

Perihelion

Online Science Fiction Magazine



TM

Sam Bellotto Jr.
Editor

Eric M. Jones
Contributing Editor

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By Jack Ryan

TRITTCHA ITCHES. ITCHES. Itches.

Night but not-night. Three moons are one moon.

Trittcha itches. Itches. Itches.

Nearly adult after this molt, she'd be able to flirt with the Flock's males as they fluttered by though the trees, their flutterby scent mixing with hers, her thoughts blending with theirs.

Trittcha crawled from the safety of her nest groove to molt. She waited, cowering, listening for any warning from the Flock's sentries, as she clung to the bark of the family bittoma tree, exposed to the night's flutterby-eaters.

One-moon brings molt. Stretch. Pull. Pull leg. Pull foot. Push. Twist.

Her molt over, Trittcha was relieved that she wasn't a late-molter and didn't have to wait, itching, until tomorrow night. She was tired after shedding her old skin. Still, she tried to stretch her new wings.

Trittcha prickles! Sentries say flutterby-eater comes. Night hawk scent! Be still. Be still.

Motionless, she relied on her black fur against the dark fuzzy bark to hide her. She waited. The night hawk's scent grew fainter. One by one, sentries rasped with their wings, "All clear."

Breeze tickles not-tough skin. Trittcha waits.



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By dawn, Trittcha's new skin had toughened. The moons set and the sun rose. Clouds scattered in with the north wind, bringing rain. To escape, Trittcha crawled back into the deep groove that her mother's wing-thorns had gouged out of the soft, thick layer of bark. The nest where Trittcha had been born was secure and dry.

After the rain, Trittcha emerged into the cloudy day. Blinking, she swept the air around her with her eyelashes to smell the morning scents and surveyed her world with her compound eyes. Slowly, testing each new muscle, pulling on each new bone, Trittcha unfurled her new wings. They extended straight up from her thorax. She bent her six legs and leaped from the tree. She spread her wings, righted herself, and flew out over the forest floor. She dived. She fluttered high into the tree tops. Trittcha held her wings rigid and spiraled toward the forest floor like a falling leaf. She darted around the trees. Over and under branches. Among the leaves. Back into the tree tops and down again.

Her abdomen swayed as she flew through the forest. She released a burst of her enhanced female scent from her wing patches.

Female-scent is strong. Many males come.

"Trittcha is here!" she chittered loudly. She batted her eyelashes at the males, flirting like any adolescent.

For a moment, a half dozen young male flutterbys joined in her wild aerial dance. Their chittering was loud and playful. Then, one after another, they fluttered away. "No! Trittcha is not-Chittintta," came their chitter, their thoughts.

Her call and her female scent attracted another group of young males. Again, the dance through the forest, again the chittering, terminated once more by the departure of each male, as each cried out at her, "No! Trittcha is not-Chittintta."

"What? Yes! Trittcha is Chittintta," she called after them. "Trittcha female-scent is strong! Trittcha wiggles abdomen! Trittcha flutters eyelashes. Trittcha is female! Next molt brings breasts. Is Trittcha's body not pleasing? Is Trittcha ugly?"

She landed on a branch of a bittoma tree to slurp up some sap oozing from a break in the bark. And to pout. She slowly fanned her wings, chittering to herself. She stopped. She saw the yellow fur covering each broad patch of scent glands on the upper surface of her wings. She smelled an alien odor, distinct from her female scent. She chittered a brief, "Eh?"

Is Trittcha not-Chittintta? Mother has Chittintta-scent! Father has Chittintta-scent!



Brother has Chittintta-scent! Does Trittcha not have Chittintta-scent? Is Trittcha not-Chittintta?

Trittcha remembered a story told by her great-grandmother. After her fourth molt, Trittcha was showing off her glossy black fur. Great Grandmother said, "Trittcha! Be not-proud. Listen! Great Grandmother was young adult flutterby. Flock Chittintta flutterbys were happy. Flock Chittintta flutterbys were many. Spring wind came to Chittintta forest. Great Grandmother was beautiful adult flutterby. Great Grandmother was proud.

"Spring wind was death-wind. Many trees fell. Sister of Great Grandmother died. Winged brother of Great Grandmother died. Great Grandmother nearly died.

"Death-wind brought Flock Gillitt flutterbys. Gillitts are not-Chittinttas. Chittinttas are beautiful black. Gillitt flutterbys are ugly yellow. Gillitts are bad scent.

"Gillitts are strong flutterbys. Gillitts took Chittinttas for mates. Gillitt took Great Grandmother for mate. Now some grandchildren have ugly Gillitt yellow. Now some grandchildren have bad Gillitt-scent. Now some grandchildren are not-Chittintta. Now some grandchildren must leave Flock. Trittcha, bad comes to proud flutterbys."

Trittcha thought about Great Grandmother's story. Is Trittcha not-Chittintta? Is Trittcha bad flutterby? Trittcha loves Flock! Flock not-loves Trittcha?

Trittcha felt the prickle. She stopped eating. She blinked her eyelashes, but could sense no flutterby-eater scent. But she could feel the flutterby-eater prickle! She searched above, below, behind her. She saw nothing, but the prickle in her head told her that a long-tongued marallit was prowling nearby.

Trittcha saw the glossy black flutterby instar on the forest floor and the gray and green striped marallit creeping toward the infant. Trittcha leaped. She released the danger scent. She rasped her wings together for the alarm. She projected the flutterby-eater prickle with every neuron in her body. Trittcha folded her wings and fell.

Others responded. Trittcha and the flutterbys attacked. Wing-thorns bared. Gouging its back and head. The marallit turned on the cloud of flutterbys. It slashed out with its claws. The flutterbys scattered. Again and again they attacked. Then Trittcha flew to the second-instar flutterby, much too young for wings, and urged it to crawl back up the bittoma tree to safety.

Trittcha flew in circles around the young flutterby on the bittoma trunk as she watched the marallit retreat to its burrow. She settled near the youngster and rasped her wings together again, this time to signal "All clear."

The instar's mother and father alighted between the nestling and Trittcha. They chattered loudly, "Go. Not-adult is not-Chittintta. Go!"

"Trittcha is Chittintta," she chattered to them, backing away. "Trittcha helped second-instar Chittintta."

"No," the father chattered, moving toward her and raising his forelegs, his hands in fists. "Trittcha is not-Chittintta. Go!"

Trittcha sensed the increasing anger and threat scents of the Flock swirling through the trees. She felt their prickle, "Go not-Chittintta! Go!"

She fled, sailing into the tree tops, calling back, "Trittcha helped. Trittcha can stay?"

Avoiding the threatening dives—the Flock's only response—she fluttered her eyelashes, sorting out the many scents in the breeze until she found her mother's.

"Mother? Mother loves Trittcha. Where are you?" Trittcha flew along the gradient and found her on their tree not far from Trittcha's nest groove. "Mother! Trittcha is winged. Three moons bring molt! Trittcha is eighth-instar flutterby!"

"No," her mother chattered and rasped her wings slowly, a warning. "Trittcha is Chittintta. Winged flutterby is not-Chittintta. Winged flutterby is not-Trittcha. Go."

"Mother ..."

"Not-mother. Go!" She raised her forelegs.

Rejected by the Flock and by her mother, Trittcha floated on the breeze and disappeared into the forest. The scent of the Flock grew fainter and fainter. She alighted on a branch at the edge of a small clearing, looking back in the direction of the Flock. She rasped her wings together in a slow rhythm and chattered the chant of the dead. Her wings drooped until their tips touched the branch to either side of her. She chattered, "Trittcha is dead ... Trittcha is dead ..."

She was almost asleep when the sun returned and the breeze ruffled the fine hairs covering her body and wings. Her eyelashes quivered. Many scents. Powerful scents. Flowers. She turned and gazed out across the small, unfamiliar meadow. The scent of so many flowers tempted her from the branch.

"No flutterby-eater scent. No flutterby-eater prickle," she chattered as she flew into, out of, then back into the clearing. "No danger. Is meadow not-meadow? Meadow is large. Not-meadow is small. Flowers grow strange. Flowers grow like ... like ... sunbeams."

"Trittcha flies. Trittcha rescues instar. Trittcha goes. Trittcha is hungry. No danger. Trittcha eats now."

She danced through the air, from flower to flower, chittering pleasantly. "Good pollen. Good nectar. Good not-meadow."

The sunbeam-straight rows of flowers masked all other scents. In her excitement, Trittcha failed to notice the rising prickle within her. A sudden shadow startled her. She looked up. A large animal. A Zetian from the flock outside the forest? She panicked. She darted among the flowers, blundering into a large chofermitta flower. Bright green pollen puffed out, covering her with dust, burning her eyes. She sneezed. She recovered and escaped to the safety of the forest.

Zetian? Zetian is large ... Yes. Zetian head is yellow ... No ... Head is chitti fungus color. Zetian head has scales ... No ... Head has black fur. Animal is not-Zetian. Not-Zetian thorax is green. Not-Zetian forelegs are green. Hind legs are black. Trittcha not-knows not-Zetian.

Trittcha could sense no danger, so she returned to the flowers. Not too near the stranger.

Not-Zetian looks at Trittcha. She tensed, ready to escape. No prickle. No danger.

"Hi there, little flutterby. You like ol' Tom's garden?" The meaningless sound startled her. "Welcome to Dendrology Research."

Sound is not-danger. Not-Zetian is not-danger. Trittcha returned to her meal, but she kept watch as strange images flowing from the mind of the not-Zetian swirled through her—other creatures of its flock, the night sky, stars. Not-Zetian is Flock "Human." Flock Human nests in stars? Human is "Tom." Tom is male. Tom is male!

For the rest of the day Trittcha hovered around him. As he took leaf samples, she watched, becoming dimly conscious of their impending analysis. When he walked into the forest, she followed.

She circled him as he gathered more flowers, brought them back and planted them.

Tom stopped as Trittcha flitted around him, buzzing his ears, waiting to remove soft wax as the Chittintta did for other large animals of their forest. He shook his head and held out his hand. She landed on his index finger. He looked into her eyes.

"I don't know much about you little critters but you're definitely different, aren't you? With those blond patches on your wings, you're not just the common *Saccharivora hamadryada* from around this station. You must be one of those blond and black cross-

breeds from over by Station 4.

"My friend, Ondomo, told me that sometimes his people make pets of you little sapsuckers. Well, I had a blond cocker spaniel when I was a kid. If you're gonna hang around, you can be my new Fido."

Trittcha understands some Tom-chitter? But Trittcha is not "Fido."

As evening approached, Tom said, "Goodnight, Fido. Sure am glad I've got this little log cabin to go to. No nuisances tickling my ears."

She heard a "click." Fallen-trees is log cabin. Fallen-trees is Tom-nest. Tom-prickle is inside Tom-nest. Trittcha gets more nectar, more pollen now. Trittcha is not "nuisance."

Later, she heard the "click" again. When she came to look, Tom wasn't there. No Tom-prickle. Gone is Tom? She circled the station. Tom-scent is here. Tom-scent fades. Tom goes toward the lake, toward the distant Zetian flock. Daylight goes. Tom hunts at night? Trittcha has no nest.

As the sky darkened, Trittcha fluttered back to the edge of the forest. She found that the bark of the trees here was too thin for her to quickly excavate a nest with her wing-thorns. She spread her wings and flattened herself against the bare bark. Trittcha is still. Trittcha is quiet. Trittcha is frightened. Sleep comes here.

The first thing Trittcha sensed the next morning was Tom. She flew out of the forest to the garden for her morning meal. Tom was there. Or was he?

Tom is not-Tom? Not-Tom has blue thorax. Not-Tom has blue forelegs. Not-Tom has blue hind legs. Not-Tom has Tom-scent. Not-Tom is Tom. Tom molts?

"Good morning, Fido. I've got to get these transplanted and go out and net some bugs in the grass for my lizard collection."

She danced through the air from the flowers to Tom's shoulder and nibbled at the perspiration on his neck. She chittered, "Trittcha likes Tom. Trittcha feels strange inside."

While Tom dug the holes and set each of his plants into the ground over the next hour, Trittcha hovered around his hands. Tom kept brushing her away, occasionally chittering something that sounded unhappy and unpleasant. She flitted over to the log cabin and began gouging at the wood. "If Tom nests here, I nest here," she chittered. "Oh! Ow! This is not-wood. My wing-thorns do not splinter it."

"Hey there, Fido! What are you doing?"

"My name is *Trittcha*, not *Fido*!" she chittered indignantly. Then, "I understood Tom!"

"Trying to make a nest in a holo-wall, Fido? Won't work! Maybe you should go back to the forest?"

"I am not going to the forest. I am staying with Tom!" She fluttered over onto his hand, interfering with his work again.

Tom gave up. "Tell you what, Fido, I'm going out to net those bugs. As soon as I finish, I'll carve a groove in a chunk of wood. I'll hang it at the edge of the woods and you can use it for a nest."

"Yes. I need a nest. Tom is a good friend. Even if he does not know my name."

Trittcha prickled. The prickle! A flutterby-eater is near! Too late! A blur from above! A chaczit! I am dead!

Another blur. Tom swooped around and up with his net. "Relax, Fido. I've got him!"

The chaczit resembled a Chittintta, but was the size of Tom's hind foot, blue-white on its underside, mottled green on its back, and with teeth to tear flesh. "I've found their sign, but this's the first *Carnivora migratorius* I've seen. I know someone who'd like to have a little peek at him. Be right back, Fido, after I subspace this to Phil at Station 4."

"I am alive!" she chittered. "I am stunned. What is *Phil at Station 4*?"

When Tom returned, Trittcha could smell the faint scent of lightning on him. "Maybe I'd better get my rasp-saw and make that nest sooner rather than later," he said.

Trittcha turned her multifaceted eyes this way and that. Tom sends the chaczit *under space* to his friend? What is happening to me? I have words that I have no chitter for.

As he worked, Trittcha heard Tom making new sounds with his mouth. Tom makes bird songs. But not bird songs. In addition to the sounds, she felt his rhythmic prickle, saw his rhythmic images. She nodded to the beat.

When he finished carving the wood with his saw, Tom said, "How's this look, Fido?" He hung the nest for Trittcha against the trunk of a tree at the edge of the forest.

Trittcha flew over to the nest and inched herself into the cleft. "It smells of wood sap. But it will do nicely. Thank you, Tom," she chittered. She emerged and fluttered to his shoulder.

I know the feel of the link to my mother, father, and brother by scent and by the prickle in my head. This is the same, but not the same.

"You'd better use it tonight! These Carnivora aren't normally nocturnal, but, according to Phil, *D R News* says solar flares are going to give us a real auroral light show. That could bring out some of these big beasts." He paused and looked up into the sky, then toward the forest.

Trittcha felt Tom's prickle and heard his thoughts—Those red and green lights might even stimulate molting of the komodo lizards. They'll be a bit irritable until their skin toughens.

"Tom calls venchittas *komodo lizards*," she chittered. "Venchittas are not flutterby-eaters."

Tom grinned. "You sure can be a noisy little flutterby."

She tried to prickle to his mind— More chaczits tonight? Chittinttas are not night-flutterbys. But late-molting instars should be warned. Sentries should be warned. More will live if we tell the Flock. Will you help me? Come.

He scratched his head and raised his eyebrows as Trittcha fluttered off into the trees. But he didn't follow.

At the edge of the forest, Trittcha turned and sailed back over the flower garden. I feel Tom's prickle, but he does not feel mine. "Tom. Come. Help me," she chittered. Tom turned and, whistling, went back to work.

Trittcha fluttered into the forest, then back out. "Tom!" In again, and out again. But Tom was not following. The Flock must be warned. Should Trittcha go alone? If only our ancient heroes, Crittcha and Hirttcha, were here now.

She turned and flew into the forest. Trittcha must go. Once again, images from Tom coursed through her, more than just images ... rhythmic images, rhythmic sounds, words, I leave you now, with a last farewell. Trittcha felt them fade as she moved deeper into the forest.

This way. Now this way. Oh! Pain is not-pain. Inside Trittcha is not-good. Trittcha feels strange ... Tom is gone! On to this tree. Now to this tree.

She was lost. She had no idea which way to go. She wandered. Eventually, she smelled the faint scent of the Flock. She fluttered in its direction. Flock Chittintta scent is stronger. Flock Chittintta prickle is stronger.

One more tree. Trittcha is back with Flock. Trittcha calls to Flock. Flock Chittintta scent is angry-threatening. Flock Chittintta prickle is angry-threatening.

One after another, members of the Flock dived toward Trittcha. "Go, not-Chittintta!" They released the threat scent. They bared their wing-thorns. They sent the threat prickle.

No! Trittcha must tell Flock ... "Night is bad." Trittcha must tell Flock ... what? Trittcha is confused. No. Trittcha must tell Flock ... "Chaczits come at night. Chaczits kill Chittintta."

"Liar! Liar! Not-Chittintta must go!" was the Flock's reply.

No! Listen! Trittcha is Chittintta. Trittcha warns Flock ... Flock will listen to Trittcha? Flock says Trittcha is not-Chittintta. Flock says Trittcha is bad. Flock says "Go!" No! Flutterby-eaters come at night!

Trittcha flew zigzags through the flock, trying to warn them by chitter, by prickle. Trying to avoid the wing-thorns of her attackers. Her right wing and her back were torn. She could feel warm blood wetting her fur, dripping from a hind leg.

Trittcha must flee. No! Trittcha must tell Flock ... what? Flock not-hears Trittcha. Trittcha is afraid.

She escaped into the forest.

If Trittcha not-tells Flock, is Trittcha bad? If Flock not-hears Trittcha, is Trittcha bad? No! Not-Chittintta is not-bad. Tom is not-Chittintta. Tom is good.

Trittcha traveled a random path through the forest. Not sure of her location, tired, she stopped to rest on a branch. As her eyes closed, she felt the flutterby-eater prickle.

The tongue of a yellow gilli lizard splatted against the branch beside her, showering her with a sticky mist. Startled, she darted from the branch. Gilli lizard is here. Trittcha is dead. Trittcha is not-dead. Where is Tom? Tom is good.

After escaping the gilli lizard, she stopped to rest again at a small puddle enclosed by the roots of a bittoma tree. She washed the blood from her fur. She covered her wounds with shreds of the gray moss growing on the trunk. Trittcha fluttered on, flying in this direction, then that. Exhausted and in pain, she collapsed into the leaf litter. She shivered with fear. Here, on the ground, she knew a marallit would soon find her. Or any of the other flutterby-eaters. But the pain would not let her move. Then her heart began to beat faster. Trittcha feels Tom-prickle! Faint but certain. Tom is near! Trittcha will find Tom.

She struggled into the air, trying to gain altitude, to get above the forest shrubs, but her feet almost brushed the leaf litter when she fluttered out of the forest. Startled by

loud, rhythmic sounds, she stopped.

"Tom!" she chittered. He was standing there, in his flower garden, just a few feet away. She used her last bit of strength to struggle into the air, collapsing onto his shoulder. Her toenails dug into the fabric of his shirt. Her hands grabbed the hair on his neck. She shivered and pulled herself against his warmth.

Tom shrank to the side and raised his hand as if to brush her off. He stopped, turned his head slightly toward her, and touched her gently. "Fido? I'm glad to see you, too. Don't startle me like that!"

Tom walked back to his cabin. The sound was even louder. Trittcha huddled closer.

From the safety of Tom's shoulder, she listened for a few moments. What is sound? Tom is not afraid. Not-danger is sound? It was like the rhythmic sounds and words that had coursed through her when she first left Tom to find the Flock. She looked around at Tom and the station. Trittcha knows this sound. Sound is good! She loosened her grip on Tom's hair and shoulder.

"It's about time you got back, Fido! You almost missed lunch!"

He had Tom-food in his hand. Its scent was of warmth and something like the spice of the chofermitta flower pollen, and something else ... the odor of dead animal in the midday sun. Tom sat down and leaned back on his ... lawn chair? His head was bobbing to the rhythmic sounds coming from a hole in his log cabin. Trittcha recognized "with a last farewell" from this morning. Her body nodded to the rhythm.

"Hey! Hey! That tickles! You like my music, Fido? Strange, I haven't been able to get that tune out of my head since you flew off this morning. But now, look what I've got for you."

The strange feelings in her mind from this morning were returning. Once again, she was sensing Tom's prickle, but more than just new images ... new words, new ideas. Once again, she could understand some of Tom's chitter and thoughts. Much of these. It was like watching the chittintta birds, which share the forest with the Flock, build their nests, stick by stick, daub by daub of mud. She could feel her mind building, thought by thought, concept by concept.

Tom gently lifted her from his shoulder. She began to struggle, weakly. "Hey, what's happened to you? Something's really worked you over! Let me put some Heal-Fast on those wounds."

Trittcha felt better when he finished smearing the goeey stuff onto the tears in her

skin. She let Tom carry her to a round red object with a small opening near the bottom and a branch-like projection below it. Trittcha could smell the scent of nectar coming from it. Tom set her onto the small "branch." Her tongue flicked into the opening and she slurped up the sweetness from the feeder.

As she ate, Tom went to the hole in the log cabin ... a window! He reached through and the sounds stopped. When he returned, he carried a narrow, flat chunk of wood with long strands of ... Were they spider silk?

"Let's see how you like a little dulcimer music, Fido." He returned to the lawn chair, laid the dulcimer across his legs, and began to stroke it. He made more, but different, rhythmic sounds. Trittcha bobbed to the new music.

When he finished, Tom said, "That was *Green Corn*. How about one by a guy named Bob Dylan, *Don't Think Twice*?"

As he stroked the dulcimer, Tom opened his mouth and made rhythmic chitter himself. Trittcha swayed to the music.

"Fido, if I didn't know better, I'd say you enjoyed my music. S'pose we spend the rest of the afternoon with some of the songs from my planet, Earth."

"Yes, Tom. *Don't think twice, it's all right.*"

The musical rhythm of her chitter of assent was almost lost on Tom. He was ready to start playing again, but stopped. He tilted his head toward Trittcha and stared for a moment. "Did I just hear...? Nah." He shook his head and started strumming *Danny Boy*.

Nibbling at the nectar, bobbing to the music, Trittcha's strength returned. She fluttered back to Tom's shoulder. She held tightly to the blue fabric of his shirt.

As evening approached, unsure of the rapid changes occurring within her mind, but satiated in body and soul, she fluttered past the log cabin, around the garden, and back to Tom.

The venchitta prickle! Tom, a venchitta comes. Tom! But Tom continued playing. "Tom! Venchitta!" she chittered as loud and insistently as she could. Tom didn't respond.

Still on Tom's shoulder, Trittcha moved away from his neck, back again, then away. She looked around at the forest and the flower garden. There! The yellow-scaled back of the venchitta slinking between the rows of Tom's flowers. Venchittas do not eat Chittinttas. Venchittas eat larger animals. The venchitta will attack Tom. Tom, flee! "Tom, flee!"

Tom continued strumming the dulcimer, even as the venchitta broke cover and lumbered in his direction. Trittcha watched it. Her body shook. "Tom, flee!" Tom doesn't hear Trittcha's warning.

She fluttered from his shoulder into Tom's face.

"Fido, stop that!" Tom's hand brushed his face. Trittcha dodged, and returned, pulling at the hairs of his five o'clock shadow. When Tom rocked his head in the direction of the venchitta, Trittcha fluttered away, toward the drooling lizard.

The mouth of the venchitta was open. Ragged teeth lined its jaws. Poisonous saliva dripped from its mouth. Tom saw it. He heard its growl.

"Komodo lizard," he shouted. "Holy sh—" His dulcimer and his bottle of root beer tumbled to the ground as he sat up. The lawn chair tipped over as he tried to get to his feet. He tumbled to the ground behind it.

The venchitta, as long as Tom was tall and considerably stronger, was on him, blocked only by the chair. Tom pushed. The venchitta growled as it pushed back.

Trittcha attacked with her wing-thorns. Jabbing into the top of the venchitta's head.



Into his back. Into his legs. He twisted, trying to get at his tormenter. Trittcha gouged at his eyes. Thick, irritating saliva flew from his mouth.

"Oh, Jeez," Tom cried, grabbing for a handful of grass to wipe the burning goo from his arm.

He grabbed his net from the ground and bashed the beast's snout. It grabbed the handle and jerked the net away.

The venchitta dropped the net. It lunged forward. Its snout slid under the overturned chair. As it faced Tom, it opened its mouth again and roared. Then it snapped at his left arm, catching the fabric of his cuff. The lizard drew back, trying to pull Tom under the lawn chair.

Trittcha flew over the chair and dived at the beast's eyes. The big lizard released Tom's sleeve as it snapped at her. Tom snatched up the root beer bottle with his right hand. He smashed the bottle's mouth against the concrete pad of his cabin. "Yaa ..." he shouted, waving his arms at the lizard. The venchitta swung its head back toward him, grabbing for his arm again. Tom twisted and rammed the broken bottle vertically into the beast's gaping maw as far as he could.

The venchitta roared and coughed as blood coated the bottle and ran into its throat. It backed away, out from under the lawn chair, pawing at the bottle with a front foot. After dislodging the bottle, the huge lizard rushed Tom and the lawn chair again. Saliva and blood dripped onto the grass. Trittcha continued gouging at its eyes and face. The brute swiped at her with a short, stubby foot. She dodged and kept up the attack. The big lizard began to back away, then broke and ran. Back toward the forest.

Tom peeked over the edge of the lawn chair and watched Trittcha pursue the venchitta. "Well, I never ..."

The creature disappeared into the forest and Trittcha returned, alighting on the lawn chair to face Tom. "The bastard hurt you," he said. He pulled more grass and wiped the spots where the venchitta's saliva splattered her wings and thorax. He daubed Heal-Fast onto her skin and the burning began to go away.

"Fido, you don't know it, but you just saved my life." Tom smeared Heal-Fast onto his own burns. "That komodo lizard would have killed me with his poison, then dragged me off to tenderize somewhere. You are welcome to stay here at the station as long as your little heart desires. Thank you, friend."

"You're welcome," Trittcha chattered to the uncomprehending Tom. "And thank you."

Trittcha's thoughts returned to her newly expanded mind. From the prickle, Trittcha knows this mind is still in Tom's head. Adult Chittinttas sometimes gouged their nest from the chittintta bird's nest. But the sticks and mud were not theirs. They used the nest as the framework for their own. Tom's mind is the framework for my new mind. When Trittcha leaves Tom, my new mind is left behind.

Trittcha must choose. Return to the forest and live alone? Find a flock of "cross-breeds over at Station 4"? Return to the Flock and be killed? Or stay with Tom?

Tom righted his chair, picked up his dulcimer, and sat down again.

Tom needs Trittcha. She flutters to his shoulder.

"Oh, Tom," she chitters. "I belong with you. Your thoughts swirl through me. Your life. The stories of your flock. Maybe tomorrow mine will swirl through you. I will not return to what I was before. That way leads to death, oblivion. I prefer life."

Tom turns his head slightly and looks at Trittcha out of the corner of his eye. "Like I said before, you sure can be a noisy little flutterby." He begins to strum on the dulcimer. "Still can't get that tune out of my head."

"Yes, I am a happy *noisy little flutterby*. Trittcha and Tom are one—like Crittcha and Hirttcha. I have no regrets." Trittcha's thoughts return to the Flock Chittintta as she chitters along with Tom, "I leave you now, with a last farewell." ∞

Jack Ryan is a retired science teacher who now writes science fiction. His short stories have appeared in "OG's Speculative Fiction," and have received Honorable Mentions in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest for 2010 and 2011.

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