

RETURN to CELEDON

VOLUME III

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TIXE OF CELEDON SERIES

Tixe of Celedon Volume I

Visitors on Celedon Volume II

Return to Celedon Volume III

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Iron People.....	1
Chapter Two: Iris	6
Chapter Three: The Mistress.....	11
Chapter Four: Waiting.....	13
Chapter Five: The New Heir.....	18
Chapter Six: The Village of Celedon	24
Chapter Seven: Catching Up.....	30
Chapter Eight: New Ideas	36
Chapter Nine: Timothy Magda Lafferty O’Hara	39
Chapter Ten: Egor’s Challenge	43
Chapter Eleven: The Sun Sliders	47
Chapter Twelve: Prisoners	53
Chapter Thirteen: Rescue.....	61
Chapter Fourteen: Escape	65
Chapter Fifteen: Almost Home	68
Chapter Sixteen: Return to Celedon	74
Chapter Seventeen: Egor’s Return.....	79
Chapter Eighteen: Adjustments.....	82
Chapter Nineteen: Results.....	86
Chapter Twenty: More Adventures.....	89

CHAPTER ONE

Iron People



“Run! Run, Tixe. Hurry, Magda! This way.” Egor shouted at the two girls racing behind him along the dusty, rutted road. They pounded across the rough dirt to the shelter of scrubby trees and flung themselves down among the roots. The noise continued, the bullets shattering the rocks and trees around them.

“I don’t understand, Egor!” Tixe shouted in Egor’s ear. “Who is firing on us? How did anyone know we were on this path?”

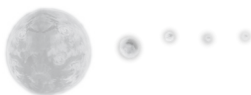
Egor could only shake his head. He had no idea why this was happening. Magda huddled against a tree, her face against her knees, her hands over her ears.

Suddenly the racket stopped and the silence beat against their ears.

Egor lowered his hands, looked around, then slowly stood. Seeing him stand, Tixe also got to her feet, reaching down to assist Magda. Tixe brushed the pine needles and dust from her clothing.



When Egor returned to Celedon after two years aboard the spaceship *Endeavor II*, he brought back disturbing news about the forests of Celedon. Something was causing them to turn brown and die. He saw it with the scanning equipment on board the *Endeavor II*. The scanners determined that the source of the problem was the villages in the mountains. After a hurried discussion with his father Trane, Egor,



his sister Tixe, and healer Magda set out to contact the people over the mountains. These people were known only as the iron people.

Jeremy Butler flew them over the mountains in one of the small scout ships. He landed on a flat meadow, and as soon as Egor, Tixe, and Magda collected their backpacks and supplies, Jeremy handed each of them a communication device.

“I’ll be back here in fourteen days unless you contact me before then.” Jeremy waved and took off.

They had been walking only a few hours when the shelling started and they found themselves cornered in the grove of scrubby trees.

“Look.” Magda pointed. A group of shabby, ragged men approached them, each carrying a long rod. The rods were pointed at the three standing under the trees.

The leader of the group strutted up to Egor and said something in a language Egor did not understand. When it became apparent that Egor did not understand him, the man began to shout, getting louder with each word.

“Wait.” Egor rummaged in his pack for the OMDLAT. This Oscillating Multi-Directional Locator And Translator would help him understand the words of the others.

Holding the shiny ball in his hand, he said carefully, “My name is Egor of the Rood. I come from the village of Celdon.” Pointing to each of the others, he continued, “This is my sister, Tixe and this is Magda Allgood, a healer from our village. We wish to speak to the leader of your village.”

“Yes, and perhaps you really wish to bring your soldiers in to destroy us.” The leader of the group gasped as he realized he understood what Egor was saying.



“We will take you and the useless women to Master Timothy. He can decide what to do with you.” He leaned closer to Egor. “You are too small for the forge. Maybe the shafts will be just your size. Now, move!”

The group of men surrounded Egor and marched him along with them. Egor left the OMDLAT activated and quickly dropped it into his bag. It would still be effective for anyone within hearing range. Two of the men grabbed Tixe and Magda each by an arm and shoved them along the rough path.

“What do you think they are going to do with us, Tixe?” Magda’s voice was shaky and breathless from hurrying.

“Silence!” the man at her side roared. “Women do not talk here.”

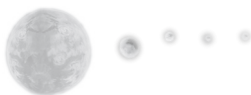
“Oh, really?” Tixe gave the man beside her a sharp look. “Why is that?”

“Women are not useful. Too weak to work the forge. Too weak to dig in the mine. Women stay in compound until we tell them otherwise.”

“Well,” Tixe gave him her brightest smile, “you haven’t met the women from the village of Celedon yet. We go where we choose, and speak when we choose.”

The closer they came to the village, the more difficult it was to breathe. The air was thick with dirty yellow clouds. By the time they entered the village of the iron people, Egor, Tixe, and Magda were choking on the dust and fog and stumbling with weariness. The town was shrouded in clouds of murky smoke.

The arrival of the newcomers created a stir of excitement. People came running from the buildings and the giant furnaces. Tixe gave Magda a quick nudge.



“Look,” she nodded at the crowd. “No girls or women. Only men.”

A silence fell over the crowd, and everyone dropped to his knees. Tixe turned and saw a tall man wearing a long black cloak stride toward their group. She felt hands on her shoulders and someone pushed her down.

“Kneel before the master!”

“I kneel before no one.” Tixe stepped away from the hands on her shoulders, folded her arms, and watched the man approach. She saw Magda stand her ground, too, and so did Egor.

“What is this? Are you barbarians that you do not yield to the master?” The tall man stopped before Egor. “Who are you?”

“I am Egor of the Rood. I come from the village of Celdon on the other side of the mountains. My sister, Tixe and a healer, Magda Allgood, accompany me. We wish to discuss with you the effect of the smoke made by your furnaces.”

“Ha!” The master roared with laughter and the other men echoed him. “This is good smoke. It makes us wealthy.” He reached for Egor’s arm and squeezed a little. “You seem strong enough.” Turning to a man behind him, he motioned. “Take him to the forge. He can load the furnace feeders.”

“Where are you taking my brother? We come in peace and you treat us like—” The man behind Tixe clamped a rough hand across her mouth.

“Women do not talk to Master Timothy.”

“Well, that is the most stupid thing I have ever heard. I see no reason we cannot talk to Master Timothy.” Magda stood as straight as she could, shaking her finger at the master, who looked at her in great surprise.

“Are you so special that visitors cannot even talk to you?” She tossed her head. “I do not believe we are the barbarians here.”

“Silence her! Take them to the mistress. She will know what to do with them.”

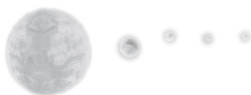
With that, the master turned and strode off. Tixe watched as Egor was dragged away. The man beside her grabbed her arm and shoved her along the path to an opening in a building close by. Magda stumbled after her, muttering under her breath.

“Silence, or you will be gagged.”

“You certainly have a lot to learn about how to treat visitors.”

They were pushed and shoved along so many twisting corridors that Tixe lost all sense of direction. Finally, they were shoved through a door and the door banged shut behind them.

Through the small opening in the door, the man said, “Wait here. Someone will come take you to the mistress.”



CHAPTER TWO

Iris



Tixe stood in the middle of the small room and looked about her. The stone walls were covered with hangings of heavy fabric. There was a couch along each wall. Each couch had several cushions of different colors. Tixe dropped her backpack on one of the couches. Magda put hers on another. Just beside the door stood a small table holding a bowl of fruit. Another table held a pitcher of water and a large bowl.

Magda went to the small window. She motioned Tixe to her side.

“This seems to be a courtyard of some kind.” She pointed to a covered walk around an enclosed garden. In the center was a small fountain and pool of green water. Around the pool was a walkway of flat stones, with a stone path leading to each doorway under the sheltered walk. There appeared to be several levels with doors opening onto covered balconies. “What kind of a place is this?”

A soft voice spoke from the shadows as a small girl moved into the center of the room. Tixe hurriedly took her OMDLAT from her bag. The girl stared in fascination at the shimmer of lights.

She repeated her words. “This is one of the waiting rooms for the mistress. Those who are waiting to see the mistress wait here until she calls.” She moved closer, holding out her left hand, palm up. “I am called Iris. What are you called?”

“Tixe of the Rood, and Magda Allgood.” Tixe held her left hand out, palm up. “We have come from the village of Celedon. Please, let us sit and rest.” She sank down on one of the couches. Magda sighed as she sat.

“I thought they would run my legs off.” Magda rubbed her tired knees.

“Iris, who is the mistress?” Tixe asked. Iris was still staring at the OMDLAT. Tixe pointed to it. “This makes it possible for us to understand each other’s words. Tell me, who is the mistress?”

“You do not know? No, I suppose you wouldn’t if you have come from beyond the mountains.” Iris sat on the chair by the table. “Mistress Doreen is in command of all the women and girls of this land. She decides what work we do, and makes sure we learn our history. She teaches us the ancient words. She arranges our marriages. She is very powerful. There is only one more powerful than the mistress and he is her husband, Master Timothy.” As Iris talked about the mistress and the duties of the women, she twisted the ends of her sash until it was quite knotted.

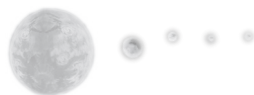
“You seem afraid of the mistress, Iris.” Tixe observed.

“We all fear the mistress. She has power over all of us. We are not allowed to go into the square. We can only go into the courtyard. The only ones who can leave are the lowliest ones who take food to the men as they work.”

“Is it dangerous to go outside?” Magda asked.

“They tell us there is danger in the clouds from the furnaces. The men bring back any who try to escape. They are afraid of the women.”

“Iris, do you have a family?” Tixe was curious.



“Of course. My mother and my two sisters live across the courtyard from this room.

“What about your father?”

“He is in charge of the cars that carry the stone from the mountains to the fire room. I don’t see him very often because at the end of his work he is always very tired.”

“I don’t know, Tixe,” Magda rubbed her eyes. “This is all very strange and getting stranger.”

“Where do the other men live?” Magda asked.

Iris tipped her head and looked at her. “Why, they live with their families in rooms assigned to them. Don’t the men in your village live with their families?”

“How can the men fear the women when they keep them locked up all the time?” Tixe just had to know.

“It is because we know the ancient words and we can read the ancient writings and charts. We are the ones who tell the men how to run the furnaces and make the metal. And we are not locked up. We stay here for protection from the clouds.”

“You mean the men cannot read? Not even the master?”

Just then a loud gong sounded, followed by a ringing of several high pitched chimes. Iris jumped to her feet.

“I must take you to the mistress! Quick! Wash the dust from your faces and hands. You must be presentable.” She handed Tixe and Magda clean towels and pointed to the pitcher of water.

As Iris hurried Tixe and Magda around the courtyard, she gave them quick instructions. “You must let the mistress speak first. You must not look at her unless she tells you to.

She will ask you questions and decide what work you are fit to do.”

“What is she like, Iris?” Magda pulled Iris back. “Slow down. We have been dragged all over creation and I am tired. I’m sure the mistress can wait a few minutes more.”

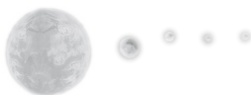
“No! No! We must not keep the mistress waiting. You don’t understand.” Iris’s voice rose to a shriek and she hurried even faster.

Tixe and Magda were ushered into a large room. Tapestries covered the walls. There seemed to be couches everywhere, covered with brightly colored cushions. The floor was stone, polished until it shone like the water in the lake beside Celedon. There were tables scattered about and a few chairs. At one side of the room sat a woman at a table covered with books. Several women in long dark robes stood beside another woman seated on a long couch. Each woman wore a sheer scarf over her hair. The ends of the scarves were wrapped around the women’s necks and draped down their backs.

Tixe studied the woman on the couch. Long, curly red hair floated around an oval face. Her skin was very pale, her eyes almost as clear as water. Jewels of fiery red glittered from her ears, and she wore a necklace of the same kind of stone. She was wearing a long thin gown of the palest pink and over that, a robe of stiff red lustrous material. A pair of red sandals completed her outfit. Tixe was fascinated by the sandals. They were nothing more than thin straps fastened to a sole.

“Well, are these the barbarians?” Her voice was low pitched and musical. “Bring them to me.”

Iris gave Tixe and Magda a tiny push.



Tixe pulled the OMDLAT from her pocket and boldly approached the mistress. She pushed the side of the OMDLAT to activate it, then said, “If you please, ma’am, this device will make it possible for us to understand each other’s words.” She stood straight as a rod before the mistress. Magda did the same. A murmur of horror swept through the room like the breeze through the Shabar trees back home.

CHAPTER THREE

The Mistress



“Silence! Did no one tell this creature she is not to speak first?” The mistress looked around at the women assembled before her. “Iris. Did you inform them of this?”

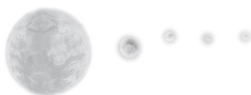
Iris dropped to her knees and placed her face against the carpet at the mistress’ feet. “I did inform them of the rules. I apologize for their lack of manners. I will take the punishment.”

Tixe reached down and pulled Iris to her feet, then turned to face the astonished mistress.

“You have no reason to punish Iris for my behavior. We came to your country to discuss a matter of great importance. We have come with peaceful intentions. I see no reason to ignore us or to imprison us.” She stared at the mistress and watched the others’ eyes glitter with anger. Tixe saw the mistress was so angry she was shaking. Her cheeks flushed and she pulled herself awkwardly to her feet.

“Remove these creatures from my sight. I will deal with them later. Iris, return here when you have taken them back to the waiting area.”

Tixe had only enough time to drop the OMDLAT into her pocket when many slender hands grabbed her and shoved her and Magda toward the door. The sharp nails of the women left scratches on the girls’ arms. Iris ran before them, skidding around corners and finally sliding to a stop at the door of the waiting area.



“What will happen to you now, Iris?” Tixe asked the distraught girl.

“I don’t know. The mistress can be kind if she chooses, but you annoyed her greatly. It is considered my fault.” Iris took a deep breath. “The mistress has not been well. Her temper is uneven.”

“What is the matter with her? Perhaps I can help. I am a healer,” Magda reminded Iris.

“The mistress is going to have a baby soon. Two times before, everything went smoothly, but when the babies came, they did not live. Master Timothy has declared that if the next one fails to live, he will choose another to be the mistress. I must go now.” Iris ran back down the hall.

CHAPTER FOUR

Waiting



Tixe and Magda waited in the small room for Iris, but it was not until late at night that she returned. Iris' eyes were red and puffy.

“What did she do to you?” Tixe pulled Iris to one of the couches and made her sit. “Are you all right?”

“I am unharmed. She has taken away my reading privilege for a span of thirty days. I must work in the garment cleaning rooms for that time.” Iris sighed.

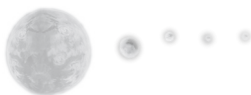
“Here,” Magda pulled the table over to Iris. “Someone brought food. Eat something.” She poured hot liquid into a mug. It looked like tea, but Magda couldn't tell from the taste what it really was.

“Do you have a room with your family, Iris?” Tixe knew Iris needed to rest, but she wanted to learn more about their surroundings.

“No, I am the official greeter of visitors. I stay here in order to take visitors to the mistress whenever she calls. I also take charge of the books for the smaller girls and help them learn the words.”

“How old are you, Iris?”

Iris straightened. “I have seen twelve seasons of the spring blossoms.” She sighed and reached for a chunk of bread. “It is written in the old writings, that one time in the newness of the year, the trees grew new green leaves. The ground was covered with blossoms of many colors, the sky was a clear yellow-green and many small creatures sailed



through the sky whistling beautiful songs. But it is no longer that way. Do you think the old writings are false?”

Tixe moved the table away since they were finished with their meal.

“No, Iris, the writings are true. In our village, the air is clear, the flying creatures that we call birds still sing, and we have green leaves and flowers. This is why we came to talk to Master Timothy and the mistress. But not quite yet. Now, we all need to get some rest.”

Iris left the room early the next morning. Before she left, she handed Tixe and Magda each a set of clothing. “Put these on,” she instructed. “The ones you are wearing need to be cleaned. I will take them with me to the cleaning rooms.”

Tixe and Magda dressed in the garments. There was a pair of loose fitting leggings, a tunic with a high collar and long sleeves in a shade of pale blue. Over this went a long, sleeveless coat of a darker blue. The coat had no closures, but it did have big pockets. Tixe activated her OMDLAT and dropped it into one of the pockets.

“Now that we look like everybody else, Magda, I don’t see any reason to sit in this room all day, do you?” They were finishing their breakfast of bread and tea.

“Absolutely not.” Magda tucked her small medkit in one of her pockets. “I’ll activate the locator beacon in my pack so we can find our way back here.” She shook her head. “I don’t think there is a straight hallway in this entire building.”

They stepped out into the hall and looked in both directions. To the right, the passageway took an immediate right turn. To the left, it seemed to stretch endlessly.

Tixe and Magda looked at each other and both spoke at once. “Left.”

They walked for what felt like miles, their padua skin boots making no noise on the stone floor. The passageway was lighted at regular intervals by lamps set into the wall. There were doors along the hall, some of which were open. At the open doors, Tixe and Magda stepped into the rooms far enough to see them. There were no people anywhere. The rooms were furnished with couches and chairs. Some had shelves containing books along a wall. All the rooms were lighted with lamps set into the walls. In a few rooms, they saw the remains of a meal left on a table. The rooms were all neat and clean, but Tixe thought they seemed dark. The two girls roamed the corridors all day, finally returning to their room, exhausted.

“It’s a good thing you thought of your locator beacon, Magda.” Tixe sank onto the couch and pulled off her boots. “We would never have found our way back.”

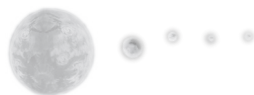
The next two days were spent the same as the first. At one point, Tixe stopped, running her hand over the wall.

“Magda, feel this. Here the wall is very smooth, but right here it becomes rough.”

Magda felt the wall. “It would suggest that instead of this being a building of stone, these corridors and rooms have been carved into the mountain itself.” Magda spoke slowly, as though the idea was just occurring to her. “That is why there are no windows in any of the rooms.”

“I believe you’re right. Let’s keep moving. I want to see what is ahead.” For some time, Tixe was aware of a low rumble and noises ahead in the passage. She and Magda followed the present corridor until it stopped abruptly at a large door.

“Magda, can you read that sign?”



Magda nodded. “Their words are very much like the words from the Beginning time. It says, ‘Do Not Enter.’”

“Yes, but we have to see where this leads, anyway.”

Tixe pushed against the door. “Magda, help me. This is really heavy.”

“Wait.” Magda ran back to the nearest open room, then came dashing back holding a cushion. “We may need this in case there is no handle on the other side.”

The girls groaned and pushed until gradually the door began to slide aside. A gust of hot air and a cloud of smoke puffed through the opening. As soon as the slot was wide enough, Tixe and Magda slid through the opening and Magda wedged the cushion against the panel to prevent it from completely closing behind them.

They were in a huge cavern on a high ledge. A retaining wall near the edge made a narrow walkway around the entire area. The air was stifling and very hot, and the girls saw shadows cast by flames dancing on the walls. There was no need to move quietly. A terrible roar and pounding noise came from the pit. They moved to look over the short wall.

Men swarmed over the floor below. Some kind of parallel tracks came from three openings in the walls and crossed in the center of the room. As they watched, a cart on wheels rolled through one of the openings. It was full of chunks of stone. When it rolled to a stop, two men rolled out another cart and began to remove the pieces of stone and place them in the second cart. Then they pushed the cart over to another doorway in the wall. When that door was opened, Tixe and Magda saw flames, brighter than any they had ever seen. They could also feel the blast of searing heat from the fire.

“Those must be the furnaces that are causing all those awful clouds outside.” Suddenly, Magda grabbed Tixe by

the arm. “Look! Isn’t that Egor?” She pointed to a small figure unloading a cart on the track.

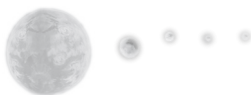
“You’re right.” Tixe stared at the small figure. “Maybe if I concentrate, I can get his attention,” she said. Magda knew that Tixe and Egor were very close and often shared thoughts.

The girls saw Egor shake his head, then he looked up. When he recognized the girls, he gave a small nod and lifted his hand as though to brush his ear. Tixe saw the streaks of grime on Egor’s face and how his shoulders sagged with fatigue.

“Oh, Magda. He looks awful. We have to get him out of there.”

“Well, let’s go back and plan what to do.” Magda pulled Tixe through the door, taking the cushion doorstep with her. As they walked back along the hall, she tossed the cushion into the room where it belonged. They hurried back to their room, following the locator signal. As they approached their room, they became aware of a new sound. Before, the corridors were all silent, and they saw nobody. Now, there were women pacing back and forth, wailing and crying.

“Something is terribly wrong, Magda. Run.”



CHAPTER FIVE

The New Heir



Iris was waiting in the room when they returned.

“Where have you been? You are supposed to stay here until you are needed elsewhere. I didn’t know where to look for you.”

“We got tired of waiting and decided to explore.” Tixe explained. “Iris, what is going on?”

Iris rocked back and forth on the couch and twisted the ends of her scarf. “It’s the mistress. Her infant has been born and it is not breathing. Just like the other times. Master is roaring at everyone and mistress is so sick and tired. I came back here,” Iris burst into tears. “I didn’t know what to do!” she sobbed.

“Well, I know what to do.” Magda patted the medkit in her pocket. “Take us to the mistress.” She handed a small packet to Iris. “After we get there, have someone make a good, hot tea using the contents of this packet. Also have someone get me several soft towels.”

They ran all the way. The mistress’ rooms were in chaos. Women milled about weeping and bowing. Master Timothy sat on a chair, his head in his hands.

“Everybody out, except you, and you!” Magda’s voice crackled with authority and she pointed to the two women beside the mistress. “Iris, do as I instructed you.”

Magda pulled Tixe over to the small cot beside the Mistress’ bed. The infant was lying on a soiled blanket. His tiny eyes were closed, his lips a sick, pale blue. Magda opened

her medkit and withdrew a small hollow cylinder with a tapered end. To this she attached a round empty ball.

“What is the meaning of this intrusion?” Master Timothy jumped to his feet and grabbed Magda’s arm. “Do not touch my son, you barbarian!”

Tixe didn’t know just what Magda had in mind, but she knew Magda had just returned from the *Endeavor II* with much knowledge of healing methods. Besides the child clearly needed help.

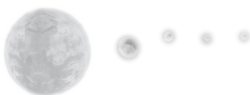
She struck the master’s hand away from Magda. “Back away, sir. Magda is trying to help. You must let her work.” She pushed him back to his chair. “Now sit down and be quiet.”

She returned to Magda’s side ignoring the master’s astonished rage. “What can I do?”

Magda did not turn. “Where are the clean towels?” Tixe handed her one. Magda turned the tiny body over onto its side. Taking the cylinder and ball, she inserted the small end into the child’s mouth.

Tixe heard a groan from the master. She heard the mistress crying, but Magda did not appear to hear anyone. Magda worked with the syringe, removing thick fluid from the baby’s mouth. Still the child remained pale and blue. Next, Magda gently rubbed the child on his back, patting him. She also tapped the soles of his feet. There was no sound in the room except for Magda’s soft voice.

“Come on, baby, you can do this.” Magda whispered to the child, but Tixe heard the desperation in her voice. There was a slight intake of breath, then a hiccup, and finally a thin wail. All at once the heir apparent to the iron people became irate and began to cry, the wails becoming increasingly indignant and lusty. He bellowed until his skin took on



a pink tint and the pale blue coloration disappeared. Magda wrapped one of the towels around him, and turned to the mistress.

“He seems to be in good shape, ma’am.”

The mistress was unable to speak. She took the small bundle, gazing at it in disbelief. The master jumped from his chair and knelt beside them both, a look of wonder on his face.

Magda turned to Iris. “Where is the tea I asked you to make? Give it to the mistress.”

When the mistress was sipping her tea, Magda gently removed the new infant from the arms of the master.

“The child needs to be cleaned up and allowed to rest. The mistress also needs to rest.”

Tixe spoke while Magda supervised the women caring for the new future leader. “We have matters of extreme importance to discuss, Master Timothy. Where can we go?”

The master led them to an adjoining room and indicated for them to be seated. Tixe placed the OMDLAT on the table between them. The master picked up the object.

“This device is called an Oscillating Multi-Directional Locator and Translator. It makes it possible for us to understand the words of another language.”

“It is truly remarkable. Almost like magic.” The master seemed fascinated by the shimmering colors. “But you said we have things to discuss. What are these things?”

“Our companion and my brother, Egor of the Rood, son of the leading elder in our village, was captured with us. He is working in a great pit of fire. We need him with us. Next, we want our own clothes back. These that your people gave us are nice, but we prefer our own. Lastly and most impor-