw the yumens kill a woman as she begged for mercy. Even if the yumens are also men, they're unfit to be men. Selver wants to return to Sornol and gather exiled and enslaved people, all of whom are likely dreaming about burning cities.

*It would be easy for Selver to assume that, because the humans are willing to kill innocents, they're animals—but like Coro Mena, he agrees that they're men. This complicates his decision to retaliate further against them, even though retaliation is necessary for the Athsheans' survival. This passage also implies that the Athsheans share dreams, which means that not only has Davidson's violence prompted Selver's violence, but Selver's violence has prompted other Athsheans to dream of violence themselves. Once again, the novella suggests that violence begets more violence, and the structure of Athshean society enables this on a mass scale.*



Selver leaves the grove, and the messenger asks who he is. Ebor Dendep says that he's a god of forest-fire, "the one who is not reborn." That night, Coro Mena walks with Selver to the place in the forest where they met. Sixty men will follow Selver, and they'll gather more along the way, but he's setting off alone first. Coro Mena tells Selver that this spot will be known as Selver's Grove one day. Selver replies that Coro Mena believes in him more than Selver believes in himself.

*The Athsheans frequently imply that death means rebirth within dream states: earlier, Ebor Dendep was certain that the humans think trees regenerate, and Selver implied that he sees his dead wife in dreams. The fact that Selver's godhood takes regeneration away from him further demonstrates his isolation from society, as does his solo journey away from Cadast.*



Coro Mena tells Selver that he sees things clearly: his people have been afraid for years, and Selver is gathering and harvesting that fear, since he's experienced more than anyone. The world will change as a result of that harvest. Coro Mena dreamed about Selver before they ever met: in the dream, Selver walked a path, and trees grew up around him. Selver leaves Coro Mena and chooses a spot to rest against a tree, protected from falling rain by its leaves.

*Even though Coro Mena outlines a violent future for Selver, he also suggests that Selver's violence will allow for progress. His language likens Selver's violence to natural growth, as he claims that Selver will "harvest" fear. Similarly, Coro Mena's dream shows Selver helping trees grow. This contradiction mimics what Coro Mena said earlier in this chapter: Selver's violence is wrong and necessary at the same time, since it's the only thing that will ensure the Athsheans' (and the forest's) survival.*



## CHAPTER THREE

Raj Lyubov has a migraine. He'd supposedly been cured of migraines during his Army psychotherapy sessions, and he's taken medicine to stop this one, but it won't go away. He wonders what the Athsheans would do to cure a migraine, but really, they'd never have one—they'd daydream the signs of it away. Lyubov tries to daydream like Selver taught him. Once, Lyubov once hooked Selver up to an EEG, and Selver showed him how to turn his alpha-rhythms on and off. But Lyubov can't do it now.

*Earlier, Selver noted that there were things he and Lyubov couldn't understand about each other, even though they could understand each other's languages. Dreaming seems to be one of those things, because Lyubov views the Athsheans' dream states as "daydreams" and suggests that the Athsheans would dream to fix an ailment. This seems to be an oversimplification, as dreaming isn't merely a tool or a cure—it's a way for Athsheans to translate spiritual concepts and work through their feelings.*



Lyubov recalls that the Athsheans burned Smith Camp two days ago, an attack that killed 200 men—everyone except Davidson. That’s why Lyubov’s pills can’t reach the center of his migraine to stop it: his migraine begins with that attack, which destroyed his certainty about the “High Intelligence Life Forms of World 41.” Over the five Earth years he’s been here, he’s been certain that the Athsheans couldn’t kill men, either their men or Lyubov’s, and he’d written many scientific papers claiming this. They’re all incorrect now, so he missed something.

Before he heads to the meeting at HQ, Lyubov takes a vodka shot, which calms him. When he gets to the conference room, the *Shackleton* crew is already there, including Commander Yung and some men in non-Navy uniforms. Lyubov is surprised to see they are non-Terran humans. When he introduces himself, he finds that one of the men is a Hairy Cetian named Mr. Or, and one is a Hainishman named Mr. Lepennon. Lepennon compliments Lyubov’s research on the Athsheans’ sleep. Lyubov assumes that the two men have spent time on Earth, but their role at this meeting is unclear.

The room continues to fill with personnel, including the colony ecologist (Gosse) and Captain Davidson. The purpose of this meeting is obviously to find out who’s to blame for the Smith incident, and while Lyubov knows that it’s him, he glares at Davidson. Commander Yung begins the meeting by saying that he initially came to World 41 to drop off new colonists, but now the attack at Smith has to be addressed—particularly because, as the colonists would have learned soon enough, World 41’s status as a colony was already in flux and this could impact it.

Yung confirms that everyone has heard Davidson’s recorded report on the Smith events, and he invites them to ask Davidson questions. His question is whether Davidson had permission to set fire to Smith when he returned, and Davidson admits that he didn’t. Lepennon asks Davidson if those under his command at Smith were happy, and Davidson says yes. Lepennon wonders, if they were happy, then what caused some of the men to massacre the other men and destroy Smith. Lyubov disrupts the resulting silence by saying that Lepennon misunderstood: the native Athsheans employed at Smith joined with the forest Athsheans to destroy Smith, and the colonists weren’t involved. Davidson referred to the Athsheans as “creechies” in his report.

*Lyubov’s migraines (which will recur throughout the novella) seem to be linked to his internal tension and guilt. Here, Lyubov feels guilty because his research led the humans to believe that the Athsheans were nonviolent. This confirms that Selver’s attack on Davidson at Central must have been the first instance of Athshean violence against a human. This also lends further credence to the idea that violence begets violence, as Davidson’s violence motivated Selver’s (both at Central and at Smith). Lyubov’s research was both correct and incorrect: the Athsheans could kill, but they chose not to until the humans modeled unforgivable violence.*



*Because this chapter introduces a new human perspective, Davidson’s worldview becomes more villainous in contrast. Not only does Lyubov not use the word “creechie”—which readers can now assume is derogatory—but he also refers to the Hainish and Cetians as “non-Terran humans,” rather than “humanoids” (Davidson’s term). It remains unclear whose perspective is more common among the colonists (or where leaders like Commander Yung fit in), but clearly, Davidson has an unusually strong grudge against anyone who isn’t like him.*



*While Lyubov’s research probably gave the colonists a false sense of security, he’s arguably right to blame Davidson for the Smith massacre, since Davidson’s murder of Thele started a chain reaction of violence. Moreover, it’s not obvious what the colonists would have done differently if Lyubov’s research had shown that the Athsheans were capable of violence—the humans might have acted even more violently toward them, which could have caused retaliation anyway. Throughout the novella, humans like Davidson have viewed their logging work as vital, so to hear that the colony might be shut down is another perspective shift for readers.*



*Davidson’s decision to bomb Smith after the massacre was an impulsive one that’s beginning to have consequences here and will continue to have consequences later on. Lepennon’s misunderstanding is almost comical, as it disrupts the human-centric worldview that characters like Davidson have. Here, Lepennon views the humans, not the Athsheans, as loose cannons. Ironically, Davidson’s derogatory treatment of the Athsheans in his report is what led Lepennon to draw this conclusion.*





Lepennon admits that he misunderstood, as he thought “creechie” was the name for a lesser Terran caste. He’d assumed the Athsheans were nonviolent, which makes him more confused than ever about what motivated the attack. Mr. Or dryly wonders whether Davidson was including the native people when he said that everyone at Smith was happy, and when Lepennon poses this question, Davidson calmly says that the native people were happy, and that they were never asked to do anything unusual.

This interaction makes Lyubov realize that his protests regarding the treatment of the natives have not been sent to the *Shackleton* along with his studies. Yung has likely seen the creechie-pens where the humans keep the Athsheans prisoner, but Lepennon and Or wouldn’t know anything about Terran colonies. Lyubov wonders why Lepennon and Or are at this meeting and whether Yung wanted them to be here, since they’re asking revealing questions. Maybe they heard about the violence and asked to come on-planet.

Lyubov feels suddenly excited by the idea that Lepennon and Or weren’t supposed to be here. He asks Davidson to confirm that one of the natives who attacked him was Selver Thele, who has a grudge against Davidson. Davidson is unaware of this grudge, and Lyubov tells him that Selver’s wife died immediately after having sex with Davidson. Selver blames Davidson (which is also why he attacked Davidson back in Centralville).

*Again, Lepennon’s confusion disrupts Davidson’s human-centric worldview, as he discusses Terrans as though they’re aliens. Davidson’s claim that the Athsheans were happy at Smith is false, but it’s not clear whether or not he’s consciously lying, since Davidson has a low opinion of the Athsheans and claimed that they couldn’t feel pain. That said, his insistence that the Athsheans couldn’t feel pain might have just reflected his subconscious anger at Selver’s attack on him.*



*This passage clarifies the positions of the humans in the novel. Apparently, the non-Terran humans have no idea that the Athsheans have been enslaved, while leaders like Commander Yung are aware of it but choose not to publicize it. Lyubov even hints that Yung would have wanted to keep Lepennon and Or away from this meeting so they wouldn’t find out about the Athsheans. Furthermore, because the humans on the colony haven’t sent Lyubov’s protests against enslavement to their higher-ups, it’s safe to assume that Lyubov is one of few humans on the colony who wants to free the Athsheans, a viewpoint that isolates him.*



*Earlier, Davidson claimed that Selver attacked him out of nowhere, and he seemingly had no reason to lie. His conversation with Ok implied that the humans regularly rape the Athshean women, and they probably wouldn’t be ashamed to admit to it. This suggests that Davidson didn’t know that his assault on Thele caused Selver to attack him initially and has—directly or indirectly—prompted all of the Athsheans’ violence thus far. This establishes a contrast between the Athsheans’ relationship to violence and the humans’: the humans are carelessly violent, whereas the Athsheans understand that violence will fundamentally change their society.*



Lyubov explains that Selver's hatred of Davidson might have partially motivated the recent attack at Smith. Athsheans are *capable* of violence, which he knows because adolescents who haven't learned "competitive singing" sometimes wrestle. Selver once tried to kill Davidson back in Central, and at the time, Lyubov assumed it was a one-time, grief-based thing—clearly, he was wrong. He asks Davidson to confirm that when the Athsheans confronted him, he ended up on his back, which embarrasses Davidson (something Lyubov feels slightly bad about). Accusing Davidson of rape and murder only supports Davidson's image of himself, but this is different.

Lyubov asks Davidson if his head was thrown back or to the side, since Davidson might have been in a position that the Athsheans would interpret as surrender. Someone is in "prone position" when they're on their back with their eyes shut and throat exposed, and it would be impossible for an Athshean to kill them. Lyubov asks Davidson if Selver sang, but Davidson doesn't know. According to Lyubov, ritualized singing is the Athsheans' stand-in for combat. Selver might have sung over Davidson either because he couldn't kill him or because he'd rather win nonviolently; the distinction is important.

Lyubov says that before yesterday, there was almost no such thing as rape or murder for the Athsheans, though accidents have happened (the Athsheans isolate perpetrators on islands). Lepennon is excited by the idea of a nonviolent society with no war and wonders what the cost is, and Lyubov says that the cost may be progress, as Athshean society is stagnant. But the Athsheans are adapting. Up until now, the Athsheans have treated the colonists like men, and the colony has responded violently and enslaved them. Now, the Athsheans might have decided that the colonizers aren't human after all and can therefore be killed.

*Throughout the novella, violence has always prompted more violence, so Lyubov's belief that Selver could act violently once and then never again seems misguided. This passage also confirms that singing is a substitute for combat in Athshean society, and that normally, adolescents are trained out of violence. This suggests that they don't have a model for violence ordinarily; the humans' presence provided one. Lyubov's guilt about making Davidson admit to his own vulnerability is odd, since Lyubov despises Davidson—Lyubov is clearly empathetic, but he may also feel lingering loyalty to the humans, even though he's aligned himself with the Athsheans. Finally, his belief that Davidson would be ashamed to appear weak but unashamed of rape or murder again shows that Davidson overvalues his masculinity to a dangerous degree.*



*Lyubov's description of the "prone position" partly explains why Selver let Davidson go. However, Lyubov could be wrong that it would be "impossible" for an Athshean to kill a human who surrenders—which he admits when he suggests that Selver might have wanted to win nonviolently. So far, it seems that the Athsheans' nonviolence is a choice rather than an innate characteristic, which makes their decision to act violently all the more significant.*



*Again, the Athsheans seem to have avoided violence by not allowing anyone to model violence—rather than executing violent Athsheans, they remove them from society. Because humans have modeled violence, the Athsheans are now violent. Lyubov's choice to frame this nonviolence as something that the Athsheans have sacrificed progress to gain therefore seems misguided. If anything, the Athsheans were previously able to progress past their violent instincts in a way that the humans can't. Notably, Lyubov is wrong that the Athsheans are killing the humans because they don't see them as men. Selver and Coro Mena decided that the colonists were men, which is why they know that killing them is wrong but necessary.*



Lepennon is horrified to hear that the Athsheans were enslaved, but Colonel Dongh (Davidson's superior) says that this is only Lyubov's opinion, as the camp uses the Voluntary Autochthonous Labor Corps. Or asks how many of each race there are, and Gosse says there are 2,641 Terrans and three million natives. Or laughs, saying that the colonists should've considered this disparity in numbers. While Dongh insists that the camp can handle the natives, he does admit that he'd thought they were nonviolent. Or scoffs at this, saying that Dongh knew the natives were as human as any of them, and no human is harmless. Now angry, Dongh says that he doesn't accept the notion that the Athsheans are human at all.

Or asks if Davidson considers the native people human, since he had sex with one. When no one answers Or's question, he angrily tells them that they haven't thought anything through. Yung then says that the reason the *Shackleton* is here at all is not just to drop off women but also to drop off an **ansible**, or transmitter, to Prestno (a nearby planet). Juju Sereng, an engineer, asks what that means. Since the Cetians invented ansibles, Or is the one to explain that the device instantly transmits messages over any distance. Yung says that messages used to take 54 years, and now there's no time gap between worlds, which will make a true interstellar species possible.

Lepennon adds that, unbeknownst to the colonists, an interstellar organization known as the League of Worlds has existed for 18 years. He and Or are emissaries. Lyubov thinks that these men could be lying about the existence of this supergovernment, which is undoubtedly what the military staff will think. Sure enough, Dongh wonders whether they should take Or's word for it, and Or says no. In fact, they're going to give this colony the **ansible** that Prestno was supposed to have, since this colony has clearly censored their reports. Now, the colony can directly ask the Terran Administration for orders, which will prevent any future catastrophes. Lyubov is somewhat afraid, since it's no longer clear who's in charge on this planet.

Lyubov stares at Lepennon, ruminating on the fact that civilization is easy for the Hainish, the same way it's easy for the "little green men," the Athsheans. An officer named Benton asks Lepennon if he and Or have authority here, and Lepennon says that no, the officers still answer to their government. Relieved, Dongh says that this means nothing is different now, but Or disagrees: the **ansible** makes things different. Yung applauds Or and Lepennon for deciding to give this colony the ansible. Yung also says that if the colonists feel that they're in danger currently, Yung can leave the *Shackleton* for a week as defense and evacuate the women.

*Because readers never learn what the Code states, it's never clear whether or not Earth's leaders intended to enslave the Athsheans or whether that was a decision the colonists made. This passage reintroduces the question of whether or not the Athsheans are human, and Or makes a new point, saying both that they are human and that all men are capable of violence. So far in the novel, this seems to be true—the only reason the Athsheans were previously nonviolent is because they chose to be, not because they were incapable of violence. Or's point actually implies that by suggesting that the natives were harmless, Lyubov was (unintentionally) devaluing and underestimating them.*



*Or is right that Davidson likely didn't think through his decision to assault Selver's wife—his motivations for doing so aren't clear, but more than likely, it was a way for him to assert dominance. This passage also introduces the symbol of the ansible, which comes to represent the possibility of a genuinely civilized human race. The fact that no instant communication device existed before the ansible explains a lot about how this colony has operated, because the colonists weren't answerable to anyone—no one on Earth would have been able to monitor what they were doing in real time.*



*Davidson's distrust of the "humanoids" isn't unique to him—even Lyubov questions Lepennon and Or's motivations, which suggests that planetary nationalism is widespread. The fact that the colonists will now have the ansible, and the fact that the ansible represents oversight, suggests that the colony will be forced to act in a genuinely civilized manner. Based on Or and Lepennon's reactions, it's safe to assume that the Terran Administration wouldn't be happy that the humans enslaved the Athsheans. Or clearly thinks that the ansible will help to hold the colonists accountable as they continue their work, even though nothing about the colony's structure will change.*



*When Le Guin first wrote *The Word for World is Forest*, she titled it "Little Green Men," which was a reference to how aliens are "othered" in science fiction. Lyubov's suggestion that the "little green men" are actually more civilized than humans turns this idea on its head—Le Guin was clearly attempting to demonstrate that to the Athsheans, humans are the strange ones, given their propensity for violence. Again, Or thinks that the ansible will solve the colony's problems, even though it doesn't address their root causes.*



Yung can take a few hundred passengers, but they need to head to Prestno. They'll come back here on their way back to Terra, but that won't be for three and a half years. He asks if the colony can last that long, and Dongh says yes. Or asks if the natives can last, and Lyubov, who has been observing Davidson with rising panic, interrupts to say no. Dongh speaks first, saying that the natives are doing well. The colonists may have been mistaken about the natives' nature, but the colonists aren't planning a counterattack—the Colonial Code forbids it—and the colony will remain self-sufficient. The women aren't in danger, either.

Lyubov argues that the native culture may not last through four more years of humans, and the humans have damaged the planet by logging. Gosse says that this is a leap. Yes, Dump Island was over-logged and is now lost, but he insists that the basic logging plan was based on an ecological study and it remains sound. Lyubov says that this is how they discussed Alaska in the First Famine, and Alaskan species are destroyed now. The forest ecology here is in danger, he claims, and since the Athsheans' word for *world* is also their word for *forest*, any endangerment to the forest endangers the planet.

Dongh says that this isn't Lyubov's call to make, especially since it's Lyubov's fault that the colonists were vulnerable to attack. Lyubov just sits there, hoping that the infighting will make Or and Lepennon likelier to check in and put a stop to any wrongdoing that happens in their absence. Lyubov doesn't mind losing self-respect as long as the Athsheans can survive, though he feels humiliated and self-sacrificial now. He can also tell that Davidson is watching him, which makes Lyubov scared: if the colonists are left with just the **ansible**, they'll exterminate the Athsheans and claim it was plague. When the conference ends, Lyubov whispers to Lepennon that he has to tell the League to save the Athsheans. Lepennon meets his gaze but doesn't respond.

*Earlier in the meeting, Yung noted that the status of the colony was in flux. It's not clear what that means in the long term, but it seems likely that nothing will substantially change until after the three years are up. This means that the disagreement between Lyubov and Dongh is significant: Dongh insists that the colony will continue to operate as is for three years. Even if the colonists don't attack the Athsheans, that doesn't mean they won't affect their lives—the colonists will continue to log wood, which will be detrimental to the Athsheans' given how closely intertwined their lives are with nature.*



*Gosse's job as an ecologist is to look out for the planet's wildlife, but unlike Kees Van Sten, he seems to take that wildlife for granted. Lyubov's description of what happened to Alaska is important, because his reproach implies that it was human greed (rather than a natural disaster) that damaged the Alaskan ecosystem. Despite the fact that the humans have apparently damaged Earth beyond repair, Gosse refuses to learn from their mistakes and insists that the humans can take more from the Athsheans' planet. Readers already knew that the Athsheans depended on nature, but this passage confirms that this dependency is embedded in all parts of their society. This includes their language, which has no way to describe the world without also describing nature (hence the title of the novella).*



*Lyubov is putting himself on the line for the Athsheans, and it's obvious that he's sacrificing a lot: he has no allies, and the humans blame him for their vulnerability. While Lyubov is willingly giving up his place in human society to help the Athsheans, his humiliation suggests that this isn't a decision he makes lightly. It also suggests that Lyubov doesn't want to be isolated from everyone—he just thinks that what he's doing is necessary. Earlier, Or claimed that the ansible would prevent the humans from mistreating the Athsheans, but Lyubov isn't convinced, and this passage is the novella's first hint that the ansible may not usher in a more civilized human society after all.*



## CHAPTER FOUR

Captain Davidson thinks that everyone who was at the meeting has gone crazy. He can't believe that a commander was bowing down to humanoids who clearly stole the idea for an **ansible** from humans. And things haven't improved since the meeting. It's fine that Davidson is now under Major Muhamed's command at New Java Camp—while Dongh might have liked Davidson's raid at Smith, he still had to punish him for it. Fair. But the orders from the ansible are insane. They've been told to limit contact with the Athsheans unless the Athsheans initiate it, and they can't enforce labor—which means they can't work efficiently. Clearly, the ansible messages aren't coming from Earth, because Earth *needs* wood.

The messages also say that World 41's colony status is “under consideration,” that colonists can't use firearms, and that they can't retaliate. Davidson assumes that humanoids have planted these messages, since the men on Earth are more practical than this. The Cetians are probably trying to take over the Terran Government, and the Hainish are in on it, since “rats help rats.” They're planning to let creechies kill the New Tahiti humans, and Dongh is going to let them. Dongh told Davidson that he's following Terra-HQ's orders and that Davidson has to follow Muhamed's. Davidson can't betray humanity by following those orders, but he feels bad for Dongh, who isn't a natural traitor like Lyubov.

Some people, particularly asiatic forms and “hindi types” are natural traitors, and euraf-descended men like Davidson are natural saviors—that's just how things are. Davidson is especially annoyed that HQ removed the 10 Collie women in New Java and sent them to Central for safety reasons. But Davidson will get things back to normal. After the meeting, the men let the creechies out of the pens, and none were loyal enough to stay, the way even a monkey would have been. Now, the wild creechies have access to the formerly enslaved creechies who know the place. If Central burns, it'll be the men's fault. Davidson knows what the creechies are like—he saw the bodies at Smith. Ok had an arrow in each eye.

*Again, Davidson's distrust of “humanoids” points to planetary nationalism (a sense of identity and pride based on one's planet of origin), which is apparently widespread among the Terran humans. This passage shows that Davidson did face consequences for his impulsive raid on Smith, and the humans are now facing consequences for their enslavement of the Athsheans. At the moment, it seems like the ansible is functioning as Or and Lepennon hoped that it would: the colonists have freed the enslaved Athsheans. That said, they're still having a negative impact on the Athsheans' lives, since the Athsheans depend on the trees that the humans log.*



*Earlier in the novella, Davidson insisted that violence and dominance were natural and manly. The fact that the humans on Earth now forbid the colonists from acting violently suggests that the colonists' violence is a choice they made rather than any natural, inevitable action. Rather than examine his own culpability, Davidson again blames outsiders, dehumanizing the Hainish and Cetians by comparing them to rats and suggesting that they're plotting nefariously—when of course, the only person plotting is Davidson. The fact that Davidson is able to so easily dismiss the ansible's orders as fraudulent again suggests that the ansible may not be the cure-all that Or hoped it would be.*



*Not only is Davidson suspicious of non-Terran humans and the Athsheans, but he apparently also distrusts non-white Terran humans. (“Asiatic form” refers a person of Asian descent, and “euraf” refers to a person of European descent.) Davidson has a definitive image of what men should look and act like, and it's now clear that there's a racial element to this image. Davidson isn't wrong that formerly enslaved Athsheans would provide valuable intel if the Athsheans were planning to attack—after all, Ben was part of the attack on Smith. But his comments imply that the Athsheans would attack out of nowhere, which doesn't account for the humans' culpability. For instance, Ok's body doesn't prove that the Athsheans are naturally sadistic—even though Ok didn't like using violence against the Athsheans, he was in charge of monitoring the enslaved Athsheans, so his specific manner of death was at least partially a result of his own actions.*



Despite the orders against retaliation, the men at Central have hoppers with guns to defend themselves. It makes Davidson excited to think about dropping “firejelly” and watching the creechies scatter, especially because he associates the thought with beating up Sam. According to some books Davidson has read, men are only men when they sleep with women or kill other men. Even though the creechies aren’t men, it’s fun to imagine killing them.

*Readers have already seen that the Athsheans (indirectly) learned violence from Davidson. Here, Davidson suggests that his own violence was also a learned behavior rather than a natural impulse. Apparently, his hyper-masculine worldview comes from things he’s read, and human society allowed him to cultivate that viewpoint. Once again, Davidson insists that the Athsheans aren’t men, and he condescends to Selver by using the name the humans picked for him while he was enslaved. In contrast, the Athsheans have decided that the humans are men, complicating their decision to kill them.*



New Java is wetter than Central or Smith, though if you were in the forest during a monsoon, you wouldn’t notice the rain until you reemerged and got bowled over by it. Then you’d have to head back into the forest, where it’s easy to get lost. Unfortunately, Muhamed is a by-the-book commander. The only good thing about him is that he doesn’t radio Central often and he doesn’t like HQ’s orders. However, he obeys them when they come. Back at HQ, Davidson once saw papers that said that his own IQ was higher than Muhamed’s, but Muhamed still assumes he knows better than Davidson.

*Earlier, Selver took shelter in the forest during a rainstorm. Davidson’s account of the same situation again demonstrates the contrast between the Athshean and human views of nature, as Davidson sees sheltering in the forest as a danger and a hindrance. Once again, the ansible seems to be functioning as Or hoped it would—Muhamed doesn’t like the new orders, but he’s following them. Even if Davidson thinks that he’s smarter than Muhamed, Davidson is no longer in a leadership position and thus can’t stop Muhamed.*



Men at New Java distrust Davidson because he was the only man to survive Smith, but soon they’ll see that he’s not a traitor, since he knows they have to get rid of creechies to make this place safe. Davidson starts disseminating this message among the loggers, who have always hated creechies but never knew they were dangerous. Davidson also tells them that the humanoids want to wipe out the Terrans who are here for their own benefit, and that humans are outnumbered by creechies, which frightens the men.

*This passage confirms that the ansible can’t fix the colony’s problems. The ansible is one source of information for the colony’s men, but Davidson has decided to become another. And even though he doesn’t have any legal power, he’s able to prey on the loggers’ fears of outsiders and render the ansible irrelevant. The ansible depends on the men acting in good faith, and Davidson won’t do so.*



Even the ecological officer here, Atranda, hates creechies—to an absurd, extra-paranoid degree, actually, but he’s a good man to have around. Davidson doesn’t bother trying to get Muhamed on his side, since Muhamed is militant *and* doesn’t trust Davidson because of something related to Smith. But it will actually be easier to take control of Muhamed’s camp when it’s so well-organized than it would be otherwise. And Davidson *will* have to take over eventually.

*Again, the ansible relies on everyone carrying out their assigned duties without overreaching. The fact that the ecological officer on New Java despises the Athsheans—even though his job involves protecting their habitat—suggests that this won’t be the case here. And ironically, the fact that Muhamed is carrying out his assigned duties actually makes it easier for Davidson to sabotage him. No matter what, the ansible can’t override Davidson’s desire for violence, which suggests that a genuinely civilized human race may not be possible within the context of colonization.*



When Davidson has convinced a group of trustworthy men of the creechie threat, he takes them to a creechie town in the woods, which they burn together. When the creechies emerge, the men drop more fire. It's not actually exciting, since it's kind of like rat-hunting on Earth, but the creechies can at least fight back. This time, though, they don't—they lie on their backs instead, a sight that makes one of Davidson's guys sick to his stomach.

The men don't take a female creechie to rape, since they agreed with Davidson that it was perverted. Perversions like homosexuality are normal enough, but it's better to kill the female creechies and "stay clean." When they get back, no one tells Muhamed about the trip. Davidson knows that the creechies will attack the humans soon enough, and then the men will know he was right all along.

*Once again, violence generates violence, as Davidson responds to the Athsheans' attack on Smith with an attack on their village. The difference here is that the Athsheans in this village are clearly innocent, unprepared to fight, and willing to surrender by lying in the "prone position." True to the novella's established pattern, this attack on innocents will have violent consequences for the humans later on.*



*Davidson had no issue raping female Athsheans earlier in the novella, so the fact that he claims that it's a perversion now suggests that he was embarrassed by Lyubov's interrogation at HQ and is willing to revise history to preserve his masculine image. He also sees homosexuality as a perversion, but one that's more socially acceptable. Notably, Davidson's anticipation of an Athshean attack hints that he may have raided the village to provoke retaliation. This retaliation would then confirm his prejudices against the Athsheans and redeem him in the eyes of his superiors. In other words, Davidson is aware that violence generates violence, and he may be using that knowledge to his own advantage.*



## CHAPTER FIVE

Lyubov has just seen Selter again in person, which he found shocking. As he flies back to Central, he tries to puzzle out why the encounter disturbed him. It had taken him awhile to get invited to the nearby Athshean village by a headwoman, but he'd felt that he needed to follow the new rules about letting the Athsheans initiate contact. Dongh asked him to meet with the Athsheans and is now hoping that Lyubov will reassure him that they aren't a threat. Lyubov isn't sure that his report will do this.

As Lyubov flew to the village, he noticed how barren the land was prior to reaching the forest. Lyubov had never been inside a forest before he got to Athshe, and he used to feel distressed by the wildness of nature. But he eventually began to feel at home in the forest. He also likes the Athsheans' words for their lands, like *Athshe* (Forest/World). To the Athsheans, the forest makes up their world. Terrans think of the earth differently.

*Again, Lyubov is in an isolating position, since Dongh is now asking him to use his connection to the Athsheans to spy on them. Meanwhile, Lyubov's determination to follow the new orders to the letter would demonstrate that the ansible is functioning as expected. But because readers already know that Davidson recently attacked a village in secret, it seems like a futile effort on Lyubov's part.*



*The humans' initial attitudes toward nature in Athshe seem to be pretty consistent, as Davidson and Lyubov both describe feeling disoriented by the forest. But while Davidson's reaction to that disorientation is to dominate the forest, Lyubov's is to learn to live alongside it. Lyubov also seems to be one of few humans who understands the importance of nature to the Athsheans.*



Lyubov touched down and walked into the Athshean settlement. Previously, Lyubov had spent time in the Men's Lodge, but he knew they wouldn't invite him in this time. The townspeople knew about Smith and knew that the enslaved Athsheans were freed after the attack, and while Dongh was angry that this would seem to them to be cause-and-effect—which it wasn't—Lyubov thought that this meant that he could start over with the natives. The Athsheans like honesty, so Lyubov assumed they'd discuss Smith, but no one at the village spoke to him at all.

Lyubov had arrived in the late afternoon, or dawn according to the Athsheans' inner clock (contrary to colonists' belief, the Athsheans do sleep). Every 24 hours, adult women sleep five to six hours total, broken into catnaps, and men can sleep just two. But it's simpler for colonists to say that Athsheans don't sleep, since they assume that their naps are laziness. As Lyubov passed through the settlement, he saw many strangers, and none approached him. He then met an acquaintance, the headwoman's cousin Sherrar. She wouldn't tell him where his old informants (Egath and Tubab) were, and she attempted to get him away from the Men's Lodge by inviting him to see the fishing-nets.

A passing girl gave Lyubov a dirty look—no Athshean had ever looked at him like that before, and he wondered how the Athshean nature could have altered so quickly, since this particular town has never encountered Terrans or been enslaved. Apparently, just *hearing* about the attacks changed them, which seemed impossible to Lyubov: he'd assumed that a community or individual Athshean had to be provoked to act against their nature and culture.

Just then, Selver emerged from the Lodge. Lyubov and Selver made eye contact, which frightened Lyubov. Now, flying in the hopper, Lyubov wonders why he was afraid—nothing has changed between him and Selver, and Selver's actions at Smith didn't matter to Lyubov. They were good friends, and Lyubov felt close to Selver after saving his life. Besides, Selver's violent actions weren't without reason. Their tense encounter actually made Lyubov realize how loyal he felt to Selver, and he was frightened that Selver would see him as an enemy.

*Lyubov's belief that the Athsheans could move on after the enslaved Athsheans were freed is arguably naïve, given that violence in the novella has always generated more violence. Furthermore, the humans are still cutting down trees, which is one of the Athsheans' central concerns. Dongh is also incorrect that the ansible's orders to free the enslaved Athsheans are unrelated to the Athsheans' attack, since Lepennon and Or only gave the colonists the ansible because of the attack. This suggests that the Athsheans' violence was necessary to their survival, and the Athsheans are clearly aware of this, even if the humans aren't.*



*This description of the Athsheans' sleeping habits explains why Davidson always thought Ben stared vacantly and why Ok found the Athsheans lazy: the Athsheans need to sleep periodically throughout the day, so there would be times when they appeared to be daydreaming and neglecting their work. This passage also demonstrates that while Lyubov is isolated from the other humans, he's also isolated from the Athsheans. While they used to welcome him into their society, they don't want him there now.*



*Technically, Lyubov is right that the Athsheans had to be provoked to act violently, since Selver's violence against Davidson was the direct result of Thele's assault. However, the Athsheans share dreams, so Davidson's continued provocation affects them all. Meanwhile, the humans are still cutting down the Athsheans' trees, which affects the lives of all Athsheans.*



*At the HQ meeting, Lyubov essentially suggested that he was willing to give up his position among the humans for the Athsheans, a sentiment he reiterates here. However, Lyubov's continued attachment to his fellow humans means that he and Selver can't have the uncomplicated friendship he wants. Selver's actions at Smith did matter, since they directly impacted Athshean-human relations and changed the way the humans view Lyubov's research.*





Selver greeted Lyubov by offering his hands, as touch is a central mode of communication among Athsheans, which always grossed the colonists out. Selver's touch reassured Lyubov, who asked to speak with him, but Selver refused. Lyubov realized that despite their touch, Selver had changed. Lyubov asked if he could speak with Selver later, but Selver said he'd be leaving the area soon. Lyubov told Selver that the massacre didn't change their friendship, that the release of the enslaved Athsheans meant that nothing stood between them, and that Lyubov was the same as ever.

Selver told Lyubov that Lyubov shouldn't have come, that he should leave Central in two nights, and that he wished he'd never known Lyubov. After Selver left, Sherrar told Lyubov that Selver was a god now. Lyubov wanted to believe that Selver's rejection was just because Lyubov was a Terran, but the reason for the rejection was irrelevant; it hurt no matter what. As Lyubov pulled the hopper into the sky, Sherrar ran away, hopping in her eagerness to leave him behind.

The sight of Sherrar's hop was somewhat funny. Terrans react so negatively to Athsheans because of their size and their similarity to human appearance, but admittedly, they're odd-looking. Thinking of Sherrar now, Lyubov considers that part of his colony's problem is their lack of old women. Old women govern the Athsheans, dealing with political matters while their men deal with intellectual ones.

Beyond this, however, Lyubov is concerned with what he'll report to HQ, particularly related to Selver. Selver had always been important to Lyubov. Before they met, he was "Sam," a slave for three officers, including Benton. Many Athsheans were groggy while working in the camp, because they had to adjust their dreaming to fit the Terran workday. Sam was one of the few who adapted, and Lyubov used him as an "ethnological informant." Sam trusted him and helped translate the Athshean culture for Lyubov's research.

*The fact that Selver greets Lyubov the way he would greet another Athshean is significant and points to the deep connection between the two men. However, Lyubov's insistence that nothing has changed between them is, again, arguably narrow-minded. Lyubov suggests both that the Athsheans' violence was a one-time event and that he and Selver are on equal footing now. Both of these things are false, especially because the humans continue to log the planet and because Davidson continues to attack the Athsheans (something Lyubov doesn't yet know). And crucially, the massacre was at least partly the result of Lyubov and Selver's friendship, because Lyubov's intel about the humans convinced Selver that they needed to be driven out.*



*Selver's warning that Lyubov should leave Central is ominous, though its meaning is currently unclear. By telling Lyubov that he wishes they'd never known each other, Selver likely means that caring about Lyubov complicates his hatred of humans. But again, Lyubov ensured both Selver's survival (since Lyubov saved his life) and the Athsheans' survival as a species, as Lyubov's information helped Selver understand the humans' motivations.*



*While Lyubov seems to value women more than other colonists, particularly Davidson, he doesn't consider the fact that the colony could utilize the young women who are already in Central, whose current role is solely to breed. After all, young Athshean women are also vital, since they disseminate messages. Lyubov's wish for old women dismisses the younger human women on Athshe, which suggests that the colonists' patriarchal mindset is pervasive even among the more progressive men.*



*The backstory of Lyubov and Selver's friendship is significant, since their relationship was always rooted in understanding each other's cultures. While readers already know that the information Selver learned from Lyubov helped him make decisions, the information Lyubov learned from Selver was equally important, particularly because other Athsheans couldn't have filled the same role—they would have been too busy staying awake to learn English.*



Lyubov had been studying the Athsheans for years without understanding their sleeping habits, and Selver was the one who helped him understand what the Athshean word “dream” meant, as it was synonymous with the word for “root.” Using Selver’s EEG, Lyubov saw that the Athshean dream-state was between sleep and waking. Selver could have escaped from the humans’ enslavement, and Lyubov had offered to work with him in another location. But Selver refused, since his wife, Thele, was also enslaved and locked up in the female pen, and Lyubov couldn’t manage to secure her freedom.

Lyubov did help Selver and Thele meet in his hut occasionally, and as Thele was returning one night, Davidson saw her, took her to his hut, and raped her. She died afterwards, either because Davidson killed her, or because she chose to die, which Athsheans can do. Either way, Davidson murdered her, and the next day, Selver attacked him. Frightened by Selver’s persistence, Davidson was about to kill him before Lyubov broke up the fight. From that day, Lyubov has hated Davidson, and Davidson has hated Lyubov for stopping the murder. Davidson is a killer, and by nature, killers have to kill themselves over and over by murdering others.

Lyubov then nursed Selver back to health, which was against regulations. Because of this, he knew that no colonists would trust him again. He’d spent a long time trying to stay on HQ’s good side and pick his battles to stay in a position that would allow him to defend the Athsheans and continue to report to the Committee on Rights, who might eventually stop the Open Colony policy. But he had to save his friend. Davidson kept threatening to kill Selver, so after Selver was better, Lyubov dropped him off with relatives in the west.

Lyubov wasn’t reprimanded for helping Selver escape, since there was no policy about that (*technically*, the Athsheans weren’t slaves). But his colleagues, including the ecologist Gosse, were annoyed. Gosse wanted to know why Lyubov came to an Open Colony, knowing that it was human nature to wipe the natives out. Lyubov argued that it’s also human nature to make note of what humanity destroys, and Gosse told him to keep making reports if he wanted, but to stay out of things. Scientists don’t rescue lab rats. Angry, Lyubov said that Selver was his friend.

*Again, Lyubov’s clinical assessment of the Athsheans’ dreaming demonstrates that despite his deep connection with Selver, there are still things that he and Selver can never understand about each other. After all, Athshean dreaming is less scientific than Lyubov imagines and far more entwined with spirituality and nature—hence why the Athsheans don’t separate dreaming and the concept of tree roots.*



*Lyubov and Selver’s friendship didn’t directly cause Thele’s death, but it is important that she died directly after one of the secret meetings Lyubov helped to arrange. Again, Lyubov and Selver’s friendship saved Selver and the Athsheans, but it also (indirectly) forced them both to sacrifice a great deal. That said, Lyubov is right that Davidson was directly responsible for Thele’s death, and Lyubov’s description of Davidson’s mindset mimics the role of violence in the novella. Violence is cyclical, and Davidson’s acts of violence generate violence against himself. Here, Lyubov suggests that Davidson’s decision to enact violence is part of his nature, but the novella has already implied that this isn’t the case—instead, violence is Davidson’s choice.*



*Readers already know that Lyubov’s reports to the Committee on Rights never left the colony, and the colonists only let the Athsheans go after the Athsheans attacked them. Once again, this demonstrates that the Athsheans’ violence was necessary, since Lyubov’s attempts to legally secure the Athsheans’ freedom failed. Although the colonists now distrust Lyubov more than ever, since his research was faulty, this distrust is apparently longstanding, and Lyubov has apparently always been isolated from human society because of his connection to Selver.*



*Here, Gosse suggests that violence is part of “human nature,” but the events of the novella has already proven that this is false. The Athsheans’ existence shows that even when people have the capacity to be violent, they can choose not to be, and Davidson himself claimed to have learned violence from books. Contrary to Gosse’s belief, the novella suggests that violence is a choice, and that choosing violence only ensures more violence.*



Now Selver is a god. The word Sherrar used was *sha'ab*, which means both “god” and “translator,” according to the dictionary in Lyubov’s bungalow (which he consults now, having landed the hopper in Central). Lyubov wonders what the significance of this double meaning is. Maybe a *sha'ab* translates visions into reality and speaks subconscious thoughts, therefore changing society “from the root.” This also means changing Athshean society by dreaming (since *root* is the same word as *dream*). As a god, Selver has brought murder to the Athsheans. Is murder part of *his* language now, or is he just parroting Davidson’s? Murder seems to have emerged naturally from Selver’s own suffering, but it could destroy the Athsheans.

Lyubov doesn’t often think about what he can do to help a situation, but it’s hard not to now. He can’t do anything more to help the Athsheans survive, as the **ansible**’s existence protects the Athsheans and Colonel Dongh is following its orders. Because the ansible’s transmission is instantaneous, Lyubov considers it a “*machina ex machina*.” People now have to answer for their crimes as they commit them. However, it’s still not clear what the League is after. This is something that worries Dongh but excites Lyubov: diversity of possibilities means life, which means hope.

The only thing that might disrupt the balance between colonists and Athsheans is fear. The Athsheans probably aren’t afraid right now, and neither are the colonists, since nothing has happened since Smith. But if Lyubov told the colonists that he’d seen Selver, they’d put Selver on trial, overriding the Colonial Code, and they’d bring Davidson to Central to stand witness. Lyubov can’t allow that. He realizes that he’s already made his decision.

The next day, Lyubov turns in a report saying that Tuntar (the Athshean village) is functioning normally. It’s an inaccurate report, since it leaves out his cold reception, his informants’ absence, the girl’s dirty look, and Selver. Yet it’s technically the truth. He has a migraine when he goes to bed, and when he wakes, he hears sirens and explosions. He’s the only person in Central who isn’t surprised, and he knows that he’s a traitor.

*The fact that “god” is the same word as “translator” in the Athsheans’ language fits with what the Athsheans have said about Selver’s godhood so far: he introduced violence into their society, which makes him unlike anyone else. Selver is alone in this translation, which demonstrates how isolated his connection to the humans has made him, even though it was necessary to the Athsheans’ survival. In this passage, Lyubov questions whether or not violence is a natural progression for the Athsheans or whether the Athsheans are mimicking Davidson. The novella doesn’t answer this question outright. But by presenting violence as a cycle, it suggests that violence is never natural (even for Davidson), and that it’s a learned behavior.*



*In literature, a deus ex machina is a plot device that unrealistically solves a story’s seemingly unsolvable problem. On the surface, the ansible appears to be a deus ex machina in *The Word for World is Forest*, and *Le Guin* acknowledges this by having Lyubov call it a “*machina ex machina*.” But readers already know that the ansible hasn’t stopped Davidson’s violence, so Lyubov’s comment is intentionally ironic: there is no deus ex machina that can solve the problem of colonization on Athshe, even if the League has good intentions.*



*By suggesting that the colonists would be alarmed if Lyubov revealed that he’d seen Selver, Lyubov implies that Selver’s presence in the village is ominous—and indeed, Selver’s warning that Lyubov should leave Central supports this idea. Lyubov’s analysis of the consequences of his decision suggests that he’s once again consciously choosing the Athsheans over the humans, even if it puts the humans in danger. This is a major sacrifice, and it again isolates Lyubov from his fellow humans.*



*Throughout the novella, Lyubov’s migraines have hinted at his guilt. His migraine in this passage confirms that even before he hears the explosions, he’s aware that he may have put the humans in danger by camouflaging the Athsheans’ attitude toward the humans. This passage suggests that he was right. Ironically, Lyubov’s connection to the Athsheans allowed them to attack, because if he didn’t care about the Athsheans, he would have turned in an honest report.*



Still, Lyubov can't be sure that this is an Athshean raid. Maybe because of the surrounding trees, his hut has been left alone. But as he leaves it, he can see that everything else is on fire, including HQ, where the **ansible** is. He has no idea where the Athsheans got explosives or how they started the fire. It seems impossible: there were guards all around.

*If anything, the fact that Lyubov's hut is untouched proves that this is an Athshean raid. Selver warned Lyubov to leave, but apparently, he took precautions in case Lyubov didn't—something that speaks to their deep connection. The destruction of the ansible in this passage, inadvertently caused by the Athsheans' retaliation, proves once and for all that the ansible couldn't solve the problems on Athshe.*



Lyubov sees a Terran girl standing in a doorway, paralyzed with fear. He runs over, pries her from the doorway, and urges her to come with him. She does so, but not before the building she was in collapses in flames. One wood beam strikes Lyubov and knocks him to the ground. As a result, he doesn't see a female Athshean grab the girl and slit her throat.

*This passage reveals that the Athsheans are targeting human women, even though these women have no power in the colony—not unlike Davidson's earlier raid on an innocent Athshean village. It's not yet clear why the Athsheans are targeting women, though their reasons will be evident later on.*



## CHAPTER SIX

Selver silently leads his people into the city center—no one sings any songs tonight. All of the groups they'd brought to Central were led by formerly enslaved Athsheans who knew the place, and most of the others had never seen a yumen city. But they'd been having the evil dream and needed Selver to help them control it. First, the formerly enslaved Athsheans broke water pipes, cut wires, robbed the arsenal, killed the guards, and prepped the dynamite in HQ. Then the cacophony began: gunfire from yumens, the sound of explosions.

*Earlier, Davidson suggested that the Athsheans would use ex-slaves to attack the humans, since the ex-slaves would know the camp well. As it turns out, he was correct to assume this—but again, the Athsheans' current retaliation comes after Davidson's attack on their camp, so their violence is hardly unprovoked. This passage again suggests that humans have permanently affected Athshean society by modeling violence, because the Athsheans share dreams, meaning that Selver's fantasies of violence are widespread.*



There were 1700 yumens in Central, including 500 females. Selver had chosen this particular time to attack because the females were there. Now, he leads his people through the city and an unarmed yumen man comes running toward them, slipping and falling in mud. Selver tells his people to let the yumen go, but he says this too quietly, because two of Selver's men grab and kill him. Selver sends out a vocal call to end the hunt, which his group picks up on and echoes.

*Again, it's not yet clear why the Athsheans wanted to target the women, given that the women have no authority in the colony. Meanwhile, Selver clearly doesn't want to kill all of the men, since he tries to let the human man go here. The fact that the Athsheans quickly kill him instead again demonstrates how naïve Lyubov was to think that Athshean violence could be a one-time thing—now, the Athsheans are killing on instinct.*



They continue on through the city, passing a dead female yumen and another yumen under a beam. It's unfair that Selver should see *him* out of all others here, but Selver kneels down to Lyubov and lifts the wood off his back. Selver hasn't slept for days. He's spent all his time gathering his people, telling them his dream, and encouraging them to master the evil in that dream. Now, he knows that this—walking among corpses—is the evil dream, and it's mastered him.

Selver believes that he's dreaming, and in the dream, Lyubov's eyes open. Selver says that Lyubov was supposed to have left the city, and Lyubov asks which of them is the prisoner here. He says it so clearly that Selver knows that this isn't a dream at all, but rather world-time. Selver tells Lyubov that all the yumens' engines are burned, and the women are dead. He'd told his people not to burn Lyubov's house or his books. He asks why Lyubov isn't like other yumens, and Lyubov says that he is, and so is Selver.

Lyubov also says that Selver needs to stop killing men and should return to his "roots" instead. Selver replies that his people's violent dream will stop when the yumens are gone, but Lyubov says to stop it now. Lyubov's gaze slackens, and Selver tells Lyubov that he can't stay with him. Selver begins dreaming again, and he moves slowly away. When he promises Lyubov that he'll stop killing, Lyubov doesn't respond, suggesting that he's dead.

Someone brings Selver to a makeshift Lodge that's been set up at a nearby village, Endtor. There, Selver dreams in total insanity for two days. Currently, 500 yumens are being held prisoner in the creechie-pens, and some have escaped. Some are still being killed, as Selver's people can hear his voice in their heads saying to do so. But some of Selver's people have abandoned killing. The afternoon after the massacre, a yumen ship flew over the creechie-pen, maybe spurred by the radio silence at Central (since the radios were destroyed). The prisoners yelled at the machine, and it dropped a parachute with something in it. An Athshean ex-slave and leader, Reswan, was worried about attacks from the yumens' ships.

*The novella continues to suggest that violence is a choice that has widespread, cyclical consequences. In this passage, Selver realizes that he can't choose to act violently without spreading that violence and without being permanently altered by it—the same thing Lyubov suggested when he claimed that Davidson kills himself over and over when he kills others. Lyubov's injury is further proof of the consequences of violence, since Selver has indirectly sacrificed Lyubov in order to save his people.*



*The fact that Selver at first believes he's dreaming suggests that his violent nightmares have become reality. Lyubov's comment that he and Selver are the same, and that both of them are like the humans, further highlights the horror of the humans' enslavement and of this attack on the human women. Lyubov was isolated from his people, but he now admits that he's one of them—and the fact that Selver is also like them further demonstrates Selver's isolation from the Athsheans.*



*In this passage, Lyubov implies that violence is a choice rather than a natural part of the Athsheans' identity (or "roots"). While the novella has supported this idea, readers are meant to question whether Selver's people will choose to stop killing, or whether violence is now a permanent part of their society.*



*Again, it seems unlikely that Athshean society can return to nonviolence after this attack, since the Athsheans apparently still feel compelled to kill even after the massacre, and even though Selver promised Lyubov that they wouldn't. Once again, violence generates more violence, and that seems to be a difficult cycle to break. It's not clear whether or not the humans are planning to retaliate or whether the parachute contained anything dangerous, but for now, the Athsheans appear to be completely in control—even locking up the humans where the humans once locked up the Athsheans.*



Selver wakes up on the third day after the attack. His people have begun to grow disgusted with themselves, but his presence reinvigorates them. Selver tells them that the killing is over, and that he needs to talk with the yumens in the compound. They head to the creechie-pen, where Reswan asks for Colonel Dongh in broken English. Gosse comes out instead, saying that Dongh is sick. They open the gates for Gosse, and Selver tells him his name and that he's Lyubov's friend. He also tells Gosse that the killing is finished, and that Gosse's people can go live in their logging camps, as long as they don't cut more trees.

Selver says that he's aware that the yumens *could* still kill Selver's people, but the yumens are also outnumbered. They should wait quietly for a ship to come in three years to take them away. Gosse is surprised that Selver knows when the ship is coming, and Selver tells him that "slaves have ears." Gosse angrily tells Selver that they already promised not to harm Selver's people, and Selver tells him that this promise was broken: a town was burned in New Java two weeks ago, which Gosse denies any knowledge of. Selver tells him to discuss this with Dongh.

Before Gosse reenters the pen, he asks if Selver organized the raid. Selver says yes, and Gosse says that in that case, Selver is to blame for everyone's deaths, including Lyubov's. Selver doesn't know about guilt, and Gosse's words make him afraid. He says that because Lyubov was his friend, he's not dead. Gosse yells at Selver for killing the yumen women, and Selver says that he did so to sterilize the men. Selver learned what a realist is from Lyubov: a realist is aware of both his dreams *and* the world around him. None of Gosse's men understand their dreams, so they're all insane. Selver had to kill them before their insanity drove his people insane, too.

Selver returns to the camp at Endtor, which was once a fishing town. He lies by the fire and asks the men gathered there—all Great Dreamers—whether *he's* the one who's mad. Tubab tells Selver that Selver currently doesn't know dream-time from world-time, because he went without dreams for too long. An ex-slave says that the yumens take poisons to dream but they can't control their dreams, and the dreams enslave them. Another Dreamer tells Selver that Selver should sing, and Selver asks the men to sing for him.

*Because Selver is a god, he may indeed have the power to stop the Athsheans from killing the humans. At the same time, they were still hearing his voice even as he slept, which suggests that he may not control their image of him. In other words, the violence he modeled and unleashed into Athshean society might be unmanageable, which is what he worried about when he walked past all the corpses. The humans' forced exile in their logging camps is arguably a fitting punishment, since they'll be forced to live alongside their ecological destruction.*



*Selver implies that he learned about the colony's plans when he was enslaved, which may be true. However, he also learned information about the humans because of his friendship with Lyubov—again, their connection was essential to Selver's decision to attack Smith, as Selver learned about the humans' motivations from Lyubov. Here, Selver confirms that the Athsheans attacked the humans a second time because of Davidson's secret attack on the Athshean village. Once again, Davidson's violence spurred the Athsheans' violence.*



*This passage explains why the Athsheans targeted the human women specifically: they wanted to ensure that the men couldn't populate the planet with human children. This means that the humans' patriarchal society endangered the women, because the women were only on the planet to breed, and because they couldn't defend themselves the way male soldiers could. Earlier, Davidson suggested that realism meant acknowledging man's superiority over other beings. In this passage, Selver gives another definition and suggests that realists are able to see the bigger picture, which the Athsheans can do because they listen to their dreams. That means that even if Selver feels guilty, he knows from his dreams that his violence was necessary.*



*Because Selver's dreams have been violent lately, the fact that he can't distinguish between dreams and reality hints to readers that reality has become equally violent—and perhaps that the Athsheans won't be able to neatly separate violence from their ordinary lives in the future. At the moment, the Athsheans can control their dreams, which makes them different from humans (whom the Athsheans believe use drugs to dream uncontrollably). Selver is proof that with the introduction of violence, the Athsheans may not always have this control.*



As Selver listens to their song, he begins to dream. In the dream, he and Lyubov lay in front of a burned building, and Lyubov tells Selver that he has a headache. The next day, the captive yumens in the creechie-pen ask to speak to Selver. Along with Reswan and a few others, Selver meets Gosse, Dongh, and three other yumens under a tree—Selver’s people are afraid to be in the open now. One of the yumens with Dongh is Benton, which makes Selver’s people nervous—Benton used to castrate creechies as punishment.

Looking genuinely ill, Dongh asks what Selver’s neutrality proposal actually means. Selver asks him for clarification, leaving off the honorific of “Colonel,” which angers Dongh. Selver demands to be called Colonel, too, but his moment of triumph passes, and he wearily repeats the Athsheans’ terms to Dongh. Dongh reveals that the yumens have had a functioning radio for days—which Selver already knew—and that they could’ve escaped all along (though he doesn’t say where they would’ve gone, had they escaped). He reminds an increasingly irritated Selver that the yumens have armed helicopters and firepower.

Colonel Dongh suddenly feels weak and asks for a chair, which Selver gets for him. Benton offers to speak on Dongh’s behalf, but Dongh says that Gosse should do it instead. The yumens agree to Selver’s terms: they’ll live in one region and stay out of the forest. Selver and the yumens argue about aircrafts, as the yumens claim they need them to transport their people. Selver agrees that they can keep their hoppers for this type of transport, but he says they must destroy them after. But when the yumens protest, Selver eventually capitulates: the yumens can have the hoppers if they fly them solely on their territory and if they destroy the hoppers’ guns.

*Even in Selver’s dream, Lyubov’s migraines recur. But this time, Lyubov is a projection of Selver’s subconscious, so his migraines hint at Selver’s own guilt. The fact that Selver explores his guilt through his dream of Lyubov again speaks to their deep connection, which isolated them both from their respective societies. Dongh has been adamant throughout the novella that the colonists followed the Code, but because the Code supposedly forbade violence against the Athsheans, Benton’s actions prove that this was never the case. Earlier in the novella, readers learned that Benton was one of the soldiers who enslaved Selver, so Selver learned violence from both Davidson and Benton.*



*Despite the fact that the Athsheans have power over the humans now, humans like Dongh still insist on displaying dominance over the Athsheans (hence Dongh’s desire to be called “Colonel”). Again, this suggests that something like the ansible would never have solved the colony’s problems, because the humans still feel that the Athsheans owe them respect. Moreover, the humans’ first response to the Athsheans’ violence is to threaten more violence. This passage also reveals that the parachute the helicopter dropped contained a radio, not a weapon, which suggests that the colonists don’t actually have plans to retaliate violently—they just want the Athsheans to fear retaliation.*



*Dongh’s strange refusal to let Benton speak hints that he knows about Benton’s violent treatment of the Athsheans. Again, this suggests that Dongh knew the Code wasn’t being followed, which may lead readers to question whether he would have truly followed the ansible’s orders long-term. Because Dongh is known to lie, or at least to stretch the truth, it’s not clear whether the humans wanted to keep the hoppers to retaliate or simply for transportation, as they claim.*



Dongh tells an angry Benton that it doesn't matter if they destroy the guns, since they can't use them anyway; they're outnumbered, and the Athsheans have no centralized government to attack. Selver notices that because Dongh is the yumens' equivalent of an Old Man, his word is obeyed. Selver then says that his people won't take anything more from Central except some of Lyubov's work. He wants to know what the yumen ship will do when it arrives in three years, and Dongh says that they might know the answer to that—and the planet's colony status—if the Athsheans hadn't destroyed the **ansible**.

This is the first Selver has heard of the **ansible**, as he previously believed that communication between planets took 27 years. Benton coldly accuses Selver of learning how to sabotage the camp from Lyubov, and Dongh is angry at the insinuation that Lyubov was a spy. But Benton presses on, saying that Lyubov was the one who made the creechies want to attack, and that Lyubov's interference (at the meeting) forced the change in orders from command, which made the humans vulnerable.

Selver interrupts the men and apologizes for putting them in the creechie-pen, which is bad "for the mind." He asks Dongh to send for the rest of the yumens, and once they're gathered here, the Athsheans will open the gates and free them. The yumens say nothing while they stare at Selver, their translator.

Selver heads back to Endtor. The headwoman who accompanies him says that the yumens aren't as stupid as she assumed, as they clearly recognized Selver's godly status at the end of the encounter. Tubab says that the yumens are clearly insane, not sensible like Lyubov was. After all, the yumens fight among themselves (although Tubab couldn't understand what they said).

*Dongh's comment suggests that if the humans could retaliate, they would. In other words, the difference in their population numbers is the only thing preventing them from continuing the novella's cyclical violence. Here, Dongh chastises the Athsheans for destroying the ansible, but readers already know that the ansible wasn't a solution to the Athsheans' problems. The fact that the League hadn't made a decision about the planet's colony status suggests that the League might have been passive, allowing the colonists to continue logging as usual. This would mean that the Athsheans' violence was arguably necessary, as there was no other way for them to defend themselves and their planet.*



*Because Selver didn't know about the ansible, Dongh was likely right when he told Lyubov that the Athsheans would think that their violence ended their slavery. The men continue to argue that this wasn't the case—for instance, Benton suggests here that Lyubov's advocacy put an end to slavery, even though Lyubov had been advocating for the Athsheans for years to no avail. Again, the colonists received the ansible because the Athsheans' attack drew the League's attention; Lyubov hinted that Lepennon and Or might have come to the planet because they heard about the violence. This means that the ansible was irrelevant—the Athsheans' violence was necessary to force the humans to stand down.*



*The humans don't speak the Athsheans' language, so Selver is their translator on a literal level. However, this passage also shows that much as Selver translated the humans' violence for the Athsheans, he's also (figuratively) translating the Athsheans' mercy for the humans. The Athsheans plan to free the humans from the creechie-pen where the humans kept the Athsheans for years, suggesting that they still have the ability to choose empathy over violence. Selver occupies a unique position, as Lyubov did when he was alive—now, Selver alone understands both the humans and the Athsheans.*



*The Athsheans' derogatory discussion of the humans mimics many of Davidson's thoughts and discussions about the Athsheans, whom he always believed were inferior to him. Now that the Athsheans have power over the humans, they're beginning to see the humans as inferior and even animalistic.*





Tubab wonders if Selver told the yumens that they were insane, and Selver says he didn't; he told them they were ill. The headwoman refers to the yumens as ugly spiders, and Selver frantically says that the yumens are men, the same as them. The headwoman says that she knows that; they just look like spiders. The Athsheans continue along the forest path, helping Selver walk.

*In this passage, Selver recognizes that the Athsheans now view the humans as an inferior species, which clearly worries him, as the Athsheans kill animals. The headwoman's casual dismissal of the humans' personhood implies that true to form, the novella's cyclical violence may continue, even though the Athsheans and humans have called a truce.*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Davidson has been using Major Muhamed's tape recorder to make note of everything that's happened in New Tahiti. Future generations should know how treacherous humans can be. The recording includes everything that happened in Smith, New Java, King, and Central, and everything he's learned from HQ since. No one knows the full truth except the creechies, but clearly the attack at Central was an "inside job," aided by Lyubov—and the creechies killed Lyubov anyway. It's safe to assume that anyone still alive is a traitor, including Gosse and Benton.

*Much like Davidson disregarded the ansible's orders, he's disregarding the truce that Dongh negotiated at Central. Once again, Davidson blames others for the violence he spurred. This time, he suggests that Lyubov betrayed his people, when really, the reason the Athsheans attacked Central was because of Davidson, since Davidson carried out a raid (which Dongh may not know about). And while Davidson perhaps isn't wrong to be suspicious of Lyubov, who chose not to share vital information with the humans, the reason Lyubov hid that information was because he was frightened that Davidson would return to Central.*



The creechies say the women are dead, but that's probably a lie, and the creechies are probably experimenting on them now. Muhamed had recorded all his conversations with Central post-massacre, and when Davidson first heard one particular exchange between Dongh and Muhamed, he destroyed the recording in a fit of anger. It was too hard to hear Dongh and Muhamed discussing total surrender, agreeing not to retaliate, and planning to move the men to a tiny plot of land. Most likely, Dongh and Muhamed aren't natural traitors and were just made cowardly by this stupid planet, which only the strongest men can withstand.

*Again, the reason that the Athsheans killed the women was to prevent them from carrying out their assigned purpose of breeding—and in this way, Davidson's own society set up the conditions for the women's deaths. Once again, Davidson equates violence with strength and masculinity, which leads him to believe that retaliation is the answer to every problem—when really, Davidson's violence either directly or indirectly spurred most (if not all) of the Athsheans' violence in the novella.*



Davidson had no choice but to shoot Muhamed, which was a bummer, but Muhamed never would've gone along with Davidson's plan. Now it's just Davidson and the officers. Davidson rarely speaks to Dongh on the radio directly; usually it's Juju Sereng. Davidson likes Juju, but he's an asiatform, and it's weird how many of them survived the massacre—the only euraf left alive was Gosse. Here in Java, the 55 men who remained loyal and are therefore still here are mostly eurafs. You can't be really human without some euraf blood, but Davidson will save the "yellow bastards" anyway.

*Because Davidson expresses overt racism here, it seems unlikely that the men Davidson killed—including Muhamed—were truly "disloyal." Davidson distrusts outsiders, and because race factors into that, he distrusts nonwhite soldiers. Davidson was always planning to take over New Java from Muhamed, and now it seems that he's accomplished this. Since Davidson's rogue decisions caused the Athsheans to attack Central earlier, it's not clear what damage he'll do now that he controls New Java.*



On the radio earlier, Juju had told Davidson that he was making it hard for the rest of the humans, since they have a neutrality agreement with the creechies. Davidson insisted that his men could still retaliate, even outnumbered, which Juju thought was insane. Either way, Juju claimed that the truce was binding, and if the humans break it, it's over for them. Maybe when the *Shackleton* comes back, it'll wipe out the creechies, but for now the humans have to back down.

Davidson asked Juju to send Central's hoppers to him if they were too scared to use them, and Juju ordered Davidson to bring the last hopper (which is at New Java) back to Central. After that call, Davidson was somewhat worried that the men would send their hoppers from Central to bomb him in New Java, but then he realized they were too afraid, since they promised the creechies that they wouldn't use the hoppers. Absolutely insane. Davidson has waited long enough to attack; it's been two weeks, and he's created a defense system in his camp, which includes landmines built by a kid named Aabi. Now, he takes the hopper and drops a bomb on a creechie camp.

After the rainy season is over, Davidson will bomb whole islands—including Central, if they don't man up. Later that day, someone on the radio—maybe Gosse—berates Davidson for thinking he can make the creechies surrender. Davidson asks if he can pick up some desserts and drugs from Central if he sends a hopper over, and they agree. Smiling, Davidson then tells them to put what he needs in a net and he'll pick it up without landing. Dongh finally gets on the radio and tells Davidson that if he keeps disobeying orders, Dongh will tell the natives that he's no longer responsible for Davidson. He wants Davidson to send the 66 men at Java back to Central, so Davidson cuts the radio off. None of the guys at Central can face reality.

The creechies don't do anything about Davidson's raids, which proves his theory that you just have to be tough with them. Davidson has kept the men at Java logging, but now there's no point in logging if no one's picking up wood. So, they decide to burn the wood instead, just for something to do. Davidson is considering a raid on Central to get the other hoppers so he can do more damage, but he hasn't mentioned this to anyone, even Aabi or his other right-hand man, Temba. An attack on HQ might be too much for them, because they still think they'll eventually return to Central. They don't know that those guys are traitors now.

*Juju may just be trying to placate Davidson by suggesting that the humans could attack the Athsheans when the ship returns. But if he's sincere, this is further proof that the humans believe that the only response to violence is more violence. Even if they don't agree with Davidson's current methods, they agree with his mindset.*



*Again, it's not clear whether or not the humans know that Davidson's raid caused the Central massacre, but if they do, they're right to be worried that he still has an armed hopper. Davidson's attack on the Athshean camp will have consequences for him, something he's likely aware of—after all, he raided the Athshean village knowing (and maybe hoping) that the Athsheans would attack the humans in turn. Davidson's actions here are self-defeating, which suggests that he craves cyclical violence even when it serves no tactical purpose.*



*The planet's ecosystem, which Davidson has spent so long trying to dominate, seems to prevent him from carrying out larger attacks, since he can't bomb islands in the rain. This passage reveals that Dongh is not fully aware of what's going on in New Java. While he knows Davidson has gone rogue, he doesn't know that Davidson killed 11 men—he thinks there are 66 men at New Java, whereas Davidson previously stated that there were only 55. Once again, Davidson suggests that "realism" means asserting dominance, which differs from Selver and Lyubov's definition.*



*Earlier, the humans' deforestation at least served a purpose, since Earth has no wood. Davidson's decision to burn trees serves no purpose and seems to be a way to show further dominance over the planet, since the humans don't value nature like the Athsheans. Interestingly, Davidson is now as isolated from his own people as Lyubov and Selver were, and maybe more so, since he's considering attacking the humans. The difference is that his isolation doesn't serve a purpose—instead, Davidson wants to act violently to prove his own prejudices right and to validate his self-image.*



Two weeks later, the men start to get antsy. Davidson tells Aabi, Temba, and another guy, Post, about his plan to liberate the hoppers. Aabi wonders how they'll get fuel, since they're low, and Davidson says they can steal that, too. The men stare at him, dumbfounded; they've lost their nerve, too. Davidson walks away, disgusted. He thinks about how they're low on "maryjanes," since some of the guys are using too heavily. Davidson will have to lock the stores up, which will break some of the men, but that's fine—maybe he can trade those guys to Central for fuel.

Suddenly, one of Davidson's guards starts screaming, and a gun goes off. Thousands of creechies swarm in, which sets off the landmines, but they keep coming. It's just like the rat army that Davidson saw as a kid in Ohio, which made him scream for his mom—or maybe that was a dream. Davidson makes it to the hopper, along with Post and Aabi.

Davidson asks where Temba is, and Post says that he's dead. Aabi wants to pilot the hopper, so Davidson lets him, but when Davidson asks where he'd heading, Aabi says that he's taking them to Central. Davidson orders Aabi to circle around Java instead, so that while the creechies burn camp, they can burn the creechies. Aabi says that they can't do that, because some of their guys might be creechie prisoners. Davidson pulls a gun on Aabi and tells him to turn around. Post argues that they should go to Central, so Davidson knocks him out with the barrel of the gun.

Aabi turns around but can't find the camp in the dark. Davidson thinks about how he's the only really strong man here. The fire at New Java must have been put out, because they can't see it from the sky now. Davidson couldn't have predicted this attack, since the creechies came out of nowhere. Aabi must be messing with him and pretending not to know where camp is, so Davidson tells him he has seven minutes to find it. They reach a clearing but it's hard to see, so Davidson switches the hopper's lights off, which leads Aabi to panic and get the hopper stuck in a tree. It plunges and wobbles, and Davidson loses consciousness.

*Again, Davidson's planned violence serves no purpose, both because the humans are outnumbered and because, as Aabi reminds Davidson, the hoppers would eventually run out of fuel and ammo. Furthermore, the men's boredom and heavy drug use suggests that they might eventually turn on Davidson, particularly if Davidson took the drugs away or revealed that he has no plans to return to Central. Davidson's situation is precarious, but he still insists on violence for violence's sake.*



*Much like Selver couldn't tell his dreams from reality after introducing violence into the Athsheans' lives, Davidson can't tell his nightmares from his memories. This suggests that his desire for violence prevents him from seeing the bigger picture the way the Athsheans ordinarily can. Davidson's memory or dream is ambiguous, but it could suggest that his deep hatred for the Athsheans might be (at least partly) rooted in a traumatic childhood experience. Interestingly, this experience left him dependent on a woman (his mom), which may have impacted his later, hyper-masculine worldview.*



*Once again, Davidson's desire for violence is self-defeating, because killing the Athsheans could mean killing Davidson's own men. (It's likely that the Athsheans are taking prisoners, since they did before.) Earlier, Lyubov noted Davidson kills himself when he kills others. Davidson's desire to bomb the Athsheans proves Lyubov right, since this will only lead to his own destruction. Again, violence is cyclical, and Davidson wants to continue that cycle.*



*The fact that the Athsheans were able to charge through Davidson's landmine defenses without anyone noticing them suggests that they might have camouflaged in the forest. This means that Davidson's lack of knowledge about nature led to his camp's downfall. He's also wrong that the attack was unpredictable, since he was courting an attack from the Athsheans by bombing their camp. Davidson is acting erratically—and again, his violence is cyclical, because his anger at Aabi hurts them both.*



When Davidson comes to, he's groggy. He can't find Aabi, and he barely knows where he is. He then figures out that he's still in the hopper, wedged between trees. He climbs out and drops to the ground. Weirdly, he doesn't have a torch on him—maybe Aabi took it, since he crashed the hopper on purpose. Davidson can see a light in one of the trees, which must be Aabi, but when Davidson goes to find him, he steps on something slick: Aabi's body. Aabi deserved that for turning traitor.

Davidson sees the light again. He reaches for his gun, then realizes it's in the hopper. He starts to run, not knowing where he's going and getting smacked by branches. As he tries to hide in a bush, the light shines on him and he sees a group of creechies. Remembering what Lyubov said, he turns on his back, shuts his eyes, and exposes his neck. He opens his eyes and sees that there are at least 20 with spears. He shuts his eyes again, and nothing happens. He almost feels like laughing: it's so easy to trick them into keeping him alive. They can't kill him—he's like a god.

Someone calls Davidson's name, and he opens his eyes to see Selver looking at him from above. It's no longer nighttime. Selver doesn't have a weapon, but the creechies surrounding him have spears and stolen revolvers. He tells Selver to hurry up and kill him, which confuses Selver: does Davidson want to die now? He spent the night in the surrender position. Davidson spits in Selver's face, so Selver spits back and laughs.

Selver tells Davidson that both he and Davidson are gods: Davidson insane, Selver either sane or insane. As gods, they've given each other gifts. Davidson gave Selver the gift of killing, and Selver gives Davidson the gift of *not* killing. Davidson will have to carry that gift alone, because the yumens told Selver that if he returns Davidson to them, they'll put Davidson on trial and execute him. That means that if Selver wants to save Davidson's life, he has to treat Davidson like an Athshean who has gone mad and isolate him on an island.

*True to form, Davidson blames Aabi for his own violent behavior. Aabi didn't crash the plane on purpose; the plane crashed because of Davidson's aggressive behavior. It's not clear whether Aabi died from falling out of the tree or died in a confrontation with an Athshean while Davidson was unconscious. Readers are as disoriented as Davidson, and he's in the same vulnerable position he was in after the Smith massacre.*



*Davidson's definition of godhood is different from Selver's. Selver is a god because he changed his community, while Davidson claims to be a god because he thinks he can control the Athsheans. In reality, the Athsheans choose not to kill him—the novella has proven that they have no biological conditioning to spare anyone, even those who surrender. It's in-character of Davidson to mistake mercy for submission—more than likely, he wants to believe he has more control than he does.*



*Maybe to demonstrate the cyclical nature of violence, the novella also follows a cyclical pattern, as Selver and Davidson are in the same positions they were in after the Smith massacre. This time, Davidson is intentionally in the surrender position and Selver has apparently abandoned Davidson's gun (suggesting that he has no further plans for violence). Once again, Selver gives Davidson mercy, but Davidson rejects it.*



*Again, Davidson and Selver have two definitions of godhood. But if being a god means impacting one's society, then Davidson has certainly done that—his impulsive violence has spurred all the novella's violence, which led to the humans' downfall. Meanwhile, Davidson is just as isolated from his society as Selver has been—and again, maybe more so, since his people have rejected him. Selver's mercy toward Davidson is also fitting punishment, as Davidson despises the Athsheans and would hate to be treated like one of them.*



Davidson says that he should have killed Selver back in Central, and Selver agrees that this might have been for the best. But Selver notes that Lyubov stopped him, and Lyubov has stopped him from killing Davidson now, too. The killing is over, as is the tree-cutting. There are no trees on Dump Island, where Davidson is headed, and no one to kill, though trees and people both existed there once. Davidson might learn to dream on Dump Island, but he'll probably just go mad.

*If Davidson had killed Selver, the Athsheans may never have retaliated against the humans and become violent, which is likely why Selver agrees that in some ways, this would have been for the best. More than likely, readers are meant to question Selver's assertion that the killing is over, since Athshean society has been permanently altered both by Selver's hatred of Davidson and by Selver's connection with Lyubov, which saved his life and then allowed him to enact mass violence. As readers learned at the start of the novella, Davidson worked on the now-eroded Dump Island before he was promoted. This means that, like the humans at Central, he'll be forced to live alongside his own ecological destruction.*



Davidson tells Selver to just kill him and quit bragging, and Selver says that he can't: Davidson is a god, and he'll have to do it himself. Someone ties a noose around Davidson. He could run, as they wouldn't dare to kill him. Instead, he follows the creechies.

*Selver's words are ambiguous, but like Lyubov, he's probably implying that Davidson's violence is cyclical—Selver's decision to spare him ends that cycle and leaves Davidson to his own self-destruction. Davidson still thinks he has control, but he's powerless.*



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Selver hasn't dreamed about Lyubov for a long time, ever since that last conversation with Davidson. But when the yumens' ship comes back (three years after the last attack), Lyubov is there in Selver's dream world, silent and tired. Selver's yumen speech is rusty now, but after the ship's yumens speak to him, he surmises that they're reasonable people. He hands them a box of Lyubov's work on the Athsheans and tells them to take it where Lyubov wanted it to go. The tall man named Lepennon agrees and says the work will be valued, which makes Selver happy, but it upset Selver to speak of Lyubov. He steps back and watches the yumens gather, including Dongh and Gosse, who look unkempt, lost, and somewhat insane.

*This passage suggests that Juju Sereng was wrong: the humans' ship won't attack the Athsheans and will instead remove the humans from the planet. Again, Lyubov and Selver's connection helped to save Selver's people, but it also required them both to sacrifice a great deal. Meanwhile, Lyubov's kindness made it difficult for Selver to understand the humans' violence. It makes sense that the memory of Lyubov is painful to Selver, because while Lyubov wanted their friendship to exist separately from the humans' violence, this was never possible.*



Currently, they're all at the edge of the forest, a neutral zone. Selver and his people sit and rest under a tree, and the ship's Commander (Yung) approaches Selver, saying that the Terrans will soon be taken away and that this world won't be a colony anymore. No one will ever return, as Selver's world is under the League Ban. Then maybe after five generations, some scientists will come back to study the land. Selver observes that yumen orders are quickly followed, which isn't the case for the Athsheans; one headwoman's order wouldn't be followed by the neighboring village.

*It's not clear whether the League Ban is the result of the Athsheans' second attack on the humans or whether it was an inevitability. But because the ansible was a useless device, Yung's assurances are questionable—humans might follow orders to begin with, but orders depend on good-faith actors. As Selver notes, Athshe operates differently, which is likely how they've retained such stability: there are no ambiguous orders, and their world never depended on men's honesty or obedience.*



The Commander says the difference is that the humans now have one centralized government. Besides, the Commander has heard that when Selver gave orders, people obeyed. He wonders why, and Selver explains that back then, he was a god. After the Commander leaves, Lepennon comes to speak to Selver. Lepennon makes Selver nervous, because he's like Lyubov: he'll understand Selver, but Selver won't be able to understand him, because even the nicest humans are incomprehensible. This is why it's painful to think about Lyubov, even though Selver can dream of his dead wife peacefully.

Lepennon tells Selver that he met Lyubov the last time he was on Athshe. He says that Lyubov's work is now finished, as Athshe is free of Terrans. Selver is more nervous than ever, because Lepennon talks like a Great Dreamer. Lepennon asks if there have been any killings since the attack on Davidson's camp at New Java, and Selver says that he didn't kill Davidson. Lepennon says that's irrelevant, and Selver realizes that Lepennon misunderstood: Selver meant to say that Davidson wasn't dead, not that someone else killed him. This error is a relief to Selver, because it means Lepennon isn't infallible.

Selver says that there haven't been killings; Lepennon can ask Dongh and Gosse. But Lepennon says that he meant to ask if there had been killings among Athsheans. Selver doesn't respond. Then he says that sometimes, gods show people new ways of doing things, and that can't be undone. Things in world-time can't go back into dreams, and pretending otherwise is insane. Now, the Athsheans are aware of how to kill each other, and it's pointless to act like they aren't.

Lepennon tells Selver that he shouldn't act like there's a purpose to murder, because there isn't. Soon, the humans will leave forever, and everything will go back to how it was. Lyubov emerges from Selver's mind, saying that he'll still be there. Selver tells Lepennon that both Lyubov and Davidson will remain here. Maybe after Selver dies, things will go back to normal. But he doubts it.

*Again, a centralized government wouldn't have prevented what happened on Athshe—the ansible came from the centralized League, and Davidson still ignored its orders. Moreover, Selver's godhood never appeared to be desirable, and the fact that he's apparently no longer a god suggests that the Athsheans quickly abandoned this temporarily centralized approach to government. Despite the fact that Selver has now acted violently, he apparently still doesn't understand the humans. And as previously noted, his connection to Lyubov only ever made his decision to kill the humans more complicated, even though that connection also saved him and his people.*



*As previously established, Great Dreamers are able to see the bigger picture in a situation, a trait Selver lost when he began to act violently. Although Lepennon makes factual mistakes that the Great Dreamers wouldn't, he's also not narrow-minded like the other humans are, which again complicates Selver's idea of who humans are. Apparently, Selver has no plans to tell the humans that Davidson is alive, which is another act of mercy (as they would likely execute Davidson if they found him).*



*This passage confirms that the Athsheans can't return to the nonviolent people they once were. Because violence in the novella is cyclical, it always generates more violence. Even though Selver wanted to stop the Athsheans from killing anyone else after the final attack on Davidson, and even though people like Lyubov believed that the Athsheans would be able to stop killing if they chose to do so, it seems that violence has permanently altered their society. While the novella suggests that violence is a choice that men make rather than a natural state of being, it also suggests that violence is never isolated and always has consequences.*



*Lyubov, Davidson, and Selver are all people who have been isolated from their societies, and now they live on, both in Selver's head and on Athshe. The novella suggests that their impact on Selver is permanent—Davidson taught Selver violence, which Lyubov then attempted to curb. Selver ended the cycle of violence, but it has left an impression on him and on Athshean society more broadly.*





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