

Article that appeared in the Plainwell Post (Reprinted with permission)

The other day, our little town of Plainwell was honored by the presence of two distinguished visitors; Peacekeeper Tom-ga-Lashpa Wilks-ga-Krish and Peacekeeper Lashpa-ga-Tom Krish-ga-Wilks. Their odd-sounding names are the result of a uniquely Rouldian belief known as gragrakch – a concept that will be explained later on in this article.

The Peacekeepers were in town to visit Mr. Wilks's sister, Cassandra Wilson. But before visiting her, they played a small prank on Paula Stevens, owner of The Country Diner on 10th street. Paula had once invited Peacekeeper Wilks to sample the breakfast offered at her diner. Mr. Wilks took her up on the offer and asked Peacekeeper Lashpa to enter the restaurant first. I was witness to this event and it will most likely be talked about for years to come. The complete story of what took place at The Country Diner appear in this edition's Community section.

I interviewed Peacekeeper Lashpa first. Following her interview, I was invited to join the family reunion at the Wilson residence where I spoke with Peacekeeper Wilks.

The highlights of my interview of the two Peacekeepers are presented below. The full transcript of the interview is available on the Plainwell Post's website.

***** Peacekeeper Lashpa *****

Peacekeeper Lashpa is a Rouldian, a reptilian race more commonly referred to as dragons by us humans. I found her to be an intriguing and very engaging individual whom I took an immediate liking to. For those readers who are unfamiliar with the Rouldian species, their home planet of Roulda orbits a star some 187 light years from Earth. The gravity there is 1.8 times what we humans experience. Rouldians have a large head with two widely spaced eyes. Their jaws are slightly elongated and filled with nasty-looking teeth. They walk on four legs and have a pair of short but very strong arms attached to their torso. A typical Rouldian measures 3.5 meters long from the tip of their nose to the end of their tail. Their bodies are covered in fine, slightly iridescent scales.

Lashpa, however does not look like your typical Rouldian. She's a peacekeeper and that means she's a cyborg. Her scales have been replaced by black armor. Her limbs and even her tail are cybernetic replacements. I was given the opportunity to study her armor up close and I can honestly say I've never seen anything quite like it. Although it covers almost every square centimeter of her body, she's able to move around with considerable grace, the individual pieces sliding over each other like a well-oiled machine. The engineering genius who designed it should be commended. The only part of her not covered is the area around her face and part of her neck. These parts can be protected when needed by a movable pieces of metal normally stored behind her head.

What impressed me most about Peacekeeper Lashpa was how well she was received by everyone. Cassandra Wilson, Tom's sister, hugged her when she met. When she did, I observed a distinctly Rouldian trait when Peacekeeper Lashpa quickly touched her tongue to Cassandra's neck. Cassandra did not appear to be bothered by this at all and I have since learned that this is a way Rouldians greet close friends.

Would you please tell me your full name?

I am Lashpa-ga-Tom Krish-ga-Wilks.

That's a rather odd-sounding name. Why is your name combined with that of Peacekeeper Wilks?

Tom and I are gragrakch. [Not sure if I had heard her correctly, I asked her to repeat what she had just said. The word 'gragrakch' is difficult for humans to pronounce correctly. The closest I could come was something like: "Gra graa" followed by the sound kids make at the end of the word 'ick'. The tongue goes to the back of the mouth.]

Can you explain what gragakch is?

Certainly. Rouldians believe that all living creatures are created in pairs and that the two halves will merge back into a single entity after death. Finding one's other-half is a cause for celebration and when this happens the pair declare themselves to be gragakch. The closest Terran counterpart is marriage, however gragakch and marriage have nothing in common. Gragakch is more of a spiritual connection.

[If the reader is interested in learning more about this alien concept, please refer to the companion article by Professor Sylvia Torrens which can be found in this edition of the Plainwell Post.]

Tell me a little about yourself Peacekeeper Lashpa.

I was born on a distant planet named Fanish. It's a relatively new colony world on the edge of Rouldian space, 262 light years from Earth. I was a police officer there for six years before joining the peacekeepers.

Why did you decide to leave Fanish?

I was bored with the life I had there. I became a police officer because I enjoy helping others but Fanish is such a small world I found myself spending day after day patrolling the streets without having to respond to a single emergency. There was very little crime and I thought I could be of better service as a peacekeeper. I was very surprised when I received the letter of acceptance. I have never regretted my decision.

How did you come to meet Peacekeeper Wilks?

I first met Tom on Centralis on our way to the academy. We became friends from the moment we first met. That friendship deepened during our time at the academy.

And that was when you learned you and Tom were gragakch?

Yes. I knew there was some sort of a connection between us from the moment we met but I'd never seen a Terran before and I just wasn't sure. After learning more about Terrans, and how quickly a friend can become an enemy, I became very hesitant about asking if he felt the same connection with myself. Over time, his actions told me everything I needed to know.

I know my readers are going to want me to ask this question so please don't be offended. Do you love Tom?

Do you have a brother or a sister?

I have both.

And do you love your brother and your sister?

Of course I do. Are you saying that gragakch is like brotherly love?

Love is such a powerful and misapplied word in your language and it really doesn't apply to Tom and me. Gragakch is a connection, an empathy between two individuals that simply cannot be explained. It's almost a tangible force that can be felt the moment two people first come into contact with each other. We are one and the same, we are gragakch. I love him because I love myself. I am him and he is me. We Rouldians say, two bodies, one soul.

I guess you need to be a Rouldian to really understand.

I couldn't agree more. Tom seems to understand, but he and I have spent a great deal of time discussing what it means to be gragakch.

Does being gragakch mean you and Tom can't marry? Not each other of course, I mean...

[At this point, Lashpa started laughing. Rouldian laughter is more like a huffing sound than anything else.] I know what you mean. Tom seems content to remain single although I would strongly support his finding a compatible mate. In my culture we declare ourselves to be mated. Gragakch has nothing to do with finding a mate.

What do you like most about being a peacekeeper?

I get to experience other cultures, see things I would never have seen had I remained on Fanish, and I get to be part of an organization dedicated to the greater good. Being a peacekeeper is not a continuous adventure though; there are long stretches of time when we are alone in our ships traveling from one place to another. We have a lot of time to ourselves. I learned how to play chess and Tom has been learning how to carve.

But there are times when you are put in dangerous situations right?

Of course.

Have you ever been in a battle?

I have, quite recently in fact. But taking part in a military operation is not typical for peacekeeper ships. They're classified as scout ships, not combat vessels, but we are occasionally called upon to take part in small combat operations.

In your opinion, what's the greatest difference between Rouldian and Terran cultures?

There are vast differences between our two cultures, but there are also many similarities. It's the similarities between us that allows us to coexist. The greatest difference, the one I have to contend with on a daily basis, is in the foods we eat. Terrans prefer to cook their food, Rouldians do not. The smell of cooking meat has been described to me as a wonderful aroma. To me, this same smell is horrible.

What do you eat then?

Roulda is a planet with vast oceans, lakes, rivers, and ponds. We eat a lot of fish and other seafood. And we prefer to eat them fresh — very fresh.

While they are still alive?

Yes. I know you think it's disgusting, but cutting your food into pieces and ruining it by cooking is just as disgusting to a Rouldian. I've tasted what Tom has told me is a perfect steak. I could not force myself to keep it in my mouth for more than a few seconds.

How do you manage on long trips? Surely you don't keep tanks full of fish on your ship?

Of course not. There are a few species of fish from my world that can survive being frozen. A few hours before a meal, one just has to throw them into some warm water and allow them to thaw out. We also like many plants; fruits and vegetables as Terrans would refer to them. There are also some species of seafood that can be eaten after they are killed but none are ever cooked.

So where are you off to next?

I am stationed here on Earth. Terrans are an interesting species and I hope to learn more about you in the near future.

Do you think you'll be returning to Plainwell?

Yes I will. Tom's only surviving family lives here and I would like to get to know them better.

***** Peacekeeper Tom Wilks *****

Peacekeeper Wilks is a quiet-spoken individual with a personality that's hard to describe. I had the impression that behind his black cybernetic eyes, is a mind that's continually analyzing what's going on around him. There were times during the interview when I felt as if I was talking to an accomplished negotiator capable of bringing two people who hate each other to a point of mutual understanding. Other times, I could sense a comedian just under the surface. I enjoyed every minute of my time with him and I felt disappointed when his interview was cut short.

Would you please tell me your full name?

I am Tom-ga-Lashpa Wilks-ga-Krish.

Tell me a little about yourself.

I was born in space aboard a Shandarian passenger ship while my parents were on their way to Bellish. I joined the space force when I was 22. I was assigned to the Komodo Dragon when I was 26 where I met Peacekeeper Sorbith during the Chroniech war. Three years later I was accepted into the peacekeeper academy. I've been stationed on Earth ever since.

Everyone has heard about the Komodo Dragon! Did you get to see the Kyrra?

I did. They were very nice. It's sad they decided to wall themselves up with the Chroniech. I would have liked to get to know them better.

What made you decide to become a peacekeeper?

I've always enjoyed helping others. I really loved what I did in the space force and, honestly, I never thought about joining the peacekeepers until I met Peacekeeper Sorbith. After talking to him, I asked about joining the peacekeepers. He told me he would look into it but I never heard back from him. Then one day I received this message that I'd been accepted into the academy. Apparently, simply expressing a desire to join was equivalent to applying.

What's the most memorable thing you've done as a peacekeeper?

That's a hard question to answer. [While Tom was thinking about this question I got the distinct impression that he was remembering many sad events in his life. He took his time in answering and after 20 seconds a smile formed on his face just before he replied.] I think the most memorable thing I've done in the service of the peacekeepers took place in Australia about a year ago. I rescued a woman and her child from a burning car. The look on the mother's face afterward is something I will remember for a very long time.

What's it feel like to be a cyborg?

I'm used to it now, but almost every peacekeeper experiences something called cyber-shock. [Holding his arms up for emphasis.] These feel almost like my original limbs, but there are differences. I never itch. I can't get a sunburn. I don't feel pain. But I also can't enjoy a warm shower or feel the sand squish between my toes. You give up part of your humanity when you become a peacekeeper. But the rewards are worth it.

Hold on a second — you can't take a shower? Are you afraid you might rust?

[Laughing] Oh, I can take a shower. It just isn't as satisfying anymore. I can feel the water hitting my limbs and I can tell that its warm. But all the finer sensations, the feeling of relaxation you get when you're standing underneath the spray, is gone. I can take a shower in boiling hot or ice cold water and it would feel pretty much the same. I don't need a coat in the winter and I don't overheat in the summer. I can see in the dark and I can hear things other humans cannot. In many respects, I am more than human, but in many others, I am less.

You've been given extraordinary abilities. There's an ancient saying — absolute power corrupts absolutely. Why doesn't that apply to the peacekeepers?

Because of my ship. [Tapping the top of his head.] I'm always linked to my ship, the Orion. The ship's AI monitors everything I do. It records everything I say, everything I hear, and everything I see. It can even listen in on some of my thoughts. If a peacekeeper starts to get out of line it will intervene. It can shut me down if it deems necessary. There never has been nor will there ever be a corrupt peacekeeper.

Unless someone disconnects themselves from their ship.

There are safeguards against that as well. If I'm out of communication with my ship for more than a few days my cybernetics will switch into a failsafe mode allowing me to move only very slowly. If communication isn't restored within a week, the cybernetics will destroy certain critical key components rendering me immobile. If something happens to my ship, another peacekeeper vessel can temporarily take over as my monitor.

So you are never alone? There's never a time when you're not being monitored by your ship?

You get used to it. Most of the time I never think about the fact that a machine is watching everything I do.

Is there a woman in your life?

I can sense there's more behind that question than a simple inquiry. Let me set a couple of things straight. I might be a cyborg but that does not mean I can't have a love life. That part of me is fully functional. My ship is a part of me and having it watch and record everything, even what happens behind closed doors, doesn't bother me in the least. Such recordings are strictly confidential. To answer your more direct question, no I don't have a girlfriend. And Lashpa doesn't count. She and I are- - -

Gragrakch, yes I know. I've already covered that subject with Peacekeeper Lashpa.

To avoid any confusion I suggest you find an expert in Rouldian culture and have them write an article explaining just what gragrakch is and how deeply it is rooted in Rouldian culture. It's much more than infatuation or love or admiration — it's a bond between two people that simply cannot be explained. It's as much a part of Rouldian culture as marriage is a part of ours; even more so in my opinion.

I will do that — thank you for the suggestion.

At this point we were interrupted by the arrival of Paula Stevens, owner of the Country Diner. Tom had promised to show her his ship. I asked if I could tag along and was politely but quite firmly told that it would have to wait for another time. This was going to be a private showing.