The Tortoise Finished Off the Race

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Editor's Choice Award Winner

There are three of us huddling around a fire. Although the planet our ship crashed into is known for its tropical climate, one could say we're the first to have discovered a glacial island. What a discovery! We're even luckier to have started a large, but contained fire from our crash; thus, freezing to death is something we can forget about. While most of our ship is burning, the cargo containing a week's worth of food remains in perfect condition, so we don't have to worry about starving. What's even better is that the bags of tasty carrots I slipped into the glove compartment before our departure are still there! Since my space suit's battery was destroyed in the crash, my suit's oxygen tank is dysfunctional, but the planet we crashed on is rich with oxygen. Although our accident happened at night, in the most isolated region of the planet, the solar system we crashed in has a reliable crash alert network, so news of our mishap has already been relayed to a nearby freighter. The three of us are quite lucky.

The two individuals sitting with me are Booleans. Their appearance is quite ridiculous. The number of limbs a Boolean has increases alongside their age. XOR, one of the Booleans sitting in front of me, has a five hundred. Sitting next to XOR is AND, a Boolean with two thousand limbs. Seeing them try to dress up in their space suits is a comedy. I imagine that tailoring those suits is a nightmare. Booleans are covered in crimson-colored scales. If you become friends with a

Boolean, they might let you use one of their scaly limbs as a backscratcher. Booleans have wide jaws containing at least fifty rows of razor sharp teeth, and their tongues are a meter in length, but a width of a few centimeters. Having dinner with solid food is quite unpleasant for them, given they end up tasting the blood of their tongues more than the actual food.

People miss out on so much when they only acknowledge the appearance of Booleans. The Booleans communicate using musical frequencies. Simple words are expressed through single notes, while words with a more complex meaning are expressed through chords. For example, home is expressed as an A above middle C, while a few phrases censored by modern translators use diminished C chords. Their numerical system is also based on music. A above middle C not only represents home but also 0. Numbers increment and decrement by one with pitch, where A# above middle C is 1 and B is 2, while G# is -1 and G is -2. The Booleans don't hesitate to ridicule our race for programming our computer systems with indices starting at A# while composing with indices starting at middle C. A few Booleans immediately apologize, claiming it's wrong to chastise lost individuals. My knowledge of their language ends there -- only trivia.

My suit's translator also relied on my destroyed battery, so I can finally witness XOR and AND speak in their native tongue. I'm pretty sure their translators don't work as well, but to be sure, I asked them a random question. After XOR and AND exchanged confused chords, they tapped their translators. AND, the older Boolean, looked back at me and repeated a single chord, egging me to repeat my last statement, so I repeated. XOR violently rolled over, emitting a series of rapid arpeggios ranging at least 10 octaves in some major key. He's laughing at me.

AND erupted into a collection of descending minor scales at XOR. AND then pulled XOR's tongue out, then downward against his jaw. As AND roared innumerable diminished C chords, XOR's major arpeggios immediately turned into a series of high-pitched tremolos. After a few seconds, AND let go of XOR's tongue. The elasticity of XOR's tongue caused it to slap XOR right in the forehead. As XOR's tongue returned to his mouth, AND let out a soft resolved chord towards me. Out of respect for the old Boolean, I nodded back.

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A few hours passed by with nibbling on carrots, fluffing my two long ears, and XOR and AND exchanging light chords. After a bit of silence, XOR let out a melancholic A. He must have been homesick. This was XOR's first week as a delivery Boolean. Junior delivery Booleans are known to be homesick for the first few weeks on the job. In an effort to console him, I tried to respond back with an A#, then A. We will return home. XOR seemed to understand. He then repeated an A, this time with a more hopeful tone. All three of us started to repeat home.

What XOR doesn't know is that I've seen AND grow a thousand limbs since AND and I last visited our respective home planets, and we plan to see him grow a million before we even consider returning. The only reason we took this job was to escape the internal conflicts of our home planets. While information repositories depict these conflicts to be contemporary events, these conflicts were always there. Few understand how these conflicts could have been prevented without violence. AND and I have made deliveries to planets that figured it out! Even fewer acknowledge the purging of contesting space alien races. Dozens were finished off, all because we ignored, or failed to understand, how conflicts slowly arise from centuries of ignorance from both sides.

I wish I could call this island home, just as long as I can rest with these Booleans. Only with them do I want to share the dominion of our little island. I sincerely hope that the rescue freighter can wait just a few more hours.