



DISPLACED

DISPLACED BOOK ONE

STEPHEN DRAKE

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About the Author

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The Displaced Series

Displaced
Civilization
Resolutions

Dedicated to Linda and Susan; for without their help and support, this work would not have been possible.

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Murdock's awareness was such that he knew he was sleeping. "Murdock. Wake up," he heard a soft, clear, contralto voice beckoning him. Or was he dreaming it? He couldn't place the voice and it sounded distant, irresistible.

"Kevin Murdock! Wake up!"

As Murdock began to wake, he found his brain to be fuzzy and his thoughts seemed slow. Where was he? He tried, but failed, to open his eyes; the lids were stuck together. Then he tried to raise his hand to rub them and found his arm unexpectedly heavy and weak.

The voice seemed to be everywhere. He felt cocooned in it. He heard no other noises. No humming, clicking, or buzzing. He felt encased in a thick blanket that blocked all extraneous sounds. Only the voice remained. After a few seconds, he tried to get to his feet, despite being blind and lost in his surroundings.

It took several attempts before Murdock struggled to his feet and kept his balance. He touched his chest and felt something smooth and clingy against his skin. Sliding his hand down to his thigh, he found that it covered him from neck to at least his legs.

"Whe—" His voiced cracked. His throat was dry and scratchy. With great difficulty, he managed a small swallow. "Where am I? What's going on?" he croaked, more to himself than to anyone in particular. To him, his voice sounded thin and weak.

"To your left is a basin to wash your face," the room-filling voice instructed.

He stumbled to the basin, and water began running. Murdock dipped the water out in his hands and started to clean his face and eyes. He found he now had quite a long beard. He ran his wet hands through his hair, which was quite long, longer than he normally kept it. He held on to the sides of the basin, his head lowered and eyes closed, attempting to organize his thoughts. He did manage to lubricate his throat with a few handfuls of water.

“A towel is located to your right.”

He reached out his right hand, locating the towel, and started to dry off his face. His vision was slowly clearing.

“Who are you?” Murdock asked. To him, the voice now seemed too perfect, too mechanical.

“My official designation is Transport pod TP737-1, but I will respond to ‘Ship’ or ‘Pod’.”

“You’re a computer?”

“No, I *am* the transport pod,” the voice corrected.

“That’s a distinction without a difference.” *I’m not in the mood to argue with a damn computer*, he thought. His belly was empty, and he needed coffee, badly. “Any chance for breakfast and coffee?” he asked.

“When you are ready, a meal will be waiting in the main compartment,” the ship responded.

Murdock’s vision was clearing and he could make out a small, unremarkable compartment with what looked to be a flat surgical table, with glass panels hanging below the pad. As he stepped away from the basin, it disappeared into the wall, as did the towel rack, once he replaced the used towel. He looked down and saw he was dressed in a clear jumpsuit, but he had no idea what the material was made of.

“Your clothing is located under the sleeping pad. Press your thumb to the switch-plate located on the sleeping pad frame to open the storage bin.”

Murdock complied, and a drawer opened just beneath the pad. In it, he found his buckskins sealed in plastic. He tried to figure out how the jumpsuit unfastened, but couldn’t, so he ripped it off and began to get dressed.

Once clothed, he looked around and noticed a doorway. As he started toward

it, he heard a slight sigh behind him. When he turned around, he found the surgical table gone, and he stood in an empty compartment.

Through the doorway, he could see a small table and moved slowly toward it. His meal had appeared in the small wall-niche that was the food dispenser, while he slowly walked to the table. He sat in the very functional but uncomfortable chair.

He placed a bowl of thin oatmeal and a cup of weak tea on the table. The oatmeal looked neither substantial nor appetizing, but Murdock began eating. While he ate, a screen came to life showing views of the outside while an unseen male spoke...

“You are aboard a transport pod that has landed on the surface of a planet, and it will never leave. During your journey, between one hundred fifty and three hundred fifty years have elapsed on our planet, though only two to three years have elapsed for you physically. This transport pod may, or may not, be the first, but it is not the only one. Every five years, another pod will land within a twenty-mile radius of this one. Each successive pod will increase your population by a factor of ten.

“This pod’s batteries will last three hundred sixty-five, twenty-four hour days — one year, as each of you is used to, if steps are taken to preserve the energy stored in them and the solar panels are kept clear of debris.

“You were not sent here to die, but to survive, if you can. You will find, in compartments accessible from the outside, weapons, tools, and a limited supply of food.

“Trying to return to Earth is a waste of time and effort. Your old planet no longer exists. It is now our planet. Your planet, now, is the one you are on, *if* you can tame it. You were sent away because none of you are compatible with our requirements, but some of your progeny might be. Good luck.”

The screen went blank.

Murdock had just finished his meager meal, which turned out to be more filling than it looked, when he heard the door open. A young woman came through the door looking haggard and disoriented. He estimated her age to be about the same as his, maybe a little younger. She was nicely built, with light

brown hair and wore blue jeans and a flannel shirt.

“What are *you* looking at and who the hell are you supposed to be?” she asked with disdain, in a deep, sultry voice.

“What do you...” Murdock started and stopped to clear his throat. “What do you mean?” he asked quietly.

“I haven’t seen anyone dressed like that, except in old movies. You look like some producer’s idea of Daniel Boone.”

Murdock stiffened and tried to ignore her comment. He was used to this reaction from others when he wore his buckskins.

He got up from the chair. The woman sat and began eating her meal. The screen once again came to life, repeating the message Murdock had just heard. He meandered around, studying the compartment, but could find no door or window to the outside. He longed to get out and into the fresh air.

The screen stopped and the woman got up, looking dazed and confused. Then the door opened again; this time, a large man in his forties came out, dressed in a business suit. The man ignored everyone and sat and ate. Again the message played. By this time, the idea of a generic message, to be used by all the pods, finally occurred to Murdock.

After three hours of this routine, twenty people, ten males, ten females, were crammed into the small compartment. Murdock felt quite claustrophobic. Just then, a motor started and a ramp opened. The smell of fresh, clean, outside air hit him, full force, and Murdock gladly breathed it in.

At the time the ramp opened, Murdock had been as far from the exit as was possible. As everyone moved en masse toward the ramp, his feeling of claustrophobia increased — until his feet met virgin ground. Once free of the others, he started to walk around the base of the transport.

From the outside, the pod looked a lot larger than it had on the inside. The flattened oval shape did not surprise him — the interior rooms had already hinted at the general shape of the craft.

As he walked around, Murdock took stock of the surroundings. The transport had landed in the middle of a grassy meadow fifty yards wide and one hundred yards long, by his approximation. The land appeared lush and fertile and, as far

as he could make out, not swampy.

At least it isn't a high desert environment, he thought. He could hear water running, not too far away, and an abundance of trees surrounded the meadow. The area reminded him of Western Montana, Northern Idaho, or the Cascade mountains in Washington State. The trees consisted of conifers, oak, maple, aspen, and birch. He noticed that everything was a different shade than he was used to — a bluish tint to vegetation that should be green — and no curious little creatures checked out the new arrivals.

Additionally, he heard no insects. All he could hear was a soft breeze in the trees and the running water, for he had tuned out the sounds his companions were making as they looked around and talked among themselves.

On his second trip around the transport pod, he found the storage compartments and opened them. *If you want something done, do it yourself*, he thought. *Don't wait for others*. He began by pulling out the items, leaving them on the ground where they fell. No one else moved to help him.

As he made his way around the pod, he heard parts of conversations.

“I don't believe a word of it!” one of the women was saying.

“I don't know, things don't look like I remember,” one of the males responded.

“Do you have any idea how expensive it is, transporting the numbers of people we were told are either here or will be here? I think it's all a hoax!” another male stated.

“I think we are being watched!” another woman said in a loud whisper.

Murdock chuckled to himself. To him, it didn't matter if it was a hoax or not. Complaining or spouting paranoid conspiracy rhetoric was a waste of time and energy. All that mattered was the here and now... and survival.



As James Whittier was being revived, he was dreaming. His father was lecturing him again.

“Most people are lazy, wanting someone to take responsibility for their

needs, and will think they are giving power to those who provide them,” his father said in his dream.

He always seemed to go on incessantly. Usually, James wanted to strangle him just to shut him up. His father had been a successful political figure and had constantly lectured him about the things he had learned in what he referred to as “the hard way.”

“As long as the little people think that you have the answers, they’ll do what you tell them,” his father continued inside his head. “But as soon as they lose faith in you, head for the hills. People won’t *give* you anything! You have to *take* it from them! And you have to do so in such a manner that they think it’s their idea and to their benefit. Politicians have to be magicians, using subtle means and misdirection to get their agendas supported by the governed.”

The elder Whittier had died while James was in his second year of college. He was glad of it as that meant he was paroled from his father’s incessant lecturing. At times of stress, though, all he could hear inside his head was the endless pontificating of his father.

“People want the government to provide everything for them and to have the power to act on their behalf,” his father’s voice continued. “To have that power, you have to be part of that government. They must never know that governments get in the way, most of the time, and are never for the benefit of the governed.”

James’ father had been a true disciple in the religion of government and had wanted his son to be its acolyte.

And James had done his best to continue his father’s legacy. The first time James had been caught cheating he was six and was punished — not for cheating, but for getting caught.

“What most people call ‘truth’ is not as objective as they may think; in fact, it is very subjective,” the voice inside his head continued. “To a politician, ‘truth’ is whatever the politician says it is. Therefore, no politician lies. No such thing as a lie; facts are fluid things that can be interpreted any way that suits the needs of the moment.”

James had managed to get into a good prep school on his father’s name and even managed to letter in a couple of sports without ever playing. Some of his

fellow students said that he bribed, bought, and blackmailed his way through school. They were correct, of course, but James chalked it up to jealousy that they hadn't thought of it first. His father had said he had accomplished a few "small feats" without dishonoring their good name.

When he had first learned the name of the school he would attend, James hired a few investigators without his father's knowledge. Their job was to find some indiscretions of the Headmaster, one Potiphar Grimsdale. Once found, his man had gone to Grimsdale with the proper inducements so that by the time James entered his office for his initial interview, he was admitted.

By the time the year was out, Grimsdale was paying him through a second party for not disclosing those indiscretions. After four years, James' bank account was greatly enhanced, and he had several sports letters, a high grade-point-average, and many letters of recommendation to his father's alma mater.

In college, James managed to get his degree without working too hard. The right amount of money here, a bit of pressure there, and before he knew it, he was graduated. A few weeks later, he ran for mayor of Athens, Ohio.

By the time James W. Whittier III was sworn in as mayor, nothing gave him more pleasure than bending another's will to his own. He knew he would willingly sacrifice millions of people for his own ends. He had no doubts that his view of reality was correct and that others should be willing to sacrifice themselves for that view. He liked having power; he would do anything to get it. And he would do everything necessary to hold on to it.

After his revival, the basic meal, and the briefing, Whittier looked around at the rest of his fellow pilgrims. *What an undesirable bunch this is*, he thought. As more joined the count, Whittier made a mental note of a couple of them as possible confederates, based on their size and their perceived low intelligence. An idea was beginning to percolate in his brain.

When everyone moved outside the ship, Whittier managed to get a big, older man, who had introduced himself as Burns, aside. "See if you can find one or two other men we can trust," he said conspiratorially. Burns nodded. "If we move quickly, we can be in charge of this mob. It may not be worth much, but I think being able to eat regularly is worth something," Whittier told him.

“I’ll see what I can come up with,” Burns acknowledged quietly.

“Do it discreetly,” Whittier whispered adamantly. “You do know what discreetly means?” he inquired, the condescension evident. *He needs to know who the boss is*, he thought.

Burns nodded, and Whittier could see the other man’s face flush at the insult. He moved off to mingle with the rest of the crowd.



When he was finished emptying the storage compartments, and after a brief rest, Murdock looked over the equipment and began to catalog it all mentally. He saw various knives, hatchets, and ax heads; several sizes of steel wedges, various machetes, a couple of two-man saws — one felling and one bucking; various diameters and types of rope, shovel heads, pickaxe heads, a couple of adzes, and drawknives. Additionally, he’d found forty water skins; quite a few heavy canvas tarpaulins of various sizes; a couple of cases of cooking and eating utensils; and forty cases of the instant oatmeal.

He picked out a pair of Bowie machetes, a twelve-inch and an eighteen-inch with scabbards and fastened them to his belt. Then he slipped a six-inch hunting knife into his boot-sheath. He shoved a hatchet into his belt near the small of his back. He neatly stacked the rest of the tools on top of a tarpaulin that he had already unfolded. When he finished, he folded the remainder of the tarp over the pile. Now, he knew what was available and had it all protected from the weather. Finally, he placed all the water skins on top of the tarpaulin.

No sooner had he finished than a man in a business suit came over to him. To Murdock, he looked to be in his early to mid-thirties, six foot one and about one hundred ninety pounds. The way the man carried himself told Murdock that he tended toward pomposity and was, therefore, untrustworthy.

“You did a nice job of stacking the supplies.” the man said, smiling, indicating the pile under the tarp. “You know what our physical resources are?”

“To a point and after a fashion,” Murdock responded curtly, quietly, “and so would you if you had gotten off that stick and helped.”

“What stick are you talking about?” the man asked, no longer smiling.

“The one stuck in your ass,” Murdock retorted, just loud enough for the man to hear.

The man’s face flushed, and he gave Murdock a quick glare. Then he stuck out his hand and tried to smile.

“I’m Whittier.”

Murdock just looked at the offered hand, then at the man’s face. His eyes narrowed. “Wittier than whom?” he asked stoically.

“No! My name is Whittier. James W. Whittier the third. And you are?”

“Murdock.”

“No first name or is that your first name?” Whittier asked.

“I have a first name,” Murdock quipped, “for friends.” *Arrogant and pushy! This one is not to be trusted. Not on any level,* he thought.

“I’m sure we’re all friends here,” Whittier stated, loud enough for some of the others to hear. He tried to maintain the disingenuous smile he had plastered on his face while looking at his extended hand.

“That remains to be seen,” Murdock responded warily. He could tell that his hesitance to take Whittier’s hand was making the other man nervous. Murdock looked at the offered hand: well-manicured fingernails, soft, meaty flesh lacking calluses. This guy was used to sitting behind a desk. Murdock bent over, picked up several water skins, and hung all but two in Whittier’s outstretched hand.

“What am I supposed to do with these?” Whittier huffed.

“You might consider filling them, unless you’re giving up water.”

“You expect *me* to carry water? You can’t be serious!” Whittier said with a shocked look.

“I don’t *expect* you to do anything. You can do as you please. Just don’t come around me when you get thirsty.” Murdock started walking toward the sound of the water with two water skins. He hadn’t taken many steps before he heard the empty water skins hit the ground. He just grinned to himself and proceeded to the stream.

As Murdock walked toward the sound of running water, he continued to scan the ground for any animal-sign. He also thought about the comments made by

his so-called companions.

He did look anachronistic in his buckskins. His boots were also buckskin and laced around his lower legs and ankles. The leather was true deerskin; he had brain-tanned them himself. They were buttery soft and a joy to wear; his prized possession, he was glad to have them.

He had noticed the clothing the others wore. They were dressed in everything from skirts to blue jeans. *Lucky no one was wearing a tuxedo*, he thought as he chuckled to himself. Why were the others so ill-equipped for this adventure? Why hadn't the ones who sent them here provided more acceptable clothing? Those in blue jeans would fare better than the rest, but all were going to be hard pressed when winter set in, including himself. And judging by the different types of trees, he knew winter would come.

Based on the lackadaisical attitudes of the others, Murdock judged himself to be the only one with any woodcraft knowledge at all. Everyone else struck him as city or suburban dwellers. *Do any of them have a clue what they're in for?*

As he neared to the running water, Murdock paid closer attention for signs of animal trails, which would indicate the easier route to the water. Just inside the line of small trees that skirted the meadow, he found several paths leading in the direction of the water. Murdock followed one down to find the small stream. The stream wasn't very broad, only four or five feet across, but it looked at least a few feet deep in places and didn't move too swiftly. At the water's edge, he noted that other animals had crossed the stream.

Not far off the path, Murdock found a pool formed by the stream flowing back on itself. He used his hand to dip a little water to his lips. Though the walk had been easy, he was already sweating in his weakened condition. He drank deeply before filling his water skins.

Then Murdock sat, watched, and listened. He saw a few large insects skim the calmer edges of the pool. While he watched, he saw one disappear. *Fish!* He waded out into the pool, cupped both hands between his legs, and stood very still. A moment later, a fish came close, and he scooped it free of the water and onto the bank in one swift motion.

After catching another, he waded over to the bank and stood looking at them.

They were fish, all right, just different from the ones he was used to. These fish resembled trout, but each had an extra set of fins in the back, and the tail was more like a dolphin's than a trout's. Murdock half expected them to get up and walk, but they didn't. He stuck his fingers into their gills, picked up the water skins, and he started back to the transport pod.

Murdock was in high spirits. This was his idea of heaven; he was truly in his element.

On the edge of the meadow, he spotted what appeared to be wild onions and stopped long enough to gather a few. *The others are going to come begging once I start cooking these babies*, he thought, grinning in anticipation of telling the others they could fend for themselves.

They could have, should have, followed me, Murdock thought. He had no use for those who either refused to learn or expected someone else to provide for them. As he walked on, thinking this, he spotted a few dead limbs and gathered those as well. By the time he got back to the transport pod, he had quite a load.

As Murdock approached the pod, he saw that the others had gathered into a group nearby. He picked out a likely spot for a camp, away from the others, and prepared the fish for cooking. As he smelled the cooking fish, he imagined the smell stirring the others' hunger.

Though it had taken Murdock the better part of the day to check and stack the supplies as well as get water and fish, from what he could see, the others had done nothing. Now, out of the corner of his eye, Murdock could see Whittier walking in his direction. He waited for the other man to get twenty feet from him.

"That's close enough, Whittier," Murdock warned without turning around.

"Hey, friend Murdock, that smells really good! Where did you get the fish?" Whittier asked nervously, without drawing closer.

"The same place I got the water," Murdock responded sarcastically. "Fish do live in water, after all."

"Um... where exactly was that?" Whittier asked.

Murdock turned his head to look sideways at Whittier. "Well, you see, I found this deli while I was out for my morning stroll." Whittier stared at him

blankly. Murdock motioned with his head toward the stream. “That-a-way!”

“Do you mind if I join you?” Whittier asked, after looking in the direction Murdock had indicated.

“I mind very much,” Murdock responded curtly. “And I am not your friend.” He shot Whittier a look of warning.

“I know we got off to a bad start earlier.” Whittier chuckled nervously. “Can’t we just bury the hatchet, so to speak?”

I’d like to bury a hatchet! Murdock thought. “That depends,” he said.

“On?”

“On what you’ve been doing while I was gone. Why didn’t you, or any of the others, follow me to get water? Sure could’ve used a hand bringing back firewood.”

“Oh! Well, we’ve been talking, organizing, and trying to think of a way to get out of this godforsaken place.”

“And what have you come up with?” Murdock asked, genuinely curious. *Didn’t they pay attention to the video briefing?*

“We haven’t come up with a way out of here, yet. We would like to invite you to a little meeting inside the transport pod, though. Talking would be easier if you’d let me get closer. Those fish sure smell good!”

“Don’t they though?” Murdock responded sarcastically. He could almost hear Whittier salivating. He took down one of the water skins and drank from it for a long moment, smacking his lips in appreciation afterward.

“Do you think I could get a little sip of your water?”

“Don’t you remember what I said earlier?”

“Yes, I remember,” Whittier snapped. “You’re being rude and unfriendly. All I was asking for was a little of your water!”

“Just to be clear, you believe that you are significant in some way, and everyone else is supposed to support you? Is that right? If you weren’t a politician, you missed your calling! What about the others?” Murdock could see Whittier’s face turning bright red.

“Yes, I was a local politician, and since you mentioned it, they’re all rather thirsty. All the talking we did today tends to dry out the throat.”

“Too bad one of them didn’t have the foresight to follow me to the water. Did you do any manual labor, at any time, before coming here?”

“No! I asked for a drink of water, and I don’t feel I have to submit to your inquisition,” Whittier fumed.

“You better realize that this situation is not conducive to a dictatorship,” Murdock took down the unused water skin and tossed it to Whittier. “That’s all you, or anyone else, will get from me!”

Whittier took the water skin and walked back to the rest.

Things are going to get out of hand, quickly, Murdock thought. He knew he was outnumbered, but he also knew he could take most of them, if it came to that. He would need items under the tarp. Though he could do without most of them, life would be a lot easier with them, or at least with access to them. *This is going to take planning and finesse, and finesse has never been my strong suit.*

While he ate, Murdock formed a tentative plan. He needed to find a more permanent base of operations. He’d start by rigging some kind of pack to carry the things he would need to make a basecamp more livable and easier to maintain. Above all, he needed to find out if humans were the apex predator on this planet, all of which called for a lot of scouting. But before he could attempt any of that, he had to build up his strength. *A day or two should be enough before I can start scouting,* he thought.

After eating less than half of the first fish, Murdock was full. With no way to keep the fish from spoiling, he took the remains to the others and offered it to any who wanted it. Some of the others refused to eat it because it was wild. Others ate a little and complained that it was under-cooked. Some thought it was over-cooked. Still others thought the fish had too many bones. Despite all the complaints, Murdock noticed that the fish quickly disappeared.



After his confrontation with Murdock, Whittier was livid. He decided that Murdock presented a problem for him and his plans. *Murdock won’t be satisfied with anything less than the role of Leader in the community and I’ve already*

reserved that role for myself, he thought.

As he was passing the water skin around, Whittier waited for Burns' turn. "I need you and one other to nominate me at the meeting for Leader," he told Burns in low, conspiratorial tones. Burns nodded.

Whittier smiled to see that Burns knew when to speak and when to be quiet and do as he was told.



The meeting proceeded much as Murdock expected. Everyone but Murdock had gathered in the common room of the transport pod, and as it was standing room only, Murdock preferred to stand on the ramp. The crowd was thin there, yet he could still hear everything that was said. Quite a few of the displaced voiced complaints about the lack of proper facilities and running water, and some expressed concern about their diet. Murdock chuckled and guessed that the others would find oatmeal very bland and unappealing before long.

"I believe that we should first hold a vote for the leadership of the colony," Whittier yelled over the din of the others all talking at the same time. "We need to have order and a leader should bring order!"

"I nominate Mister Whittier!" someone called out from the middle of the room.

"I second!" someone else piped up. Murdock smirked as he shook his head. *Could Whittier be more obvious?*

"A nomination has been made and seconded! All those in favor say 'Aye!'" Whittier commanded from the front.

"Aye!" came a loud roar.

"Opposed?"

"No!" Murdock yelled, but his was the lone voice.

"In the opinion of the chair, the ayes have it. The first order of business is to establish committees for some of the basic needs of the colony."

Murdock walked off, disgusted. He had always been wary of politicians and their ways of gaining control. *If you need a privy, you start by digging a hole!*

Not by forming a committee, he thought as he walked back to his campfire. All the while, he could hear Whittier taking votes, and he couldn't help wondering what sort of con the politician had cooked up.

Whatever his scheme, Whittier is going to be the chief beneficiary.

At sun-up, Murdock had been up and moving for at least an hour. He saw that the ramp to the transport was closed and no sign of anyone else. On his way toward the stream, he encountered a small herd of animals resembling deer — but if these were deer, they were enormous. By his estimation, they appeared to be closer to the size of an elk, judging from the distance.

It's not going to be easy to bring down one of those brutes without a bow or a ranged weapon of some sort, he thought. He doubted he could throw a heavy spear far enough to be effective against such a large animal. Maybe an atlatl would be better.

But as he approached the stream, he halted. A large, black bear stood in the middle of the stream. Murdock had encountered bears on Earth, but he guessed this one to be the size of a large grizzly.

The bear hadn't seen him, so he decided to back away slowly and as quietly as he could. The last thing he wanted to do was tackle a bear of this size with just the weapons he had on him, especially in his weakened condition. When he was completely out of sight of the bear, he breathed a little easier.

After calming himself a little, Murdock noticed that he was downwind of the bear and decided to creep in closer and observe it. No sooner had he got down on his belly than he heard approaching footsteps. He rolled over in the high grass to see the woman who had called him Daniel Boone walking blindly toward the bear.



Rose Griffen had risen earlier than the rest of the group and had decided to find the water Murdock had mentioned. After exiting the pod and reclosing the ramp, she glanced toward Murdock's campsite.

"You're an early riser, Murdock," she said aloud. *Oh, well. You need a bath, girl. Just suck it up and head in the general direction and you'll find it... eventually,* she thought.

As she walked, she gazed around, appreciating all the different colors of the wildflowers, as well as the odd blue-green shade of the grass and trees. The area reminded her of a park that she had visited as a child in Omaha.

She also noticed the absence of noise. Used to all the road noise, humming power lines, birds chirping, and kids yelling, Rose found the silence almost deafening, even disturbing. She was on guard as she walked, following a path of sorts created by someone or something, pushing down the knee-high grass.

Rose wasn't far from the smaller trees that skirted the meadow in which the pod stood when suddenly she was falling. Something had hit her leg behind the knee, causing her leg to buckle. Then, as she hit the ground, someone was wrapping her legs and arms. She took a deep breath to scream when a hand clapped over her mouth.

"Quiet," a man whispered, his mouth close to her ear. "There's a bear in the stream!"

When she quit struggling, he slowly removed his hand from her mouth and untangled himself from her. Without saying a word, he motioned for her to follow him, crawling toward the stream as she followed. The bear had neither heard nor smelled them and was continuing to feed on the fish it caught.

Murdock turned toward her. Rose's mouth was agape, her eyes wide, stunned.

They watched the bear for several minutes. Finally, the bear finished and walked away from them and the transport pod. As she tried to get up, Murdock pushed her back down and put a finger to his lips. They waited a few more minutes, and then Murdock got to his feet slowly.

“Sorry about that,” he said, offering a hand to her to help her to her feet while looking around — she presumed he looked for other dangers. “I didn’t think you wanted to meet that particular local resident this early in the morning.”

“Under the circumstances, it’s okay. That really was a bear?” she asked quietly, still filled with awe.

“It’s the closest thing to a bear that we’re likely to see. Definitely was one of the apex predators of this planet,” Murdock explained.

“Yeah, not really in the mood to meet the neighbors,” she quipped while brushing herself off. “My name is Rose Griffen.” She extended her hand, and Murdock took it.

She had seen Murdock when she was first revived on the transport pod. At the time, she thought him anachronistic, belonging to an age long gone, and a little on the arrogant side. Now, she took a longer look. He was shorter than she was by an inch or two; stocky build, black hair, either tanned or naturally dark-complexioned, and apparently well-muscled, although he hid it well. Overall, she thought he was pleasant to look at. Rose classified him as someone most people would underestimate, which she suspected was his intent. He obviously knew what he was doing when it came to surviving in the wild.



Murdock noticed Rose, finally.

“Murdock,” he said while gently shaking her hand. Her hands were soft and warm, but they did have a few calluses. “What’re you doing out here this early?”

“I was hoping to get a bath in the stream.”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea. Until we figure this place out, I wouldn’t recommend venturing off alone.”

“Well, I wouldn’t recommend standing downwind of me until I get a bath, either. Lesser of two evils,” Rose quipped and grinned.

She has a nice smile, he thought, infectious.

“A bath is out of the question, for the time being.” Murdock noticed she had not so much as a knife. “Washing up would be all right, but not alone and

definitely not unarmed!”

“Wasn’t issued a weapon,” Rose replied offhandedly. “It wouldn’t do me much good in any case. Don’t know how to use one. I’m a city girl!”

Murdock was stumped by her statement. He had taken it for granted that everyone knew how to use a knife as a weapon. He pulled out his six-inch knife from his boot and handed it to her. “Stick this in your belt.”

Rose looked at the offered knife and shrugged. “I’m not wearing a belt.” She lifted her shirt a little to show Murdock that the loops on her jeans were empty. “Besides, you’re here now and appear to be armed to the teeth.”

“I’m not nearly as well-armed as I’d like.” Murdock replaced the knife in his boot. “When we get back I’ll see what I can do. This is not a walk in a park. We’re in a survival situation. You can die out here in a heartbeat!”

“If you’re that concerned, I guess you better follow me then.” Rose ignored his warnings and started toward the stream.

Murdock just looked at her as she passed and decided to follow. He already knew arguing with her wasn’t going to get him anywhere. When they got to the stream, Rose removed her tennis shoes while Murdock filled the water skin. She looked at Murdock.

“Promise you won’t look?” she asked sheepishly.

“No, I won’t promise anything of the sort. Someone has to be the lookout,” Murdock stated flatly while climbing back up the low bank.

Rose just shrugged, removed her flannel shirt and her jeans, and laid them beside her shoes. She waded in and began to wash up. Murdock remained on the bank watching for possible threats from either side of the stream. When she finished, she put her clothes back on and slipped her shoes on without tying them. Murdock hadn’t noticed her dressing or undressing. His attention was elsewhere.

“I’d tie those shoes, if I were you,” he said as she climbed up the bank, with his help, seeing her untied shoes. “Your ankles are going to need the support, and you never know when you’ll have to run.”

“Don’t even think of telling me what to do,” she blasted back. She stomped off toward the transport pod.

Back at his camp, it wasn't long before Murdock saw Whittier heading his way, and he let out a little groan.

"Mind if we have a little chat?" Whittier asked.

"I suppose," Murdock responded coolly. "I don't think it would matter much if I said no."

"Rose said you saw a bear by the stream?" Whittier asked, ignoring the quip.

"Not exactly a bear that you'd find on Earth, but it resembled one."

"Wow! I wasn't aware there would be large animals here," Whittier stated.

Murdock couldn't believe his ears. "You thought we were just dumped in a park?" he asked sarcastically.

"I wasn't expecting to have to fend off bears!"

"Mind if I speak freely?" Murdock asked.

"Go ahead."

"There are lots of things about this planet that we don't know. You can just about guarantee that we are not the only apex predators here. There could be all kinds of wild animals that present a danger to humans. This place appears to be somewhat parallel with the Colorado Mountains back home, but appearances can be, and generally are, deceiving. There are probably ten thousand ways this planet can kill you, and that is a conservative estimate."

"Hold on a moment," Whittier protested. "We are men, not predators."

Murdock was dumbfounded. *This guy is totally clueless*, he thought. "Deal with many bears in your office back on Earth?" he asked sarcastically.

"No, we just seem to have a difference of opinion on what a predator is."

"Maybe you can tell me what Earth species endangered wolves, seals, whales, lions, tigers, and eagles, just to name a few?"

"Humans did, but that was for our progress. But I'm not going to debate that issue with you."

"Sounds rather predatory to me, but you are the duly elected colony leader, so far be it for me to tell you anything!" Murdock, incensed, turned back to his campfire.

"Hold on! No need to be rude! I came over here to ask your opinion on the matter."

“My opinion is that you should leave the bears alone, if you find one.” Murdock went back to tending his fire. “Trying to eradicate them will be far beyond your capabilities, thankfully!”

“Since, as you say, I am the duly elected leader, and the safety of the colony is my concern, what would you suggest we do about getting water and food in this hellhole?”

Murdock just snickered slightly. *Hellhole?* “I think that your safety concerns are for yourself only,” Murdock answered. “As with any situation, you have to assess all your assets before you can proceed.” He just wanted Whittier to leave him alone. *You can't teach anyone who refuses to learn, much less someone who thinks he has all the answers.*

“That has already been done. You assessed our assets yesterday.”

“And you refuse to listen,” Murdock blasted back. “I said *all* your assets! Is anyone here a doctor? How many know how to hunt? How many have gone camping in the wild? Does anyone know any basic survival skills? Or don't you consider those skills an asset?” The volume of Murdock's voice rose through frustration and thundered toward Whittier.

“I see your point,” Whittier responded coolly, appearing somewhat intimidated by the smaller man.

“And I wouldn't allow anyone to walk around outside the transport pod without being armed with at least a knife. As of our landing, humans are on the menu!”

“I see no reason to allow that! Surely, with all of us here, we're safe!”

“You think so? Ask Rose Griffen. She saw the bear. How many here would want to fight it to save someone?”

“Well, there aren't enough of us to do much when it comes to rescuing someone.”

Murdock wasn't surprised to hear this from Whittier. “Not even if it was you who needed rescuing?” he asked coolly.

Whittier said nothing. Murdock saw Whittier's jaws clench and could tell he hadn't thought of that.

“You probably wouldn't rescue anyone,” Murdock muttered. “It would mean

you'd have to care about someone else's hide over your own!"

"That was an unfair statement! I care about everyone here!" Whittier raised his voice so the others could hear.

"If that's true, then why did you lock me out of the transport pod last night?"

"That was a decision I made as colony leader. I figured if you wanted to come in, you would have before the ramp was closed."

"Without warning me you were closing it? It is my considered opinion that the best thing you could do for everyone is to take a very long walk. With any luck, you wouldn't come back!" Murdock turned his back on Whittier. "Who do you think you're fooling with your false concern? You're a typical politician! Look out for yourself and everyone else is expected to look after you as well!"

Whittier, furious, grabbed Murdock by the bicep to turn him back around. Murdock shook off the other man's grip on his arm and trapped Whittier's arm with his body, bringing up his free arm to put pressure on Whittier's elbow. He stopped short of breaking it. Whittier was in shock and on the balls of his feet trying to relieve the pain and pressure on his elbow and shoulder.

"Get this straight! You don't touch me! Ever! Next time, I'll break it for you," Murdock warned through clenched teeth, just loud enough for Whittier to hear. "Get out of here!" He pushed the other man toward the transport pod. Whittier lost his footing and fell.

When Whittier got up, he was rubbing his elbow, looking shocked and fearful.

"You're a very violent and unstable individual! I'm not entirely sure we need your kind here," Whittier yelled while walking toward the others.

"As nice as Earth was, it had one bad thing about it: too many people like you," Murdock shouted at Whittier's back.

He knew he should have kept his anger in check, but Whittier's stupidity and arrogance had brought his temper to full boil in a heartbeat. Murdock could tell that Whittier would sacrifice everyone else trying to save his own skin. Did Murdock mean what he said? Yes, every word of it, but he also knew very few people could handle either the naked truth or the reality of their situation.

He watched as Whittier went inside the transport pod, helped along by two of

the other men and one of the women, none of whom he recognized. The rest of the group were having an independent discussion and hadn't appeared to notice the altercation.



Whittier fumed as he walked away. *How dare Murdock put hands on me!* He'd hoped to get rid of him; now, Murdock's temper had just given him the means to do so.

When he got close to the pod, Burns and another man helped him inside the ship. A female he didn't know followed.

"Are you all right, Boss?" Burns asked, with real and evident concern. Whittier scowled at the strangers and then scowled at Burns. "They're okay. This is Tom Collier and Krysia Oblonski." Krysia smiled coyly at Whittier when Burns introduced her.

"I need to talk to Burns, so you two leave! Go get some water or something!" Whittier told them gruffly.

Once they had left, he asked Burns, "Did you see that altercation?"

"Yeah, well, sort of! Never seen anything like that! Never saw him move! I blinked and he had you!" Burns responded excitedly.

"Damn near broke my arm," Whittier said venomously, more to himself than to Burns. He rubbed his elbow as he remembered the incident. "Murdock is too dangerous to roam free and remain armed!"

"I don't think I could disarm him," Burns responded, shaking his head. "I don't think all of the men working together could disarm him!"

My leadership has been challenged, he thought and he knew this couldn't go unanswered. "I want the group to vote me emergency powers," he told Burns after thinking for a moment.

"I think I can deliver a majority if I'm allowed to do so by whatever means necessary," Burns answered.

"I don't want anyone physically harmed...yet," Whittier instructed. "Use the idea that Murdock could come after them at any time. Use their fear! Get as

many people as you need to get me a majority vote. Promise anything!”

“What do I get out of it?” Burns asked slyly.

“What would you like?” Whittier asked grumpily. *What a fool*, he thought. Whittier smirked while he waited for Burns to verbalize what he wanted.

“I don’t know,” Burns responded. “I know that you are going to be a big deal after this vote, and I want to be part of those in charge.”

“I could make you police chief. Allow you to hire whomever you wish,” Whittier offered, still smirking. When the time came, he would have no problem cutting this fool loose. *I’ll make them all pay, sooner or later! No one would help me, so I’m going to make them wish they had!*



After more than twenty minutes, Rose came over to Murdock.

“Are you calm enough to get me set up with what you think I need?” she asked pleasantly.

“We don’t have what I think you need,” Murdock responded with a slight smile. He had cooled down sufficiently to be somewhat polite. “I saw no tanks or rocket launchers. All I can do is make do with what we have.”

He and Rose went to the tarp and he threw it back. He selected some quarter-inch rope and measured off about fifty feet and cut it. This he coiled up and slung diagonally across his body. He then measured off another fifty feet and cut it again. He wrapped it around Rose’s waist three or four times and cut it again.

“Divide that up until you have enough to tie it in front of you without too much extra,” he suggested while he continued to search through the items under the tarp. He outfitted Rose the same way he was outfitted.

“Do I really need all this stuff?” she asked as he hung the machetes and the six-inch knife on her makeshift belt. He inserted a hatchet, much the same way as his was.

“Yes, you do. You never know what you’re going to need until you don’t have it,” he responded.

“But I don’t know what all this stuff is used for.”

“The belt can be used for several things if you have to, like setting snares or tying a splint on someone’s leg,” he explained. “The big machete is used for clearing brush or taking down small trees. The little machete can be used for smaller jobs that are too small for the big machete and too big for the six-inch knife. The six-inch knife can be used for anything from cutting small rope to skinning and cleaning game. The hatchet is good for trees too big for the machete to handle. All of these can be used as an effective weapon, if you have to. I would also suggest you get in the habit of tying your shoes whenever you wear them. Otherwise, you could lose them if you have to run from a bear. I don’t think you want to go through life barefoot.”

As Murdock got Rose outfitted, the rest of the group came over to listen to his explanations. Following his lead, the members of the group grabbed their own sets as he explained and hung them as his were. When he found the whetstones, he gave each person one. The others looked at the stones blankly.

“They’re for sharpening your six-inch knife and twelve-inch machete. You only cut yourself with dull knives. Anyone else been camping, hunting, or fishing?”

“I have been camping before,” one man said with another nodding his agreement, “and did a little fishing.”

“I’ve been fishing before, sort of,” another piped in sheepishly.

“This is going to be a lot different than anything you’ve experienced before. You’re going to have to rely on each other — on your skills and theirs. It’s not going to be easy.”

“Why did you tell me we can’t bathe for a while?” Rose asked, obviously still in a snit about the bath.

“Do any of us know what’s in the water?” Murdock explained. “Does it have leeches or snapping turtles? I wouldn’t recommend bathing until we know a lot more about our surroundings and the creatures we share this environment with. Are there any snakes around? Just because you haven’t seen them doesn’t mean there aren’t any.”

When they were all outfitted, Murdock stood back, looking them over. He suppressed his laughter. They all looked ridiculous in their skirts and suits,

outfitted for tramping in the woods.

“What about bathroom facilities?” one of the women asked.

“Until you figure out where you’re going to build a more permanent settlement, I would say go out in the trees. I would *highly* recommend that none of you go off on your own. Take someone with you. Four eyes see more than two.”

They seemed to accept what he said. To Murdock, they all looked to be in shock. He suspected that the reality of their situation hadn’t sunk in yet, not totally.

Just then, one of the men who had helped Whittier into the transport pod came over.

“Whittier has called an emergency meeting,” he said gruffly. “Murdock is banned from it!”

Murdock shrugged and walked off toward the trees in the opposite direction of the stream. It was close to midday, and he was starting to get a bit peckish. The further he walked from the transport pod, the more the issue of Whittier disappeared from his consciousness.

As he walked, he heard something moving in the waist-high grass parallel to his course. *Must be something small or something crawling.* Though he couldn’t see what was following him, he could hear and feel it, as if he were being stalked. Slowly, he withdrew the eighteen-inch machete from its sheath, carrying it at his side in his right hand. The hair on his neck stood on end. The creature was close; soon it would strike from his left.

He took a couple more steps and caught movement at the edge of his peripheral vision. In a swift, single motion, he moved his left side away from the attack and brought the large machete into play. As soon as he saw the mouth, he swung the machete upward. No time to analyze the attack; in his disconnected state, his response time had been close to instantaneous.

Not until the attack and response were over did Murdock realize what had attacked him. At his feet lay the biggest snake he had ever seen writhing around, missing its head. The severed head lay off to the side with only a few inches of the body attached.

Murdock stepped away as the snake continued to thrash and roll. He waited for the contortions to subside and for his own adrenaline to run its course. Finally, after the snake had stilled, he walked the length of the body. *Twenty-five feet long and twelve inches across its diameter*, he thought. He estimated the weight at two hundred pounds at least — more than he could drag or carry.

He cut the carcass in half and carried the front half back to his camp. The trek was hard going, and he sweated profusely. There, he tied the first half of the snake in a tree with the rope he carried, grabbed a drink of water from his water skin, and headed back to retrieve the rest of the snake. Before he reached it, though, he saw a dozen or so large carrion birds finishing what he had left behind.

“So much for that idea,” Murdock said aloud, heading back to the camp.

After cleaning and prepping the snake for cooking, he placed the skewers on to cook. Needing fresh water and a quick clean-up, he headed off to the stream. On his way back, he noticed the others had come out of the transport pod and now milled around talking to each other.

He avoided them and went to his campsite instead. When he checked the meat, he found a couple of pieces were done so he ate them. The meat was juicy and a little on the sweet side, but very rich and he could tell it would be very filling. While he took a drink from the water skin, he saw Rose walking in his direction.

“What’s for dinner?” she asked, smiling.

“Chicken,” Murdock snickered. “Would you like some?”

“Don’t mind if I do!” she said gratefully. She selected a skewer of cooked meat and began nibbling. “Tastes pretty damn good to me!” she said after chewing up and swallowing a good-sized bite. “Where did you find chicken out here?”

Murdock just chuckled. He had finished his skewer and, after refilling it and placing it on the fire, ate another. Meanwhile, Rose finished her skewer.

“If you want more, help yourself.” He took her empty skewer, refilled it, and set it on the fire to cook. “There’s plenty.”

Rose looked to the other skewers and then at the rest of the group, all of

whom had stayed back.

“You know there’s trouble coming from your little dust-up with Whittier,” she said quietly as she selected another skewer.

“What else is new? It isn’t the first time, and I doubt it’ll be the last. Would be worth it, too, if the rest of this group could see him for what he is. What happened to your gear?”

“That’s one of the issues that your argument with Whittier brought to the fore. A majority voted to give Whittier some temporary discretionary power for inside the colony area. Everyone voted, but he got only a slim majority. The first thing he did was to appoint Burns and Collier as the police department.”

“Don’t think I know who they are.”

“They are the two burly... gentlemen—and I use the term loosely—with little or no neck,” Rose reminded him. Murdock nodded. “First thing Burns did as head of the police was decree that no weapons be allowed in the colony area. They confiscated all the gear from the rest of us.” Rose paused as all this sank in. Murdock had stopped eating and now looked at her in a way that told her that he knew what to expect next from that quarter. “This is really good chicken,” Rose said changing the subject. “It’s a lot better than that oatmeal crap we’ve been eating.” Rose looked at him seriously. “Mind if the rest have some?”

Murdock looked over at the rest of the group. He didn’t see Whittier, Burns, or Collier anywhere.

“What are the two stooges plus one cooking up?” Murdock asked.

“Don’t know. We’re in adjournment for a while.”

“Why are you telling me this? Won’t you get into trouble with the leaders?”

“I’ve never had to look for trouble,” Rose stated between bites. “It’s always been right there, waiting, whether I needed it or not.”

Murdock started to choke and almost spit out the meat. “I know what you mean,” he laughed.

“Besides, you did save my bacon this morning, and you tried to be of some help, even if the rest don’t appreciate it. I’m just returning the favor.”

“It’s always nice to know trouble is coming and be prepared for it.”

“What about the others?” Rose asked.

“I’ve had enough for now. I suppose the rest might as well enjoy it while they can.”

“It would be better if you made the offer,” Rose suggested. “You might need the goodwill. It couldn’t hurt!”

Murdock thought for a couple of seconds. He walked over to the rest. “Soup’s on,” he yelled.

After the group had eaten its fill, Murdock saw someone, he assumed it was Burns, come out of the transport pod. He stood at the base of the ramp, arms crossed, scowling. As the others spotted him, they began nudging each other and walking sheepishly toward the transport pod. Rose was the only one who thanked him.

Left alone, Murdock slung his empty water skin across his body, replenished the skewers, and set off to the stream. As he returned he saw that the colonists had lined up between himself and his campsite, facing him. Whittier, Burns, and Collier each had a skewer and were helping themselves.

“That’s close enough, Murdock,” Whittier yelled after swallowing.

Murdock stopped.

“The Colony Council has judged,” Whittier intoned, “that colonist Murdock is a danger to himself and others. Further, it has judged the aforementioned person to be guilty of the unprovoked assault and battery upon the duly elected leader of this colony.”

Murdock looked at the others’ faces as Whittier spoke. No one looked back. He saw more than a few bruised cheeks and bloodied lips in the group.

“Further, he has been judged guilty of sedition, insurrection, and treason. How say you?”

Each one of the group looked at Murdock. One at a time, they responded, “Aye.” However, only a few seemed eager to express their vote. Murdock remained standing, stoic, looking each in the eye, his hands rested loosely on the hilts of his machetes. When everyone in front of him had spoken, Burns and Collier, who stood behind the group, voted.

“Aye!” Collier yelled.

“Aye!” Burns yelled with relish.

“Aye!” Whittier shouted around a mouthful of meat. After swallowing, he continued. “It is the sentence of this court that Murdock be stripped and banished. Should he ever be seen at any time by any other member of this colony it will be that colonist’s sworn duty to execute him. Mister Burns! Carry out the sentence!”

Murdock hadn’t moved or flinched at any time during Whittier’s recitation of

the charges. As Collier and Burns came through the group, Murdock remained still. Collier and Burns took a few steps beyond the line of the group and then stopped to see if the rest followed. No one else moved. Both men looked to Whittier. Murdock noticed that neither man was armed, at least not in a way that showed.

“It looks like your hired thugs need your help, Whittier,” Murdock scoffed. “Why don’t you quit hiding and come out here and show them how it’s done!”

“Burns, you better move,” Whittier warned loudly.

Each of the men took another step. Then they split up, both taking on a semi-crouching stance.

“Two on one hardly seems fair! Why don’t you come out and help, Whittier? It would even the odds a little more,” Murdock taunted. “Or are you a coward?”

He waited.

“Collier, you are now in charge. Execute the sentence!” Whittier commanded impatiently.

Neither man made another move.

Murdock continued his taunt. “Personally, I think you’re all cowards. Are you two afraid of these?” He indicated the two machetes by tapping his index fingers on the hilts. “I’ll wait while you two arm yourselves, but I should warn you that if you do, I’ll give no quarter.”

The two men looked at each other, then back to Murdock, who still hadn’t moved.

“It looks to me as if your two slugs have no backbone, Whittier,” Murdock taunted again. He watched as Collier inched back slightly and straightened up a little. “I bet they are good at beating up women, children, and small pets, but they seem spineless against someone who’ll stand up to them.”

Collier and Burns exchanged glances again, then looked back to Murdock. Murdock hadn’t moved. The men inhaled, then looked at each other again. Slowly, they retreated toward Whittier.

“Whittier, I think you’ll find it easy to establish laws or rules, but it’s quite another matter to enforce them,” Murdock chided.

Collier, Burns, and Whittier began a heated discussion. Murdock couldn’t

hear what was being said, but he was fairly certain that Collier and Burns were going to lose their positions. After a few minutes of arguing, Collier and Burns joined the rest of the colonists in the line.

“I put the order to the entire colony. Execute the sentence. All of you!” Whittier yelled.

Still, no one moved.

After a few minutes, Murdock shifted his stance a little.

“Are we going to do this or not?” he asked everyone, but no one moved or spoke. “Guess not! All of you have made your feelings and intentions plain. I’m leaving, but before I go, you need to be warned. Do *not* let me catch you across the stream over there!”

Murdock indicated the stream he had just visited, then slowly backed away from the group. He wasn’t so foolish as to turn his back on any of them.

After he had widened the gap to forty or fifty yards, he turned and walked normally, though still alert for sounds of an oncoming attack. He didn’t relax until he had entered the trees and crossed the stream.

Although he was in unfamiliar territory, a weight lifted from Murdock. Now he was on his own and responsible for no one.

He continued down a wide path into the woods — an animal highway. A few yards from the stream, the trees formed a bower like a high, leafy tunnel over the path. He judged it to be fifteen or twenty feet from the ground to the tree limbs above. *A lot of large animals have walked this path for many years. If I have to take an animal, this could be the place to do it; by ambush from above*, he reasoned, considering the tools he had to work with.

After walking a little over a mile, Murdock found a hidden boulder off the path. It looked like to good place to rest.

As he sat drinking water and watching for animals, Murdock thought he heard talking in the distance, but the longer he waited, the more clearly he heard the voices. He stood and grabbed a few low branches on the side of a tree away from the path. As he climbed, staying close to the trunk, *I hope I’m hidden well enough*, he thought. As soon as he saw the two men, he recognized them: Burns and Collier, both armed as he was.

“... not sure anymore. What do you think?” Collier asked Burns.

“I think we’re going to be next if Whittier thinks we let him down again,” Burns responded. Both closely watched the path.

“Maybe so, but what can he really do? I mean, Whittier can do nothing on his own. Like I said, he needs us. Murdock backed him down,” Collier continued. By this time they both walked right under Murdock.

“What the...” Burns exclaimed. “Who the hell is this guy?”

“What’s wrong?” Collier asked.

“His tracks just stop. He couldn’t have just disappeared, so where did he go?” Burns asked.

“Why are you asking me? You were supposed to be keeping an eye on him,” Collier said accusingly.

“I distinctly remember telling you to keep your eye on him!” Burns responded.

“That’s not how I remember it,” Collier chided, chuckling.

“Damn it! We’re really screwed if we don’t find him.” Burns appeared more worried than Collier. “Find his trail again!” Both men searched the ground intently, trying to pick up Murdock’s trail. Murdock watched from above, hoping they would continue their conversation. Then both men backed up a few yards, retracing Murdock’s trail several times. Without his realizing it, Murdock had left the path at a spot at which a lot of leaves lay on the path.

I can see my own footprint in the leaves from here, but these two boobs lost my trail. More than once his pursuers looked right at his tracks in the leaves, yet failed to see them. Murdock had a very hard time containing himself.

“Now what do we do?” Burns asked after they had searched for quite a while.

“What do you mean?” Collier asked.

“It’s obvious that we can’t find Murdock’s trail. Do we go on? Or do we go back and tell Whittier that we lost him?” Burns asked.

“I don’t see that we have a lot of choice in the matter,” Collier responded.

“Damn you, Murdock,” Burns yelled.

Both men turned around to go back the way they had come. Murdock waited

until they were out of sight, though he could still hear them talking, before climbing down from his perch and following them. When the path made a turn, Murdock cautiously closed the distance between them and him, and it wasn't long before he could just see their backs. Soon he noticed the bower thinning, indicating their proximity to the stream. He started running toward the two men as quietly as he could.

When Collier, who had been bringing up the rear, started to turn, Murdock jumped. He'd caught Collier's back squarely with his feet. Collier was knocked forward with all the momentum that Murdock could impart and he, in turn, ran into Burns. Burns, who was only a couple of feet from the stream bank, was knocked face first into the cold water. Murdock thought he made a satisfyingly large splash.

Murdock, still on his feet, stood over the prostrate Collier with his eighteen-inch machete poised to strike. Collier rolled over and froze. His eyes were wide in amazement, and his mouth hung open. Burns, meanwhile, got to his feet and turned around then stopped. Too stunned to react, Burns hesitated, oblivious that he was still standing in the stream.

"Apparently, my original assessment of you two was wrong," Murdock stated coldly, not taking his eyes off either man. "I *had* thought you two were smart enough to heed a warning when you heard one."

Burns' hand moved toward one of his weapons.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," Murdock warned. Burns froze.

"Let's not be too hasty! Can't we talk about this?" Burns asked, voice trembling.

"I thought I made it plain enough so that even someone of your limited intelligence would understand. You two should not have come on this side of the stream!"

"Be reasonable, Murdock," Burns pleaded, as calmly as he could. "We had our orders. You shouldn't have embarrassed Whittier."

"Whittier *is* an embarrassment. So are you two," Murdock chided.

"We did elect him as our leader," Burns responded, shrugging as if the statement required no explanation.

“Maybe *you* did, but why is that? Is he better than you?”

“We felt that he was the most qualified to lead us. So, I guess, yeah, he is better than me.”

Murdock saw that Burns was both trying to give an honest answer and placate him at the same time.

“You know, you two have put me in a difficult position,” Murdock stated.

“What position is that?” Burns asked warily.

“Do I let you go? Or do I remove your heads and stick them on a pole?” Murdock asked coldly. “Nothing personal, just as a warning to others, you understand.” Both men swallowed hard. “I suppose I could strip you both and hang you upside down from a tree, like so much meat, and let the animals finish you.”

Collier, upset, looked from the machete to Murdock and back again. Murdock could see him licking his lips continually and saw he was breathing heavily. Murdock fixed his eyes on him.

“I could take your head and give it to Burns to take back to Whittier,” he stated flatly to Collier.

A splash sounded. He jerked up to see Burns scrambling up the bank on the other side. *Running back to your master*, Murdock supposed. He looked back at Collier, who was trying to get up. Murdock kicked his arm out and Collier fell back to the ground. Murdock resumed his posture with the machete, threatening Collier.

For the first time, Murdock got a good look at Collier. In his early twenties, two fifty at least, well over six-five, and scared to death.

“I guess you’re not very valuable to your buddy,” Murdock said, with a cold smile on his face and a piercing glare. “Weapons! Over there!” Murdock indicated a spot beyond Collier’s reach. Collier started removing his weapons, but then hesitated. Murdock could almost see the thought run across Collier’s face. “Don’t be any more foolish than you’ve been already,” Murdock warned and was pleased to see that Collier grasped the folly of such an action.

“Get on your knees,” Murdock ordered roughly once Collier had relinquished his weapons, “Hands behind your back,” he ordered his captive. As

he bent down to pick up the rope Collier was carrying, he laid the flat of the machete on Collier's shoulder. Being unable to find an escape, Collier hung his head and complied.

After securing Collier's hands, Murdock pulled Collier's shirt over his head from the back, so that Collier could see only the ground right in front of him. Murdock slowly drew the eighteen-inch machete again so Collier could hear the metal-on-metal scraping of machete and sheath.

"What...what're you gonna do?" Collier asked, the big man physically trembling.

"Do you really want to know? Too bad you didn't heed my warning. Now, I really don't have a choice," Murdock said quietly, no emotion in his voice.

"Please! Please, Mister Murdock, sir! Don't do this!" Collier pleaded. He sobbed and trembled all the more.

Murdock said nothing and pulled his shirt up further, exposing Collier's neck. Collier still couldn't see what was going on. Murdock pushed Collier's head down, stretching the skin on the back of his neck, and then pulled the edge of the machete across the flesh, making a thin red line in the skin.

"Oh, God! Oh, God, no! Please, sir!" Collier pleaded. "Don't do this! Please!"

Collier started to rock back and forth a little, still sobbing.

"I'll try to make it as painless as possible," Murdock said softly, "but if you move, it'll just be more painful. If you have any last words, I'm listening!"

"No! Please!" Collier wept. Murdock heard Collier's bladder empty. "Oh, God! Oh, God! Mercy! Have mercy, please!"

As Collier made his pleas, Murdock quietly gathered up all the weapons and the unused portion of rope and ran off just inside the bower. He could still hear Collier's pleas as he climbed a tree high enough to be able to see the stream and Collier, who still wept and still pled. Not a minute later, three men approached the stream. Collier's pleas, in turn, became more intense.

Murdock recognized Whittier and Burns, but not the third man. Burns pulled out his knife to cut Collier's bonds when Whittier stopped him.

"You're pathetic!" Whittier spat at Collier. "I have a good mind to leave you

right here! Maybe I should continue what Murdock started and didn't have the guts to finish!"

Collier's weeping and pleading became louder again as he rocked back and forth on his knees.

"What the hell? Did you pee yourself? You really are a coward!" Whittier continued, deriding Collier.

Whittier slowly paced, hands behind his back, around Collier.

"You're totally useless, Collier!" Whittier yelled. "Burns, kill this coward!"

Murdock saw the other two men jerk their heads from Collier to Whittier. From his perch, Murdock could almost hear their disbelieving thoughts.

"What about the others?" Burns asked.

"We can take his head back to the others and say that this was all we found after Murdock finished with him." Whittier's coldness had sent a shiver up Murdock's spine. "It will help keep the others in line and keep them from seeking asylum with Murdock."

Murdock saw Burns start to take out his eighteen-inch machete. At the sound of the blade leaving his sheath, Collier started his pleading and weeping all over again.

"Whittier, don't do this," the third man finally spoke up. "It isn't right, and you know it!"

Burns looked at Whittier, who said nothing.

"Burns, you do this, and I'll kill you myself!" the third man stated. When Murdock heard this, he knew the man meant it.

Burns seemed to think about it a while. Finally, he threw his machete down at Whittier's feet, sticking it in the ground.

"You want it done? Do it yourself!" Burns spat at Whittier.

Whittier just stood there looking at the machete as it wobbled back and forth.

"Oh, come on! I was only kidding," Whittier stated. "You didn't think I was serious, did you?" Murdock couldn't see the cold grin on Whittier's face, but could hear it in his voice, and he knew he not only meant it, but was very serious. "Help the poor man up!"

Burns and the third man helped Collier to his feet and cut his hands free.

Collier pulled his shirt back down and rubbed his wrists. After a rest, all four men left, traveling toward the pod

When they were out of sight, Murdock climbed down from his perch and started down the path away from the stream. As he walked, he mulled over the scene. He'd intended to scare the hell out of Collier to ensure he wouldn't cross the stream again; his personal belief system had kept him from beheading Collier, especially for something so minor. He saw Collier as an incompetent fool, not the brightest crayon in the box, but since Murdock couldn't give life, he believed he shouldn't take it lightly. To him, execution of any type was murder. He would and could kill in a fight, if he had to, but to take a man's life when he could just walk away was wrong.

He was glad that Burns and the other man had proven that they had some honor by refusing to execute Collier. But Whittier's callousness disturbed him most. Apparently, Whittier could order that someone should die, but he didn't have the intestinal fortitude to carry it out himself. *Typical politician*, he thought. *He refuses to carry out his own edict because his own hands have to remain clean. He thinks rules and laws apply to everyone except him. He is good at manipulating people, though.*

He was now already long past the point, in his new domain, at which Burns and Collier had penetrated. Now, no trees grew on the right side of the path, though when the trees had thinned, he hadn't noticed. What he saw now was rock — almost as if a huge slab of rock had been dropped in the middle of the trees. The rock appeared to have a very smooth surface, with no purchase anywhere close to the path. Murdock continued on, and not long after, the bower had stopped.

A huge meadow stretched before him. Murdock stopped to take it all in. Though he'd assumed he had been walking a fairly level path, from where he stood now he saw a low valley. The path continued into the meadow and then curved to the right, following the base of the rocks. He took a few more steps into the meadow and looked up and to the right. It wasn't just rock. It was a mountain.

Though the day had grown late, Murdock pressed on. In the distance, he

heard the distinctive rumble of a waterfall.

As he continued on the path, Murdock's senses were on alert. *Why am I feeling so exposed, so vulnerable?* he thought. As he walked, the path curved a little to the left to follow the foot of the mountain, then turned sharply to the right, all the while remaining flat.

Murdock stopped. The valley continued on for a mile or more and was hemmed in by the mountains on this side. He saw more than one mountain now. The waterfall also rushed about a quarter mile from where he now stood.

The waterfall rose six hundred feet or more in the air, with a large volume of water running off it. To Murdock, it looked magnificent. He looked down the path of the falls and saw it empty into a large, fast-flowing river that went off to his left for the full length of the meadow. A large cloud of mist billowed at the point that the water from the falls hit the river. The path he currently walked led to the base of the falls. Murdock paused. Depending on the availability of game, he felt he could live here.

The first night away from the others was quite restless for Murdock. His feelings of foreboding grew as the sunlight failed; the darker it got, the more the feelings wore on him, so much so that he spent that first night in the vicinity of the falls, off the path against the mountain and under the trees. His sense of foreboding was not so great here as it had been on the path out in the open. Though his large fire helped, the night was filled with strange noises and even stranger dreams.

Dreams were something new to Murdock. He couldn't recall ever remembering dreams when he woke. Now, in these dreams, he was in a strange, very dark, shadowy place. He could just make out a single figure, large and menacing.

"Who are you? What are you? Why are you here? Where do you come from?" the dark form asked. "There is great danger here! Go away! This place is not for you!" Time after time, the dark form repeated itself in his voice. Sometimes, a flash of lightning illuminated the area, and Murdock saw thousands of robed figures, but never their faces nor any feature. In his dreams, he tried answering them, but when that failed, he tried ignoring them. Neither option worked; it made for a long night.

He awoke early, well before sun-up, and walked to the entrance of the bower. A thick mist hung over the low valley. Murdock could barely make out the path winding around the base of the mountains. A small herd of deer, maybe a dozen animals, walked toward him on the path. They hadn't detected him. As he

watched, it seemed some of them disappeared, as if they had fallen off the path into the mist. The rest of the herd hugged the mountain side of the path and kept going.

Then the one in the lead saw him and froze. The animal seemed uncertain what to do, and the rest crowded it farther ahead. The herd bolted past him; in a few seconds, they had all vanished down the path.

They had startled Murdock as well. He was not a short man, but he could have walked under the biggest ones without bending down. Oddly, only six animals of the original dozen had run past him, but when he checked the path, it was clear. *Where did the rest go? I'm sure there were more than six animals*, he thought.

Curious, Murdock cut and trimmed a small tree of about an inch or two in diameter, making a nice ten-foot long pole. With the small machete, he sharpened one end, turning the pole into a makeshift spear.

He then walked to the edge of the path and probed the tall grass with it. The edge of the path, he now saw, dropped off considerably just a foot or so off the path. The grass that he saw just a few feet in from the path was longer than his spear. But this wasn't just a path—it was a ledge.

Murdock quickly backed away from the edge. Then he found a smallish rock and threw it into the grass. It swished as it passed through the grass, and then nothing. *Either it fell a very long way*, he thought, *or it hit something soft enough to not make a noise I could hear.*

After a second or two, he heard another swishing sound. Murdock backed up into the bower a few yards and waited silently, his spear at the ready. Something was heading his way.

By the sound of it, several of the somethings were coming, but Murdock saw nothing. He decided to proceed to the river without investigating further.

As he approached the falls, Murdock noticed that the ledge had gone from dirt to bare rock some thirty feet from the falls. At the edge of the falls, he turned to look downriver. Both sides of the river were rock-lined and were on the same plane as the ledge he had just traveled. The river itself flowed as straight as an arrow. *This is not a natural formation*, he thought. *It looks more like a moat,*

than anything else, but what could it be used for out here?

He walked on the wall downriver for a quarter mile, keeping close to the river's edge and looking into the river as he walked. Spotting some rather large fish close enough for him to spear from the edge, he managed to get one speared and up on the wall.

As he walked back, Murdock sensed that something in the high grass on his side of the river stalked him, but he saw nothing in the grass. *It might be better to stay away from the edge and get back to the woods quickly*, he thought. He managed a slow trot, for him, and covered the ground quickly, but he didn't relax until he was back at the bower.

While the fish cooked, Murdock sat and mulled over all he knew about this place. He had seen the deer, which were the size of large elk, come from the falls area, but he hadn't seen any sign of their crossing the river. Because the sides of the river were rock, tracking their origin would be extremely difficult. He knew from his hunting experience that elk, which ranged over hundreds of miles, could trot faster than a man could run — and could do so for miles. He also knew that the larger the animal, the more food was necessary for sustenance, which meant that their range was larger.

When the fish was cooked, he ate his fill. Not far from his camp was a wide-leaved plant. He gathered several of the leaves, rolled the left-over fish in the leaves and filled his pockets with them. He also fashioned a sling out of the small diameter rope he had taken from Collier.

As he left the campsite, he'd decided to follow the foot of the mountain back toward the transport pod. He hadn't noticed any smaller game trails when he had traversed the bower, but he was sure there had to be some. After some close inspection, he found a game path that followed the foot of the mountain. As he walked, he periodically picked up some rocks and practiced with the sling. He knew he wasn't being quiet, but stealth was secondary to the need to practice with the sling before he actually had to use it.

Murdock tried to keep track of how far off the bower path he was as he walked. He had walked for the better part of the day when he heard water running. At the same time, he also noticed another path that seemed to go up the

side of the mountain in roughly his direction of travel. But he stayed close to the trees, for now, as he didn't feel so exposed.

Eventually, he came to a small clearing with a stream. Though he knew this was the same stream that he had found while he was with the others, he knew he was now many miles upstream from the transport pod. He couldn't have said how many miles, or even how he knew that, but it just seemed right, somehow. After resting a while, drinking his fill in the stream, and filling his water skin, Murdock decided to backtrack to the path that went up the side of the mountain.

That path went up gradually and at times widened to ten feet or more. Murdock rounded one of the many bends in the path and stopped to look out over the area. He saw the tops of the trees a couple of hundred feet below him, as well as the stream and the clearing he'd just left. As he looked out farther, in the direction of the bower, he saw nothing but treetops. *Being this high, he thought, I should be able to see the bower. It must be further away than I thought.*

As he turned from the overlook, he noticed that a huge rock obscured what looked to be a cave entrance. Had he not stopped, he would have passed it, but coming down the path, he would have seen it clearly.

Pulling his twelve-inch machete, Murdock decided to explore the cave's interior. As he entered, a breeze hit him in the face. That meant the cave was well ventilated, but he couldn't see inside.

While his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he sniffed the fresh, warm air inside the cave. He didn't pick up any animal scents. *If this was truly an empty cave, it might work as a base.*

Now Murdock could see a large room just inside the entrance. The breeze seemed to come from the back of the room, but it was just too dark; he couldn't see that area clearly. He stripped off most of his gear, left his spear pointing into the rocky path to indicate where the entrance was, and went back down the path to get firewood.

The sun had set before he returned to the cave. He started a fire, noticing that the smoke went out the entrance to the cave and the flames flickered, as if someone were gently blowing on them.

The fire lit the cave, allowing Murdock a better view of his new home. The room had a fairly high ceiling, and the floor was not level but canted downhill toward the fire. A narrow walkway ran uphill and spiraled toward the center of the room just inside the door. Behind him, toward the back of the room, a tunnel headed down in a spiral toward the center.

Picking up a good-sized piece of wood from the fire, he followed the narrow walkway upward. It ended in a larger ledge, about the size of a large bedroom, and overlooked the main room.

The tunnel, on the other hand, was long, wide, and high, forming an almost a perfect circle. Enclosed in the tunnel, Murdock could walk down it without stooping. The walls were quite smooth, almost as if the tunnel was drilled. His flaming brand cast a lot of light, allowing him to see several yards in front of him.

The farther he went, the tighter the spiral became. He figured he was several yards from the outside of the mountain, but the tunnel seemed to follow the same cant and grade as the path he had walked up on the outside. After several minutes, he reached the bottom of the tunnel.

Again he was in a large chamber. When he entered the chamber, Murdock noticed another tunnel immediately to his left, as well as one straight in front of him. The one to the left was straight and mostly level and it seemed to go toward the outside of the mountain.

He followed this tunnel. It ended abruptly in a small slide of stones, but the flame on his brand leaned somewhat back toward the chamber he had just exited, and he felt a light breeze on his face.

Murdock decided to explore the other tunnel. In that tunnel, the grade remained the same and continued to spiral down. The walls of this tunnel were no different than those in the tunnel he had first descended. After several minutes of walking, this tunnel ended in another chamber.

He estimated he was several hundred yards under the surface. The chamber was quite warm and very dry. When he raised his brand, he saw a milky, white substance along the walls of the chamber. Inspecting the substance closely, he wet his fingers, touched them to the white band, and then tasted them. *This is*

salt.

He knew from the color it was relatively pure. Taking a good-sized rock, he hit the white band with it. A few chunks of the white crystals flew off the wall. Murdock gathered them up and returned up the tunnel.

As he ascended, he knew one of his major worries was alleviated. Besides what was needed for leatherwork, he'd need salt to preserve food, as well as for dietary needs.

His brand gave out while he was in the first half of the last tunnel, but the smoothness of the walls of the tunnel defied the darkness. An eerie glow shone from the walls as he walked onward and upward. The further he went, the brighter the tunnel became until he was at his fire again.

Walking outside the cave, Murdock saw that it was well into the night now, but he could smell the dampness in the air and feel the change in the wind. It would rain sometime during the night or early in the morning. But as dark as it was outside, Murdock saw no other fires anywhere. *Am I that far from the transport pod?*

He decided to move his fire and his gear up onto the smaller ledge above the entrance level. As he curled up next to the fire and closed his eyes, he was glad he had not decided against exploring it in favor of the freshwater stream with its fish. And as he drifted off to sleep, he couldn't help but wonder if this was a natural cave. It looked more like one that had been made rather than created through natural processes.

"Who are you? What are you? Why are you here? Where do you come from?" the dark form asked in Murdock's dream. The dark form seemed to be alone. Murdock thought he was asleep, but couldn't be sure. Though he could hear the rain, he felt no dampness from it, for it seemed to be in the distance. He could feel the heat from the fire, or so he thought. This time, the dark form wasn't as ominous, but it still frightened him, for Murdock only feared things he had no control over — and these dreams were not only totally new to him, but, apparently, beyond his control. Just as he was starting to feel fear, Murdock was flooded with feelings of peace and safety.

"I am Murdock. A human," he answered aloud in his dream. He was filled

with great puzzlement, not his own, but directed to him.

Murdock perceived that the voice spoke again. "Will you show us your story?" Now it was his turn to be puzzled.

"Yes," he responded aloud in his dream. He was filled with a sense of peace and comfortable coaxing. In his dream, he relaxed and remembered.

He was taken back to his capture on earth. He saw all the people he knew changed in a way that he couldn't describe. He remembered running away and the sting of a tranquilizer dart in his right buttock. He saw the brief meeting with the mayor and his being bound and injected, then falling asleep to wake up in the transport pod here.

He was then taken back further in his life. He seemed to be four or five when his father had taken him hunting in the woods in Washington State. He just followed along behind while his father stalked a deer with his bow.

The flow skipped ahead. He was now ten and his father was giving him the rules of his trial: how he had to stay in the general area and survive for two weeks, armed only with a bow and arrows. Murdock recognized the area as that near his uncle's place in Northern Idaho.

The flow skipped ahead again. He was now fourteen and at his father's funeral. He felt the sadness, loss, and pain all over again. He felt the strangeness at having to live with his uncle instead of his father.

The flow skipped again. He was seventeen and in his final trial. He was naked in the Montana woods. No weapons, food, or water. He had to survive for three months. That was when he had started his buckskins.

The flow skipped again. He was nineteen and at his uncle's funeral. More sadness, loss, and pain at having buried two men he had called Father.

"Mother?" the voice asked. Murdock had never known his mother. His father had told him she had died before he was a year old. Murdock felt consolation flow to him, and that made him feel somewhat better.

Murdock was sorry that his story was so short. When reviewed in this way, it seemed lacking somehow.

"You are young. Many things are yet to be added to your story," came a reply.

Murdock awoke with a start. His brain felt like a well-squeezed sponge. His fire was low, but he estimated he had been asleep for two or three hours. Going outside the cave, he felt the rain on his face. The dream had really shaken him. All the pain and loss he thought he had put behind him was now fresh in his mind again. The wind was coming up; this was going to be a long night, and he was almost afraid to go back to sleep. He didn't want to have that dream again. He nibbled on some of the fish in his pocket and drank a little water before going back to his fire.

As he sat there, staring into the flames, he thought he heard a noise by the entrance. He grabbed up the two eighteen-inch machetes, got to his feet, and prepared to fight. But as he stared at the entrance, the opening filled with a huge head and lots of black and brown fur.

A bear! Quite a large one, too!

The bear entered slowly. He completely filled the cave entrance, dripping water on the floor. Murdock was shocked. The animal, coming toward him, stopped and shook the rain from its fur. It looked intently at Murdock as it proceeded toward him.

The animal snorted at him contemptuously.

“To you kind this acceptable for visitor?” flashed through his consciousness. He heard the words in his mind — and the voice was that of his father. *“We fear you kind not at all!”*

Murdock’s mouth gaped in amazement. The bear was looking at him, and Murdock felt disgust coming to his mind. He put away his machetes and stared at the animal.

“This belongs to us!” Murdock got a mental vision of a planet hanging in space. *“You visitor here!”* The animal moved closer to him slowly and cautiously. It began sniffing the air around him and then snorted. *“We know you. Have watched you long time!”* came to his mind.

Murdock glanced around the animal and noticed it stood on all fours on the floor of the main part of the cave. It had to hunch down to look him in the eye.

“I’m sorry. Where I come from, bears don’t communicate,” Murdock said, as if to explain his behavior. The animal snorted again in his direction.

“No need noise. You offensive enough to senses! You are human Murdock!” A small segment of a vision showing him standing beside his campfire outside the transport pod came to his mind. Murdock recognized the scene, but couldn’t remember seeing this animal nearby. In fact, he didn’t recall seeing animals of any kind. *“You young and see what we allow!”* flashed through his mind.

Murdock tried to envision all the men of the group and associated the group with the word *man*. He then tried to envision the females, associating them with

the word *woman*. Again he envisioned everyone together and associated all of them with the word *human*. In turn, he received a vision of himself associated with *human, man, Murdock*. The emotion associated with all this seemed patronizing to him.

Murdock then tried to envision the bear, and tried to make it a question. What he got back was the same as he sent, but with emphasis. Murdock had always had the ability to guess what an animal would do or where it would go, but he had never thought of it as telepathy.

“Rudimentary!”

Murdock was astounded. He brought up a mental picture of being comfortable and sat cross-legged on the floor of the cave looking at the animal. It, in turn, sat on its hind legs and rested its front leg on the ramp leading up to Murdock. Then it rested its head on its foreleg and looked at him. Murdock stared at the animal, trying to figure out why it had chosen to show up now, as well as what it wanted. “On my planet, bears don’t usually associate with humans,” Murdock stated.

“Why?” the animal responded mentally.

“Bears eat meat.” Murdock pictured a bear eating some of the animals he had seen here so far: a fish, a snake, a deer, and a man. What he received was a dissertation, of sorts, on the feeding habits of the animal in front of him. Apparently, the animal ate everything except men and the huge snake that Murdock had killed. The vision of the snake was one of fierce rage. He guessed that this animal actively hunted the snakes just to kill them. And he found that the bears here, like the ones back on earth, liked sugar, getting it mostly from berries and some unfamiliar roots.

As Murdock looked over the animal in front of him, he tried to estimate its size. Though its coloring was similar to that of a Kodiak, the bear outsized the biggest polar bears and Kodiak bears that he had ever seen in his travels to Alaska and Canada. And he couldn’t begin to estimate its weight.

The animal rubbed its nose with his free paw and sneezed. Murdock noted the twelve-inch-long claws.

Murdock tried to ask the animal its name. He pictured each of the others that

he had met and put a name to each. Murdock then pictured this animal and tried to get it across that it was a question. He got a question in response. So he tried to picture the black bear that he had seen on his second day here, then another question. Puzzlement came to his mind.

“Not have names. Identify by smell,” the bear flashed.

“Can I give you a name? It would help me communicate and differentiate you from others of your kind,” Murdock asked. “Beron seems to be a good name to me.”

The animal showed indifference to his name. *“Significance?”* flashed the bear.

“In one of the ancient tongues of my planet it meant ‘brown one’,” Murdock answered. Beron flashed pleasure at the meaning of the name.

“Why did you come in here tonight?” he asked. Beron flashed back puzzlement. Murdock was stumped. “Were you curious about me?”

Beron flashed an affirmative.

“Wet is fine. Dry is better,” Beron flashed.

“Ah, I see. You’re always welcome at my fire, Beron.”

“Share?” Beron flashed.

“Sure, whatever that is.” Murdock had shifted to a reclining position to stretch his legs and immediately felt as if he were asleep and dreaming.

This time, he saw from someone else’s viewpoint. He saw himself following the mountain base through the trees, and it was as if he passed himself. He saw the other Murdock go to the stream, get water, and relax in the sun. Then he watched himself get up, come toward this strange viewpoint, and take the path up the mountainside. The view changed slightly; he saw two shadows on the side of the mountain, and then the view shifted back. At the cave entrance, the other Murdock passed from his view. The dreaming Murdock seemed to go to the center of the cave and wait. Then he saw himself again.

Murdock immediately grasped the meaning. He had been led here by Beron for the purpose of this meeting. He woke immediately and propped himself up on one arm.

“Did you give me the warning by the falls?” he asked.

“*We did,*” Beron flashed.

Murdock hadn’t figured out why Beron always referred to himself in the plural. While he was still thinking about it, Beron got down and curled up on the floor of the cave. Murdock, reclining again, fell asleep. This time, he slept without dreaming.

When he awoke, Murdock found that the fire had gone out. He intended to go find more wood, but before he could reach the cave entrance, Beron had stuck out a paw, blocking his path.

“Is something wrong?” Murdock asked.

“*Meet others and eat,*” Beron flashed.

“I am a little hungry,” Murdock admitted. “What others?”

Beron didn’t answer. Murdock started to gather up his weapons.

“*No need those,*” Beron flashed.

Murdock was reluctant.

“*Trust,*” Beron flashed as he got up from the floor of the cave and started toward the entrance.

Murdock complied with Beron’s request. Just outside the entrance, Beron stretched up the side of the mountain. Murdock, seeing how big he really was, felt dwarfed by Beron’s size.

“*Follow!*” Beron commanded, starting up the mountain path. Murdock complied but found it difficult to keep up. The grade of the path had gotten considerably steeper. Trotting, he could feel his legs were not up to the task.

Finally, he had to stop. Beron had stopped also. Murdock was panting and sweating and had difficulty catching his breath.

“*Wrong?*” Beron flashed.

“I can’t... keep up... with you,” Murdock managed to get out between breaths.

Beron cocked one front leg outward. “*Climb... up/on!*” he flashed.

Murdock grabbed a handful of fur as high as he could and, using the offered leg as a step, scrambled up the side of the huge animal as best he could. He settled himself just forward of the animal’s shoulders, at the base of his massive neck.

Beron trotted on. As they proceeded, Murdock felt the muscles move under the heavy fur. The breeze that the speed of their passage caused chilled him a little. In his estimation, Beron was truly impressive, and Murdock felt a little sheepish having to ride atop him in this way. *I should have been able to keep up*, he thought.

“*Our very young travel this way, when needed,*” Beron flashed.

That made Murdock feel even worse. *I feel like I’m imposing on another intelligent species and I dislike imposing on anyone*, he thought.

He immediately felt calm coming from Beron. “*Stronger should care for weaker/smaller.*”

Murdock enjoyed the ride atop the huge bear. He didn’t mind being a long way off the ground; he took in all the scenery he could. He had no way to gauge how far they had come from the cave.

After moving for an indeterminate amount of time, they had reached a mountain meadow. Murdock could see that the path continued up the side of the mountain, but Beron was not going farther up. Instead, he trotted across the meadow. From his perch atop Beron, Murdock could see a river flowing off in the distance, and Beron seemed to be heading toward it.

“We will meet others here?” Murdock asked as they approached the river. He got an affirmative response from Beron.

“*Sacred place!*” flashed the bear.

To Murdock, *sacred place* came across as a place of meeting and safety, a place in which unescorted outsiders were not welcome. He didn’t think the animal had any religious leanings, but he couldn’t be sure.

As they approached the river, Beron stopped. “*Get... down/off!*” flashed Beron and Murdock complied.

Beron continued on into the river while Murdock waited on the bank. As Murdock watched, Beron snagged a large fish in his jaws and carried it over to him. The bear deftly removed the fish’s head and sliced the skin down the length with a claw. Then Beron quickly swallowed the fish-head whole. Seeing no means of cooking the fish, Murdock bent down, took a large chunk of the raw meat, and ate it. The fish looked and tasted much like salmon, but Murdock was

never one for raw fish.

Beron speared some of the meat from the side of the fish with his claw and popped it into his mouth. As Murdock was reaching for another piece, Beron stopped him with a negative thought.

“Hunter gets head, hunter’s right. One bite for hunter. One bite for visitor. Rest for others,” Beron flashed. Then Murdock caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

Twenty or thirty other bears of all different colors and sizes were coming toward them. Black ones, white ones, brown ones, but smaller than Beron. Murdock heard not a sound as they approached, and at first, he thought he was just imagining that they were there.

As the first arrivals got closer, Beron backed away from the fish, leaving it on the ground. Murdock backed up to stand beside Beron and watch. Some of the other animals that came toward him were carrying cubs, and some had cubs following them. Each adult, in turn, approached Beron and Murdock and nodded slightly to Beron, who returned the nod. Then each adult bear took a piece of the fish and backed off to allow the others to approach. The cubs didn’t take any of the fish; Murdock presumed that they were prohibited because of their age. *This seems to be heavily ritualized and speaks of a high degree of sophistication and intelligence,* he thought as he watched.

When all who were allowed had eaten, Beron swatted the remains of the fish in the direction of the cubs. Next, the adults, in turn, and in the order of their arrival, sniffed Murdock much as Beron had in his first encounter with the human. Murdock got quick flashes of disgust from each of them.

After what Murdock interpreted as the introductions, they all sat or lay on the grass. Murdock said nothing. He sensed that his fate lay in the outcome of this meeting. He stood patiently next to Beron, watching the cubs play among themselves.

He suddenly had a vision of one of the large snakes coming after one of the cubs as a question. Murdock envisioned himself defending the cub.

Then he saw himself being violently torn apart by one of the white bears; a feeling of disgust and revulsion was directed toward him. Murdock’s attention

quickly turned toward the largest white bear, which snorted in his direction and began walking off. He got similar visions from some of the others as they followed suit. Murdock guessed that the meeting was over and that he was not well-received.

“So, what is the verdict?” Murdock asked when the others had all gone as silently as they had arrived.

“*Some want hunt/kill all your kind. Some want leave alone,*” Beron flashed.

“How do you feel about it?” Murdock asked. Without further discourse, Beron had started to leave the way they had come, and he followed.

He received a feeling of uncertainty from Beron. “Is that all of your kind there are?” Murdock asked. He got a vision of many thousands of the bears, all led by one of their own kind. “So, that was just a meeting of the leaders?” He received an affirmative response. Both walked in silence until they had reached the path they had come by.

“*Is forbidden you, or any you kind, come beyond point/here! Only you allowed come onto mountain!*” Beron flashed. Very deep cautions and warnings were embedded in the message, and Murdock got the vision of being torn apart, which he interpreted as a possible repercussion of any violation.

“You are correct not to trust my kind,” Murdock stated. “On our own planet, my kind had eradicated a lot of the species that once inhabited it; cruelly and without mercy, for the most part.”

“*Why?*” The flash was tinged with distress.

“Most of the time, it was for money or sport.” Murdock could feel the high degree of distress in Beron as they walked back down the mountain path toward the cave. He understood that Beron didn’t understand *sport* or *money*, but didn’t know how to explain these concepts. Personally, he had always felt that *hunting for sport* was akin to murder. He knew many so-called hunters who would kill deer or elk, take the head as a trophy, and leave the rest.

Murdock, however, hunted to survive. The thrill others got from sport hunting was foreign and disgusting to him. He always felt remorse when taking an animal — with the exception of those that attacked him first, such as the snake by the transport pod. A sense of understanding and sadness came from

Beron as these thoughts ran through his mind.

“*You stay/live here? You guard/protect path to sacred place?*” Beron flashed as they reached the cave entrance.

“Am I allowed to? I would like to stay here, live here. I would like to learn more about you and your kind,” Murdock responded, stopping at the cave entrance. Beron responded with feelings of pleasure.

“*We observe and share more in coming days,*” the bear flashed as he left Murdock, continuing on down the mountain path.

Murdock went inside the cave and gathered up his gear. As he did so, he felt an uncomfortable bulge in his pocket. *The salt. I'd forgotten I had it. I wonder if I could barter salt for the use of some of the tools,* he thought.

As he left the cave, Murdock turned down the mountain path. While he traveled down the path, he thought Beron's character was much like his father's and his uncle's. Beron seemed to think much the same way as he did about certain subjects. Murdock hoped he'd found a friend in Beron, which was strange for him. He didn't make friends easily, nor did he desire them. For him, friendship required a lot of trust and understanding. Doing things for one another because you wanted to, not from any sense of repayment for previous good deeds or help rendered.

As far as a friendship with Beron went, that remained to be seen. *Beron would be a powerful ally or a formidable enemy. I hope I can learn enough about his kind to not find out how formidable he can be,* he thought. *I'm not sure he understands my motives, though, and I don't know what rules or restrictions he is bound by. Hopefully, I can survive long enough to learn. I certainly don't want to offend him.*

After walking for the majority of the day through rolling hills, Murdock heard talking. Even though he saw no one, he proceeded cautiously. He was hidden by the trees and by a small hill. As he topped the hill, he made out people walking through the trees ahead of him. Murdock crouched down and moved ahead as stealthily as he could.

He saw three of the women coming from the transport pod, each with two water skins. He recognized only one — Rose Griffen.

Murdock crept into position to stop her on her return. He checked the area and detected no one else around.

“Hello, Rose,” Murdock said softly as she came toward him. She hadn’t seen him until he spoke. Her shock was evident in a deep breath she took as she tried to back away from him quickly.

“Goddamn it, Murdock,” she said tersely, breathlessly. “Do you have to sneak up on a girl that way? You scared me out of ten years’ growth!”

“Sorry, didn’t want the others to know I was here.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! You just about made me pee my pants! What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I just wanted to talk. I have a business deal for Whittier, but I’m not the one to propose it to him directly. How are things going?”

“About as well as could be expected. Whittier has set himself up as Lord and Master over the rest of us. Burns and Metzger are his muscle. What did you do to Collier?”

“I just tried to put the fear of God into him. Why?” Murdock asked.

“Well, it worked! He hasn’t slept well since Whittier, Burns, and Metzger rescued him from you.”

“Really? Do tell!”

“According to Whittier, you were about to behead Collier when he, Burns, and Metzger came to the rescue,” Rose said. “Whittier said they scared you off and you ran into the woods.”

“What do you believe?” Murdock asked her.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there, and no one who has disputed Whittier’s version. What business deal do you want to talk to Whittier about?” she went on.

Murdock reached into his pocket and handed her some of the salt. Rose looked at it and shrugged. “What’s this?” she asked.

“Taste it,” Murdock suggested. As she took one of the smaller pieces and touched her tongue to it, her eyes widened with surprise.

“Well, some of us would be interested! The oatmeal has tasted pretty bland

of late, but I don't see any use in salt except as a seasoning," Rose stated flatly.

"We all need some salt in our diet," Murdock said matter-of-factly. "Besides its use as a seasoning, it is used as a food preservative and in tanning hides."

"And... we need it why?" Rose asked skeptically.

"Do you think it's going to be summer here all the time? When winter comes, some of you are going to get pretty cold, considering what the colonists were wearing the last time I was here."

"I still don't understand what you want me to do."

"If I can get one of the pickaxes and a small tarp, I can get you enough salt to begin tanning some hides for clothing."

"I don't think Whittier will go for it. He has a real dislike for you. You could give him a mountain of the stuff, and he still wouldn't go for a deal. Not with you, anyway."

"That's where you come in."

"I'll deliver the message, but don't hold your breath. How do we contact you, assuming he wants to talk?"

"I'll be around this area for a while. Just go to the stream and yell for me."

"Okay," she said, walking off toward the transport pod.

When Rose was out of sight, Murdock crossed back over the stream. He speared a fish, cooked it, and ate his fill. After he had eaten, he heard voices over by the stream.

"Murdock!" That was Whittier calling for him. Murdock headed in the direction of the voice. When he reached the stream, he saw Whittier, Rose, and Burns standing on the other side.

"I'm here, Whittier," Murdock said, showing only his head and shoulders. Grass and small trees hid his lower half.

"I have a counter-proposal for you!" Whittier yelled. "Why don't you just show us where you got the salt, and we'll do the work for you?"

"Can't do that," Murdock responded.

"No deal? No room for negotiation?"

"None!"

"How about you supply us with a couple of tanned hides and some meat?"

Whittier countered. "Say, two hides and a deer butchered. We would pay you with the use of a tarp and pickax."

As Murdock pondered that proposition, he heard someone behind him, getting closer.

"Let me think about it," Murdock said as he drew his twelve-inch machete. "How about one hide and half a deer?" He readied himself. The noise was a lot closer, and whoever it was would be striking soon.

"I have to get two hides and a whole deer. The tarp and pickax are worth that much, at least!" Whittier called back.

Just then, the attack from behind came. Murdock just managed to sidestep the downward slash of a machete held by Metzger. The machete stuck into the ground as Murdock made a quick little slice across the top of Metzger's wrist. The other man yelled and grabbed his wrist as Murdock got behind him and shoved him with his shoulder. Metzger stumbled forward and fell face first into the stream. When Murdock looked up at Whittier, he saw that Whittier had grabbed Rose by the hair and was holding his own twelve-inch machete at her throat.

"You're a real class act, Whittier," Murdock yelled.

"Just doing my civic duty," Whittier responded with a wry grin. "Now, suppose you come over here and surrender to Burns and Metzger."

"And if I don't?"

"Well, maybe your little girlfriend, here, won't be quite so pretty the next time you see her!" Whittier drew the machete a little way across Rose's throat. Murdock could see a thin line of blood start to flow from the small cut. Rose's eyes got big, as the shock of what was happening hit her.

Murdock laughed aloud.

"I fail to see anything funny in this situation," Whittier yelled, frowning.

"You won't kill her, Whittier," Murdock called back.

"And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"Several factors. Only one of which is the fact that, if you do, she won't be able to carry any more water. Besides, it isn't your style," Murdock taunted. "You would rather have one of your goons over there do it for you. Too much

like work and too messy for you!”

Murdock had noticed Burns and Metzger looking nervously toward Whittier. Metzger was still holding his wrist, which was still bleeding. “Why don’t you come over here, Whittier?” he continued. “We can settle this like men!” He paused. “Well, one of us is a man, anyway.”

“I’m warning you, Murdock — don’t test me!”

“I’m way over here, Whittier. What can I do to stop you? Keep in mind, though, that if you kill her, I’ll be hunting you and those two slugs over there. You won’t see me or hear me until it’s too late. I can guarantee you one thing, though.”

“And that would be?” Whittier asked haughtily.

“I can guarantee your death will be a slow and painful one! So, if you’re going to kill her, do it and get it over with!”

Whittier’s thoughts were plain on his face for all to read. Then the other man relaxed his knife hand, and Rose pushed it away. She knelt at the stream and splashed the cut with water.

“You stupid asshole,” she screamed at Whittier as she dipped water onto the cut. “You have a problem with Murdock, take it up with him! Leave me out of it!” Rose put more of the cold water on her neck.

Whittier, Burns, and Metzger were turning to leave. Murdock bent down and picked up Metzger’s machete.

“Hey, Whittier, you forgot something,” he yelled at the retreating Whittier. Whittier turned just in time to see the machete heading for his chest and leaned back. The sharp edge drew a neat line across his chest as the machete stuck in a tree just past him.

“You see that! He tried to kill me,” Whittier screamed to the other two men.

“If I wanted to kill you, Whittier, you’d be dead,” Murdock stated coldly.

Metzger walked over to the machete stuck in the tree and pulled it out. All three men turned their back to Murdock and walked off in the direction of the transport pod. Rose followed close behind them.

Murdock waited until the area was clear before turning his back on them and returning to his fire. He sat by the fire for an hour or so before finally deciding to

take what he needed. *I offered to barter, but they obviously didn't think I had anything to barter with, he thought. Besides that, I have a right to at least use some of the tools. I'm part of the colony, even if Whittier doesn't like it.*



Whittier, Metzger, Burns, and Rose walked quietly back to the transport pod. Whittier was livid and his mind continued to scheme. *I have to turn this around,* he thought. Murdock's earlier escape into the wild had been a major disappointment, but Whittier had managed to turn it around to his advantage. He had made Murdock an unacceptable alternative to his rule, but this was not the same.

Rose's presence complicated things. Whittier controlled Burns and Metzger and knew they didn't dare dispute his version of the facts. But what was he going to do with Rose? She and Metzger had begun a relationship, but Whittier doubted that Metzger could control her. He doubted anyone could.



Burns was fearful of Whittier and his further loss of status and fearful of Murdock and his threat. He knew Murdock meant exactly what he said and was skeptical of his survival chances if Murdock decided to make good on it. Burns also knew that if he were banished, he'd have nowhere to go. He could survive inside a city, but not out here.



Metzger was in pain. His wrist hurt from the slice Murdock had given him, and his pride was hurt. He didn't care much for Whittier or Burns, and he didn't care if he lost his position with either man. Whittier could do his own dirty work if he didn't like the results. Murdock had proven, once again, that his skills were superior.

Metzger had figured the chances of their ambush succeeding were low. He'd told them as much. And he wasn't bothered by Whittier's threat to Rose. Metzger knew Whittier didn't have what it took to take a life himself.



“When we're back at the pod,” Whittier began angrily, “we need to have a meeting of the minds. Go straight into the pod, and say nothing to anyone. That means you, too, Rose!”

When they were close to the camp, Burns trotted ahead to eject anyone who might be in the pod. He knew Whittier well enough to pick up on what the man wanted.

After the three men and Rose were inside the pod, Burns closed the ramp.

“That went well,” Whittier said sarcastically, exhaling heavily. He sat in the only chair, glaring at everyone.

“We did exactly as you told us,” Burns pleaded.

“I told you it wouldn't work,” Metzger accused. “Only an utter fool would have fallen for that little ambush. Murdock never struck me as a fool.” Metzger glared back at Whittier.

“Murdock was correct about needing the salt. So, what do we do now? Do any of you have any helpful suggestions?” Whittier asked.

Rose looked sideways at Whittier, glaring, arms crossed.

“You have something to say?” Whittier asked, glaring back at her.

“You threaten me with a knife again, you better make it good,” she warned.

“I said *helpful suggestions*. Denigrations or idle threats aren't helpful.” Whittier scowled.

“We could let him borrow what he wants,” Burns stated, rather fearfully. “It didn't seem to be an unreasonable request.”

Whittier slowly turned his attention from Rose to Burns.

“So, you're saying that we should trust him? What makes him so trustworthy?” Whittier asked.

He waited for a response.

“All we get from him are threats and insubordination,” he continued when no one spoke up.

And then Whittier got an idea.

“I think you could be right, Burns,” he mused after a long pause. “I don’t see that we have a lot of choices. He could just walk into the camp and take whatever he wants, whenever he wants. Who could stop him?” Whittier looked from one to another slowly. “Since we have a tentative plan, we can at least continue talking to Murdock about it. I would keep this to ourselves until we can get things ironed out. I see no need to unnecessarily alarm the rest. Agreed?”

Everyone nodded agreement. “Rose,” he went on, “I need to talk to these two about other matters. We all will leave shortly to continue the negotiations, and I want you to do the negotiating. Close the ramp on your way out, please.”

Rose left and closed the ramp behind her.

“Do you have any special attachments for that one, Metzger?” Whittier asked after Rose left the pod.

“Nothing permanent, not that it’s any of your business,” Metzger said defiantly as he shrugged. “Why do you ask?”

“She’s going to be a major problem. I thought of a way to turn this around to our advantage, but it means that we all have to be of the same mind on the matter,” Whittier stated. “I know where Burns’ loyalties lie. I am not so sure of yours.” Whittier squinted skeptically at Metzger.

“What do you have in mind?” Metzger asked.

“Does it matter? I want to know if I can count on you.” Whittier asked.

Metzger thought.

“Let me put it another way, Metzger,” Whittier continued. “You don’t back me, then you’re of no use to me for anything. No special favors. You’ll be treated just the same as the rest. Or back me and be one of the elite, if things go as I want them to. But if I can’t trust you, you’ll be *neutralized*.”

“Is that supposed to intimidate me?” Metzger asked boldly.

“Not at all. I’m relatively certain I can find someone to replace you. You’re dismissed.” Whittier turned to Burns. “Burns, find me a replacement for Metzger.”

Metzger didn't move.

Whittier could see the thoughts running furiously through Metzger's head reflected on his face. *Good! He is balancing his ambition with his morals,* Whittier thought. Burns stood still watching both men. After a short while, Burns activated the ramp.

"I won't be a party to murder," Metzger said through clenched teeth.

"What would you call what you attempted with Murdock?" Whittier asked. "It wasn't self-defense!"

"I mean, I won't murder Rose," Metzger clarified.

"Who asked you to?" Whittier asked. "I understand that there are some lines you won't cross. No problem. I respect that!" *Sort of,* he thought.

"All right, I'll back you," Metzger said, angry at his capitulation.

"Good! You and Burns go get Miss Rose and a couple of filled water skins," Whittier ordered. "With any luck, we can make contact with Murdock again before dark."



As he studied the encampment around the transport pod, Murdock noticed that very little had been done to secure the tools and equipment. It was as if he had never left. He saw the rest of the group milling around, talking or lounging on the grass. Just past them, he could see the site of his old campfire, where he cooked the snake he had killed. The remains of the snake still hung in the tree.

But as he waited for dark to fall, his conscience began to bother him. *I can't do this! There is no justification for stealing,* he castigated himself. Stealthily, he retraced his steps, careful to be unseen by the others.

When he was far enough away from the transport pod, he traveled faster. Not long afterward, he crossed the stream and headed for home. But fatigue stopped him when he had traveled only a little over a mile from the stream crossing. He would have to spend the night there.



As the four walked back toward the stream, Metzger led, and Rose walked behind him. Whittier fell in behind Rose, and Burns brought up the rear. After they were out of sight and hearing of the pod, Whittier bent down quickly and picked up a rather large rock. As the rest walked, Whittier, making sure Rose didn't see or hear him, rushed forward and struck her in the head with the rock. Rose hit the ground hard, face first.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Metzger asked excitedly. Blood oozed from the side of Rose's head.

"Don't act so surprised," Whittier responded sternly. "You knew what was going to happen. You two pick her up and carry her across the stream."

Burns and Metzger carried Rose while Whittier guided them across the stream.

"Stand her up," Whittier commanded when they had reached a likely spot, out of sight of the stream crossing.

With Burns and Metzger holding Rose up, her head lolling forward and to the side, Whittier unbuttoned her shirt and removed it.

"What the hell are you doing?" Metzger asked, full of concern for Rose.

"What do you care?" Whittier asked. "She is nothing to you, remember? Burns, throw a rope up there. I want her standing up somewhat."

Burns did as he was told, tying and hanging Rose, still unconscious and topless, by her arms, her feet barely touching the ground.



Murdock made camp and got a small fire going. Then he sat looking into the flames. He could not reconcile what he should do with what he knew to be right. After a while, he threw the last piece of wood on the fire, frustrated by his moral dilemma.

"Aw, hell!" he said aloud as he settled in for the night. His mind had turned back to Beron and the ritual he had attended earlier in the day. *In a way, I felt privileged to attend the meeting with Beron by my side. I'm sure that not many strangers had ever attended a similar meeting. But then, maybe it is*

commonplace for them, but that's of no consequence to me, I still feel honored. These thoughts pleased him as he drifted off to sleep.

Murdock suddenly woke. He thought he'd heard someone scream, but he couldn't be sure it was real or just a dream. Checking the fire, he guessed he had been asleep for only a few hours. He stirred the embers of the fire with a stick, making it a point to be quiet.

Then he heard it again. A definite scream — and he knew from experience that only a human could scream that way. Someone was in a lot of pain.

He started to trot toward the sound, which came from his side of the stream; that much he was sure of. As he moved, trying to watch his steps and be as quiet as he could, he heard another scream. This time the scream was closer — a lot closer. Murdock trotted on.

When he reached the stream crossing — the spot at which he had confronted Whittier and company earlier — the screams had stopped. He could hear something, though. It sounded like dripping, but no rain fell. No, the dripping sound wasn't water. It dripped too thickly, too much like syrup, to be water. And he smelled blood in the air.

Murdock followed his nose. Soon he found a limp body tied to the side of a tree. His hands moved quickly over the body, checking for breathing and trying to find a pulse. The breathing was very shallow, and the pulse he found was weak. His hand brushed against a bare breast. *This is one of the women*, he thought. His hands were covered in something sticky, and he knew it was blood without needing to see it.

As quickly as he could, Murdock felt around the woman's extremities, trying to locate the points that secured her to the tree. Failing, he got a fire going nearby. He needed to see to assess the damage done, as well as how she was secured.

Murdock took in a shocked breath in the firelight. There was Rose Griffen, tied to the tree. She was totally naked, bleeding badly, unconscious, but still alive.

With some effort, Murdock managed to cut Rose down from the tree and lay her close to the fire. As he started to wash off some of the blood with water from his water skin, he saw something carved into her chest. The carving appeared to be letters. As he put more water on her chest, the letters began to show. The word “spy” was clearly carved into Rose’s chest, still open and bleeding.

Looking at her face, he barely recognized her. Her face was battered, bruised, cut, and bleeding in several places. Her eyes had swollen shut with huge bruises covering her eye sockets. Her nose appeared broken, and she had a few teeth missing.

As he continued to assess the damage done to her, he became aware of Beron close by. He looked up to see the creature looking at Rose.

“Is she still alive?” Murdock asked Beron.

“*Barely,*” Beron flashed.

Murdock continued to check Rose over. None of her major bones had been broken, but she had quite a few bruised or cracked ribs. He rolled her over on her side to see her back and the evidence was there to indicate that her attackers had raped her.

“Oh, God,” he groaned. Dirt and blood covered her upper back as well. Murdock, washing it off, saw the word “slut” carved into her flesh. The cuts were still bleeding. Her buttocks and lower back were badly bruised.

“She’s in bad shape,” Murdock said quietly.

“*You know this one?*” Beron flashed.

Murdock tried to explain to Beron who she was as he tried to stop the bleeding. But it was a losing battle. Finally, he picked her up and carried her to the stream. He laid her in the water, which was a lot colder than the water in his water skin. Then, he gently dipped water all over her body to wash it and try to soothe the bruises and cuts. *I hope the cold water will help to stop the bleeding*, he thought. He winced as he tried to gently clean her face and reset her nose; it wasn’t the work that caused him to wince, but that he hated to cause her any more pain. After he had cleaned her, Murdock dug up some mud from the bank of the stream and packed it on the cuts and carvings.

“Can you help me get her back to the cave?” Murdock asked Beron as he finished coating her with mud on the front side.

“*Is your mate?*” Beron flashed.

“No,” Murdock answered quickly. “Will you help me or not?”

“*If dies?*” Beron flashed.

“Then she dies. At least I tried to save her life.”

“*Will help. Get her... on,*” Beron commanded. He lay down to make it easier for Murdock to get Rose onto his back. Once she was on Beron’s back, Murdock smeared more mud on the cuts on her back.

Beron stood very slowly and carefully so as to not spill the unconscious Rose from his back. “*You also,*” he flashed.

“Can you carry both of us?” Murdock asked. Beron flashed an affirmative.

Murdock climbed up and settled in the same spot that he’d ridden before. Behind him, Rose lay sprawled out on her stomach and, he hoped, balanced enough to stay put while in transit.

Beron began to move toward the cave. *I can’t see much of anything and I hope a low-hanging branch doesn’t catch me in the chest and knock me off*, he thought.

Beron’s muscles weren’t moving as much as they had when only Murdock had ridden him, and he didn’t sway as he did with just Murdock. Murdock chalked this up to Beron’s being careful with Rose. The entire trip took only two hours; not once did Rose come close to falling off, not a single leaf touched

Murdock's face, and their passage made no sound.

After they had reached the cave entrance, Beron lay down once more, and Murdock pulled Rose off. He carried her into the cave and up onto the ledge on which he had slept the night before. After laying her down on her side as gently as he could, he restarted the fire, more for light than heat.

Through the rest of the night, Murdock monitored Rose's condition as best he could. The mud had dried sometime during the passage to the cave, acting as a bandage to stop the bleeding. But as he looked at her mangled face, his face hurt as well. It would take her a while to heal, especially the cut that ran from her nose to ear, just under her right eye.

More than once Murdock saw Beron observing him, but Beron asked no questions. He did thank his large friend for his help. Several times, Murdock forgot the huge creature was even there. *I am extremely grateful that Beron was able to help*, he thought. *Without Beron, I would have had to treat Rose's wounds by the stream where I found her.* Rose was just too much for him to carry very far, which would have made them susceptible to further attacks, not just from the animals that had assaulted her, but from other animals drawn to the scent of blood.



Whittier, Burns, and Metzger had all cleaned themselves at the stream before heading back to the pod. Metzger appeared to be experiencing guilt over Rose and his part in her attack.

“Now, we're *all in*,” Whittier stated. “From now on, either we hang together, or we'll hang separately!”

The other two men said nothing for some time.

“What if she dies?” Metzger asked finally.

“If she does,” Whittier shrugged, “she does. You two had better hope she does! If Murdock finds her and finds out what we did, you're going to have a hard time explaining it!”

Metzger reeled as if physically struck. “You aren't going to give explanations

to Murdock?” he asked, his voice full of contempt.

“No, not a single one,” Whittier replied in mock joviality. “I’ve known for a while now that he’ll kill me on sight! And that will leave you two to deal with him and his rage. He’ll probably torture the two of you for a week, maybe two, before he finishes you off.”

“So, how do we explain to the others that Rose is missing?” Burns asked. His mind on a week or two of torture, he could barely get the words out.

Whittier considered it for a little while. “Murdock dragged her off into the woods and probably killed her,” he explained. “She was trying to negotiate with him for us, and he snapped! We tried to find her, but we couldn’t see much in the dark. We’ll go looking for her in the morning.”

“That won’t wash!” Metzger responded angrily.

“Who cares?” Whittier responded hotly. “We control the food. We control the shelter. We control them! Do they want to leave? Where are they going to go? If they go to Murdock, they run the risk of him killing them. They’ve all seen how violent and ill-tempered he is. If they go off on their own, they’ll die from lack of food and shelter.” Whittier paused and slowly walked around the other two. “Make no mistake, gentlemen, it’s going to be our way... no matter what! In my opinion, they simply have no alternative.” He smirked.

“So, you want us to go looking in the morning?” Burns asked.

“Of course,” Whittier responded. “And I expect you to find her clothes and blood stains — nothing else!”

“And if we do?” asked Metzger.

“Didn’t you understand me? I’ve made it plain enough that even Burns understands,” Whittier responded curtly.



At daybreak, Murdock gathered his tools and headed out of the cave and down to the stream. He refilled his water skin with fresh water, speared some fish for all of them to eat, gathered firewood, and transported everything to the cave. Then he returned to the stream and crossed over to the high grass. While keeping

an eye out for snakes, he used his machete to cut all the grass he could carry and then went back to the cave.

There, he put all the grass up beside the unconscious Rose and carefully rolled her onto it. It wasn't much, but it would be better than sleeping on stone. He noticed that Beron had left sometime between his trips to the stream.

Murdock then took the fish outside the cave to clean them. Exhausted, however, he nodded off. He woke when he thought he heard Rose moaning. Taking in the fish he had already cleaned, he put them on the fire and checked on her.

"Where am I?" she asked weakly as he checked for a pulse.

"You're safe, and you're going to be all right," Murdock said calmly; trying to soothe her fears. Her eyes were so swollen that either she couldn't see, or she was still in shock.

"Water?" she asked groggily.

Murdock gave her the water skin. "Not too much. Little sips," he warned. When she had a few small sips, he put a little water on her forehead. But before he had finished, she passed out again. Murdock returned to cleaning the fish outside the cave.

Later, after the fish had cooked and Murdock had just begun to eat, he heard Rose.

"Where am I?" she asked again. She had awakened while his back was turned,

"Lie back and relax," Murdock cautioned her. "You're hurt pretty bad."

"You," Rose screamed weakly. "This is your fault!" She held her ribs in pain.

"I think you have a couple of cracked ribs, so it will be easier to breathe if you don't scream," Murdock told her. "Try to breathe slowly. And I didn't do anything to you, except save your life. Hungry?" He offered her some fish.

"It's *your* fault, Murdock," Rose said through gritted teeth. "You insisted on throwing that machete at Whittier!"

Then she realized she was naked. "You're a *pervert*, Murdock! What did you do with my clothes?"

"I found you just as you are now, except you were a lot bloodier."

Rose tried to cover herself as best she could and discovered the mud on her body.

“Why is there mud on me? Why can’t I see?” she asked angrily.

“I’d leave the mud where it is. You have some nasty cuts, and the mud helped stop the bleeding. As far as seeing, you’ll be able to see after the swelling goes down. Right now, your eyes are not just swollen, but black,” Murdock explained. He walked over to her and pressed some fish into her hand. “Try to eat that, slowly.”

Walking back over to the fire, he asked, “Do you remember what happened?”

“I remember you throwing the machete at Whittier,” Rose responded, nibbling on the fish. “And I remember how mad he was. I remember going back to the transport pod. We all argued and discussed the situation ad nauseam, and I left the transport pod. That’s all I remember. Why am I here? What happened to me?”

Murdock took a deep breath. *Do I tell her what I know? I’d hate to say what I think happened.* “I woke up hearing you scream and found you tied to a tree.”

“I don’t remember screaming,” Rose said adamantly. “Who tied me to a tree?”

“I have no idea who did what to you. All I know is this. I found you tied to a tree; naked, beaten, carved on...” Murdock took another deep breath, “... and raped.”

“I don’t believe you,” Rose said adamantly, coldly. “You’re lying! John would never allow anything like that to happen to me!”

“Who is John, and why would I lie?” Murdock asked calmly.

“John Metzger! Who knows why *you* do anything! If all that had happened to me, I’d know it... somehow.” Rose insisted. “John would have defended me. He wouldn’t have allowed anything or anyone to harm me!” She seemed more intent on convincing herself than she was on convincing Murdock.

“Whatever you say. By your logic, either he couldn’t or wouldn’t defend you,” Murdock stated flatly.

“He *would* have,” she insisted. “He told me he loved me and highly valued

me.”

“Well, you know him better than I do. Maybe your value to him wasn’t what you thought it was. It does give you something to think about, though.”



What happened to me? Rose asked herself. Do I believe Murdock? Or do I believe John would have protected me? He would, wouldn't he?

Murdock had told her she was raped... *Again?* The first time had been many years ago, and she had taken quite some time to deal with that. She had been conscious the first time, but this time she wasn't. *If I wasn't aware, did it really happen? Best I don't dwell on it.*



Rose didn't speak for a long time, and Murdock gave her the time to mull it all over.

“You *will* get better. It may take some time, but you will. You'll see,” Murdock said after a while. He stared into the flames of the fire.

“And what am I supposed to wear in the meantime?” Rose asked accusatorially.

“You can wear my shirt, if you think it'll fit. I think it'll be way too small for you. Or you can wear what you have on. Not much of a clothing choice here, you know.” Murdock had become a little irritated with Rose.

“Well, you could look away! You don't need to stare at me!” she accused.

“For your information, Missy, I'm not staring at you, and how would you know if I were?”

“Yeah, right! And I'm supposed to believe you?”

“I don't care what you believe.”

They both sat in silence for a long time, Murdock staring into the flames. Rose ate the fish by pulling it apart in small bits. Both were lost in their own thoughts.

Murdock finally had an idea for covering Rose up and got up.

“You want any more fish?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Not right now,” she said contritely. “Could I have some water, please?”

Murdock handed her the water skin. She seemed a little sheepish in her request.

“I’ll be back in a while. Stay where you are and you’ll be fine.”

“Where are you going? Don’t leave me here alone,” Rose said. Murdock could tell she was starting to panic.

“You’ll be fine. Just stay put. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Murdock left the cave and started down the mountain toward the stream. He intended to make her something out of the grass that was across the stream. He was on his way back when he spotted Beron by the stream and walked up to the creature.

“Thanks again for your help,” he stated.

“*How is... female?*” Beron flashed.

“I think she’ll be okay after she heals some.”

“*Will female share?*” Beron queried.

“I don’t think it would be a good idea to try to introduce you two right now. It might be too much of a shock for her. She’s in shock as it is.”

“*Female knows what happened?*”

“I told her, but I think she is denying it for the present.”

“*She needs truth!*”

“I agree, but she’s emotionally fragile right now.”

Beron said nothing else and Murdock headed back to the cave.

“Who’s there?” Rose demanded as he entered the cave. She sounded on the verge of a full-blown panic attack.

“Nobody special, just me,” Murdock responded, jovially. He put his load of grass on the floor by the door. “You okay?”

“No, I’m decidedly *not* okay! I don’t think I’ll be *okay* for quite some time, if ever, but I am breathing and glad you’re back,” Rose said with a small smile. “Sorry for what I said earlier. I still haven’t come to grips with my situation yet. Where did you go?”

“I understand. You’re still in shock. I went to get more of the high grass. I had an idea of braiding it and making you something to wear. It won’t do for winter, but it should get you by until I can get some hides tanned.”

“How much of what you said was the truth?” Rose asked quietly, with a downcast gaze.

“All of it,” Murdock responded matter-of-factly, with a shrug.

“I see,” she said, so low that Murdock barely heard her. “I suppose I should thank you for doing what you could, but words seem... inadequate. They don’t express my gratitude properly.”

“I wouldn’t worry about thanking me just yet. Plenty of time for gratitude later,” Murdock said, with a grin in her general direction. “Are you hungry? I have plenty of fish if you are. Do you need anything? I’ve got to go back out to get more firewood.”

“Yes, I do need something. I need to get out of here for a while. I need to make my own assessment of my condition. I can’t help carry anything, yet, but I would like to get some fresh air.”

“Can you see at all?” Murdock asked. He was dubious of the outcome of the venture.

“I don’t know if I can see. It’s just so dark in here.”

Murdock saw the cave as lit dimly. He wouldn’t want to read anything in the cave, but it would prevent hurting her eyes with too much light so soon after her injury.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. I’ll be busy gathering firewood, and most anything can happen. I won’t be able to watch over you.”

Rose’s face looked as if he had hurt her feelings. “Whatever you say,” she said without conviction. “What’s to keep me from going out once you’re gone?”

“Nothing, except maybe a cliff, but you can suit yourself. If you’ll wait, I’ll take you down when I get back.”

“Okay, I’ll wait. Just don’t take too long.” Murdock thought he saw her smile a little in his direction.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said as he walked out of the cave and headed down toward the stream. It didn’t take him long to find a load of

firewood and head back toward the cave. When he entered the cave, he felt relief to see Rose sitting there waiting.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked, as he dumped the wood close to the fire. She was up and trying to locate him by sound. Murdock took her outstretched hand and helped her to the cave entrance. “Hold on to my belt,” he said as he turned around and waited for her to get a firm grip on his belt. As they walked down the path toward the stream, Rose put out her free hand, feeling the side of the mountain as they descended.



“You don’t talk much, Murdock,” she said, shortly after they started out. “I don’t even remember your first name.”

“I don’t talk much because I was taught to listen more than talk. Besides, when walking in the wild, it’s always a good idea to use all your senses; it could save your life,” he responded.

Rose took what he said as a hint that she should be quiet, and she remained silent during their walk. She had a thousand questions for him but decided to keep still.

“The water sounds wonderful! Can I wash up a little?” she asked when they reached the stream.

“A little, yes. Leave the mud where it is, though,” he said, as he looked around. He didn’t speak very loudly, and Rose had to really listen to hear what he said.

She waded out into the stream and splashed some water on her face. Then she took several handfuls and let them fall over her head.

Murdock wasn’t watching Rose. With his eighteen-inch machete out and at the ready, he was more concerned about threats.

When she had freshened up, she walked out and shook as much water off as she could.

“Can you lead me to a tree and give me a little privacy?” she asked sheepishly.

Murdock complied with her wishes all the while keeping vigil. When she finished, he took her hand, and she immediately found his belt. They walked back to the cave in silence.



When Murdock led Rose into the cave, he saw Beron in his usual spot. He walked Rose past the creature and up to the bed he had made for her.

“Can we talk in here?” she asked, after she sat down on the grass.

“If you want. Hungry?”

“A little,” she said.

Murdock went to the fire and stirred it to life. It was starting to get dark outside. “*Beron, would you like some fish?*” Murdock flashed.

“*Not like your way!*” Beron responded.

“*I have a couple of fish that haven’t been cooked. I got them for you.*”

Beron flashed an affirmative to the offer. Murdock tossed two of the fish to him. One he caught in his mouth. The other he caught with his paw. Murdock then got some more cooked fish for Rose and pressed it into her hand. Beron, enjoying his fish, was surprisingly quiet while he ate.

“What did you want to talk about, Rose?” he asked as he sat next to her on the grass bed. They were both pulling the meat from the bones with their fingers and popped the meat into their mouths.

“Where did you learn to take care of yourself in the wild?” she asked.

“My dad taught me... until he died. My uncle took over after that. I guess you could say I’ve been doing it all my life.”

“What about your fighting skills? Was that part of your survival training?”

“Pretty much. My dad insisted that I take martial arts. I started training at six and was a second-degree black belt before I was seventeen.” Murdock chuckled. “My dad always thought that people should be armed, even when others are sure you aren’t.”

“What about your mother?” Rose asked.

“Never knew her. She died shortly after I was born.” The thought of not

knowing his mother had always bothered him.

“I’m sorry,” Rose said with a deep sadness in her voice.

“No need to be.”

“What is your name?” Rose asked trying to lift the mood.

“I was born Kevin Matthew Murdock.”

Rose thought for a little while. Murdock had finished off his portion and was watching Beron clean himself. “More fish, Rose?”

“No, I’ve had enough. I could use some water, though,” Rose responded.

“What’s your story?” Murdock asked as he handed her the water skin.

“Not much to tell, really,” she said, after taking a long drink. “I was born Rosa Lea Griffen, into a lower-middle class family. I have two brothers and one sister, all younger. Mom and Dad died shortly before the takeover, thank God. I spent most of my life in Omaha.”

“How did they get you?” Murdock asked.

“I was nabbed as I left work one day. I worked in a plastics factory, and one day as I was leaving work, they ran us through a checkpoint and grabbed me. Don’t remember much after that.”

“So, there *was* a takeover of some kind?” Murdock asked.

“Well, yeah! It was all over the news! Where were you?”

“I was out in the woods for a couple of months. It’s a little hard to get the news out there.”

“Sorry. I thought everyone knew about the takeover. I didn’t know anyone could just go out into the woods for a couple of months.”

“My dad was rich. Never did know how he made his money. I was homeschooled and didn’t have a lot of contact with other kids my own age growing up. Guess that’s apparent.”

“It does explain a few things. You were an only child?”

“Yes, Mom died before they got around to making more. Dad never did recover from Mom’s death. He never remarried.” Murdock had gotten some of the grass he had gathered and now sat by the fire braiding.

“Mind if I ask you something?” Rose asked after a long pause.

“You can always ask me anything, but I reserve the right to refuse to

answer,” Murdock said, half-jokingly.

“That’s fair enough. Why did you ask me to take your salt deal to Whittier?” she asked.

“You seemed to be more accepting of me from the day I cooked that snake. You were the only one I was comfortable talking to. So, you were the logical choice. I knew he wouldn’t go for it if I’d brought it to him in front of the rest of the people on the transport and that he might if brought to him privately.”

“You didn’t suspect he’d try to trap you?” she asked.

“I knew it was a possibility, but I tried to give him a chance to do something good for the rest of the group. I had no idea he’d retaliate against you.”

Murdock failed to hide the regret in his voice when he referred to her.

“What are your expectations of this situation?” she asked after a long pause.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you expect from me, should I decide to stay with you?” she asked bluntly.

“I expect you to help when and where you can,” Murdock said, after briefly thinking about it.

“Nothing else?” Rose asked.

“I don’t want anything from you that you’re not willing to give freely,” he said after another pause for thought. “Not even displays of gratitude in any form. Does that answer your question?”

“Yeah, it does. So, I’m free to leave should I decide to?”

“How can I stop you? Why would I want to? If you really don’t want to be here, you can leave any time you choose. I won’t stop you.”

That was plain enough, she thought.



The next morning, Burns and Metzger returned to the place of Rose’s attack. Though they spent a long time trying to locate her or her body, they found nothing. However, when they saw the cut ropes, both men paled at what that meant. As they left the area, Burns picked up Rose’s clothes. Both men walked

back to the pod in silence. Both were hoping they wouldn't run into Murdock.

As they approached the pod, they saw Whittier talking to the rest of the group.

"Here are the men I sent to search for poor Rose. Please, tell us what you found," Whittier said for all to hear.

"This is all we could find of Rose," Burns said, as he handed her clothes to Whittier. Whittier's head bowed, theatrically; he looked very sad and visibly slumped as Burns handed him her clothes.

"Is that all you found?" Whittier asked, his voice cracking a little. He appeared to be moved to tears.

"We did find a lot of blood," Metzger stated flatly.

"Did you see any animal tracks?" Whittier asked with apparent hopefulness.

"No tracks of any kind," Metzger responded.

"Anything else?" Whittier asked.

"Just some cut ropes," Burns stated.

"Did you all hear? Murdock killed Rose! He grabbed her and spirited her off into the night, tied her up and killed her! God only knows what he did with the body! Probably cut it up and fed it to the animals," Whittier expounded loudly. "The man is a savage!"

"How do you know he killed her?" a man in the crowd asked.

Whittier looked to Metzger. "Was there the amount of blood you'd expect from a body?" he asked Metzger.

"How would I know?" Metzger asked as he shrugged his shoulders. "I can take you to the spot so you can see for yourself."

"Where was the blood?" Whittier asked. "Was it on our side of the stream?"

"No. All the signs we saw were on Murdock's side of the stream," Metzger responded.

"Does anyone want to see for himself?" Whittier asked the group. He waited for someone to respond. No one did. "If that's all, I think we all need to meditate on Rose, in silence." To Burns and Metzger, Whittier said, "I want you two to meet with me in the pod now."

The group broke up somewhat as Burns, Metzger, and Whittier went into the

pod. Whittier carried Rose's clothes.

"Close the ramp, Burns!" Whittier commanded.

"What did you really find?" Whittier asked, after the ramp was closed.

"We told you," Metzger stated.

All three men turned pale.

Over the next few days, Murdock and Rose settled into a daily routine. Murdock got firewood, water, and fish, and hauled as much grass as he could to soften the bed he had set up for Rose. At least twice a day, he would lead Rose down the mountain path to the stream. For Rose's peace of mind, he would talk to her about anything she wanted to talk about as he worked on her grass skirt. He thought it was because she couldn't see and needed someone to vocalize to know she wasn't alone.

Murdock worried the entire time about taking a deer for the hide and the meat. Though he was tired of fish, he was reluctant to leave Rose alone for any length of time.

They spent some of the time talking and planning for winter survival. Murdock knew he had to get in as much firewood and meat as he possibly could.

On one of the trips with Rose to the stream, she let go of his belt and followed him. When she broke her grip, Murdock stopped and turned around quickly.

"You can see?" he asked.

"Yes, I can see... a little. Well enough to walk to the stream without stumbling," she responded as she passed by him on the path.

"How long have you been able to see?" he asked as he followed her.

"Today has been the best, but I think I started to be able to see shapes yesterday."

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

“I think today you can wash off the mud. I need to check your cuts,” he said when they reached the stream. Rose entered the water and started washing off the mud that had been covering her wounds. “Don’t scrub hard. Just let the mud dissolve or rub gently.”

“I’m glad you let me wash off the mud. It was starting to drive me nuts,” she said as she let the mud dissolve.

“Come over here and let me see your cuts,” Murdock instructed after the mud was gone. He inspected the cuts closely, looking for any sign that they might reopen. He turned her head to the left to check the cut under her eye then turned her around to inspect her back.

“What are you looking at back there?” Rose asked.

“Your bruises seem to be getting better, and the cuts have closed nicely.”

“I have cuts on my back?” Rose asked in shock. “I knew my back was sore, but I figured it was just from the beating.” Then she looked down at her chest. “What the hell is this?” she screamed trying to rub off the newly healed cuts on her chest. She quickly turned to Murdock. “You need to give it to me straight. Just what were my injuries?” she asked accusingly.

“You were beaten and raped,” he stated flatly.

“Yeah, I know that, and I know I have a couple of teeth missing!”

“You also have words carved into your skin.” Murdock could see Rose’s lip start to quiver.

“What words?” she asked, her voice indicating her closeness to hysteria.

“On your chest is carved *spy*.” Murdock could see her eyes start to well up with tears.

“And on my back?”

“On your back is carved *slut*.” He saw the tears starting to flow down her cheek.

“And is my face cut as well?” she asked trying to hold back the tears and failing.

“Yes, it is. You have a cut that runs from your nose to your ear just under your right eye.”

Rose just sat on the ground and cried. Murdock thought her spirit was

broken. He didn't know what to do.

"Anything else?" Rose asked between sobs.

"You also had a broken nose. I reset it best I could when I first found you."

Rose started crying again, harder this time.

"Why didn't they just slit my throat?" she asked to no one in particular. She was still sitting on the ground, her head in her hands crying.

Murdock went over to her and gently put an arm around her shoulders. She accepted his comforting while still crying and sobbing. Periodically, she winced, while sobbing, and tried to hold her ribs. After a while, Murdock knelt down in front of her.

"It'll be all right," he said softly, reassuringly.

"You think so?" she screamed at him. "All my life I did everything I could to preserve my looks, and now I'm just a mess!"

"I don't think so," Murdock said calmly.

"Shows how much you know," she snapped and started crying again.

Murdock was at a loss. He had no idea what to do or say. All he wanted was to say something that would soothe her and get her to stop crying.

He stood up and went to the stream with the water skin. He had knelt down to fill it when Rose grabbed it out of his hands, shoving him a little as she did. Murdock caught his balance with his hand in the stream.

"I'll do that. It's about all I'm good for," she yelled, between sobs and tears.

"You can knock off that kind of talk," he said sternly as he regained his feet.

She filled the water skin and turned around to face him.

"Just look at me, Kevin," she yelled as she threw the water skin at him.

Murdock deftly caught the water skin before it hit him in the face and turned around to look her square in the eyes. He stood looking at her face.

"Yeah, so?" he said after a few seconds.

"I'm a mess. I'll have all kinds of scars. It wouldn't be so bad if I could hide them, but I can't hide them all!"

"You look fine to me," Murdock said, without affectation. He could see the fire in her eyes.

"I'm just an ugly mess," Rose screamed.

“Not to me,” he stated softly.

She glared at him, and he thought there was murder in her eyes. “Who in the god-damned-hell would want an ugly, scarred-up hag?”

“Is there an ugly, scarred-up hag around here?” he asked innocently and started to look around. “Hmm... can’t see one, but maybe your eyes are better than mine.”

Rose didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to. Her hand snapped up to slap his face. He ducked under the slap and caught her around her waist before she lost her balance and fell. In the blink of an eye, he stood behind her, tying up both her arms with his own.

“Knock it off, Rose,” he commanded quietly in her ear.

She tried to push backwards to knock him off balance. It didn’t work. The two of them struggled like that for a second or two; Rose could not get the upper hand. Finally, she just slumped and started to cry all over again.

When he released his grip on her, Rose fell to her knees and buried her face in her hands. Murdock let her be until her sobs grew faint.

“Are you done?” he asked gently. All she could do was nod an affirmative. “Come on,” he said, offering her a hand up. “Let’s get back before it gets dark.” With Murdock’s assistance, Rose got to her feet, and the two started back toward the cave. Neither said a word all the way back.

When they returned to the cave, Murdock dumped the gear he was carrying, and Rose headed for her bed.

“Wait a minute,” he said, stopping her. “I have something for you.” He went to where he had been working on her grass skirt, picked it up, and gave it to her.

“What’s this?” she asked quietly.

“I always thought pretty women liked pretty dresses,” Murdock said, looking at her with shock on his face. “Was I wrong?”

“No, you weren’t wrong,” she said quietly. She hadn’t lifted her face the whole way back.

“I know it isn’t much, but the store is just too far away to walk. This is the best I could do on such short notice.”

“All you need now is a pretty lady to give it to,” she said quietly, trying to

hand it back to him while still looking at her feet.

“I just did. I gave it to the prettiest lady I know.” Rose just stood there. “Give it to me, and we’ll see how it fits,” Murdock said quickly. He took the grass skirt and wrapped it around her waist twice and tied it in the front. The grass hung down to just below her knees. Rose stood like a mannequin. Murdock stepped back and looked at her. “Looks good on you!” he said with enthusiasm.

“Thanks,” Rose said unenthusiastically. She went to her bed and sat down staring into the fire.

Murdock followed her and started stirring the fire to get it going.

“Sorry, you didn’t like the dress. I guess my seamstress work needs improvement,” he said after a long pause, his attention on the fire.

Silence prevailed for a very long time.

“Kevin?” Rose asked finally. “Did you make this so you wouldn’t have to look at me any longer?”

“Hell, no! If it were up to me, I’d keep you naked all the time, but what would the neighbors think?” Murdock was trying to be upbeat. Rose chuckled a little.

“They’d think you live with an ugly woman,” she said, still staring at the fire.

“Yeah, well, what do they know? And who cares what the neighbors think anyway? Getting hungry?”

“A little,” she said. Murdock could tell she wasn’t over the shock of her disfigurement.

The two ate in silence, both sitting and looking into the flames, with Murdock closest to the fire and his back to Rose. After they ate, Rose lay down.

“Kevin?” Rose asked as Murdock banked the fire for the night.

“Yes?” he asked without turning around.

“Would you do me a favor?” she asked quietly.

“Depends on what it is,” he stated.

“Would you sleep with me tonight?”

Murdock was shocked and stood straight up.

“If you like,” he said as calmly as he could manage.

“Just lie between me and the fire. I need to be held.”

Murdock went to the makeshift bed and lay down on his back. Rose lay on her side with her head on his shoulder and her hand on his chest; Murdock put his arm around her shoulder. They lay there quietly for a while.

“Kevin?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for the dress. It was nice, and I really do appreciate it,” she said.

“You are most welcome,” he said. They lay silently for a while.

“Kevin?” she asked softly.

“Yes?”

“Did you mean what you said?”

“About what?”

“About me not being an ugly hag.”

“Rose, I know I don’t talk much, but what I say, I mean.” Murdock kissed the top of her head and held her close. “Now, go to sleep, please.”

Soon they both were asleep.

Murdock woke up sometime during the night and thought Beron was there. He couldn’t see him or hear him; he just had a feeling.

“*Hello, Beron,*” Murdock thought, trying to communicate with the creature.

“*She has much fear,*” Beron flashed. “*She has much pain!*”

“*Can you communicate with her?*” Murdock flashed.

“*She not receptive yet. Pain and fear blocking,*” Beron responded.

“*I know she’s in pain.*” Murdock lay quiet.

“*Care for her you do.*” The statement came to Murdock’s thoughts.

“*I guess I do,*” Murdock flashed back.

“*Caution! Too much fear and pain! Danger to all!*” Beron cautioned.

“*She isn’t a danger to you or your kind. I don’t feel she is a danger to me,*” Murdock responded. Rose snuggled a little closer to him as she slept. *I think she could be to those who did this to her, though,* Murdock thought to himself.

“*Danger to all! Aware you be! Cautious!*” Beron repeated.

Murdock neither heard nor saw Beron leave. He just knew the creature had gone and that he and Rose were alone.

Murdock looked at Rose sleeping on his shoulder. Neither had moved since they had lain down. He thought about holding her closer, but decided it might cause her pain and wake her up. She slept peacefully, and he was quite content to have her sleep on his shoulder.

He hadn't had much luck with women in his past, but now he hoped that would change.

I do care for her, he finally admitted to himself.

Murdock woke up a few hours later. Day had not quite broken yet, but the sun would rise soon. He carefully untangled himself from Rose and stirred the fire. Then he heard Rose moving around behind him.

"We need to do something about getting blankets of some sort," she said as she moved closer to the fire. "It gets kind of cold this early in the morning."

"Not to me," Murdock said while he added more wood.

"Well, you have more clothes than I do," she responded. She picked up the water skin and took a long drink. "And I sure could use some coffee."

"Want me to run to the store and buy some?" he asked jokingly.

"I'd really like that!" she joked back. "And on your way back, stop off at the bakery and bring me some donuts. Not too many, I have to watch my girlish figure!"

Murdock chuckled and glanced over at her. "You didn't remove your dress last night! Now, it's all wrinkled!"

"I'll just have to iron it, then."

They both laughed.

"What's on the agenda for today?" Rose asked.

"I don't know about you, but I need to go hunting. I need to try to take a deer," Murdock told her. He looked over at her and saw her disappointment.

"How long will you be gone?" she asked quietly.

"I don't really know. I need to scout an area first. Could take a day or it could take a week."

"How far away is the area you have in mind?"

"Not far. I could get there in a few hours, probably. The problem lies in the fact that I need to scout the area to see when the deer come through, and it's too

far to check three or four times a day.”

“Can’t I come with you?” she asked quietly while looking into the flames of the fire.

Murdock didn’t answer her right away. He could tell by her tone that she really didn’t want to be left alone. He didn’t like the idea of leaving her alone either, but he saw little choice. Besides, he was hoping for information from Beron on the deer and their habits. He had no idea how he would explain Beron to her. In his eyes, Beron was a majestic creature, but Rose might see him as a threat and do something stupid. Beron’s warning during the night jumped to the forefront of his thoughts.

“If you come with me, you’ll have to follow a few rules,” he said finally.

“What rules?” she asked.

“If I tell you to do something, do it immediately and without argument. If you want to discuss it later, we can, but not when I tell you. Can you do that?” he asked.

“I think so,” she responded.

“Even though you’re going with me, I need to do the scouting alone. We’ll find a campsite and you’ll stay there.”

“That sounds fine to me. I just don’t want to be alone for days and days.” Rose’s spirits seemed to lift a little.

“Besides, if I happen to get lucky, I’m going to need help hauling the deer back here. Maybe it *would* be a good idea for you to come along. It would be a good opportunity for your first training in survival.”

“When did you want to leave?” Rose asked.

“We’ll leave later in the day today. We need to get some things together before we leave, and I want to get to the area and have camp set just before dark.”

“Good, that will give me an opportunity to finish my dress,” she stated.

“I thought I did finish it?” Murdock asked.

“You finished the bottom half. Don’t you think I need a top half to the dress?”

Murdock just grinned.

Rose saw the grin and smiled. “Never mind the comment! Take my word for it. I do need a top half.”

Murdock tried to look innocent. “What? I didn’t say anything,” he said, trying not to laugh.

“Maybe not, but you were thinking it awfully loud,” she accused. “And thanks for last night. I really needed to feel safe,” she said with gratitude.

“Not a problem,” Murdock said softly, with a shrug.

Murdock spent much of the time that day working on the spear he had fashioned. He used his eighteen-inch machete to square off the pointed end and then made a notch to hold Collier’s twelve-inch machete. He then took a small piece of rope and wrapped the end of the spear to tightly hold the machete in place.

Rose, on the other hand, spent the day fashioning a top piece to her grass skirt that slipped over her head and hung below the waist of the bottom part.

“What do you think?” she asked Murdock when she had finished it and tried it on.

“I think you look like a haystack,” he said, looking up from his work on the spear. “Or is it just stacked? I can never remember which,” he said, smiling.

Rose smiled at his attempt at humor.

When they had everything that Murdock thought they might need, they set off down the path. Murdock stopped at the stream. They both drank from the water skin, and Murdock refilled it with fresh water.

“If you see any wild veggies, don’t stop to collect them without letting me know,” he told her while they rested.

“Okay. So, you’re saying I can stop you when I need to?”

“We can stop whenever you need to. Just let me know, and I’ll stop. You’re the one determining the pace,” he explained. “I just don’t want to stop and turn around and find you aren’t there. This has to be a team effort.”

Rose nodded.

Murdock had in mind to hunt the deer near the end of the bower, but he wanted to make camp closer to the foot of the mountain and as far from the *dread feeling area*, as he thought of it, as feasible. They reached the end of the

bower just before sun-down. Then they backtracked until Murdock found a campsite that he was comfortable with and that provided the necessary cover.

“We’re here,” Murdock announced finally and started removing some of the gear.

“Good! I was beginning to wonder if you were ever going to be satisfied with a campsite,” Rose said, as she dropped the gear she was carrying and stretched her muscles.

“How are you doing?” Murdock asked, making preparations for the campfire.

“I’m still pretty sore,” she explained, “but I’ll live. I’m not used to all the exercise. Anything I can do to help?”

“You can gather some dry firewood, but don’t go too far. Just keep your wits about you, and you should be fine.” He watched her as she wandered around looking for wood. He thought she swayed gracefully, like tall grass in a breeze, when she walked.

“Is this enough wood?” Rose asked as he came to help her with her load.

“For now. We’ll both go again before it gets too dark,” he replied.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, dropping the wood close to the fire.

“Yeah, I am,” he said as he put some of his load of wood on the fire, laying the rest beside it.

“Here you go.” She produced some of the left-over fish from the night before. She had hidden it under her skirt, tied with a piece of rope.

“Thanks,” he exclaimed as he accepted it. “That was ingenious of you, but we need to conserve as much rope as we can. No place to buy more.”

“I didn’t use any of the rope that we brought with us,” she said. “I made it from the excess grass for my top.”

Murdock was shocked. “Can I see it?” he asked.

Rose pulled out the rope that she had carried the fish on.

“I am impressed,” he said as he inspected it closely. “I wondered what we were going to use for rope when what we have runs out.”

“It was no big deal,” Rose said, smiling. “I did learn to braid as a kid, and this seemed the way to do it.”

Murdock pulled on the small piece of rope. It appeared very strong.

“Very good, Rose,” he said as he handed it back to her. “Looks like you’re going to be our little ropemaker.”

Rose giggled, “I like having a useful skill; one that others will need, even if they don’t realize it yet.”

Murdock felt good about it, too. At least now she could feel as if she was contributing, which might help her to get over her attack.

Later, when they both went out to gather wood together, Murdock used the chore as a training tool. He explained to her that he wanted her to walk as softly as she could, avoiding twigs or sticks, and not slipping on anything that would make noise and give away their position. Rose did the best she could. She seemed eager to please Murdock.

“How did I do, Kevin?” she asked when they had gathered as much wood as they could carry and were heading back to the fire.

“Not too bad, for someone who has never had to be quiet in the woods,” he answered. He glanced over at her and saw her beaming. “With practice, you could get quite good at it.” She puffed up a little more with pride. “Any walks we take should be an opportunity to practice, if speed isn’t an issue.”

When they were back at the fire, they both dumped their loads. Rose stood by the fire, grinning. She seemed quite pleased with herself. “That good, huh?” she asked.

“Who knows, you might replace me as the hunter!” he said, trying hard not to smile.

“I might,” she exclaimed.

“Then I can stay home, and you can do all the tramping around in the woods.”

“Oh, you,” she said as she slapped his upper arm.

Murdock started laughing, which in turn made her laugh. They both were laughing hard before long. That was when Murdock became aware of the sound of her laughter and found that he liked it; hers wasn’t the kind of laughter that grated on his nerves.

When they had calmed down, Murdock loaded up the fire with wood and

found a comfortable spot to sleep upwind and somewhat close to the fire. Rose got another drink of water and found her own spot. She reclined at an angle to Murdock, and if she stretched out her hand, she could touch his face. They both lay quiet for a while.

“Kevin?” Rose inquired after lying still for a while, watching the flames.

“Yes?” he responded without opening his eyes.

“Did you stare at me when I couldn’t see?” she asked.

“Every second of every day,” he responded, eyes still shut.

“You did?” she asked, shocked. She had gotten up on her forearms and lay on her stomach, looking at him.

“Yup, I spent all my time leering at you with terrible perverted thoughts running through my head!”

“Oh, you did not,” she stated loudly.

“Are you sure?” he asked with a smirk. He had opened his eyes just enough to see her expression.

“Yeah, I’m positive,” she said emphatically. “You said you didn’t before, and you haven’t lied to me yet.”

“No, I haven’t lied to you... yet. So, you’re saying that I’m such a saintly gentleman that the sight of a naked, helpless, desirable woman had no effect on me?”

Rose smirked. “Well, saying you’re *saintly* is a bit of a stretch,” she said as she looked sideways at him. “More like a doctor. I needed one, and you were the closest thing to a real doctor I’m likely to ever see again in my lifetime.”

“Thanks for the compliment! I’m sure all the other women I used to leer at and lust after would be glad to hear that I’ve changed my evil ways.”

“How many women?” she asked after a pause.

“Well, if you lined them all up front to back, the line would go for miles and miles!”

Rose was silent for a long time, and Murdock tried hard not to laugh.

“Kevin, why is it I feel a distinctive tug on my leg?” was all she asked.

They both drifted off to sleep with smiling faces.



When quite a number of days had passed and Murdock didn't show, Whittier, Burns, and Metzger relaxed considerably. In the interim, Whittier had solidified his position by cracking down more on the rest of the group with a series of decrees. One of the first was the establishment of the Ruling Council, a body to determine the future projects and requirements for the colony. The body was mainly staffed by Whittier's favorites and classified all clothing as "essential resources," thereby confiscating all of them, and required everyone to keep all water skins filled. The Council also cut all rations in half to help preserve the food for winter. The Ruling Council was, of course, exempt from these decrees.

Whittier was sitting in the only chair in the pod, absentmindedly twirling and spinning a knife in one hand while a naked Kryisia Oblonski slowly massaged his shoulders; Burns and Metzger were talking to Whittier.

"We're going to run out of food soon," Burns stated. "We're all eating, and nothing else is coming in. I'm open to suggestions."

"I think they're all too fat as it is," Whittier proclaimed through closed eyes. "If they want to eat, let them find fish or eat grass or dirt or something."

"But what about us?" Metzger asked, while leering at Kryisia openly.

"If they find some other food, confiscate it," Whittier commanded. "If they don't like it, they can go somewhere else. Let them go to Murdock!"

"I don't think this is working," Burns offered cautiously. "We need fishermen and hunters to get us more food. We need shelters built. What are we going to do about winter? None of us know anything about those things."

"I doubt anyone will live past the summer. They're all too weak." Whittier stated. "The weak have to make way for the strong. Metzger, I want you to organize a hunting party. Find a deer or something. If you don't, you could be the one on the roasting spit!"

"How are we going to do that?" Metzger asked. "I have no idea how to hunt or how to clean an animal!"

"Don't bother me with details, Metzger. Just do it. Burns, I want you to get a team together to design and build some sort of shelter."

“But —” Burns started to object.

“You going to give me guff, too, Burns?” Whittier growled loudly, firmly gripping the knife. “It isn’t easy to rule this group. I can’t be expected to know everything. I do know that if people don’t start succeeding in the tasks they’re given, I’ll eliminate them and find someone who can. I want all the food that is prepared to be brought to me first. Then anyone who wants to eat has to ask me for the favor. Same goes for the water. Now!”

Metzger and Burns hurried out.

“I think we may have backed the wrong guy,” Burns stated, once they were outside and out of earshot of the pod.

“You think someone else would have been better?” Metzger asked as he gathered up all the water skins.

“Murdock did get fish and that other animal that was hanging, all without any help from anyone else,” Burns said, helping to gather the water skins.

“Don’t let Whittier hear you say that,” Metzger warned. “Ever since the Rose incident, I don’t think we have any choice in the matter.”

“You and I have no choice, but the rest do,” Burns urged.

“Give me those,” Metzger commanded. “You go ask around and see who has some skill with hunting or fishing.” He took the water skins into the pod.

Metzger entered the pod, put the water skins where Whittier could reach them, and turned to leave.

“One moment, Metzger,” Whittier said. “I noticed you leering at my little toy here.” With his free hand, Whittier guided Krysia around in front of him. Then he started to carve a “W” into her upper left breast. Krysia whimpered a little as Whittier carved. “This is to let you know. Any woman with this mark in this spot,” Whittier pointed to Krysia’s breast and the carved letter, “belongs to me. That means you can’t have her unless I say so. Clear?”

“Yes, it’s clear,” Metzger responded, anger and frustration tingeing his remarks.

“You can go now,” Whittier said dismissively.

Even though Metzger was strangely excited watching Whittier carve on Krysia, he knew deep down that they were all in trouble and that Burns could be

right about backing the wrong man. *Too late for that now*, he thought as he hit the bottom of the ramp.

When Murdock woke up, he estimated it to be an hour or so before dawn. He got to his feet, took a drink of water, grabbed his spear, and gathered the other gear he thought he might need. He hesitated when he came to the rope. *I better take it, just in case*, he thought as he began draping it across his body. Just as he was about to head out, Rose woke up.

“Heading out already?” she asked, her sleepy eyes barely open.

“Yes, I am. Sorry, I woke you. Stay by the fire and you’ll be fine. Go back to sleep, if you want. I’ll be back in a few hours,” he said. He gently touched her face and smiled at her.

Murdock didn’t take long to find the bower and an ambush position. He picked a spot by a tree with the wind blowing from the direction he expected the deer to come and waited, spear ready. While he waited, his mind worked on all the little details that he would have to attend to if he managed to harvest a deer. A part of his consciousness was always focused on the task at hand, but the majority of his mind thought what it wanted. *I’m a little worried about Rose*, he thought. *I’m sure she’ll be alright. She’s more capable than she thinks and I do enjoy her company.* He had found the hike from the cave to be pleasant, even though he had intentionally walked slowly so she could keep up.

I’m more than a little worried about winter. How cold is it going to get and how much snow? Is game going to be available?

He had already planned to move to the lower parts of the cave, where it was warmer, when the weather turned cold. He could store the wood and meat in the

salt mine. The dry air would help speed the curing rate for the wood and preserve the meat by drying it somewhat. *The hard part is going to be properly tanning the hides*, he thought. *I have no idea how to make barrels or buckets, and I wish I did.*

His attention snapped back to the present when he felt the vibrations of hooves through his feet. Dawn had just broken, and the deer were coming down the path that led across the dread feeling area. They were in a panic, as they had been before. His pulse quickened at the sound of hoof beats approaching. The animals were running with the small breeze that gently blew this morning, so with luck, if they didn't see him, they wouldn't know he was there until it was too late for one of them.

Murdock saw the herd coming toward him and noticed that their pace had slowed somewhat. He timed his spring to take the deer that was behind the leader and jumped into the path with his spear at the ready. When he entered the path, his target was startled and tried to skid to a halt, but the creature was too slow. Murdock had dropped the butt end of the spear onto the path with the point aimed at the chest. The deer, pressed forward by momentum as well as the rest of the herd, skidded directly into his spearhead, which sank deep into the center of the animal's chest. Then the spear, unable to take the stress, snapped in half, leaving the business end hanging from the animal's chest.

Meanwhile, Murdock had quickly darted across the path to avoid being trampled by the herd. He watched as his target ran off down the path with part of his spear still in its chest.

Shaking from the massive amount of adrenalin flowing through him, he tried to calm himself.

Now the hard part began. He had to wait before he could track his prey, but he didn't want to wait too long, or his prey would be dinner for another animal. After calming down quite a bit, he walked over to the spot at which the deer had run into his spear and found a massive spill of blood and a good blood trail leading down the path. Murdock began following the blood trail, careful not to come up on the animal before it had a chance to bleed out. He didn't want to startle it any more than he already had. Fear would give the animal more

adrenalin and thus more strength to run farther.

As he followed the trail, his thoughts began. *That was lucky. Lucky I'd found the right place for an ambush. Lucky I hit the target the first try. Lucky I didn't get trampled.*

Soon Murdock came upon the body of his prey. It had run about five hundred yards before it had calmed down. Then it lay down and bled to death. The animal was a little off the main trail, and as Murdock looked around, he thought he saw smoke off in the direction of the mountain.

"Rose," Murdock yelled as loud as he could. "Follow my voice!" He listened for a while and heard nothing, so he repeated the call. While he listened for a response, he unwound the rope he had tied across his chest and threw one end over a tree branch, tying the other end around the neck of the deer, close to its head. He repeated his call for Rose and pulled on the other end of the rope with all his weight and strength. When he could no longer pull on the rope, he tied it to the trunk of the tree.

There's no way I'm going to get this animal hung without help. He still hadn't heard anything to indicate that Rose had heard him. As he walked around the animal, he could see the end of his spear, battered and broken, but the machete tied to the end had stayed in the chest and done its deadly work. Murdock pulled it out slowly, noticing that the blade had lain flat and slid between the ribs. More luck, on his part. The spear had either just missed or slid slightly off center of the animal's sternum, probably piercing the lungs or the heart. After withdrawing the machete and stowing it, Murdock stood looking at the animal.

"I'm sorry," he said to the dead animal. "We need to eat and clothe ourselves, and you're helping to ensure we survive."

Just then, Rose came upon him from the direction of the smoke.

"Who were you talking to?" she asked. She had just cleared a little rise and now saw the huge deer partially hung in a tree. Her mouth fell open, and she looked at Murdock. "Oh, my God," she exclaimed. "That is a *big* deer!"

"It certainly is! And it's not even the biggest one of the herd," he said.

"Damn!" she said with great admiration. "You got a deer!"

“I did! Now, we have to get it hung and dress it out. It won’t be easy, but I think if we both work at it, we’ll get it done.”

They spent the next hour hanging the deer. They both pulled on the rope as hard as they could to get the animal’s head as high as possible. When they could pull no more, Murdock began skinning and gutting the animal, spilling its intestines and vital organs on the ground and pulling as much of the hide as he could down closer to the ground. Then they both pulled on the rope again. Alternating this way, they managed to get the animal’s hind feet off the ground, barely.

Murdock and Rose were both worn out by the time they got the deer hung. Two piles lay close to the hind legs. One pile consisted of the hide, and the other consisted of the deer’s entrails. They took a breather and drank some water while Murdock inspected the heart and the surrounding arteries. The heart was intact, but the machete had severed the main artery.

“I couldn’t get luckier than that,” he exclaimed, as he took a long drink of water. “That’s as close to a heart shot as you can get.”

Rose was overwhelmed by the sheer size of the animal and the work necessary just to get this far.

“Do you have your machete on you?” he asked Rose.

“Yes, I have the one you gave me when we left the cave. Why do you ask?”

“Someone has to stay here and guard the carcass while the other runs for more water. We have to get as much blood washed out of it as we can,” he explained. “Since I can run farther than you can and know where the water is, you can stand guard.”

“What am I guarding against?” she asked.

“Other animals may try to get at the carcass; the smell of the blood is sure to draw them in. You have to stop them any way you can. Did you bring any rope with you?”

“Some, yes.”

“I’m going to have to make a travois to haul the beast back to the cave after I quarter it. That’s the plan, anyway. Are you okay with it?”

“Umm... how long will it take you to get more water?” She was nervous

about staying here alone with bait hanging.

Murdock cut a small tree and in short order had a spear made for Rose to use.

“If anything comes around, stand your ground and stab at it with this,” he said, handing her the crude spear. “It should change their minds about a free lunch! The water is that way,” he said, indicating the path the deer had taken. “It shouldn’t take me more than a few minutes to get there and back. Fifteen minutes, tops.”

“Okay. I guess I can do that, but hurry back, please? I feel like I may be the free lunch. I’ve never had to fight off animals before, and the thought of it scares me,” she explained.

“It scares the hell out of me every time I have to do it as well. I’ll hurry. Try to think of it as defending your meals for the next few months, as well as a new dress. Maybe that will help give you courage,” he told her, trying to bolster her confidence. Then he smiled at her and took off at a fast trot in the direction he had indicated.

Murdock moved as fast as he could toward the river he had found days earlier. Soon, he reached the river, where he filled the water skin, and then began running back.

Then he heard a scream. He ran faster toward Rose and the deer. As he approached the scene, he saw two dead wolves. One had been speared through its mouth, and the other’s head lay at an odd angle. Rose, machete drawn and bloodied, was trying to fight off the rest of the pack as they circled. Murdock picked up a heavy rock and stopped long enough to use his improvised sling.

The lead animal caught the heavy rock at the jaw joint and dropped. The rest turned in his direction. Murdock continued running toward them with both machetes drawn. The remaining members of the pack, seeing another antagonist entering the fray, wanted no part of it and gave up, running off out of sight.

“Are you okay?” Murdock asked, breathless after the long run. He inspected Rose as best he could while trying to catch his breath.

“I’m okay. None of them bit me,” she said, though her hands shook terribly and her voice trembled as she talked.

“Damn, woman! You sure did give ‘em hell,” Murdock exclaimed, still breathless.

“Well, I asked them nicely to leave. It really got my blood up when they refused!”

Murdock laughed. Rose started laughing, too. When they had both calmed down, Murdock inspected the wolf carcasses. Each was bigger than any wolf he had ever heard of. The first one to attack had gotten a mouthful of Rose’s spear, dying when the point entered his chest cavity via his mouth. The second one had attacked when she had the eighteen-inch machete out; she had almost decapitated him. The skull of the one he had hit with the rock was crushed. At some point, the wolves had eaten or dragged off the deer intestines, and they had dragged the hide a short distance from where he had left it.

“Not a bad day’s work, if I do say so myself,” he told Rose after inspecting the wolves.

“Did I do okay?” she asked.

“You sure did! Couldn’t have done better myself,” he exclaimed with great pride.

“They got the guts. I didn’t know if you wanted them or not, but when they tried for the hide and the carcass, I got really mad,” she explained.

Murdock smiled broadly and handed Rose the water skin. “Getting the intestines is probably what slowed the wolves down. Take some water and pour the rest inside the deer carcass. I’ll make the travois to haul the meat and skins back to the cave.”

When Murdock had built the travois, he quartered the deer carcass and put the quarters and the hide on it. Then he skinned the wolf carcasses and put the pelts on the travois with the deerskin. He left the carcasses where they lay. Then they both grabbed a pole on either side and began dragging the travois, stopping at their campsite only to rest and load it with their gear.



Murdock figured the haul to the cave would take at least twice as long as it had

to get to the campsite. "After we've rested, we'll be going back the way we came," he explained. "With any luck, we should make it halfway home before dark." He pointed back the way they had come. "The stream is that way."

"This is a lot of hard work," Rose exclaimed, looking at the travois loaded with meat, skins, and gear.

"Nothing worth the effort is ever easy," Murdock said.

"Why did you skin the wolves?" Rose asked.

"Winter will be hard. Gloves and warm boots will come in handy. Besides, they're your trophies." Murdock could see Rose's pride and confidence in the way she carried herself and the way she looked at the wolf pelts.

"Rose?" he asked, as he got to his feet and took his position on one of the travois poles.

"Yes, Kevin?" Rose followed his lead, taking up her position on the other pole.

"I'm very proud of you! You did extremely well today. Better than most people I have known on their first time out," he told her, looking her straight in the eye so she could see his sincerity.

"I think we make a good team," she responded, smiling with pride at him as they both started hauling the travois toward home.

Several hours later, Murdock decided that they had gone far enough for the day. Sun-down was coming; he had to get a fire going, and both he and Rose were exhausted and famished from their exertions.

As he got the fire going, he marveled that Rose was doing her part without being told every little thing to do. He had feared he would have to lead her by the hand when he had met her the first day after landing here. Now, he thought she was quite impressive.

Rose, who had been picking up firewood, had returned with the first load. After dumping that by the fire, she was off to gather more. Murdock threw some wood on the fire and cut a couple of good-sized chunks of venison from the deer carcass. He was starting to cook them when she returned with her second load.

"Sorry, we haven't got any water, but at least we don't have to eat fish for a while," he said to her.

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but I was getting a little tired of fish,” she said, as she placed the load of wood close to the fire. “How far do you think we have to go?”

“We should be at the stream, or close to it, by about midday tomorrow,” Murdock told her. “Why don’t you sit and take a load off?”

“My legs are too stiff to sit on the ground,” she said.

“So, sit on the travois,” he said.

She sat on the deer pelt covering the deer meat and exhaled loudly.

“Feels really good to sit on something other than rocks or the ground,” she said. She patted the deer meat. “This is quite a haul!”

“Yes, it is! It’s too much, though.”

“How were you going to get all this back by yourself?” she asked.

“The same way we are, except I wouldn’t have been able to take all of it and it would have taken me a lot longer.” Murdock sat next to Rose on the travois.

“What do you mean, it’s too much?” she asked.

“We have no way of refrigerating all this meat,” Murdock explained. “We’ll salt and smoke as much as we can, but about a third is going to rot before we can eat it all.”

“Then why are we hauling this much home?” she asked.

“I’m hoping to get it home and take the choicest cuts for us. The rest I hope to trade for tools we’ll need,” he explained.

“Trade?” she questioned, her voice pitched higher than normal. Murdock could tell Rose was upset. “You’re going to trade with Whittier and that pack of bottom feeders?”

“We don’t have a lot of choices,” he explained. “We’re going to need saws, tarpaulins, more rope, and more water skins if we’re going to survive.”

“You’re going to trust them to trade fairly with us?” she asked incredulously.

“No, but I *am* counting on a few things that will work in our favor.”

“Like what?”

“I won’t deal with Whittier at all. I’ll work it so that everyone will see what we have, and they’ll do the trading, without regard for Whittier or his wants. I can’t see him, or his thugs, fighting everyone.”

“Kevin?” Rose asked somewhat calmly.

“Yes?”

“What is this *I* shit you’re talking?” Her calm voice and the smirk on her face didn’t ally with the venom of her words. “I helped dress and defend the deer. I’m helping haul it back home. I do have a say in this!”

Murdock looked at her, startled. He hadn’t figured on her wanting a say. He had assumed she would just go along with whatever he decided.

“Besides, you’re going to need someone to watch your back with those two-legged snakes!” she continued. “You said this was a team effort, and now you want to cut me out of the team?”

Murdock got up to turn the meat and to think. “That isn’t what I’m trying to do, Rose,” he said, as he walked over to face her.

“Then start explaining,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest with a defiant look. “I’m all ears!”

“My plan is to set up a campfire and start cooking some of the meat so that the wind will carry the smell to the transport pod. I’m counting on everyone being tired of the bland oatmeal they’ve been eating. They’ll come to me salivating, wanting the meat. It’s then that I’ll trade the meat for the tools and supplies we need. Whittier and his thugs won’t be able to control all of them, not with hunger driving them.”

Murdock was pretty proud of his plan. But when he looked at Rose, who sat swinging her legs, he saw that his explanation wasn’t good enough for her.

“Sounds good, except for one minor detail,” she said with arms still crossed and legs still swinging.

“What detail?” he asked.

“How are you going to defend yourself against an entire group bent on revenge?” she asked, tilting her head to one side.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he asked.

“The night you rescued me, did you cover up all the evidence?” she baited him.

“Umm... no, I didn’t. I was more concerned about preserving your life.”

“And I’m truly thankful you did, but knowing Whittier, what do you think he

did with the evidence that you failed to cover up?” she asked. Murdock remained silent while he turned the meat again. “If I know Whittier,” Rose continued, “he’s made you out to be the worst kind of criminal. A terrorist who preys on defenseless women, raping and pillaging and taking what you want with no regard for human life.”

“But that isn’t how it happened,” Murdock protested.

“I know that,” Rose exclaimed. “Kevin, if you have a flaw, it’s that you don’t understand politics. You think truth and justice go hand-in-hand when, in fact, they seldom do.” Murdock looked at her, confused. “Whittier has probably told everyone that you abducted me while they were trying to reason with you. I’m sure he told them how he, Burns, and Metzger walked up on you in the act of raping and beating me and they, concerned for my safety, tried to get you to stop before you killed me. He probably said something to the effect that you told them to leave and they complied, to get you to spare my life, but when they had waited long enough and gone back, all they found was a bloody tree and my clothes.”

Murdock thought about it for a while. Apparently, she had thought out this scenario quite thoroughly. “If what you say is true, how do we convince them otherwise?” he asked.

“We can’t,” she stated.

“But if you go with me and tell them what happened —”

“What good would that do?” Rose asked as she got to her feet and walked toward the fire. “Whittier will tell them that you raped me, beat me, took me prisoner, and now, suffering from Stockholm syndrome, I am defending you.”

“But you can tell them I didn’t rape you or beat you,” Murdock pointed out.

“Honestly, I can’t say who raped and beat me. I was knocked out, remember?”

Murdock was truly at a loss. Rose looked at him from by the fire.

“But I didn’t do anything to you! I just tried to help you,” he pleaded.

“I know that... now,” she said emphatically, touching the side of his face softly with her hand. “Since I’ve been conscious, you’ve treated me with nothing but respect, concern, and caring. As far as I know, you haven’t taken advantage

of me in any way and have done nothing but try to help. But I know you better than the rest do. They'll assume the worst in other people, and most of it is justified." Rose dropped her hand and turned toward the fire.

Murdock hadn't thought of it that way and was galled that individuals like Whittier, Burns, and Metzger could get away with what they did. As he finished cooking the meat, he tried to figure a way to get what they needed.

"Soup's on," he said, handing a skewer of meat to Rose. He picked one up for himself and started eating and thinking. *There has to be a way to get what we need from Whittier*, he thought.

"Smells wonderful," Rose said, accepting the meat and sniffing it. "Tastes great," she said around a mouthful.

They both ate in silence. Murdock tried to plan how to get what they needed.

"You can sleep on the travois," he told Rose after they had eaten. "It'll be more comfortable for you than the ground."

"What are you going to do?" she asked as she reclined on the travois.

"Someone needs to stand watch, and I need time to think," he said.

"Well, you need to rest, too. You worked harder than I did today, and you'll probably do so again tomorrow. What good will you be if you're too exhausted?" she asked.

He conceded her point. "Okay, I'll take the first watch," he said. "I'll wake you in a couple of hours."

"You better," she warned as she got comfortable and went to sleep.

Murdock spent the next several hours stewing in his own juices. He knew deep down that Rose was right. Trying to negotiate with Whittier or anyone from the transport pod was a dangerous proposition at best. Taking Rose's lead, Murdock recalled all he could about the successful politicians in history, but came to the conclusion that none of them remained in power through anything good they did. They kept their power and position because they made others feel safe. They lost their positions only when the majority of the people didn't feel safe any longer.

He remembered what he'd read about the Old West in America; a lot of innocent people died because a majority of the people considered them guilty.

Guilty people often would go free because those prosecuting them didn't prove that they were guilty, or because of some deal made on their behalf.

And he remembered what his father had once told him; *Son, might don't make right, but political might is always right, because of the majority.* And his uncle used to tell him that if he wanted justice, he had better be willing to pay for it. He did want some kind of justice for Rose and all the others that would suffer at the hands of Whittier and his cronies, but he knew that *justice* was subjective and if they wanted it, they would have to take it. He couldn't give it to them.

After a few hours, Murdock got up and paced the area to help keep him awake. Though his mind may have been racing, his body was done in. As he walked past Rose sleeping on the travois, he marveled at her. A few weeks — or was it days? — ago, she had been a victim. Now, she was a seasoned warrior — against wolves, anyway. He considered her quite a striking woman. Sure, she was tall, taller than most men liked, but that didn't matter to him. Based on what he had observed so far, he thought she had a good heart but wasn't squeamish about doing what was necessary. That was what mattered most. *I wonder if my mother was like that?* He suspected that she must have been. His father used to refer to some things from the softer side of his nature as his being “just like your mother.”

As he stood watching Rose, he gently removed the stray hairs that had fallen onto Rose's face. She looked so peaceful and absolutely beautiful lying there asleep in the firelight. Without realizing it, he smiled at her.

“You always stare at sleeping women?” Rose asked without opening her eyes.

“Not usually, only the sleeping beauties,” he quipped.

“My turn to take a watch?” she asked, smiling at his comment.

“No, you can sleep a while longer.”

Rose got up and tried to smooth out her mussed hair.

“How can I, when I know someone is watching me?” she joked. “You need to sleep, so it's my turn to watch.”

“Only if you insist,” he said.

“I do,” she said, getting up. “Take my spot. It's already warmed up.”

Rose got off the travois and walked over to the fire. Murdock lay down in her spot on the travois.

“If you hear anything or get too sleepy, don’t hesitate to wake me,” he told her as he settled into her warm spot.

“I won’t,” she said. Then, after a short pause, she asked, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” he said, lifting up on one elbow to look at her.

“Which were you more concerned about today with the wolves, me or the deer?”

Murdock thought before answering.

“I was worried about the *dear*,” he said as he closed his eyes, smirking. “You need to figure out if the variety was two-legged or four-legged.”

Rose walked over to him and grabbed a handful of hair and pulled.

“You and your damned word games are very frustrating,” she said through clenched teeth. “Can’t you give me a straight answer just once?” she asked, releasing his hair.

“I could,” he said as he rolled over and turned his back on her, “but where’s the fun in that?”

Rose moved around the travois to face him.

“I want to know, damn it,” she yelled in frustration. Her nose almost touched his.

Murdock opened his eyes, kissed her nose, and then closed his eyes again.

All he said before he fell asleep was, “You already know the answer.”

Murdock woke up well past dawn. Rose sat on the ground tending the fire. “Why didn’t you wake me earlier?” he asked, as he tried to get the kinks worked out of his abused muscles.

Rose shrugged without looking at him. “You needed all the sleep you could get,” she responded flatly.

“Have you eaten anything this morning?” he asked as he came over to the fire.

“No, I was waiting for you,” she said, avoiding his gaze.

“You could’ve eaten,” he told her. She just shrugged. Murdock picked up a piece of the leftover meat and started chewing on it. He offered some to Rose, who refused. “What’s the problem?” he asked finally.

“You don’t really want to know,” Rose stated.

“If I didn’t want to know, I wouldn’t have asked. Something is bothering you, so spill it!” He watched her for a few seconds, but she didn’t say anything; she seemed to be working up the courage to speak her mind. After a little while, she looked up at him sideways. She had been crying, but he had no clue why. All he could do was to wait.

“I told you yesterday that I thought we made a good team,” she started finally, “and you made no effort to respond one way or the other.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think I needed to respond. To me, you were stating the obvious.” Murdock shrugged while chewing on the piece of meat.

“So, you think we do make a good team?” she asked.

“Of course,” he responded.

“As your teammate, I have this nagging feeling that you’re going to do something extremely stupid,” she yelled.

“Like what?”

“Like get killed,” she said with venom. “And over nothing more than a few tools that *you* think we need!”

Murdock didn’t know what to say. “What do you mean?” he asked after a lengthy pause.

“I have this feeling that you’re going to go ahead with that stupid idea of yours to trade some of this meat for tools.”

“I was thinking about it —” he began, but Rose interrupted him.

“You know, since I’ve been with you, you have acted like you care for me. You flirt with me constantly and say all manner of sweet things that I know aren’t true.”

“How do you know they aren’t true?” he asked indignantly.

“Shut the hell up when I’m talking,” she blasted. “I’ve had a long time to think this out, and I’m going to have my say!” Murdock put up his hands in surrender. “Like I was saying, you’ve got me thinking that maybe you do care about me, and then I hear about some harebrained scheme you’ve cooked up. I’ve known people like Whittier and that bunch all my life and had to contend with them, but I’ve never known anyone who has been as nice to me or respected me as you have. Now, I get to stand by and watch it all just go away.”

Tears had started running down Rose’s cheeks again, and she wouldn’t look up at him. “Kevin, please don’t go through with this trading scheme you’ve cooked up. If you want me to get on my knees and beg, I will, but you need to think about what losing you would mean for me. I’d either be alone out here with no way of surviving, or I’d be forced to return to that... that... group of back-stabbing, scum-sucking, power-hungry, lowlife individuals who think they can abuse anyone and everyone and no one can stop them. Neither is an option that I find particularly appealing. I know that bunch a lot better than you do! I wouldn’t trust any of them as far as you could throw them. I know their type! I’m not one for wanton violence, but they are for killing... nothing more! There

isn't a single person at that transport pod that is worth redeeming."

"I don't think it's for either of us to judge who is worthy of redemption," Murdock stated after she had wound down some. "First of all, I don't say anything to you that I don't believe to be true. You may not think they are true, but who are you to tell me what I think or how I view things?"

Rose started to protest, and Murdock gently covered her mouth with his hand. "It's my turn, now. Second, you were right about the trade deal. I was thinking about it, but before I woke you last night, I had already come to the conclusion that you were right. There's no way to work a trade deal with that bunch. I mentioned it to you because you're my partner, and I wanted your input. We're in this together, so in my opinion, you had a say in matters that would make things a little easier and a little more comfortable for you." With that, he released her and started to walk away from the fire.

Murdock hadn't gotten very far when he heard running behind him. He turned just as Rose jumped and hit him, full force. Unprepared, he caught her whole weight, which drove him to the ground on his back. Rose sat on his stomach with both her hands around his throat.

"You asshole! I ought to wring your neck," she yelled at him, her face inches away from his.

"What did I do now?" he asked.

"You made me waste a perfectly good cry on nothing! Do you know how depressing the dawn is when you've been crying all night? I put a lot on the line with that little speech of mine, and for what?" she yelled. And then, surprising him all the more, she kissed him and then leaned back, smiling down at him.

"You know, you're cute when you're angry," he said with a smile. Rose smiled back and started to giggle. "At least I got you to stop crying," he said, giggling back. Rose kissed him again, and he kissed her back.

"Are we going to press on toward home, or are we going to stay here all day?" he asked after the kiss. "You know, I do have to apologize!"

"For what?" Rose asked, smiling down at him.

"Your nose is a little crooked," Murdock said as he ran his finger down the bridge of her nose. "Sorry I didn't do a better job of setting it."

“Well, then, you’ll just have to deal with it. You’re the one who has to look at it, not me,” Rose quipped. They both chuckled and got off the ground.

“You weren’t joking with me, were you?” Rose asked as they walked toward the fire.

“About what?” he asked.

Rose promptly slapped his upper arm. “About your trade-deal with Whittier, of course,” she yelled.

“No, I wasn’t joking. You were right. Whittier can’t be trusted at all, so any idea I had will have to wait until he leaves or dies.”

Rose started bouncing with glee and smiled broadly.

“I’m very glad to hear that,” she said enthusiastically as she kissed his cheek, her arms around his neck.

“So, what are we doing? Are we going to rest here another day or head for home?” Murdock asked as they reached the fire.

“I *am* in dire need of water,” Rose said, “so I guess we head for home.”

“I agree,” Murdock said.



They stopped again a little after midday. Working together, Murdock and Rose managed to get a fire going with enough wood to last a while. Then he picked up the water skin.

“Where are you going?” Rose asked.

“We need water, badly,” he said, looking in the direction they had been heading. “I can’t drag the travois any farther, and neither can you, so I was going to go get some water.”

“How long will it take you?” she asked.

“Not long. It can’t be that far to the stream.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll stay here and guard the meat and make us something to eat. Just don’t be gone long, please? Staying out here alone still bothers me.”

“I will,” he said, giving her a peck on the cheek as he left.

Three hours later Murdock returned. When Rose saw him approaching, she

ran to him and threw her arms around his neck.

“Wonder what kind of reception I would have gotten if I’d been gone a day?” he joked.

The next day, after several hours of dragging the travois, they managed to reach the stream at the foot of the mountain. They both headed for the water. Murdock stopped at the bank and lay down to drink his fill. Rose filled the water skin, took a long drink, and refilled it again. Then both Rose and Murdock got into the water. Murdock had taken off his buckskins, laying them on the bank. Rose had removed her grass skirt, laying that on the bank on top of his buckskins. Once in the water, both lay back and let the cool water run over them for a long time.

When they were done bathing, Murdock inspected Rose’s cuts. Some looked to him as if they may have parted a little, but none were bleeding.

“You need to watch the rough horseplay for a while yet,” he told Rose after his inspection.

“Why?” she asked as she finished getting dressed.

“Some of the cuts look like they tried to reopen,” he told her.

“That could’ve been from all the strenuous work we’ve been doing lately. Besides, you like rough horseplay,” she told him, while smiling at him.

Murdock had just finished dressing and was inspecting the scar on her face. “That may be true, but you need to be more careful for a couple more days.” Murdock’s smile faded. “How’s your vision?”

“Fine, why? What’s wrong?” she asked, panic starting to creep into her voice.

“Cover one eye at a time, and tell me how your vision is,” he told her.

She covered one eye then the other.

“Vision is fine in both eyes,” she told him. “Why did you ask?”

“The cut on your face must have severed some nerves or muscles. Your lower lid is drooping a little,” he told her cautiously.

“What?” she asked shrilly. “So, not only do I have a scar, but a droopy eye and a crooked nose? How can you stand to look at me?” she asked, with a little more panic in her voice. “I must look hideous!”

Murdock pulled her close and hugged her tight.

“Not to me, you don’t!” he said emphatically.

Rose hugged him back and cried a little.

“Would you tell me if I was hideous?” she asked through the tears.

“If you looked hideous to me, then I might tell you, but that is a mighty big if!”

Rose seemed to accept his word for it. “Well, then, I won’t worry about it until such time as you make a mirror for me,” she told him, trying to smile and turn her face away from his gaze.

Murdock firmly grasped her chin and kissed her right eye first, then her left eye. “I’m not joking,” he said seriously while looking squarely at her.

“I know you’re not,” she said, holding back her tears. Then she changed the subject. “So, do we make camp here tonight or try to get up to the cave?”

“It’s up to you. The cave is a lot safer, but it is a long climb up that path. Are you up to it?” he asked.

“I am if you are... shorty!” she said playfully.

“Shorty?” he asked as he resumed his position on the travois. “You need to remember that dynamite comes in small packages!”

“Yeah, it does,” Rose responded. “But I’m the explosive one!”

Several hours of hard dragging later, the pair and the travois, were inside the cave. Murdock and Rose went to the bed of grass, collapsed from exhaustion, and were asleep in minutes.

The two of them slept until after sun-up the next day. Murdock woke first and did so with a start. He hadn’t slept that hard in years. He got up, drank some water, and then checked the firewood status. *There’s enough wood to get the fire going, but we’re going to need more before too long*, he thought. He walked up to Rose, who still slept, and laid the water skin beside her before walking down the path to get more wood to start a fire and make them something to eat.

The walk down the path was long and tedious, and his leg muscles protested all the way down and back, though Murdock expected the pain after the workout he had. But as he dragged himself into the cave, he came to a quick stop, and his mouth dropped open. Beron sat in his usual spot in the cave, looking at Rose.

Rose was awake, unarmed, and looked petrified.

“Umm... Kevin, can you help me?” she pleaded quietly, her voice trembling.

“Rose, it’s okay,” Murdock told her calmly but firmly. “This is a friend of mine. His name is Beron.”

“*Sorry, Beron, you must have startled her,*” Murdock flashed.

“You have a bear for a friend?” Rose asked in disbelief. “And just when were you going to tell me about him?”

“*Female very scared,*” Beron flashed.

“I was going to as soon as we got up here to the cave. You owe him a debt of gratitude,” Murdock told her. “He’s the reason I got you here as quick as I did the night I found you.”

“*We went hunting. Just got back yesterday afternoon,*” Murdock flashed to Beron.

“I am grateful, but how do I make a bear understand?” she asked in a terror-filled voice.

“Just talk to him like you would to me. He’ll understand,” Murdock told her.

“*We know where you been and what you doing.*” Beron flashed to Murdock.

“How is that possible?” she asked incredulously.

“He’s... telepathic,” Murdock told her.

“Of course! A telepathic bear! Why not?” Rose responded, with even more incredulity.

“*Female was much better when sleep. Much fear when awake!*” Beron flashed.

“He won’t hurt you, Rose,” Murdock told her as he walked up to Beron and put his hand on him. “Just try to calm down and trust me!”



Rose took quite a number of deep breaths trying to calm herself and to get her courage up. “I want to thank you for your part in my rescue, Beron,” she finally said to Beron. “It was much appreciated!”

Beron flashed an image to Rose that she could only interpret as *you’re*

welcome. Her face betrayed her shock even more.

Murdock went up to Rose and put an arm around her shoulder.

“It’s okay!” he told her reassuringly. “He’s a friend. Trust me!”

Rose looked at Murdock, shocked, and then at Beron. Murdock’s presence beside her had a significant calming effect on her.

“So, what does Beron want?” she asked Murdock with tension in her voice.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask him?” Murdock rubbed her shoulder gently with his hand.

“What can we do for you, Beron?” Rose asked, slowly calming down.

“*Share*,” Beron flashed to Rose.

“What does he mean by *share*?” Rose asked Murdock.

Murdock explained to Rose as quickly and concisely as he could what Beron meant and told her about the times he had *shared* with Beron. Rose nodded understanding as Murdock explained.

“Will you be in my mind with him?” she asked Murdock.

“If you want me to be,” Murdock told her.

Rose breathed deeply again. Between the deep breathing and Murdock’s touching her, she was surprisingly calm, at least under the circumstances.

“Okay. I’m game,” she said after a few more deep breaths, “but only if you’re there, too!”



Both Rose and Murdock seemed to go to sleep immediately, entering a dreamlike state. For the next couple of hours, Rose experienced everything that had happened to Murdock from his perspective since the landing. Murdock, in turn, experienced everything that had happened to Rose from her perspective since the landing. Then they both experienced and saw what Beron wanted to show them about him and his kind.

Murdock already knew some of what he saw from previous *sharing* sessions with Beron. Some of what he saw from Rose’s perspective differed only slightly from his recollections; some he didn’t know at all. Her attack, and the events

leading to it, was a complete blank.

Before breaking the mental connection between the three of them, Beron chose to replay a small portion of things from Murdock's perspective for Rose. She saw her own face; as she watched, she saw the scar on her face, disappear and the droopy eyelid return to normal. She looked just as she had before Murdock was expelled. After several replays of the same scene, she ventured a question to Beron.

"Is that how he sees me?" she asked Beron in the trance-like state. Beron responded affirmatively. Rose was shocked. "But what about my scars and deformities?" she asked in disbelief. By way of an answer, Beron caused the scene to pull out. At first, she saw all the cuts and bruises, but as she watched, they all disappeared. Rose was speechless.

"*Gift to you,*" Beron flashed to her.

Murdock came around to consciousness not long after the mental connection was broken. During the *sharing*, Murdock felt Beron's disappointment at not being asked to go along on the hunt.

"*We have too much meat. Would you or your kind want the excess?*" he flashed. He was careful to make it clear that the meat was raw so as not to offend Beron.

Beron's response was affirmative and came with much appreciation for his generosity.

Murdock went down to the travois and uncovered all the deer meat. He separated the meat he and Rose had eaten from, as well as one other quarter.

"*These are for you,*" he flashed, indicating the other two quarters. Beron then pushed Murdock aside, gently but firmly, and they both waited. After a moment, two of Beron's kind entered the cave, and the deer-quarters that Murdock had indicated as Beron's disappeared in a flurry of flashed "*thank you*" and "*very generous.*" After these others had left, Beron nodded slightly to Murdock and left as well.

Rose, still in shock from Beron's presence, the *sharing*, and what she saw in the dream-state, was aware of what Murdock had done and approved. She estimated that Murdock had given only slightly more than their excess. That

seemed to make the neighbors happy, so she considered it a good diplomatic move on his part.

“I saw something that disturbed me,” Rose said to Murdock, when Beron and his kin had left and they were, once again, alone.

“What bothered you?” Murdock asked as he started the fire for their dinner.

“First, is it possible to lie during the *sharing*?” she asked.

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask Beron. I think it is, but it would defeat the purpose. Beron uses the *sharing* to see into your heart as much as your mind. So, to lie to him during a *sharing* would be lying to yourself. But that’s just my take on it,” Murdock explained.

Rose had moved next to Murdock and turned him around to face her.

“I think I saw what I look like through your eyes,” she said softly. “Did I? And don’t play any of your bullshit word games. I want to know straight up.”

“What did you see?” he asked her in his most serious voice.

“It was like looking into a mirror and seeing all my scars and defects disappear. Did I see what I thought I saw?” she asked.

“Yes, you’re correct,” he answered, blushing.

She threw her arms around his neck and held him close.

“I don’t know if you’re crazy or delusional, or maybe I’m the one who’s crazy. I don’t know, and I don’t care,” she whispered into his ear.

Murdock held her close, not knowing what else to do or say.

“You sweet, lovely man!” she said into his neck. “Just hold me, you sweet, lovely man!”



Whenever Tom Collier thought about this new life, he came to the conclusion that only his location had changed. It had taken no time at all for him to go from being on the inside with Whittier to being on the outside. Before coming here, Collier had been just another big guy. He was nobody special by most definitions. He knew he wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box, but he wasn’t entirely stupid, either.

After Murdock had put the fear of God into him and Whittier and Metzger had rescued him, Collier was beaten, mocked, and reviled by Burns and the other two on a regular basis. Most days, he thought he would have been better off if Murdock had killed him. At least he would have gone out on top, or, at the very least, a lot higher than he was used to.

No one else seemed to care what had happened to him that day. Some would say that Murdock had been unduly cruel. He didn't think so. Collier thought he'd needed it to wake up and see what was going on. The real cruelty came when his friends rescued him.

To escape the ridicule, Collier often walked off to the stream. He was always careful not to cross it, but he did walk upstream and downstream along the bank. He had found a nice area further downstream that no one else cared about. He had all the water he could need, but he wasn't allowed any weapons or water skins.

He would often disappear from the pod area for days. When he was hungry enough, he would show up and get his ration. No one else noticed when he was there and when he wasn't. Everyone else was too busy trying to survive Whittier's reign of terror.

When the confiscatory decree came down, Collier had been walking back to the pod from his hiding place. Seeing that everyone going for water was naked, he had hidden all his clothes before returning. He'd need them; he wasn't going to just hand them over to Whittier and crew.

I wish I would've left with Murdock, instead of hunting him, he thought.

After a long time, Murdock disentangled himself from Rose and returned to tending the fire. He was hungry, and Rose must be hungry as well. But Rose hindered his meal preparations somewhat. She took every opportunity to just lay her head on his shoulder and sigh deeply. Even though Murdock was not used to a lot of attention or affection, they were not unwanted. Quite the contrary; he found that he enjoyed it. He didn't know if it was the attention and affection itself or if it was Rose. He didn't care, and he refused to analyze it too deeply.

"What's on the agenda for today?" Rose asked, when Murdock handed her a good-sized chunk of cooked meat.

"We have to get the meat stored and figure some way of tanning the hides," he said, as he took his own piece of meat and sat beside her.

"Any ideas on storage?" she asked between bites. She was truly famished after all their work harvesting the deer.

"I explored the cave when I first found it. I found the salt in the lowest part," he explained. "I need to see what I can come up with for a storage rack. How much of your braided rope can you make?"

"I don't know." Rose shrugged. "I was just playing around with it. I'd have to actually sit and try it to see how long I can make it and how much."

"As far as the tanning goes, I think I can make do with a hole dug down by the stream, if I can find something to dig with," he said, as he continued eating. As they talked, Murdock looked at Rose and caught her smiling at him. Her

smile was infectious. More than once he caught himself smiling back at her.

After dinner, Murdock took off his buckskin shirt and draped a wolf hide over his shoulder.

“Go get a good-sized piece of wood from the fire to use as a torch,” he told Rose, who complied immediately. “Take another wolf hide and go on down the tunnel and stop at the first room you come to. I’ll be right behind you,” he said, as he picked up one of the deer quarters and put it on his shoulder.

Rose did as she was asked and they both started down the dark tunnel, Rose in the lead and Murdock, carrying one of the heavy deer quarters, right behind her. When she reached the next room, she moved to the center.

“Put your hide on the floor in that little tunnel over there.” He indicated the tunnel. “Fur side down.”

Rose had just finished laying the hide down and moving out of the way when Murdock put the deer quarter on the hide.

“That was heavy,” he said, breathing a little easier.

“This is nice,” Rose exclaimed as she held the torch high and looked around the room. “It’s warmer in here and cozy!”

“I thought about moving down here when winter comes. It’s just a long walk to get wood and water and haul it here,” he said, as he followed her lead and looked around the room, though more closely than he had on his first trip here.

As Murdock looked for a way to attach or wedge small logs to the walls to hang the meat from, Rose piped up from behind him.

“Where does this go?” she asked.

“It goes down to the salt chamber,” he answered, without looking at her.

“No, that has to be over there. That one seems to go downward,” she retorted.

Murdock turned around to see what she was talking about. He saw her run her hand over the wall surface and then go inward. “I didn’t see that here before,” he exclaimed. He moved to the center of the room and looked around. He did not see the tunnel that Rose had indicated. He then moved to an angle acute to the spot she looked at. Now he could see the tunnel plainly. “I’ll be damned,” he chuckled.

“What?” Rose asked.

“That tunnel entrance is placed in a way to make it invisible without close scrutiny,” he explained. “I didn’t see it the first time I was down here. I must have been at the wrong angle to see it.”

“So, where does it go?” Rose asked again.

“Who knows?” he said. “But we can find out quick enough.” Murdock took the flaming brand from Rose and ventured slowly into the tunnel. The tunnel was just big enough to pass through easily without bending down, and it turned a sharp corner to the right just inside the entrance. The tunnel went on to make several sharp turns, both left and right, in alternating succession. Soon, after another right turn, they entered a huge room.

As they emerged from the tunnel, Murdock held the torch high. They both gasped. They stood in a huge cave with a floor several feet below the ledge on which they stood. Murdock estimated the room could hold half a dozen of the transport pods. As they followed the ledge down to the floor, looking around in awe, they heard water falling somewhere toward the back of the room.

Murdock saw veins of various ores close to the floor of the chamber. Rose, however, just saw the pure natural beauty of the place. After they reached the floor, Murdock turned back to see the tunnel they had just exited. It reached a little over head-high on him, about seven feet. The ledge continued past the tunnel entrance for several yards and then ended in the wall.

As they walked around the chamber, they saw smaller chambers around the main room. Nearer to the water, the floor became sand, with some larger rocks spread intermittently throughout. Murdock thought he spotted some veins of clay in the walls and some flint in the mostly sand floor. But when they reached the water, they were both awestruck. The water emerged from a hole in the wall about eight feet off the floor and spilled at a fair rate into a large pool. The first pool overflowed into a slightly smaller pool and so on across the width of the chamber. The floor around the pools was mostly sand, with the pools set in the rock.

“The sand feels really warm,” Rose said, startling Murdock.

Murdock, concentrating hard on the possibilities of what he saw, jumped a

little when Rose spoke. Then he walked over to the edge of the first pool and immersed his hand. The water was cold, colder than the stream they used for drinking water. At each of the pools, he immersed his hand, and each time, he found that the water became progressively warmer as it proceeded across the room. The next-to-last pool, roughly a six-foot-diameter circle, was the hottest.

After checking the water temperature, he asked, “Did you want a hot bath, Rose?”

“I’ve wanted one since we got to this planet. Why?” she asked.

“Here’s your bathtub,” he told her.

When he inspected the last pool, he saw it was a lot smaller, with a fast-moving swirl in the flowing water.

“There must be a volcanic flow running somewhere beneath the bottom of the pools. Each one is hotter than the one preceding, and this last one is acting like a drain!” he explained, excited.

“Wonderful!” Rose giggled. “We have our own modern bathroom with hot and cold running water!”

They both giggled.

“Do you think we can move down here?” she asked excitedly.

“I don’t see why not,” Murdock said. “It’s big enough to suit all of our present, and most of our future, needs. It will require some work, but I think we couldn’t do better even if we built our own house!”

“No offense, but this sand would feel wonderful to sleep on,” Rose remarked. “Far more comfortable than stone. And I love the sound of running water. It just seems so peaceful here.” Then she said, “I saw you looking around the walls. What were you looking at?”

“There appear to be veins of iron ore and clay in the walls. More toward the center appear to be flint stones. This is a treasure trove!” he exclaimed.

“Um, I don’t get it,” Rose said, confused.

“Flint is great for arrowheads, spearheads, and making fires. Clay makes pottery, after you form it and fire it. Iron is used for pots and pans, weapons, and lots of other things,” he explained.

“I like the idea of being able to take a hot bath,” Rose said, with excitement

in her voice.

In a burst of inspiration, Murdock chuckled to himself, snapped to attention and held the torch high with one hand, his free hand bent at a right angle across his belly, palm up.

“Milady’s bath is ready!” he said in a false English accent, keeping a very straight face.

“Seriously?” Rose asked with excited anticipation.

“I don’t see why not,” Murdock responded.

Before he could get the words out, Rose had removed her grass skirt and was dipping her toes into the pool, testing the temperature. A second later, she was in the pool, immersed up to her chin.

“This is just wonderful,” she exclaimed from the pool.

Murdock started laughing from the edge of the pool.

“What are you laughing at?” Rose asked accusingly.

“Nothing much. When I first met you, I thought you might be one of those snooty women who require gold and diamonds. Now, I see all it takes is a hot bath!” he joked.

Rose looked up at him sideways.

“A girl can go a long way in life with a hot bath... and a good man,” she replied, grinning up at him slyly.

“Just be careful! I don’t know how deep that pool is or if there are any sharp rocks,” he said, chuckling at her antics. “The only thing wrong with this place is how difficult it will be to light.”

“I think it’s wonderful the way it is,” Rose said, relishing the hot water.

Murdock stuck the torch into the sand.

“Enjoy your bath, Rose. I’m going to get started on the improvements. I’ll be back in a bit,” he said, heading back the way they had come.

Back in the main entrance chamber where he had nursed Rose, he put his buckskin shirt back on and loaded up with as much equipment as he could carry. Then Murdock gathered all the wood together to haul it to their new quarters. This all seemed perfect to him, and he noticed a little spring in his step. *I know I can survive with just the bare necessities, I’ve done it several times in my life,*

but having a few comforts just made life more bearable, he thought. Life here is going to be very hard, especially on Rose, so any comforts I can find, she deserves.

Back in their new quarters, he removed all the equipment and set it neatly in a pile on the rocks. Then he set up a fire pit on the rocks close to the sand in the center of the room. Rose had finished her bath, bringing the torch over and tossing it on the fire pit. Murdock stood up and saw that she wasn't dressed.

"It's your turn," she insisted.

"I'll take one later," he replied as he stood up. "I want to get everything moved in here as soon as I can and get the meat hung."

"You are going to take one now," she demanded, shoving him toward the pool. She grinned in a playfully evil way.

Murdock stumbled a little in the sand but regained his footing. Rose was slowly walking toward him. "I'll take one when I get things moved," he maintained, as he backed slowly away from her advance.

"No offense, Kevin, but you smell like an old horse," she said through tight lips, still advancing. "I'm in the mood to have a clean-smelling man around me!"

"I'll take a bath when I'm finished," he exclaimed, still retreating toward the pool. "I promise!"

"Oh, you do, do you?" she said, still grinning as she nodded and advanced. "You promise to do it later?"

"Yes, I promise," Murdock pleaded, nodding back.

He was still retreating from her advance, but, focused on Rose, wasn't aware of his feet and caught his heel on a half-buried rock. Murdock stumbled backward into the pool, head first, resulting in a large splash. His head popped out of the water as he sputtered.

Rose laughed at him from the edge of the pool. "No time like the present!"

Murdock removed his boots first and threw them onto the sand at Rose's feet. Next, still in the water, he removed his pants and threw those at Rose, too. She tried to catch them, but a wet pant leg whipped around and slapped her lower back. By this time, Murdock had his shirt off, and he threw it at her as well. The wet shirt caught Rose full in the face with a soggy slap.

Rose took his wet buckskins and spread them out on rocks close by the fire, then joined him in the pool.

“Woman, I ought to wring your neck for that fool stunt,” Murdock chastised her as she entered the pool.

“Sorry, Kevin, but you really do stink,” Rose said, semi-apologetically.

“What about my buckskins? They could be ruined,” Murdock protested.

“If they are, I’ll make you a grass skirt to wear,” Rose said, moving closer to him.

“I wouldn’t be caught dead in a grass skirt,” he told her.

“That’s okay. I prefer you naked, anyway.”

Under the water, his arms went around her waist automatically. She smoothed out his long, wet hair as he gently caressed her wet skin. “I don’t like your beard,” she said, after studying his face for a while. Rose wrapped her legs around his waist so that he held her entire weight in the water.

“As soon as I can get a mirror, I’ll shave it off,” he told her, enjoying the feel of her skin.

“I can do that for you,” she said excitedly. Then she exclaimed, “Oh, my.”

“What?” he said.

“Well, I would ask if that was a pickle in your pocket, but you don’t have pockets right now, and I can tell you’re definitely glad to see me.” She grinned broadly.

Murdock’s face turned a deep shade of red. “Sorry,” he said, sliding her back a little.

Rose immediately slid forward again forcefully. “No need to apologize,” she said, still grinning. Then, changing the subject, she said, “I like your hair long. I’ll make you a tie to keep it off your face.”

Murdock held onto Rose, looking into her face, caressing the small of her back gently as he let the hot water work on his abused muscles. After a few minutes, Rose untangled her legs from Murdock’s waist and stood free from him.

“Well, get busy,” she commanded. “What do you think? You have all day to lounge around in the pool?”

Murdock splashed water in her face and laughed.

“Oh, you’re going to pay for that,” she promised as she tried to dunk him.

After a few minutes of splashing and general horseplay, Rose got out of the pool and walked over to the fire. Murdock followed after her. Once at the fire, she spread out her grass skirt on the sand and lay on her stomach on top of the skirt. Murdock came over next to her and gently started rubbing the small of her back.

“Feel better?” she asked him coyly.

“I felt okay before. Now, I just feel wet,” he said facetiously.

“Well, you smell better, anyway,” she stated after sniffing the air. Then, after a pause, she said, “Kevin, we need to have a serious talk.”

“What would you like to talk about?” he asked, still massaging her back.

Rose rolled over on her side to look at him.

“Do you find me attractive?” she asked seriously.

“I think you’re very attractive,” he told her.

“But not sexually attractive?”

“No, I find you to be extremely attractive in all aspects,” he responded, nervously.

“Then why is it you passed up a golden opportunity?”

“What are you talking about?” Murdock asked, with a shocked look on his face.

“Any other man would have taken me a long time ago, but, as of twenty minutes ago, you passed on the opportunity, and I would like to know if it’s me.”

Murdock quit rubbing her back and sat cross-legged on the rocks by the fire. He looked at his feet, not knowing what to say. “I just don’t find sex to be all that important,” he finally said softly.

“You don’t? You don’t think human intimacy is important?” she asked, incredulous. “What about kids and ensuring the survival of the species?”

“Intimacy is very important,” he said, clearly uncomfortable with the subject matter, “but in the proper context.”

Rose lay with her head propped on her hand. She gazed at him, and he knew she was waiting for him to explain further.

“What, to you, is the proper context?” she asked him finally. When he didn’t answer, she asked him, “Truthfully, how many women have you had sex with?”

All the color drained from his face, and he felt extremely nervous. Soon, she rolled over on her back and started laughing hysterically. Already uncomfortable, he got up and started to get dressed.

“I don’t believe it,” she said, trying to stop laughing and failing. “The big bull of the woods is a virgin?” she asked between fits of laughter. “Well, that figures! That’s just my kind of luck!”

Murdock stopped dressing and turned, his blood boiling. “I fail to see what is so damned funny,” he yelled at her finally. “I’m really glad you’re having such a good time at my expense!”

Rose got up and, still chuckling, went over to him. “I’m sorry, Kevin. I didn’t mean to laugh,” she said, “but it’s just my kind of luck to finally find a man who treats me like a real person instead of a piece of meat to have fun with, and have him turn out to be a virgin.” Rose gently touched his bare back.

“I just never found the right woman! What’s wrong with that?” Murdock yelled, immediately shaking off her hand.

Rose finally stopped laughing. “Kevin, you said I was raped... and I believe you, but they didn’t get a virgin,” she went on, without laughing. “You are a damn good man, Kevin, probably the best man I have ever met, and you deserve a lot better than me for your first time. Your first time should be something very special with someone very special.”

“And you don’t think making love with you would be special to me?” he asked, without turning around or looking at her.

“That isn’t what I meant,” Rose said softly, but full of emotion. “You deserve a pure virginal beauty, not some used and abused, beat-up old hag!” Rose turned her back on him, and the tears started to flow. “I don’t know, for your first time, you should at least feel like you are in love, even if you’re not. And maybe she should feel, or think she feels, the same way about you.” Rose hung her head. Then Murdock turned around and put his arms around her, holding her tight.

“Rose, to me, you *are* someone very special! To me, you’re a pure virginal beauty! I love you, Rose! Would you be my first and only?”

Rose whipped around in his arms, mouth hanging open, still crying. “Oh, Kevin, I love you, too! What took you so damned long?” she said through the tears. “I’d be upset if I weren’t your one and only!”

A few minutes later, on top of the grass skirt, he had made for her and with many tears and declarations of love, Murdock and Rose made love for the first time.

An hour later, while they lay together enjoying the afterglow, Murdock broke the silence.

“I suppose we should get married,” he said to the roof of the cavern.

Rose rolled over to look at him in shock. “Okay, if you say so. Are we talking religious or civil ceremony?” she asked.

“Oh, just a civil ceremony is fine with me,” he stated seriously.

“Then you’re going to be one busy man!”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you need to re-invent medical science, for the blood tests and so we can be properly poked, prodded, and generally abused by strangers; you need to re-invent paper and a printing press for all those invitations to people who don’t really matter; and you can’t forget about the government, so our lives can be properly controlled by those who don’t care, and so we can be taxed and papers stamped; gift stores, so those who get invited can pick out inane gifts that we really don’t want or need. If you want a religious ceremony, then you also have to re-invent religion on top of everything else. As I said, you are going to be one busy man!”

“Hmm, well, I guess we won’t get married today, then,” Murdock said, after a short pause to think about what she had said.

“Hate to break it to you, pal,” she said, tapping her hand on his bare chest, “but we’re already married! At least, I feel like we are, and if you run across any other damsels in need of rescuing in your travels, I plan to make sure my claim

on you isn't jumped by some other bimbo!"

"But what about my harem?" he joked

"Oh, you beast," she yelled, pinching him in the side. "You're nothing but a lazy lay-about taking advantage of poor, innocent young women!"

"Hey, cut me some slack, I just got married," he pleaded.

"I know," she said, smiling at him, "so did I! But married life isn't always a bed of roses, you know!"

"Doesn't need to be, as long as I'm in Rose's bed... besides, every rose has its thorns." He chuckled at his puns.

"You are such a love... and a total beast! Seven times a bastard! Insulting your new wife that way," she said, laughing uncontrollably.

Suddenly, Rose got up on her elbows.

"Oh, my God! Here I am, a newly wedded and bedded bride, and I don't even know how old my husband is," she said, distressed.

"Twenty-eight," Murdock answered, giggling.

"And an old bastard at that! I'm just a sweet, innocent, twenty-four! You should be ashamed! Taking advantage of someone so sweet and innocent and of such tender years," she joked.

Murdock laughed. "Innocent?" he asked.

"More slander? You slanderous, old, lusty coot," she chided good-naturedly. Then she kissed him soundly and passionately. "But you're my old, lusty coot," she added.

"And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Come on, old man," Rose said, tapping his chest, "you're burning daylight!"

"I think we already burned most of it," Murdock responded.

"And what a perfectly wonderful way to burn it, too," she said as she kissed him again. "But you have to get up and at 'em. Get the rest of our stuff moved down here, so your new wife can make her husband a proper meal."

Murdock continued laughing as he got dressed and went to get the rest of their stuff. On a whim, he left the cave and walked all the way down to the stream. There, he saw some white and yellow wildflowers growing along the

bank. He picked several, then gathered more wood and returned to the cave. Then, he picked up more of their gear and carried it all down to their new home.

“Honey, I’m home,” he yelled as he entered the large chamber. He dumped the wood by the fire and turned to Rose, who tended the meat on the fire. He gave her the flowers.

“I thought you might like these,” he said as he gave them to her.

She immediately smelled his breath. “Trying to make up for your night out drinking with the boys?” she said slyly, and then she chuckled. “They’re wonderful, thank you. Now, hustle your ass, and get the rest! Dinner will be ready soon.”

“That’s all of it, except for the grass you were sleeping on and the last quarter of deer.”

“A new bride and I have no bed to help me seduce my old man,” she chided.

Murdock laughed all the way back up.

After gathering the grass and deer, he returned to the cave. Rose had taken the flowers he had brought and made a crown with the white ones and a necklace with the yellow ones. She wasn’t dressed, but he thought she couldn’t be more beautiful.

“All done?” she asked.

“Yes, all done. You look absolutely gorgeous dressed like that. Now, can we eat?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said, smiling at his compliment. “Have to keep my husband’s strength up so he can perform his husbandly duties.” Then she pouted. “Unless you’re tired of me already.”

“Never,” he declared with vigor. “How could I ever tire of such a lusty, busty, beauty as you?”

They both had a wonderful laugh during their meal.

“How sharp is the knife in your boot?” Rose asked after they had eaten.

Murdock pulled out the six-inch knife and tried to shave the hair on his arm. With a single pass, his arm was bare.

“Sharp enough, I’d say,” he replied. “Why do you ask?”

“You’ll see,” she said, holding out her hand.

Skeptical, Murdock handed her the knife.

“Now, go get in the tub. You smell like an old meat packer who had sex before work,” she commanded.

Murdock shook his head and decided that her request wasn't up for argument. He stood up, stripped, and headed for the hot pool. He had to admit that the hot water felt wonderful. As he soaked, Rose took off her crown and necklace and laid them carefully beside the pool. Then she got in with the knife. She immediately wrapped her legs around him again.

“Now, lie back, and relax,” she ordered.

Murdock was more than a little nervous.

“Um, this can wait, you know,” he said trying to stave off the inevitable.

“Maybe for you, but I prefer to get all the shocks done and over with quickly. Since I have never seen you without a beard, that should be quite a shock for me,” she told him in a matter-of-fact tone.

Murdock tried to lay his head back and relax while Rose wet his face with the hot water.

“Ever been shaved before?” she asked.

“No, I haven't! And it does make me nervous.”

“Well, then, just lie back, because to be honest,” she said as she took the first swipe down his face with the knife, removing a good portion of his beard, “I've never shaved anyone before.”

Murdock's eyes widened and he tried to get her off him.

“Just relax,” she said calmly, “I promise to try real hard to not slit your throat.”

Murdock didn't relax, but soon she finished shaving him. He rubbed his face with a wet hand.

“How did I do?” Rose asked, caressing the side of his face.

“You did just fine, but you could have told me you've never done that before,” he said, finally relaxing.

“Oh, pooh! What fun is that? Don't you have a sense of adventure?” She giggled at him.

“I do, but there's a difference between adventure and foolhardiness,” he

exclaimed.

“Did I cut you or nick you?” she asked innocently.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Then you worried for nothing!” she chided.

“You know, life may not be easy, but with you, it sure won’t be boring.”

Murdock chuckled.

Rose smiled, obviously pleased with herself.

“Good! Glad to hear it,” she said, snuggling with him in the hot water.

“Kevin,” Rose said after a long silence during which they soaked, “I have to apologize.”

“For what?”

“I trapped you. We really aren’t married. There’s nothing legal, and it’s unlikely to be for a long time,” she said after a long pause. “If you don’t want me to refer to you as my husband, I’ll understand.”

Murdock lay there. He felt as if he were in heaven. He had the best woman he could possibly want and a situation that he could only dream about on Earth. As far as he was concerned, he had it all. “I’ll make you a deal,” he said, after thinking for a while. “If things don’t work out between us after the first fifty years or so, I’ll just tell you to leave. Okay?”

Rose raised her head and looked in his face. His was a good face, improved by a shave. “Deal,” she said softly as she rubbed his smooth face with her hand.

They soaked for a long time before getting out and going to bed. After making love again, Murdock sat up on their bed.

“Rose, if I believe I’m married to you, and you believe you’re married to me, does it really matter about all the legalities?” he asked seriously.

“Not a bit,” she responded without moving or even opening her eyes.

“Then, I say, we’re married, if you agree,” he declared.

Rose rolled over and touched his thigh.

“I do agree, dear one,” she said, holding back the tears. “Now, go to sleep. You’ve completely worn out your new wife.”

They both slept soundly the rest of the night.



Over the next few weeks, Murdock and Rose tried to make their new home better. Murdock made a small rack for smoking meat and set it up in a little alcove close by the entrance. He found a stand of what passed for hickory trees, felling a few with the small hatchet. He used the chunks to smoke some of the venison and a few fish. With the rest, he fashioned a bow and a few arrows, though it took some experimentation. The arrows, though straight, had no fletchings, nocks, or points, but he was working on that part. He knapped a few points, but these were more useful with the three spears he'd already made than with an arrow.

Rose, meanwhile, learned how to braid long sections of thin rope from the tall grass that grew on the other side of the stream. She also learned to weave the grass into mats for sleeping on, covering the sand. At first, Murdock went with her to harvest the tall grass, but soon, he was comfortable with her skills and was assured that she could handle herself in an emergency.

Together, they found some wild vegetables that were similar to onions, carrots, and potatoes on some of the walks they made both upstream and down. Beyond the pools in their cave, Rose found a depression that Murdock filled with water. She soaked the hides in a brine, which he made with the salt from the lower part of the cave. Together, they managed to flesh the hides, get the brain tanning mixture applied, and stretch them to dry with poles that Murdock had made. This took work, but even though Rose was not used to the amount of work required, she never complained and had become a great helper to Murdock. Under his tutelage, she was well on her way to becoming a good frontier wife.

The bond between Murdock and Rose grew at a phenomenal rate. Murdock considered himself to have finally found the perfect woman, and Rose believed she had found the perfect man for herself. Whether they were working together or training in fighting techniques and weapons, the two were inseparable. And many times their work was interrupted with spontaneous and passionate love-making.

Beron showed up as it suited him. The three *shared* whenever possible, as it

was the most efficient way to communicate. Often, Beron came at suppertime, though he only accepted small amounts of raw venison. Murdock assumed that he only ate it to be sociable and that Beron came, then, to enjoy their company. Beron did not understand the two humans' puns and jibes, so they tried to refrain while Beron was around, lest he thinks they had lost what little sense they had.

Murdock was setting up the poles to smoke the wolf hides when Rose came skipping and bouncing up to him.

"Kevin! It's wonderful! I finally got my menses," she exclaimed.

"Okay... so what's so wonderful about that?" he asked. "Shouldn't you be grumpy or something?"

Rose's face showed that he had dashed her exuberance.

"It's wonderful as far as I'm concerned," she said seriously.

"I guess I just don't get it..." He shrugged as he turned back to his work.

"Dear one, I was raped. What this means is, if I become pregnant now, it will be yours, without a doubt," she explained.

Murdock ignored her. Then, continuing working, he asked, "So, you think if you were pregnant from the rape, I would just dump the baby in the river or something?"

"Well, no, I don't think you would do that," she responded hesitantly.

Murdock secured the hides, and the fire now produced much smoke. He stood back a little to appreciate his work.

"What do you think I'd do?" he asked without looking at her.

"I guess I'm not sure what your views are," she said, confused.

Murdock turned to face her, finally, with the look of grave seriousness.

"Rose, if you had become pregnant from your rape, it wouldn't matter to me," he said through tight lips. "A baby is an awesome responsibility, and to deny that responsibility purely on the basis of genetics is criminal, in my view."

"But isn't it important for men to know that their kids are theirs?" she asked, hurt.

"Then I guess you don't know me like you think you do. If you ever have a baby, how could I not love and care for it the same way I love and care for you?" he asked. "No matter the parentage, it would still be at least half of you."

Rose looked at Murdock's face and gently touched his cheek.

"I guess I have an even better man than I thought," she said as she walked away to resume her daily chores.

They both stewed about her question for the rest of the day, until they went for one of their daily walks along the stream.

"If you found a baby out here while walking," Murdock said, turning toward her, "what would you do with it?"

"I would take it in and care for it, of course," she responded, shrugging.

"And you would raise it and treat it as one of your own?"

"Well, yes." She shrugged again. "It wouldn't matter to me who the parents were."

"And you think I'm any different?" he asked, as he shoved his hands in his pockets and walked on.

"I think you're very different," she said, stopping him. "You're so different from anyone else I've ever known that sometimes it's scary. And that is what I love most about you. You're not like anyone else."

They continued their walk in silence, holding hands.

When they had returned home, they found Beron there with another of his kind, who was slightly smaller than he was.

"Greetings, friend Beron," they said together. Saying the same thing at the same time happened more often than they cared to admit.

"*Mate hurt*," Beron flashed to them both, distressed.

Now Murdock noticed that one of the smaller one's front paws was swollen and that it favored that paw when it moved. He and Rose inspected the paw. Murdock tried to project sympathy for the creature's pain and gingerly turned the paw over.

"It's infected," he said to Rose.

"Has been for a while, from the smell," Rose replied.

Murdock tried to project that he wanted the injured one to put the sore paw in the hot water pool and leave it there. The creature complied, and Murdock took salt and threw it into the coldest pool.

"Won't that make the pain worse?" Rose asked as she followed him back to

the hot water pool.

“It shouldn’t make it too bad,” he explained. “The amount of water should dilute it enough. We have to do something to clean it out, or she’ll die from the infection.”

Rose took off her grass skirt and got into the hot water. She gently rubbed the injury site to try to get all the dirt and sand out of the wound.

“Trim as much of the fur away from the wound as you can,” Murdock told Rose as he handed her his six-inch knife.

Murdock looked over at Beron. He lay quietly close by, large and ominous, watching everything that Murdock and Rose did.

“She has something stuck under one of the pads,” Rose reported, after trimming the fur and cleaning and inspecting the wound. “It looks like a sharp rock sideways under the pad.”

“Can you get hold of it and pull it out?” he asked.

“Maybe after it’s cleaned out a little more,” Rose said, looking closely at the injury.

“Well, don’t try to remove it yet,” he told Rose. “Just let it soak in the water so it can get cleaned out. Sorry about your tub.”

“I’m not worried about it,” she said, looking sideways up at him and smiling.

Murdock tried to visualize to Beron what was wrong and what he planned to do about it. Beron nodded slightly, but Murdock got a very strong sense of distress and concern from him.

Murdock got a chunk of raw venison and offered some to Beron, who refused, and then offered it to his patient. She ate it grudgingly, but Murdock could tell she wasn’t hungry.

“She doesn’t feel like eating,” Rose told him.

“How do you know?” Murdock asked.

“She told me,” Rose said, shrugging.

Murdock was taken aback. He had received no mental images from his patient.

“What else did she tell you?”

“She’s Beron’s youngest mate,” she told Murdock, who knelt by the side of

the pool. "I gather she's his favorite. There is one other complication you need to be aware of, *Doctor Kevin*."

"And that is?"

"She's pregnant."

Murdock's mouth hung open in shock. *So, if what I do helps, I save two lives, otherwise, it could cost four lives: Beron's mate and unborn cub, and mine and Rose's lives*, he thought. "Nothing like pressure," he said to no one in particular. Then, to Rose, he asked, "How're you doing in there?"

"Pruning up nicely, thank you very much."

"It should be clean enough now," he told Rose as he stripped off his clothes. "I'll do what I can."

"I can do it," Rose said.

"No, I need you to keep her calm. This is going to hurt her, and I don't want her to strike out at me when I need a steady hand and all my focus," he said as he got in the pool.

Rose left the pool without arguing and went to the patient's head, stroking it to keep her calm. Murdock, inspecting the injury, could barely see the offending piece of rock.

"She is being brave and says she trusts you... and so do I," Rose told him.

With some effort, Murdock pried the big pad up just enough to get a grip on the protruding edge of the rock. As he pulled it slowly out, he heard Beron's mate grunt and breathe heavily. When the rock was out far enough that he could grip it, he smoothly pulled a little faster until it was out. Then he immediately put the paw in the water and left the pool. He showed Rose the rock.

Rose glanced at it and then at the water in the pool.

"Um, you might want to do something about the bleeding," she said, indicating the water.

"It needs to bleed for a bit," Murdock explained to her, "to help clean it out and to drain the infection."

Murdock picked up one of the strips of wolf-hides, some of the rope Rose had made, and went to one of the cave walls and dug out some clay, and then put it on the hide. Taking some of the clean water from the pool inlet, he mixed the

clay into a thick paste on the leather side of the pelt.

“How’s she doing?” Murdock asked Rose, as he moved the pelt and clay closer to his patient.

“Much better, but she’s still in pain,” Rose told him.

“Get her to stand lightly on this hide and clay so I can tie it up,” Murdock requested.

His patient complied, and Murdock bandaged the paw as best he could.

“Well, *Doctor*? What’s the verdict?” Rose asked.

“The patient will survive,” he said, “but I’m not so sure the *Doctor* will! I think it’ll be fine, if she’ll leave the bandage on for a few days. I’d really like her to stay off her feet, but I don’t know if that’s possible.”

Beron got up and left, flashing many thoughts of gratitude and calm, leaving his mate in Murdock’s care.

“You’d think he be a little more worried,” Murdock said as he watched Beron leave.

“He is,” Rose told him. “He’s just entrusted you with his greatest treasure! It’s a high compliment.”

“How would you know?” he asked, turning toward her.

“She told me,” Rose responded, as she went back to check on Beron’s mate. “We girls just know these things.”

Murdock shook his head.

For the next couple of days, Beron’s mate didn’t move much. She finally accepted some of the raw venison from Murdock and Rose, and she left the bandage alone. Beron’s mate refused to communicate with Murdock directly, which stumped him. Rose was no help in the matter. When he asked her about it, she just giggled, saying, “It’s just girl talk,” and went about her business.

When Beron returned early on the third day, his mate was on her feet, walking with a limp and feeling much better, according to Rose. Her appetite had increased, and their stock of raw venison was almost depleted.

“*Follow*,” Beron commanded both Rose and Murdock after inspecting his mate.

“You better stay here and wait,” Murdock told Rose at the main entrance to

the cave.

“Why?” Rose asked.

“Because I’m the only one allowed farther up the path,” he began to explain to Rose.

“*No! Both!*” Beron interrupted, flashing the message to both.

Murdock shut up, and he and Rose followed behind Beron and his mate. The pace was slower so she could keep up, but Murdock and Rose were still hard-pressed to keep up with the large animals.

“Where are we going?” Rose asked after a while.

“I know where we’re going,” Murdock told her. “I just don’t know why.”

All Rose said was, “I guess we’ll find out when we get there.”

The walk was hard on them both. Beron’s mate hobbled along as best she could, but Beron acted as if it were an everyday event. The trip became easier after they turned from the path and headed for the river in the meadow. As they approached, Murdock could see all of the others in the distance.

“Well, we’re about there,” Murdock told Rose.

Rose reached down and took his hand. “Well, then, we’ll face it together,” she said, smiling at him. Her love for him was obvious.

“As it should be,” he said, with a brief smile.

After they reached the river, Murdock looked around. Quite a few new faces looked back at him, as well as a lot of familiar ones. Murdock noticed one old creature who resembled Beron, but looked ancient. This one seemed to be the one conducting this little get-together.

As the meeting proceeded, Murdock, who was more versed in their conversation techniques, managed to pick out the general gist of the meeting. Beron was touting Murdock’s accomplishments and showing great gratitude for all the things he had done. Murdock blushed. Rose stood there, mouth open, staring at him. When Beron had finished, a very long pause followed.

“Well, this may be where we get our comeuppance,” he said quietly and nervously to Rose. “No good deed goes unpunished.”

Rose didn’t respond.

The older creature broke the silence. Murdock didn’t catch very much of

what he said, but it must have been important, as everyone else remained reverently silent.

Once he had finished saying his piece, the big white one, Murdock's nemesis, came over and snorted at him and Rose.

"*Trust you not!*" he flashed. He stated this in such a way that Murdock took it as, "I'll never trust you or your kind, no matter what." Then the big white one walked away in a huff.

"He's a friendly one, isn't he," Rose said facetiously.

"Must be one of my many admirers," Murdock responded in kind.

When Murdock looked up, he saw that the rest of the group hadn't moved. They stood or sat with their heads all in what seemed to be a bow. A few seconds later, fish flew out of the river, and everyone ate their fill. The general mood was one of great joy and relaxation. Beron's mate reverently dropped a fish at Murdock's and Rose's feet, and they both ate their fill, raw.

After an hour, Beron approached, bowed deeply to them both — at least, that was how Murdock took it — and then, everyone left. Murdock and Rose also turned to leave the meadow and head for home. As they walked, Murdock caught Rose looking at him in awe. He ignored her the first time, but it soon became apparent that she wasn't going to stop.

"What?" he asked impatiently.

"Oh, nothing," Rose responded offhandedly, returning her attention to the path home.

After the fifth or sixth time Murdock caught her looking at him, he stopped and turned her around to face him.

"What the hell are you looking at me that way for?" he demanded loudly.

"You really don't know, do you?" she asked, incredulous. "Do you know what just happened back there?"

"Yeah, Beron showed me his gratitude for helping his mate."

"Is that all you got out of it?" she asked in disbelief.

"Yes! What did you get out of it?" he asked her impatiently.

"I was looking at you that way because," Rose took a deep breath. "I've never seen a god before."

“What? What the hell are you babbling about?” he yelled.

“That wasn’t just a teddy bear’s picnic, you know. That wasn’t just Beron showing gratitude. It was a celebration, a party. This is what I got out of it.” Rose breathed deeply again. “Beron told the others that you are a mighty hunter and as generous as the rain — I’m paraphrasing now — and share in your plenty with others without expectation of recompense.”

“You’re joking,” Murdock said, disbelieving.

“Not a bit. He also said that to him, you are blood-brother to the sun and hang the stars in the heavens!”

“Now, I know you’re teasing me!” Murdock said incredulously.

“He said you and your mate are great healers and have infinite wisdom and generosity,” Rose stated proudly. “So, you better be nicer to me in the future and treat a goddess as she should be treated!” Rose pushed him to the side, laughing.

“What do you mean, *be nicer to you?*” Murdock questioned. “You show me another woman on this planet who can have a hot bath whenever she wants. I think I take good care of you!”

“Yes, you do, love!” she said, kissing him. “I saw you looking at the old one at the gathering. Do you know who he is?”

“No, I’ve never seen him before.”

“From what I gather, he is the Elder, King, Duly Elected Leader, whatever term you want to use, of all their kind,” she said. “And Beron’s father.” Rose looked sideways at him, grinning. “I never would have thought you knew who to suck up to!”

Murdock was dumbfounded.

“What did you do to that big white one? He really doesn’t like you!” Rose continued.

“Exist, I think. I haven’t offended him in any other way that I can recall.”

“Yeah, that was the impression I got, too. Beron’s father warned him to leave us alone... or else. The *or else* part frightened me!”

Rose’s words bothered Murdock. By his standards, he didn’t do anything worthy of godhood. He had just helped someone in need.

“Rose, you were there,” Murdock started. “You know all I did was some

simple first aid. It was no big deal. I would do the same for anyone.”

“Yeah, I know. But who am I to argue with Beron when he thinks you are the greatest healer since Jonas Salk? You want to argue with him, then you do so on your own — I refuse!” she stated flatly. “Mainly because I happen to agree with him.” She kissed him and skipped ahead.

Several weeks passed after the gathering before Murdock and Rose got back into their daily routine. Beron hadn't come around the entire time, and Murdock found that he missed his friend.

Murdock had perfected his knapping technique, managing to make several arrows with fletchings after finding a cache of bird feathers. He had also perfected his bow and got in a lot of practice.

Rose, confident of her capabilities, wanted to learn to shoot as well, so Murdock began making her a bow of her own. The venison from the first hunt was almost gone, and Murdock knew it would soon be time for another hunt. He felt confident that taking another deer would be easier with Rose armed with a bow and him with spears.

Using the wolf pelts, Murdock made another water skin, of sorts, and a pair of calf-high moccasins for Rose similar to his boots but without a sheath for a six-inch knife. When he gave Rose the moccasins, she acted as if they were made of mink, oohing and ahing, as she did when he made or did anything for her.

Using the deerskin, they both worked on a dress for Rose. When they had completed it, the dress covered her arms and went to just below the tops of her moccasins. Murdock had done most of the general work, with an excited Rose playing mannequin. When he finished it, she liked it but immediately made some alterations to flatter her figure more; not that she needed her figure more flattering than it already was, in his opinion. When she announced that she had

finished and that it was acceptable, Murdock, who had found some yellow iron oxalate in the veins of ore around the cave, painted a necklace of the yellow wildflowers around the front and back yoke of the dress. He was no artist, but he did the best he could, and Rose made all the proper noises when he showed her. Rose thought it was a nice touch and loved wearing the dress whenever she could.

From the back-strap tendon, Murdock managed a bowstring and thread to sew the leather. From the scraps of the pelts, he fashioned a quiver and a more acceptable sling. He did some repairs on his own buckskins, made lashings for spears, and had plenty of thong ties.

Even though he kept busy, his mind roamed over all the inconsistencies of this planet and the cave they called home. Murdock saw precious few birds here and even fewer insects. He saw no small animals, such as squirrels and chipmunks; it didn't seem quite natural to him. And all the animals were so much bigger than he was used to.

Some of the inconsistencies might have been natural, but the cave? The tunnel walls were too smooth, and everything in it was exactly what they needed when they needed them. It was all too convenient. And why hadn't he seen the entrance to the chamber in which they now lived until after Rose's recovery and his gift of the venison to Beron? What made him so uneasy in the area of the falls?

He was still uncomfortable with what Rose had told him about the nature of the gathering, as well as why her impressions were so much clearer than his. But when he asked her, she was no help. All she would say was, "Females have their little secrets that males don't need to know about."

Then, at times he just thought about kissing Rose, and she would appear and kiss him first. How was it that she was able to complete some of his thoughts when they talked?

Murdock vowed to get answers from Beron the next time he came. He needed to understand the rules here, and he intended to end his confusion — within reason, of course. The last thing he wanted was to ruin the relationship he had established with Beron.

He was resigned to the fact that he would get all the answers he could from his friend the next time he saw him. And as it turned out, he didn't have long to wait.

On the day that Beron came to see Murdock and Rose, they were preparing to go on another deer hunt. Their supply of venison was reduced to a few chunks, and Murdock estimated that only a few days' supply remained before they would be eating fish. They hadn't eaten much fish since the last deer hunt, preferring fish as a change from venison rather than the other way around.

With preparations almost completed, Murdock and Rose lay on their bed talking. Outside, it was just after dusk.

Murdock and Rose were surprised to see Beron and his mate right next to their bed. They had neither heard nor felt them coming, and they were unnerved to look up and see them there.

Murdock got up and stirred the fire to give more light. He liked to see who he was talking to.

"How is your mate's foot?" he asked aloud. "Glad you came by! Early tomorrow we are leaving on a deer hunt," he finished as he lay down next to Rose again.

"*Share*," Beron flashed to Rose and him, ignoring Murdock's question.

"Her foot is one hundred percent," Rose told him in a low tone.

Both Rose and Murdock agreed to *share* with their friends. To an outside observer, Murdock and Rose appeared to go from full consciousness to total unconsciousness in the blink of an eye as they collapsed. An outside observer would not have seen any bears inside the cave.



As Murdock entered what he called "the sharing state," he seemed to be floating above the grass field that he and Rose used to gather grass to make their mats and ropes. The mountain that they lived in was in plain view, and it appeared to be either just before dawn or just after dusk. Rose faced him, looking as beautiful as ever, and he could feel her hands on his hips, even though he

couldn't see her hands — or his, for that matter. Her face was inches from his, and he couldn't look away. He saw the rest of the scene in his peripheral vision, as if he were inside a hologram with a panoramic view.

This was something completely new to Murdock. He was used to flashes of pictures or deep feelings, not something with this degree of continuity or immersiveness, and not so free-flowing.

“Hi, babe, where's Beron?” he said to Rose in this dream world. He never referred to Rose as “babe” when talking to her in real life, but he had thought it more than once.

“We are here,” she replied, but it wasn't just her voice. It sounded like his father, his uncle, and Rose all speaking at the same time to him, all saying exactly the same thing. In a way, he wasn't too surprised. Whenever Beron appeared to speak to him in previous *sharing* sessions, he had heard either his dad's voice or his uncle's, but never the two together.

The trio of voices continued, “You have...” And then in Rose's voice alone, “questions?” Immediately, Murdock knew that Rose was helping with the unfamiliar words he heard, but he asked himself whether he was really hearing the voices or whether he imagined it. He couldn't tell if Rose's lips moved, either. He couldn't see them, but he did get the impression that she smiled broadly at him.

“During the gathering, did you tell me what really went on?” he asked Rose directly.

The trio replied, “Yes.”

“But I got none of that myself, and I was there. How is it you understood more than I did?” he asked Rose.

“Mate violated rules/protocol showed... me.”

“When I helped Beron's mate, why didn't she communicate with me directly?” he asked.

“Forbidden/violates protocol when... male... is present.”

“What about the cave?”

In his peripheral vision, he saw the mountain change to a three-dimensional line-drawing that began to slowly rotate. He clearly picked out the places he had

already been, but the entire mountain looked like a warren of caves and tunnels. It was as if he looked at an extremely complex, extremely large ant hill. If the scale was correct, multiple layers went from the top of the mountain to several thousands of feet below the lowest level Murdock had been in, all running through the entire mountain. Based on what he could see, very few ways into the unexplored part of the complex existed and only one anywhere close to the base that he and Rose called home. That entrance was on one of the walls close by the pools. Soon, the scene changed from the line-drawing back to a realistic view.

“Refuge/sanctuary... for our... clan... during long... sleeping.” He heard *sleeping*, but Murdock received the impression that it was like hibernation or stasis. “As guardian, your... duty... protect always.” He heard *always*, but he felt as if it were more like *at all times and seasons and by whatever means necessary until all the stars are cold*. Murdock also perceived that *guardian* meant that he was the army, the police, and the mayor all rolled into one. And it wasn’t just him. It also included Rose and all their progeny, forever and ever.

“Before your kind... arrived... no need for guardian. Our... refuge/sanctuary... we made for us. Your... moral values similar... ours. That is why... we value you.” Murdock heard *value*, but it meant a lot more than that. He received the impression of great admiration, honor, and respect.

“As I see it, I did nothing special to warrant such honor when I helped your mate,” Murdock responded. He immediately felt a swell of good feelings. The view in his peripheral vision changed, so that he saw one of the large snakes attacking Rose. She was unconscious and couldn’t defend herself. Extreme fear took hold of Murdock when he saw this, even though he could see Rose right in front of his face. Then, the scene changed slightly, so that he saw Beron killing the snake with a single swipe of his sharp claws, protecting Rose.

“To us, is same... you did for... mate.”

Murdock was ashamed. He should have realized that on his own. Though, from Murdock’s perspective, he had done nothing special for Beron’s mate, from their perspective, they either didn’t know how to do, or couldn’t do, what he had done, for some reason, and so his action was something great and very much appreciated.

The questions and answers seemed, to Murdock, to go on for days, but quite a few of his questions were answered. Granted, *because*, when he asked why the snakes hadn't been eradicated, and *destroyers*, when he asked what lived in the area by the falls, weren't really answers, nor were they descriptive, but that was better than no answer at all. Over the course of the time he spent in the dream world, he figured out, inferred, or was told or shown outright that Beron and his kind, who called themselves Oomah, were, at some point in the distant past, the same kind as those who had invaded earth, the Teknarah. He discovered that the Teknarah needed what Murdock liked to think of as sheeple, to survive.

Murdock viewed *sheeple* as self-aware beings, who, for whatever reason, couldn't or wouldn't think for themselves. On Earth, they were the *go along to get along* crowd, the ones whom all the advertising geniuses loved to cater to. These were the people who thought as others do and did as they were told without questioning, having no idea why they did. The Teknarah couldn't have dissension in their midst, so all free-thinkers had to go, but they also had a deep revulsion for wasting resources. Thus, the forced emigration from Earth, which wasn't the only planet they had invaded. Their choice of this planet for the humans had been a way of getting back at the Oomah for their rebellion against accepted practices.

In the distant past, the Oomah had developed a deep moral aversion to controlling others by force, preferring to suggest rather than command. This really wasn't control, as they gained nothing, other than knowing that they tried to help others. Anyone they helped was free at any time to go his own way. The Oomah had no vested interest in the outcome.

At some point, the Oomah had decided to live a more corporeal life and had created and developed this planet and everything on it to suit only their needs. In taking on the forms that they had chosen for themselves on this planet, they had gained a more fulfilling life. A few of the gains were the sensual pleasures of companionship, eating, and lying in the warm sun on the grass in their meadows. But they had also given up a lot.

Their current form didn't require a lot of deep sleep. Relaxing, resting, and dozing sufficed; however, they required recuperation for extended periods. For

millennia, they had roamed this planet from mid-spring to late fall, going into their long sleep cycle the rest of the year. Only the white ones could stand the cold of winter, so their cycle was reversed from that of the rest of the Oomah. Their long sleep could be interrupted for something very important, but they didn't like it and became what Murdock thought of as grumpy. However, they were vulnerable during their long sleep.

Another loss for the Oomah consisted in their inability to control very small or very fast-moving objects. When Murdock questioned Beron about this inability, he learned that while it would be nothing for them to change the orbit of the planet, toss the transport pod back into space, or throw a man a continent away, small objects, such as stone shards or arrows, were either too small or too fast-moving for them to manipulate. However, the Teknarah, whose bodies were small, gelatinous, parasitic masses, had the reverse ability.

The vulnerability of the Oomah hadn't become apparent to them until the pilgrims arrived. Then, the Oomah perceived them to be a dire threat to their existence through the humans' dogged determination, ingenuity, and sheer, cussed meanness. But by that time, it was too late to change forms; they had grown comfortable with the form they had taken, preferring to die rather than change.

Half of the Oomah wanted to wipe the offenders off their planet. The other half took a "wait and see" stance on the matter. To the Oomah, killing one of the snakes was something that their cubs did when they reached adulthood. Murdock, having killed one while Beron was watching the humans, had made him more acceptable. Thus he had been selected as Guardian for several reasons, mainly for his maturity, compassion, intelligence, and generosity.

Since the Oomah had no knowledge of humans, Beron had volunteered to investigate and report his findings on the stranger's capabilities and intentions. He had also volunteered to die if need be in order to gain the information they required to make an informed decision. Because Murdock demonstrated what Beron considered signs of the higher qualities, such as compassion, lack of greed, concern for limited resources, and independence, the Oomah had made more resources available. Murdock also found that the big, white bear,

Murdock's antagonist at the gatherings, was from the "squash 'em and eat 'em" camp and wouldn't be swayed easily, if at all.

Murdock discovered that they had no word or understanding of human love or humor. He and Rose were teaching them those concepts, which was why Beron had brought his favorite mate to Murdock when she was hurt and none of their kind could or would help. Murdock felt that Beron was starting to care for his mate.

When Murdock asked about the area near the river that he called the "dread feeling area," he received the impression that monsters or destroyers lived there, and he learned nothing more about it, no matter how he asked.

From what Murdock gathered, the Oomah had a strong moral bias against violating another's privacy, which explained why he and Rose were never interrupted during intimate moments, as well as why Beron always asked about sharing. Granted, sometimes Beron, in dire need of information, was a little impatient, but Murdock was always free to decline. Telepathy was as nothing to them, but because they lacked a common frame of reference with humans, this made it extremely difficult to perform under the best of conditions, and the Oomah viewed forced sharing as a violation of privacy. Eavesdropping, however, was acceptable. Murdock discovered that he broadcast his thoughts to everyone and everything around him. Even though they had developed from the same creature as that of the Teknarah, the Oomah had developed their own individuality while simultaneously maintaining the hive-mind closeness of what Murdock considered their evil twins, though that was not exactly an accurate description.

He learned that by human standards, the Oomah had a very strong moral compass that could be violated only at peril. The Teknarah, however, were totally amoral by any standard. They were certain that no entity was qualified to judge their actions or motivations, much like a lot of politicians Murdock had heard about, as well as one in particular with whom he had some unfinished business on this planet.

When he asked how they had hidden things from him, they did what Murdock could only describe as a chuckle. It really was no trick for them to tell

his mind that there was nothing to see or nothing to touch. They used this trick a lot in the early days in order to watch the humans and observe them up close. The trick was much like a movie special effect, only a lot more elaborate. The eye sees or fingers feel, but before the brain can interpret the sensation or image, sections of the scene or that which was touched are removed or added, and the human brain couldn't tell the difference. Murdock found that many times since their meeting, he had seen Beron although he was not really there, and vice versa.

When he asked about Rose's ability to complete his thoughts, they laughed, at least as Murdock perceived it, and told him to ask her. They had nothing to do with it.



When the *sharing* ended and Murdock finally woke up, Rose had crossed her arms on his chest, her chin on top of her hands as she studied his face.

“Good morning, sunshine,” she said with exuberance.

“Is it morning already?” he asked through half-open eyes.

“Somewhere in the universe, I'm sure it is,” she said, “but not here, I think. I haven't been outside to check.”

“How long were we out?” he asked, as he gently moved her so he could get up.

“Seconds or weeks, who can tell?” she asked. “I think they can stop time, or our perception of it, at will.”

“Did they tell you that?” he asked.

“No, just some healthy speculation on my part.”

When he rolled over to look at the fire, he saw that it had burned down and gone out. He touched the cold ashes.

“We were out for several hours, anyway,” he stated. “Maybe days.”

“So, what did you think?” Rose asked as she rolled over on her side to watch him.

“I don't know,” he said. “I have such a headache and haven't had a chance to

process all the information yet. What's your take?"

"Well, I don't have a headache, and I feel really well-rested," she said cheerfully.

"I do have a problem with the control thing, though," Murdock said, over his shoulder.

Rose looked at him with a strange expression. "Sometimes, you are extremely intelligent and insightful," she accused, "and at other times, extremely dense!"

"What?" he responded defensively. "I just don't like the idea of being controlled!"

"Do I control you, Kevin?" she asked.

Murdock knew her question was a trap, but his head throbbed, and he didn't resist. "No, you don't, because I won't let you," he told her. "No one controls me."

Rose rolled over and laughed.

"Of course I control you!" she teased. "The same way you control me!"

"I do no such thing," he responded, shocked and defensive.

"Then, dear one, maybe you need to re-think your definition of *control*," she said as she got off their mat.

"I don't get it," Murdock said as he relit the fire. "How do you control me, or me you?"

"Influence, dear, influence," she said vehemently. "Something politicians and lobbyists know a lot about."

Murdock looked at her, dumbfounded. He opened his mouth to say something and then closed it without a word. He had to admit — influence was a form of control.

"To control someone or something means to change it," she explained. "Influence is a form of control. Indirect, but it still is, and I do hope I influence you."

"Oh, you do that quite well," he admitted. "I just got this feeling that we are Beron's pets or something."

"Oh, pooh," she exclaimed. "I hate to break it to you, but I don't think we

rate any higher than a minor nuisance to most of the Oomah. We are no threat to them. And do you think they would hesitate to swat us out of existence if we became one? Beron has been nice and helpful, but he could make things a lot easier for us if he wanted to, but I know he won't. He cares enough about us to keep his nose out of our business. At least, that's what I think."

"What about the guardian business?" he asked.

"Oh, it's real," she stated. "No doubt in my mind they are serious!" Rose frowned a little, thinking deeply. "It's hard to explain," she continued, "but I think on one level they admire and maybe even envy us, but on another level, they treat us like flies or something equally non-threatening."

"Do you really think so?" Murdock asked. In some respects, he felt better knowing more about Beron and the Oomah. But he wished he hadn't asked other things.

"At least we know what crawled up the white one's ass," Rose said.

"We do?" Murdock asked innocently.

"Yeah, he needs to quit being woken for the likes of us *mere humans*." She looked sideways, smirking at Murdock. "Or he needs to get laid!"

Murdock started to chuckle, "Yeah, I agree," he said. "Maybe both!"

Rose laughed. "The point is, sweetness, don't worry about it so much," she advised. "Change or do what you can, and let the rest go."

"I guess you're right," he admitted. "Speaking of getting laid..." Murdock grinned sideways at her.

"What about the deer hunt?" she asked, as she hurried to remove her dress and headed toward the mats.

"They won't care if we are a few hours late," Murdock retorted while stripping down himself. "You can trust me on that!"



Over the past few weeks, conditions at the transport pod had changed dramatically. Whittier believed that he could do anything he wanted — at least, that was how Burns saw it. Once a day, all who wanted to eat were required to

present themselves to Whittier and beg for a very small portion of the bland oatmeal. Some women had been caught receiving more than their portion during the preparation and had been beaten severely as punishment.

Whittier himself had carved or burned a “W” into their left upper breasts. Most of the women had, at some point, given Whittier, Burns, or Metzger some sort of sexual favor, mostly as a way to mitigate the severity of any impending punishments. With the exception of Metzger, Burns, and Whittier, all of the colonists were naked. And those who were naked slept outside the pod unless invited in. Because the pod contained the only chair in God knew how many light years, Whittier behaved as if it was his throne.

Burns had seen Collier skulking around, trying to scrounge for whatever he could, and this made Burns think about his own position. He knew that his and Metzger’s positions were transitory. Opposing Whittier was dangerous. Burns was certain that if Whittier was angered, he was quite capable of slitting throats while they slept, as that appeared to be his way of doing things. Burns also knew that Metzger, who backed Whittier all of the time, was equally capable of cutting throats and was currently on Whittier’s most favored list. Burns suspected Metzger’s clandestine relationship with Krysia helped him to stay in favor.



At the end of an otherwise unremarkable day, Collier got in line to receive his meager ration. At the bottom of the ramp, everyone received a small, metal plate for their ration. A young Asian woman stood in front of Collier. She appeared very lithe, reminding Collier of a ballet dancer.

“Look at this!” Whittier said to her as she walked up to face him, stopping about four feet from him; her plate held out in front of her. “Burns, check and see if this is a male or a female. I can’t tell from here!”

Burns stood still, appearing unsure if Whittier was serious or not. Metzger leered at her suggestively and openly. Krysia, who was massaging Whittier’s shoulders from behind the chair, chuckled. Whittier waited. Burns seemed to finally figure out he was supposed to check and started toward her.

“I’m a woman,” she said, defiance obvious in her tone and carriage. “Why is it you can’t see that when I can tell from here that you’re a fat bastard?”

Whittier’s eyes widened and he chuckled. “We-e-ell, a feisty one. I find that refreshing!”

“If you’ve finished leering, I would like my ration,” she stated, with a touch of sarcasm.

“You shouldn’t be so sassy when asking for a favor,” Whittier warned.

“A favor?” she asked, her voice getting shrill. “You call what you’re doing a favor? Do you think we like to beg for a little taste of food?”

“I could care less what the others like. I’m in charge here, so you shouldn’t press your luck, Missy!”

The girl took a deep breath and stood in such a way that told the others, and Collier, that she was bored with their leering.

“Well?” she asked, holding her plate a little closer, still holding her defiant, bored pose. She moved a little closer.

As she moved, Metzger snapped out his hand and smacked the side of her face with the back of it. Collier cringed. The force of the blow was enough to cause her to drop the plate, which clanged noisily on the deck, and she stumbled to the side; her head turned, looking down at the deck. She slowly stood up straight, glaring at Metzger. Everyone could see tears start down her cheek, but they didn’t hear a whimper from her.

“Pick up that plate,” Metzger ordered.

The female started to bend over to pick up the plate. Collier had seen Metzger’s leg muscles tense a little and he was sure she saw it, too. She used her foot to sweep the plate out of Metzger’s reach. The plate slid noisily across the compartment. She walked over, picked up the plate, and resumed her position in front of Whittier. Metzger had moved a little forward to be closer and more intimidating. Again, she held out her plate.

“I want you to get on your knees and beg,” Whittier commanded.

Collier ran up to interpose his body between Metzger and the girl. *What are you doing*, he thought.

“That’s pretty tough of you,” he said to Metzger. “What is she? A hundred

pounds lighter than you, at least? A foot shorter? Definitely a few years young —” Collier was cut off by the same back-handed slap that Metzger had given the girl. Collier’s head turned at the force of the slap, but it didn’t have the same effect on him as on the girl.

“I’d mind my own business, if I were you, Collier,” Whittier warned. “Look, everyone, the coward is finally standing up for someone. All of a sudden he’s very brave!”

Everyone present giggled, except Collier and the girl.

Metzger started to punch Collier. Collier managed to catch Metzger’s fist before the blow could land. Both men were locked in a struggle, each arm shaking from the strain and muscle tension. Burns was stepping slowly forward, drawing his twelve-inch machete as he did so.

“Burns!” Whittier yelled. Burns stopped his advance. “Metzger, you two can take it up outside at a later time!”

Metzger and Collier let go and glared at each other.

“I’ll look forward to settling this later,” Metzger said quietly as he grinned at Collier. Metzger walked back to his position.

“Missy, pick up your plate and bring it here,” Whittier commanded. The girl complied and Whittier gave her a small ration. “You two were entertaining, to a minor degree, so both of you can share the ration!”

“It isn’t enough for one, let alone two,” Collier protested. *She deserves more*, he thought.

“Take it or leave it. Get out, both of you. Next.” Whittier commanded.

He followed the girl out of the pod. Once outside, he started to move off to let her eat in peace.

“Part of this is yours,” the girl said to his back.

“It’s okay, you eat it,” Collier responded.

“You could at least join me and maybe have a little,” she offered. *Such a sweet voice she has*.

They found a spot well away from the others.

“My name is Mei Lee,” the girl said as she sat on the grass.

“Collier,” said Collier, as he sat facing her. He could see a nasty bruise

starting to discolor her cheek. “That’s going to hurt,” he said, pointing at the bruise.

“I’ve had worse,” Mei Lee said, grinning wryly. “Why did you interfere?”

“I don’t know.” Collier shrugged. “It just didn’t seem right, to me, that someone that big should be beating someone so much littler.”

“Things sure have changed since we got here,” Mei Lee said, obviously trying to change the subject, as she took a small bite of the bland mass that passed for food.

Collier nodded as he took a small pinch. Sitting there while she was eating was not easy. He liked being close to her and enjoyed the conversation. “Why did you get mouthy with Whittier?” he asked, after a pause. He was looking more for conversation than information.

“I don’t know,” Mei Lee replied. “I guess I don’t like my sex being questioned or being ogled by fat bastards.” They both chuckled a little and took another bite.

Collier nibbled periodically and looked at Mei Lee. He liked the way she looked and he liked her sass.

“Like what you’re looking at?” Mei Lee asked after a short while.

“Sorry,” Collier apologized and looked away a little. “I didn’t mean to stare.”

Mei Lee shrugged. “No big deal. I suppose I owe a good look to my ‘knight in shining armor’,” she said, chuckling.

“I’m no hero. Not by a long shot,” Collier tried to assure her. As he reached to take another bite, Mei Lee touched his hand lightly.

“In that split second, you were. At least that’s how I see it,” she said. “And that’s all that counts. Being heroic is just stringing those split seconds into several instances of longer duration.”

“We-e-ell, look-ee here. Collier is sitting with his boyfriend,” Metzger taunted, as he came storming up to the pair. Collier got to his feet. “You got a beatin’ comin’, Galahad,” he said sternly to Collier.

“You just leave us be,” Collier responded roughly. He was taller than Metzger, but his muscle mass had diminished through starvation.

Metzger stood looking at Collier; fingering the hilt of his twelve-inch

machete. "Don't push it, Collier," he warned.

"Metzger, Whittier wants us," Burns said, trotting up to Metzger.

Metzger looked at the two and then turned toward the pod.

"I'd make myself scarce for a while, if I were you two," Burns warned, once Metzger was out of earshot. Burns hurried to follow him.

Several hours later, Murdock and Rose emerged from the main entrance to the cave complex and started walking down the path toward the woods and the stream at the bottom. The majority of their gear hung from various points on Murdock's body. He carried his bow and wore the quiver with their precious few arrows. Rose, who wore her buckskin dress, walked with a spear and carried four more diagonally in a bundle behind her back. Murdock had rigged a way to tie the spears together tight enough that they could be carried silently, but could be dropped instantly by simply pulling on a leather tie at the chest. An outside observer who didn't know better would have taken them for a frontier Native American couple.

As they usually did, they walked with Murdock in the lead. As their journey progressed, Murdock's mind continued to roll over the conversation between himself and Rose several hours prior. *I believe Rose is partially right about the Oomah, he thought. I would agree that they would be powerful allies, or dangerous enemies, but I believe Beron, at least, did have a stake in our personal lives and what happens to us.* Before he learned how powerful they really were, Murdock had felt what he thought was genuine affection coming from his large friend during casual visits. In his heart, Murdock believed Beron loved his favorite mate and had truly worried about her the night Murdock treated her paw. *I remember Beron, that night, was not projecting any feelings that I could pick up on, he thought, but Beron was too concerned about his mate to not project something.* He suspected that Beron was closely guarding his

thoughts and feelings so that no one in the cave would pick up on them.

When they reached the stream, they decided to rest and fill their water skins before pressing on.

“You look like a beautiful princess,” Murdock told his wife, smiling at her as she filled the water skins while he watched for threats.

Rose grinned back at him with the little sideways tilt to her head that she often used when being clever or seductive. “Thank you, love! I feel very special this morning, as a matter of fact,” she said, smiling broadly.

“It’s more like early afternoon.”

“If you say so, love,” Rose said and sighed deeply.

“What, no quips?” he asked, putting on a mock look of surprise.

“I’m not in the mood.” She sighed again, smiling lovingly up at him.

“Are you in the mood for a repeat performance?” Murdock quipped, chuckling.

“No, I’m not, thank you very much. That last performance was sufficient to last me a good long time,” she smirked. “Well, a few more hours, anyway. I was just thinking that I can’t remember ever being this happy.”

“I know what you mean,” he said, nodding in a knowing way. “Me neither! I do have a little surprise for you, though.”

“Yes, dear one?” she asked, as she got to her feet after filling the water skins.

“I’ve decided that we should trade weapons,” he stated. “You’ve become quite good with the bow, and I think you deserve to take the first shot if we see a deer.”

Rose’s mouth opened in surprise. “I don’t know if I could,” she protested. “You’re much better than me, and a lot is riding on taking another deer. You better do it!”

“Rose,” he said, with as much confidence as he could muster, “you need to learn to do this, too. What if I should be injured to the point that I can’t go hunting or even pull the bow?”

Rose shook her head. “No, I refuse to believe that anything will happen to you,” she stated flatly.

“It could. You never know,” he said, trying to convince her to be realistic.

“I’m not ready,” she protested again.

Murdock, being patient, looked at her. “Rose, do you trust my judgment?” he asked in a loving way.

“You know I do,” she said emphatically.

“Then it’s settled,” Murdock said, removing the quiver and handing it to her.

Rose took a deep breath and removed the bundle of spears she was carrying, setting them on the ground. Her hands shook as she donned the quiver and accepted the bow from him. Murdock picked up the bundle of spears and tied them diagonally to his back, then accepted the spear Rose had carried. After they finished the weapons transfer, she immediately pulled out an arrow and nocked it, just as he had taught her. Then they set off once again.

“Just don’t shoot me in the back,” he quipped over his shoulder.

“No promises,” she returned, chuckling.

Murdock had decided to head back to the spot at which they had taken a deer the last time. As they walked silently through the woods, Murdock periodically glanced over his shoulder. He knew she was following him, but she made no sound. Rose held the nocked arrow point down, with her index finger over the arrow to hold it, just as he had taught her.

He beamed with pride as he returned his attention to the trail. He couldn’t be more proud of her. She was turning out to be a far better student than he had been at her stage. All she needed was a little more confidence.

On the way to the hunting spot, Murdock decided to check the stream crossing he’d set as the boundary for his territory. He had not returned since rescuing Rose, and he had wondered for some time whether the others had respected his turf. He knew they hadn’t, but felt he needed to check.

During one of their rest stops, Rose asked again about her rescue, and Murdock retold the story to her.

“I don’t understand how you heard me cry out even though I don’t remember doing it, especially because you were so far away from the site,” she wondered aloud.

“Well, it was night... and you know how quiet it can be at night,” he responded.

“If I were as far away as you’ve said, I don’t doubt you, of course, but that’s well past the hearing range of any human.”

“I’ve always had good hearing... and I suspect that Beron had more than a little to do with my hearing you. Does it really matter?” he said, looking at her blankly.

“It’s just that it’s a puzzle that’s been gnawing at me. Any other *special abilities* I should know about?” Rose asked.

“None that I’m aware of,” he said. Then he told her, “You take the lead from here.” She nodded, and they stealthily walked on.

Several hours later, though Murdock figured they were only halfway to the area in which he wanted to hunt, he called for them to halt. He looked around, found a likely campsite, and started making the preparations. Rose returned the arrow to the quiver and, beginning to gather firewood, she helped prepare the camp without Murdock’s telling her. They had been walking roughly parallel to the stream since leaving the cave, and he knew they were only a couple hundred yards from it. So after getting a fire started, he headed for the stream to fish.

As he approached, he heard someone in the water. He quietly continued until he saw someone standing in the middle of the stream. The person seemed to be talking to the water. Even in the quickly deepening gloom, Murdock knew the individual was Collier. Though Murdock was fairly certain Collier hadn’t spotted him, he checked the area anyway to make sure. Then, certain no one had spotted him, Murdock headed upstream a few hundred yards before crossing. Then he crept up on Collier as quietly as he could.

“Here, little fishie,” Collier, who stooped over, was saying to the water. “Come to Papa... ‘cause Daddy needs to eat!”

Murdock tried not to laugh as he got as close behind Collier as he could.

“Does that help?” Murdock asked him quietly.

Collier turned, fell back into the water, and tried to get away as fast as he could, crab-walking backward.

“Sweet holy Jesus!” Collier yelled, wide-eyed and panicky. “I wasn’t doin’ nothin’, Mr. Murdock! I wasn’t on your side of the stream!”

“Didn’t say you were,” Murdock replied quietly. “You do need to work on

being quieter, though... and more aware of your surroundings.”

Collier stood up and started to shake the water from his hands and arms.

“You could’ve let a body know you were around,” Collier complained. “Not that I’m trying to tell you what to do or anything,” he quickly added.

Murdock took up a position, speared a fish expertly, and tossed it to the bank. “Have you eaten lately?” he asked Collier, while spearing another, tossing it to the bank as well. He hadn’t looked at Collier at all, and if he hadn’t been talking, the other man wouldn’t have known that Murdock noticed him at all.

“Been a while,” Collier responded, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. He rocked nervously from one foot to the other.

“Well, when you’re done—” Murdock speared a third fish, “—playing in the water, you can come to the camp. It’s about two hundred yards that way.” Murdock indicated the general direction of the camp, picked up the fish on the bank, and started off in that direction. Collier followed him cautiously. As he approached the camp, Murdock gave a little whistle and walked into the empty camp. When he hunkered down to clean the fish, he saw Rose hiding behind a tree, bow at the ready. Collier wasn’t far behind him.

Murdock paid attention to cleaning the fish. “You’re a long way from home, aren’t you?” he asked Collier, without looking at him.

“I suppose,” Collier answered cautiously. “From your point of view, I am, but not from mine.”

“They kicked you out, didn’t they?” Murdock asked.

“No, they didn’t kick me out... exactly,” Collier responded, guarded.

“Pick up that water skin and rinse these fish, okay?” Murdock requested, holding the fish out. Collier did as he was asked. The other man did glance in the general vicinity of the knife Murdock used to clean the fish, but his action wasn’t enough to unduly concern Murdock. After Collier rinsed the fish and Murdock had put them on sticks to cook, Murdock stood up.

“Can I trust you, Collier?” he asked, staring the man in the eyes warily.

“Hey, you invited me,” Collier stated. “I can leave if you really want me to!”

“Okay, fair enough. Let’s say that we agree to eat and talk and to trust each other while we do. Does that sound reasonable to you?” Murdock asked.

“Sure,” Collier agreed with a shrug.

Murdock gave a quick motion to let Rose know she could come into the camp. He had done so quickly, and he was sure Collier didn't see the motion.

“You look a lot thinner than I remember, Collier,” Rose said from behind, but close to him.

“Sweet Jesus!” Collier jumped up and almost landed in the fire, stumbling around, but managing to keep his feet. He just missed the fire and the cooking fish. “What is it with you two? You don't always have to sneak up on a body!” Murdock watched as the light slowly turned on in Collier's brain. “Hey, you're Rose Griffen, aren't you?” Rose nodded. “You're supposed to be dead!”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Rose quipped indignantly.

“Not what I meant, sorry,” Collier apologized. “It's what we were told. Whittier told us that Murdock took you and killed you.”

Collier hunkered back down close to the fire, staring into the flames. He appeared to enjoy the warmth, which helped to dry him.

“So, what happened to you?” Murdock asked as he tended the fish. Rose sat close by on a log, weapons close at hand.

“Nothin' much.” Collier shrugged.

“Rose is right. You have lost a lot of weight; what happened?” Murdock asked again, trying to carry on a conversation to draw the man out.

“Well, after you scared me out of five years' growth, and I'm not complainin' — I deserved it, should've heeded your warning. After we all got back to the transport pod, I basically lost my job. Metzger, the one who got it, continued to ridicule me, and the rest mocked me, basically became an outcast. While I had the job, I ate pretty good and regular; after, not so much.” Collier wound down a little and sat looking into the fire.

“What about Rose?” Murdock asked again.

“We were told that they were trying to work some trade with you, and you got mad and stole Rose. They said they saw you rape her and beat her and carry her off, threatening to kill her if they tried anything,” Collier told them.

“Did you believe that?” Murdock asked.

“Not really,” Collier replied, frowning and still staring at the flames.

“Why not?” Murdock asked. He wondered if Collier was hypnotized by the flames.

“You let me go when you could’ve killed me and Burns.” Collier paused a long time. “It didn’t fit that you would beat a woman. It didn’t sound like something you’d do,” Collier finished.

“Did they kick you out?” Murdock repeated.

“No, they just don’t pay me no mind. I go out by myself a lot, trying to find something to eat,” Collier answered. “Whittier doesn’t feed everyone what they need. Keeps saying that all this is a fake and those watching won’t let us starve. But everyone is on reduced rations.”

By this time, the fish were done, and Murdock offered one to Collier, then took one over to Rose, who had been sitting quietly, listening. She looked as if she was trying not to tell him *I told you so*, but he could tell from her expression that she was thinking it. Murdock took his fish, and everyone started to eat.

“If it’s been a while since you ate, Collier, I’d eat that slowly,” Murdock warned.

“Tastes pretty good cooked,” Collier said, after trying a couple of bites. “The ones I catch, I have to eat raw. I haven’t figured out how to make a fire. Say, what did happen to you, Rose?”

Rose related to Collier what had happened to her and how she came to be with Murdock. She didn’t mention the Oomah or their cave sanctuary.

“Did they really carve words into you?” Collier asked when she had finished. Rose pulled her dress yoke a little so Collier could see the top of a few of the letters. “Damn, that looks painful!”

“It was,” Rose responded.

“Where do you go from here?” Murdock asked.

“Back to the transport pod, I guess, at least that general area,” Collier responded half-heartedly. “Don’t have anywhere else to go. Besides, someone is waiting for me to come back.”

“Why don’t you leave that group?” Murdock asked.

“I don’t know enough woodcraft to feed or defend myself...” Collier’s words trailed off to nothing. After a short pause, he continued, “Some of the others are

on their last legs. Whittier has almost starved all of them to death.”

Murdock didn't know what else to say. He didn't like hearing that the others were being starved, but he also didn't know how many others backed Whittier and company. He sat brooding.

“You didn't like the fish?” Rose asked Collier.

Murdock noticed that he had only eaten half of what he was given.

“Oh, no, it was great, very filling!” Collier said, patting his belly. “You don't mind if I take the rest with me?”

“Why would we mind? We gave it to you. You can do with it as you see fit. It just won't keep for long, is all,” Rose informed him.

“Well, it's dark, and I should've been back before now. I wouldn't want to worry anyone. Sure did appreciate the hospitality, though,” Collier said, as he stood to leave.

“Thanks for the information, and the company.” Murdock smiled. He stood and shook hands with Collier. Collier looked shocked at the expression of civility.

“It was pleasant having you join us,” Rose piped in, without getting up.

Murdock walked with Collier back toward the transport pod.

“You know, I could use some help for the next few days, I need to harvest a deer. I'd be willing to share some of the meat with you, for helping, if you're interested?” Murdock asked, after they were across the stream. He did not find it easy to ask for help, but he could use it. More importantly, he could tell that Collier needed to feel useful.

“When is that?” Collier asked.

“It's where we're going and what we'll be doing for the next couple of days. If you're willing, meet me on my side of the stream up by the transport pod watering hole late in the day tomorrow. You need to make arrangements to be gone a day or two,” Murdock told him.

“Okay. You're serious?” Collier asked, incredulous.

“Yes, I'm serious. Could really use the help and besides, you might learn more than you think,” Murdock said, trying to lift Collier's mood.

Murdock watched Collier head in the direction of the pod. He waited until he

was out of sight before returning to camp.

“What do you think?” Murdock asked Rose after he returned. He took a stick and absentmindedly stirred the coals of the fire as he kept an ear open for sounds of an attack. He didn’t trust Collier enough to be totally comfortable with his knowing their location.

Rose shrugged. “I don’t like to think that anyone could be so cruel as to allow others to starve just for politics or for entertainment. Don’t know what else there is to say.”

“What about Collier?” Murdock asked.

“He certainly has changed! His spirit seems to be... broken. Was that your doing?” she asked.

Murdock had not looked at her while they talked. “I’d like to think that it wasn’t.” He paused. “But I can’t be certain.”

They both sat staring into the flames.

“Was your offer about the deer-hunt a serious one?” Rose asked after a long pause.

“Yes, it was,” Murdock said. “As helpful as you are, taking a deer is a lot of work, and another strong back would be appreciated. Besides, Collier needs to feel useful, and I thought he might benefit from the experience.”

“And were you going to share the take with him?” Rose asked.

“Of course! I was thinking a front quarter for helping as much as I plan to make him work,” Murdock responded. *It would be better than just giving him something to eat*, he thought.

“It would be better than just giving him something to eat without seeing what went into it,” Rose said absentmindedly, staring into the flames.

Murdock’s head snapped up as he looked at her.

“What?” she asked.

“I was just thinking those very words. How do you do that?” he asked.

“Do what?” she asked innocently.

“Since we’ve been together, you seem to be able to read my mind,” Murdock said.

“Oh, pooh! I think you’re confusing some sort of telepathy with just

knowing each other to the point that we can finish each other's sentences."

"What about all the times I just thought about finding you for a kiss, and then you showed up and gave me one?" he asked suspiciously.

"You don't think I might need a kiss and seek you out for one?" she asked warily.

"I'm not upset," he stated. "It's just that it's —" he paused, "— unnerving, when it happens."

"Why is this coming up now?" Rose asked.

Murdock shrugged. "It was something Beron said during our long sharing session."

Rose sat on the log looking into the flames, hands in her lap.

"Okay, I've always been able to tell when someone close to me needed something from me, like a kiss or a hug," she said, after pausing to get her thoughts together. "It's not mind-reading per se. It's more like a feeling. I would say, empathy more than telepathy."

"But you just said exactly what I was thinking," Murdock rebutted. "And I didn't mention the deer-hunt to you when I got back. How did you know about it?"

Rose thought for quite some time. "My theory is that *sharing* with Beron and his mate has turned my empathy talent into something else. I didn't read your thoughts. I did, however, know that you would make the offer in order to make Collier feel better. That's something you would do. You're that type of man."

Murdock looked at her for a long time. He was unsure if she had finished her explanation.

"Just tell me one thing," he said, when it was apparent that she had finished. "Did you know Collier was coming with me into camp?"

Rose flushed. "I knew someone was with you," she said finally. "I didn't know it was Collier."

"When did you know I was bringing someone with me?" Murdock asked.

"When you two were at the stream," she said, looking into the fire.

They both continued to stare into the flames.



Several hours had passed since sun-down, and Mei Lee was getting cold and worried. Collier had told her he would be back around sun-down, but wasn't there yet. The two had been staying in Collier's little hideaway since the confrontation with Whittier in the pod. They both had managed to collect some boughs for them to lie on, as well as to help conceal them. Neither had ever seen anyone else around their hideaway, but there was always a first time. After all, they weren't too far from the pool that the others used to get water.

When Mei Lee heard something heading her way, she held her breath and tried to make herself small and invisible.

She heard the whisper in the dark. "Mei Lee." Mei Lee breathed again in relief.

"Here, Tom," she whispered back.

When he entered, Collier took off his shirt and gave it to Mei Lee, who immediately put it on. It helped to warm her. After he had sat down, he gave her the half-eaten fish.

"Where did you get this?" she asked quietly. She was hoping for something to eat, but a cooked fish was too much to hope for.

"Eat up. I've already had mine," Collier whispered close to her ear. "We'll talk after you eat."

Mei Lee ate greedily, and soon the fish was devoured. When she finished, she threw the remains toward the stream as far as she could.

"Where were you?" she whispered close to Collier's ear. "I was getting worried."

"You wouldn't believe it. I'm not sure I believe it," Collier began. "You need to calm yourself. Rose Griffen is alive."

Mei Lee had to stifle a scream. "You saw her?" she whispered, trying to remain calm.

"Yes, and I also saw Murdock," Collier responded. Mei Lee didn't respond, but she did stiffen in shock.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?" she asked quietly, after recovering a

little.

“He was nice. They both were,” Collier responded excitedly, whispering. “He even shook my hand. Seems like forever since someone shook my hand.”

“You crossed the stream,” she whispered. “And if Whittier knew you had seen them and not told him, he’d have you killed.”

“I didn’t just cross the stream. He met me in the middle of it and invited me,” Collier whispered back. “I got a job to do tomorrow.”

“What kind of a job?” Mei Lee asked.

“Helping to get a deer, is all I know,” Collier explained. “It means meat for us to eat.”

Mei Lee said nothing for a long time. “Can you trust him?” she asked finally.

“More than I can trust Whittier and that bunch.”

“Are you coming back when you’re finished?” Mei Lee asked softly. She knew her whisper sounded sad. When Collier remained silent for a while, “If you don’t want to come back, I’ll understand,” she continued, as she rolled away from Collier.

Collier held her close and rose up on one arm so he could whisper in her ear. “I’ve got to get permission to stay, but you are going with me, if you want.”

Mei Lee rolled over quickly. “To get the deer?” she asked excitedly in his ear.

“Yes, tomorrow, when I cross the stream to meet up with Murdock, you’re going with me,” Collier said. “I’m done with Whittier and that bunch. If Murdock will have us, then we can learn from him and Rose. If they want us to move on, we’ll find our own place.”

Mei Lee cuddled close to Collier. She went to sleep excited about the new day coming.



The next morning, both Murdock and Rose woke early and broke camp shortly after sun-up.

“Where did you tell Collier you’d meet him?” Rose asked as she made final

preparations.

“I wasn’t very specific,” Murdock told her as he, too, finished preparations. “I just said on this side of the stream where you used to get water.”

Rose shivered. “I don’t like getting that close to the others! Specifically, Whittier, Burns, and Metzger,” she said with venom.

“I don’t like you getting that close, either,” Murdock said, “but Collier would only know major landmarks. He said he hasn’t been over since I scared him out.”

When they were ready, Murdock led the way. He had decided to make camp close to their first camp on the first hunting trip. He thought they could get there in time to get camp set up and then rendezvous with Collier.

After some time of walking, Murdock heard Rose request a stop.

“Why did you stop?” Rose asked.

“Because you asked me to.” Murdock looked at her strangely. “You did, didn’t you?”

Rose looked puzzled. “You heard me ask to stop?” she asked.

Murdock shrugged. “Yes, I heard you plainly. You didn’t scream it, but I heard you. Why?”

Rose took a deep breath. “I whispered as softly as I could. I could barely hear it myself. You were a good thirty or forty feet away.” She stood looking at him.

“What do you want me to say?” Murdock asked. “I told you I had good hearing!” He handed her the water skin.

Rose took it, drank deeply, and then looked at him skeptically. Murdock took back the water skin and drank deeply as well.

“I didn’t ask for water out loud,” Rose stated. Murdock went pale.

“When we can, we need to sit down and try to figure this out,” Murdock said. “There’s more going on than we’re aware of.”

“I agree. Do you think Beron can help?” Rose asked.

“Maybe, but I’d rather we try to figure it out first,” Murdock suggested. “If he can help, or will help, he can fill in the gaps.”

“How much farther are we going?” Rose asked.

“Another couple of hours and we should be close,” Murdock responded.

They headed off again, staying as quiet as possible while Murdock dealt with his thoughts.



Collier and Mei Lee awoke at daybreak. They had nothing to pack or carry, so they headed off toward the stream crossing. Collier led the way, with Mei Lee watching for signals that she should hide. She still wore his shirt. As Collier approached the stream crossing, he saw a few colonists getting water, so he gave the signal. Both lay down and were very still. Collier could hear talking, but though he tried to see, he could not hear what was said. When he saw the last person leave, he motioned for Mei Lee to come up to him.

They both lay hidden in the tall grass.

“I want you to run as fast as you can across the stream and down the big main path you’ll see after you cross,” Collier whispered to her.

“What about you?” Mei Lee whispered back.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Collier responded. “Just don’t stop for anything until you’re a fair distance away from the crossing.”

Mei Lee took off, running as fast as she could toward the crossing. Collier continued to watch for others heading their way while he ran after Mei Lee. Mei Lee hit the water with one foot and was across. Right behind her, Collier also hit the water with a single step in the middle and was across. They both continued on.

Because they were so close to each other and running as fast as they could, they both failed to see Burns standing on the trail. As Mei Lee hit Burns, Burns grabbed her with both arms and spun off to the side. Collier didn’t hit Burns or Mei Lee and quickly stopped on his own, turning on Burns. Before he could say anything, something poked him sharply in his bare back.

“I’d stand real still if I were you, Collier!” Metzger said from behind him.



It took Murdock and Rose longer to reach the proposed campsite than Murdock had originally thought. When they did get to the general area, Murdock motioned for Rose to stop and stay put. He checked the campsite and surrounding area for the presence of others. After drinking and resting a bit, Rose began getting the camp ready for cooking and sleeping, while Murdock started cutting what he needed to make another travois.

After everything was cut, Rose helped to build the travois. When it was finished, Rose stood up quickly, looking at nothing at all. Then Murdock looked at her and saw her face blanch.

“Something is wrong,” she said, looking agitated.

Quickly, Murdock determined that there was nothing wrong in their immediate area. He immediately started to worry that Collier may have gotten himself into something he needed help to get out of.

As they prepared to leave, Murdock checked the sun’s position and realized dusk was approaching. They started off, Murdock in the lead, looking for Collier.

Just after dusk, Murdock suddenly dropped behind a tree. Rose immediately did the same and watched him for signals. Then she heard men laughing and yelling. Murdock signaled her to be quiet and stay put. Rose nodded her understanding, and Murdock crept ahead. He hadn’t gone very far when he came upon the sickening scene.

Three men were gathered in a small clearing ahead, one — who was screaming — sitting on the ground with his back against a log. The man’s arms were draped over the log behind him. Another man stood behind the log doing something to the seated man’s hands, Murdock guessed. The third man was hitting and kicking something not far away from the seated man.

Something touched Murdock’s arm slightly, and he turned sharply. Rose stood right behind him, and he scowled at her. With her eyes, she indicated the scene, and as two of the men stood, Murdock recognized them; *Burns and Metzger*.

Murdock indicated that Rose needed to stay put, and he crept in a little closer, moving to the side to get a better look at the seated man. From his

vantage point, he could see that the seated man was Collier. Murdock pulled the knot to release the bundle of spears and stood up.

The spears clattered slightly when they hit the ground, and the two standing men turned sharply toward him.

“Don’t you two have anything better to do?” Murdock asked them. He leaned a little on the spear, which was point-up. He looked very relaxed. “You should know by now that the woods are dangerous at night!”

“This is none of your concern, Murdock,” Burns yelled, pointing at him with a twelve-inch machete. “So just you crawl back into the hole you came out of!”

“Hey, Burns,” Metzger yelled, chuckling. He was looking at Murdock with a sadistic grin. “Is this one going to be as much fun as the last one?” he said over his shoulder to Burns.

“Please, don’t hurt her anymore,” Collier pleaded breathlessly from his seated position, head lolling forward.

Murdock saw that Collier, who had blood running down his face, had been beaten; he seemed unable to get to his feet.

“I’m going to take a lot of pleasure from this slope bitch before we’re done!” Metzger said sadistically, as he walked closer to the center of the clearing.

Both men warily watched Murdock as they slowly moved toward each other.

“Yeah, with any luck, she’ll last longer than the last one!” Burns said loudly, never taking his eyes off Murdock. “They aren’t as much fun until they’re out cold!”

“I wonder sometimes whatever happened to that stupid bitch,” Metzger said, watching Murdock intently.

“You picked her,” Burns chided Metzger with a snicker.

“I know, but the dumb bitch needed me to lie to her before she’d give it up,” Metzger responded. “She should’ve known that men only tell women what they want to hear to get into their pants!”

Murdock heard the slight twang of the bowstring from behind him and ran forward after the arrow passed him. The arrow hit Metzger in the shoulder. Metzger spun and dropped. Murdock jumped forward and, with two quick strikes with the butt end of the spear, hit Burns in the groin and then on the top

of his head. The other man dropped to one knee, head down, and Murdock straightened him up with a swift kick to the face. Burns passed out on his back, still holding the machete.

When Metzger rolled over, he saw Murdock, grinning and holding the spearhead threateningly close to his face. Rose emerged from the woods ready to shoot again, if necessary.

“You stupid bitch, you shot me!” Metzger yelled when she was close enough to be seen. He seethed with anger.

Murdock promptly smacked him on the side of his head with the butt end of the spear, hard enough to snap his head sharply to the side.

“I’ll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head,” Murdock said sternly down to Metzger, “before someone cuts it out!”

“You’re going to get yours, Murdock,” Metzger snickered, turning his head slowly back to look at him.

Murdock struck him again with the butt of the spear, once again, hard enough to snap his head to the side. Metzger grinned as he turned his head back toward him and spit a mouthful of blood on the ground.

“Your kind never learns to keep your trap shut, do they, Metzger?” Murdock asked. “Cover him, Rose, and if he so much as blinks, put another shaft into him, and I don’t care where!”

Rose stood ready, out of reach of Metzger. Metzger could see the anger on her face and just grinned.

“Oh, come on, babe! You know I was only joking! I was just trying to get Murdock’s goat,” Metzger said to Rose, as Murdock stood on Burns’ wrist and took the machete.

Burns, who was starting to come around, groaned a little. Murdock dropped the spear, tied a quick knot around Burns’ wrist with a leather thong, rolled Burns over, and then tied the other wrist before Burns knew what was going on.

“What about all we meant to each other?” Metzger asked the motionless Rose, who was ready to shoot again.

“Help her... please,” Collier pleaded weakly.

Murdock went over to the body that Burns had been kicking and hitting and

rolled it over gently. *She* was a rail-thin Asian female of slight build in her early twenties. He recognized her through the blood and terrible bruises on her face, but he couldn't recall her name. She had been stripped and had much the same kind of bruises he'd seen on Rose. He clearly saw a recent but healed scar in the shape of a *W* on her left upper breast.

"Is she okay?" Collier asked weakly.

Murdock checked her pulse and breathing and left her lying down. He hurried over to Metzger, pulling out another leather thong as he went. Then he wrenched Metzger's hands behind him, intentionally hurting the shoulder with the arrow still in it. When Metzger's hands were secured behind him, Murdock tossed a short length of Rose's homemade rope over a low-hanging limb. He tied one end around Metzger's neck and tied the other to Metzger's ankles after pushing him forward onto his knees and face, pulling his legs out behind him. To Murdock's satisfaction, when the arrow-nock touched the ground, Metzger screamed in pain as it cut deeper into his shoulder. Metzger had to arch his back to bend his upper body backward to raise the arrow-nock off the ground to get relief from the pain.

"Think of it as a good aerobic exercise," Murdock whispered into Metzger's ear. He then checked on Collier, who hadn't moved much since the excitement started. When he jumped over the log against which Collier leaned, Murdock saw that Collier's upper arms were tied. The rope passed under the log and then went around his waist. Blood covered Collier's left hand; upon closer inspection, Murdock saw that the other man's left thumb had been cut off at the first joint and still bled profusely. Collier, too, was naked.

"Rose, give me one of your leather napkins," Murdock pressed her.

Rose, who had stopped guarding Metzger now that he was secured and had dropped most of what she carried, was tending the female. She quickly complied with her husband's request then returned to the injured female.

Murdock cut Collier's bonds and then, using the wolf hide, wrapped the stub of the man's left thumb as tightly as he could. Then he left Collier in the same position. Collier's head lolled backward, and Murdock saw a "T" carved into the man's forehead, which also bled.

Just as night fell, Murdock quickly found an adequate spot to start a fire. After the fire was going and Murdock had checked on Metzger's and Burns' bonds, he trotted over to Rose, who still tended the unconscious female.

"Is she okay?" he asked.

"Of course she's okay! The party was just getting started when you two crashed it," Metzger chimed in, grinning at the two newcomers.

Rose looked up at Murdock with a grave expression.

"What is it with you and distressed damsels?" she chided quietly.

"I don't know. Must be my winning personality," he quipped back. "Who would've thought?"

"I don't know yet if she is all right. Her eyes are swollen shut, and my guess is she'll be sore and out of it for a while, but she should be physically okay, eventually," Rose reported. Then, with venom, she added, "No thanks to them." She glared at Metzger and Burns.

"That was an excellent shot you made, by the way," Murdock praised her.

Rose grinned up at him sheepishly.

"I'm sorry, I should've let you handle it, but they were infuriating me," she told him. "I shot when I couldn't take any more!"

"You did perfect," Murdock told her. "Did you see the carving on her chest?"

"Yeah, I did," she said with vehemence. "Bastards!"

"You know her?" he asked.

"Mei Lee Soong. She was always nice and on the quiet side. From 'Frisco, I think," Rose told him as she continued cleaning up the injured girl. "What's up with Collier?" she asked, after a few seconds.

"He has a carving on his forehead, and they cut off his left thumb," he told her. "If he doesn't bleed to death, he'll be okay."

"Except for playing the piano," Rose quipped.

Murdock chuckled as he went to tend the fire and check the prisoners.

"Get this arrow out of my shoulder," Metzger demanded loudly.

"Sure," Murdock responded, "Just as soon as you give us a thousand reasons why I should."

"This is cruel and inhumane treatment!" Metzger objected.

“Well, then, it’s perfect. You two qualify as both *cruel and inhuman*,” Murdock replied without humor. “I got a news flash for you, shit-head! I’m the law out here!”

“Personally, it would be okay with me if the son-of-a-bitch bled to death,” Rose injected with nonchalance, still turned away. “I might even pay to watch.”

“Want to cover him while I retie him?” Murdock asked Rose.

“Sure,” Rose said with too much pleasure, retrieving the bow and an arrow. Metzger and Murdock could see the evil in her grin as she took up her position.

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” Murdock whispered into Metzger’s ear, while he untied the rope from his ankles. As he helped Metzger to his feet, Murdock kept tension on the rope around his neck. Once Metzger stood tall, Murdock secured the rope to the tree. “I wouldn’t slouch too much if I were you, fat boy,” Murdock said, patting the man’s small but developing paunch.

Rose relaxed after Metzger was secured once more and walked over to the fire with her back to Metzger.

“This just makes me livid,” she said to Murdock, who now joined her next to the fire, his back to Metzger as well. “I was really looking forward to hunting with my hubby. Instead, I have to contend with these two assholes!”

“Now, now, dear,” Murdock chided. “Didn’t your mama teach you to be kind to dumb animals?”

“Yeah, but Dad taught me rabid dogs are to be killed on sight,” she responded with venom.

“So, what do we do with them?” Murdock asked Rose, loud enough for the prisoners to hear, winking at her conspiratorially.

“We could leave them for the wolves,” Rose offered just as loudly and with cheerful relish.

“Maybe that grizzly we saw a couple of days ago will get them instead,” Murdock offered, grinning at Rose.

“Oh, yeah, he would definitely fix their little red wagon for them!” Rose agreed with glee.

“How big was he, you think?” Murdock asked Rose, with a smirk.

“He must have been twelve feet tall, at least,” Rose said, smirking back.

“I think it was closer to fifteen, but I wouldn’t want to try to measure him to settle it,” Murdock corrected. “Mean sucker, too!”

“I don’t give a damn what you two do, but you better make sure you kill me,” Metzger warned, a little panic edging into his voice. “You don’t, I’ll hunt you both down! And I have something special in mind for you, *Miss Priss*! I’ll make sure you experience every little thing, too!”

Murdock walked up to Metzger, eyes blazing.

“You’re going to hunt me? Like you have since we got here? It appears to me that your style is to hurt the helpless and defenseless,” Murdock said with menace, through clenched teeth. “You’ll find I am not that easy!” He returned to Rose, trying to relax.

“Did he just say he had a *little thing*?” Murdock asked Rose, hooking his thumb back toward Metzger.

“It sounded that way to me,” Rose responded with a chuckle. “First thing he’s said that was truthful!”

Murdock turned and pulled out the twelve-inch machete he had taken from Burns and then walked slowly toward Metzger. As he walked, Murdock rubbed his thumb against the edge of the blade, testing its sharpness.

“We could always neuter him,” Murdock offered to Rose over his shoulder as he advanced on Metzger. “It would be fitting justice for *Mister Rapist* here.”

Rose came bounding over to Murdock’s side.

“I like that idea,” she said, with malice in her voice. “Whatever you decide to cut off, stuff it down his throat.” She grinned with evil intent at Metzger. “But only if the knife is dull!”

“This one’s dull,” Murdock told Rose, still running his thumb over the edge.

Metzger’s face remained unreadable. Murdock could see that he was not bothered by what they were saying.

“You always were overly melodramatic, Rose, and very easy,” Metzger said.

Murdock kicked the side of his knee just gently enough so as not to break or dislocate it. Metzger slouched a little and choked some before regaining his balance.

“Such sass,” Murdock exclaimed. “You need to be more respectful of your betters.”

“I would,” Metzger said as he turned to look Murdock in the eye, “if I had any!”

Murdock stomped down with his heel on Metzger’s instep and felt a satisfying crunch. Metzger raised his injured foot, gritted his teeth, and refused

to look away from the pair in front of him. Murdock turned slowly and looked down at Burns, who was conscious and listening quietly. Murdock kicked Burns, not too softly, in his paunch.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” he asked, looking down at Burns.

Burns said nothing, but from the look in his eyes, Murdock knew he was afraid. Burns’ fear was so strong that Murdock could smell it.

“I have an idea,” Rose piped in. “Why don’t we wait and see what Mei Lee and Collier have to say?”

“And if neither makes it?” Murdock asked her.

“We could always feed them to the *monsters*,” she replied.

“I think that would be too cruel,” Murdock responded, “even for these two.”

“It may be excessively cruel,” Rose reflected, “but only for the *monsters*. These two deserve whatever they get.”

Murdock rechecked the bonds on the two prisoners and, finding them secure, checked on Collier. His pulse was a little on the weak side for Murdock’s taste, and the injured man remained unconscious. After that, he checked on Mei Lee. She seemed to be doing a little better. He picked her up, carried her closer to the fire, and gently laid her on the ground. Rose had gotten out some smoked venison and warmed it a little in the fire. Murdock went to gather more wood, though he was never far from the fire.

“What are we going to do with them?” Murdock asked Rose softly, indicating Collier and Mei Lee, as he dropped the wood by the fire.

“I don’t know,” she said softly as she handed him a piece of venison.

Murdock sat close to Rose at the fire and looked across the clearing at the prisoners.

“Was I this bad?” she asked, indicating Mei Lee with her eyes.

“No, love, you were worse,” he said so the others couldn’t hear. “You know we have to guard them?”

“Yes, dear one, I know,” she said sadly.

“You take the first watch,” Murdock told her. “I don’t think Collier is going to be a problem for a while yet, if at all, and I don’t trust any of them. So, keep a sharp eye.”

Murdock got up and went to check the prisoners again.

“If either of you hurt Rose, you will face my wrath, which will be considerable,” he said to Burns and Metzger. He walked back to the fire, lay down, and closed his eyes.

Rose kept a close vigil on the camp while Murdock slept. No one gave her any trouble. When she grew too tired, she woke Murdock with a soft kiss. He hadn't been sleeping very soundly and was awake immediately. Rose lay down and went to sleep.

While he sat watching the prisoners and their victims, Murdock turned the available options over in his mind. Beating the hell out of them and turning them loose would solve nothing. They would continue to be a danger to others. He was sure that he and Rose would have to look over their shoulders for the rest of their lives, and he would be no better than they were by causing more suffering. Would it be any better a solution if he killed them outright, slaughtered them like the animals they were, which had been his initial desire since finding Rose? Was there honor in execution? Not for them, not that they had any honor to begin with, but Murdock did have to live with any decision he made.

He did have the combat option. He hadn't engaged in full combat for a long time. And if they managed to kill him, what would happen to Rose? If he killed them, then he thought he could live with that. At least they would have a chance. *More of a chance than Rose, Collier, or Mei Lee had*, he thought. And he knew it was *his* decision to make. He had declared, when he was ousted, that the land on this side of the stream was his, but that would be viewed as an empty threat by doing nothing and would never be respected.

As he mulled this over, Collier started to stir a little. Murdock went to him and saw the injured man would come around soon. The carving on his forehead had stopped bleeding, at least.

“Collier, you hear me?” he asked, shaking the man's head by the hair.

Collier seemed to be coming around, but he was extremely weak.

“Collier,” Murdock repeated more loudly, shaking his head again by the hair.

“Let the thief die,” Metzger spat.

Murdock walked over to Metzger, grabbed the arrow, and pulled a little.

Metzger winced from the intense pain.

“This arrow was not designed to pull out,” he said to Metzger softly and with menace. “To remove it, it has to go all the way through. Pulling it out hurts a whole lot worse and does a lot more damage. One more peep out of you, and you’ll see what I mean. Got it?”

Metzger glared at him in defiance but nodded that he understood. Murdock returned to Collier, who was a little more lucid.

“Collier, do you hear me?” he asked, again shaking the man’s head by the hair.

“Is Mei Lee okay?” Collier asked weakly.

“No, she’s not okay,” Murdock told him, “but maybe she will be, in time. Are you thirsty or hungry?”

All Collier could manage to say was, “Water, please.”

Murdock gave Collier a few sips of water and poured a little over his head, which appeared to help bring him around. Murdock also gave him a small piece of venison to chew on.

“Eat that, slowly. It might help,” Murdock told Collier.

Collier took a small bite and chewed it weakly. From the look of him, Murdock wasn’t sure the other man was going to make it. He seemed too weak from starvation and blood loss.

“Had to save... Mei Lee,” he managed. “I had to bring her with me.”

“You see? He admits his guilt,” Metzger shouted. “She belongs to Whittier, you lyin’-ass thief.”

Murdock looked in warning at Metzger.

“Well, she is. She has his mark.” Metzger continued.

“Keep it up, asshole,” Murdock warned. “You’re not helping your case.”

“Did Whittier mark Mei Lee?” Murdock asked Collier.

“He marked all... the women,” Collier nodded weakly as he took another bit of venison.

“Why did they cut off your thumb?” Murdock asked Collier.

“They say I stole... Mei Lee,” Collier answered, “and they say I stole... food.”

“You’re damn right you did, thief,” Metzger yelled.

Murdock walked over to Metzger, who watched Murdock with pure hate in his eyes. Murdock gave the arrow a swift and firm tug. Metzger rose up and yelled out in pain.

“Hurts, don’t it?” Murdock said through clenched teeth. “Now, shut! Up!”

Metzger had raised enough of a fuss that Rose finally got up and came over to Murdock.

“Morning, my love,” she said as she kissed him. Then, grinning at Metzger, she said, “Looks to be a nice day for mayhem and torture.”

Murdock continued to stare at Metzger, seething.

“If he makes another sound,” he told Rose without looking at her, “pull the arrow out as slowly as you can.”

“Will do, my love,” she said, putting one hand on Metzger’s shoulder to brace herself and the other on the arrow. “Can I twist it as I pull?”

“If you like,” Murdock said as he went over to Collier. *I spoil her terribly*, he thought.

“Wha — what is going on?” Mei Lee asked, as she stumbled towards Murdock’s and Rose’s voices.

Rose stopped what she was doing and ran to help Mei Lee back to the fire.

Murdock went over to Metzger.

“It doesn’t matter what Whittier does,” Metzger said with vitriol. “We elected him leader, and that means he can do whatever he wants!”

“Tsk, tsk,” Murdock said as he slapped Metzger’s face lightly. “I almost feel sorry for you, if that’s what you truly believe!” He walked over to the fire and knelt down next Rose. “How is she?” he asked.

“She’ll live,” Rose responded.

“How are you doing, Mei Lee?” Murdock asked.

“I could use some water and a little something to eat,” Mei Lee told him quietly.

Rose handed her a chunk of venison and gave her a few sips of water.

“Better?” Murdock asked, after she had a chance to chew on some venison and swallow a little water. Mei Lee nodded her head. “Do you know who we

are?" he asked. She shook her head no. "Murdock and Rose," he told her.

"Rose?" Mei Lee asked.

"Right here, hon," Rose said softly, while caressing Mei Lee's shoulder.

"You're supposed to be dead," Mei Lee responded. "Raped and killed by Murdock." Mei Lee started crying. "That's what we were told, but I couldn't believe it when Tom told me otherwise."

"Nah," Murdock responded, "she's much too pretty to die."

Rose looked up at him and smiled coyly.

"Why don't you tell us what happened?" Rose asked Mei Lee.

Mei Lee related the story of herself and Collier as best she could, telling how they came to be together, and how they were trying to escape so Tom could help with the hunt.

"Metzger and Burns have standing orders to take anyone to Murdock *for the proper punishment as agreed upon*," she stated. She went on, "Everyone was stripped a while ago, and the women were all marked." Mei Lee unconsciously touched the mark. "When Burns caught me, they started beating and kicking me the whole way. Tom was helpless. They had him restrained. We got this far before I passed out."

Rose looked up at Murdock. "Pretty damned handsome for the *Bogeyman*," she said.

"Why does Collier have a 'T' on his forehead?" Murdock asked.

Mei Lee started crying harder.

"He has the mark of a thief!" Metzger yelled out. Then he spat in their general direction, "They both lie! They were treated very well."

Murdock got up and went over to Metzger.

"I've had enough of you," he said, as he grabbed the arrow and pulled slowly.

Metzger began screaming loudly and long. After a short while, he passed out from the pain.

"Maybe now we can have some peace," Murdock said. He looked over to Burns. "Anything from you?" he asked threateningly. Burns shook his head fearfully.

“They found out about the fish you gave Tom,” Mei Lee continued when Murdock returned. “They say all food belongs to Whittier. They say he stole food so we could eat,” she continued, crying. “They also say that I belong to Whittier and that Tom was trying to steal me!”

“Who is Tom?” Murdock asked.

“I am,” Collier answered weakly.

“Are you and Collier married?” Murdock asked Mei Lee, ignoring Rose’s comments for the present.

“We wanted to be, but Whittier won’t allow it,” Mei Lee explained. “He says no one is married without his consent as Leader. He just does what he wants with all the women.” She started to cry again, harder.

“To hell with Whittier,” Rose interjected. “Do you believe you are married to Collier?”

Mei Lee nodded her head and kept on crying.

“He’s looked after me and treated me better than anyone else did,” she said between sobs. “I love him.”

Murdock had heard enough. He got up, went over to Burns, and nudged him. “What’s up with the food rationing, Burns?” he yelled.

Burns shied away from Murdock. “Umm... Whittier is trying to make it last through the winter,” he said finally.

“Goddamn him,” Murdock cursed. “He knows it won’t last that long!” Then he yelled at both Metzger and Burns. “You two don’t look like you’ve missed many meals.”

Just as he started to come around, Metzger heard part of what Murdock said.

“We don’t answer to you,” Metzger said deep in his throat, so that it sounded more like a growl. “You have no authority over us!”

Murdock walked over to Metzger and stared him up and down. “What do you think, Burns?” Murdock asked Burns while glaring at Metzger. Burns gave no response.

“Rose!” Murdock bellowed. Rose promptly ran over to her husband’s side. “Do you believe I have authority here?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she stated emphatically. “I know you do!”

“Mei Lee?” Murdock yelled.

“Yes,” she said quietly, but everyone heard her.

“Collier?” Murdock yelled.

“Yes,” he replied weakly.

“You’re all whores, cowards, and thieves,” Metzger yelled. “You’re all going to pay!”

“Well, I can tell you that two of the cowards are definitely going to pay,” Murdock said emphatically. Metzger and Burns pulled away as best they could.

When dawn broke, Murdock was still seething with anger. He finally walked out of the clearing a little way and selected a small tree. He gave one angry swing of the eighteen-inch machete, and the blade rang and the small tree fell. A few minutes later, he walked back into the little clearing carrying a two-inch diameter pole cleared of all branches. Rose had not spoken. Murdock walked to the fire, laid the pole close by it, and then walked over to Metzger.

“Guard him,” he commanded through clenched teeth.

Rose immediately took up her guard position.

Murdock roughly untied the rope holding Metzger and threw him to the ground at the base of a tree. He then retied the rope around the tree. He had enough rope to loop it twice around the tree, as well as Metzger’s neck. He took out another length of the sturdy rope Rose had made and tied another double loop around his waist and the tree. On the ground, Metzger now sat on his hands, tied to the base of a tree.

When Murdock finished with Metzger, he walked over to Burns, who shied away immediately.

“Now, this one,” Murdock ordered, indicating Burns.

Rose shifted her aim without changing her body position.

Murdock swiftly tied Burns to another tree and in the same sitting position so that he faced Metzger. When he finished retying the prisoners, Murdock picked up the water skin and gave each some water. Then he dumped some water on the dirt close to Metzger and knelt down. He took out his six-inch knife from his boot and spun it nervously in his hand.

“Coward,” Metzger started in. “You’re going to slit my throat while I sit here

helpless? It's what I'd expect from a coward like you!"

Murdock said nothing. Instead, he took the knife and scored the arrow shaft buried in Metzger's shoulder several times around before grabbing it and snapping the shaft, leaving two inches sticking out of the wound. With thenock-end of the arrow, he mixed the water into the dirt to make a thick mud and then packed it around the arrow still in Metzger's shoulder. He did all this without emotion, gentleness, or caring. When he finished, he returned the knife to its place in his boot and stood up, flipping some of the mud on his hands at Metzger.

"Hey, what are you trying to do?" Metzger complained. "That was dirt! You're going to give me an infection!"

"That's the least of your worries," Murdock said with menace, glaring at him.

He walked to the fire, tossed in the arrow shaft, and got two pieces of their meager venison supply. He gave each a piece, mostly to give their mouths something to do so he didn't have to listen to them. Then he walked over to check on Collier. Collier was either sleeping or had passed out, but Murdock thought his pulse was getting a little stronger.

As he stood, he spotted something in the dirt, tucked under the log that Collier had been tied to. When he picked it up, he was even more livid. He had found the knife that Metzger had used to cut off Collier's thumb — and he found the end of Collier's thumb. He picked up both.

He was more livid because Metzger had been too cowardly to face him in the clearing with a weapon when Murdock had first shown himself. Metzger had obviously cut off Collier's thumb while he was still conscious, for the sole purpose of causing more pain.

He walked over to Metzger and tucked the thumb in his shirt pocket.

"Souvenir of your bravery," he said sarcastically to Metzger.

Murdock retrieved his spear and stood to leave.

"Where are you going?" Rose asked him quietly.

"Fishing," he said as he stormed toward the stream. When he got close to Metzger, he stopped and turned to Rose. "This one gives you any grief —"

Murdock tapped the center of Metzger's chest. "Right here! Center shot!"

"Okay. Hurry back?" Rose asked.

"I'll be back as quick as I can," he told Rose with a slight smile. "Take care of the other two."

Murdock stomped off toward the stream. It took him no time to get two fairly large fish and return to the camp. He had hoped the walk would cool his temper. But no such luck.

That is where I found Rose, he thought. Seems like a lifetime ago. It's not far from the clearing we invaded last night. Not far at all. There must be something about this place that makes them feel safe to do their dastardly deeds here.

He sat close to the fire, cleaned the fish, and put some on skewers to cook.

"May I please have a few bits of the fish?" Mei Lee asked very quietly, head bowed.

Murdock could tell her eyes were swollen shut, but why was she so quiet and subservient?

"You can have some now, or you can have some when they're cooked," Murdock told her. "Whatever you want."

"May I have one bite of raw, thank you?" she asked quietly.

Murdock shrugged and gave her a large chunk of raw fish. She had taken several small bites when Collier stirred.

"Mei Lee," Collier said groggily. "Are you okay?"

Mei Lee got up and went to his side, following the sound of his voice. She began giving him small pieces of the raw fish, and he accepted them gratefully. Watching them, Murdock was reminded of how he had cared for Rose when she was so battered and broken. He sat sticking the twelve-inch machete into the ground between his feet, thinking and remembering.

"What's wrong?" Rose asked softly, as she walked up behind him and touched his shoulder lightly.

"Do you love me?" Murdock asked quietly.

"With all my heart," Rose said softly. "You're the best man I've ever known."

"If you could, would you change anything about me?" he asked, looking

down at the ground.

Rose smiled to herself, a faraway look in her eyes. “Not a thing,” she said with conviction. “If I did change something, you wouldn’t be you.”

“Will you back me one hundred percent, no matter what?” he asked.



Rose stiffened. She knew he was planning something she wasn’t going to like. And she knew him well enough to know that it was probably dangerous. Did she love him enough to let him do what he felt he needed to do? *Time to put up or shut up*, she thought. *I think so, but enough to let him do what he feels he has to do, when the time comes? You’re the one who’s going to have to live with what you tell him now. Can you? He has taught me so much and given so much of himself to me. Can I do less for him?*

“Yes,” Rose said softly, hanging her head.

She made sure no one saw the tear running down her cheek. She brushed it away and gently touched him.

“Can Mei Lee and Collier travel?” he asked her over his shoulder.

“Mei Lee can,” Rose told him. “Collier may take a while yet. Where are we going?” *You’ve done it now! You had to ask that question, and now do you really want to hear the answer?*

“To judgment,” he murmured with conviction.

He stood and jammed the twelve-inch machete back in its sheath. Rose, seeing his action, knew that he had reached a decision. No one and nothing would change his mind or deter him. *And that is what scares me*, she thought.



When the fish was cooked, Murdock and Rose offered more to Mei Lee and Collier. They gratefully accepted a minor portion.

“Well, if you’re hungry, eat,” Murdock informed them. “If you don’t, I’ll just have to throw it away.”

“What about us?” Burns pleaded. “We’re hungry, too!”

Murdock had been pacing and now stopped in front of the two prisoners.

“You two look like you need to skip a few meals,” he said with venom. “If you can find someone willing to feed you, you can eat!”

About mid-morning, Collier was standing, after a fashion. Murdock noticed how pasty he looked and how weak his legs were, but, thanks to Mei Lee’s ministrations and some food, he was up. With Mei Lee’s help and support, Collier stepped in front of Murdock on one of his circuits of the clearing. Murdock stopped, noticing how emaciated they both were.

“Mister Murdock,” Collier started, “I would like to thank you for all you did for Mei Lee. I really do owe you a debt I can never repay.” Collier spoke softly and his voice trembled, but Murdock heard the sincerity in his voice.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said to both of them, trying to step around the pair.

“I’m serious. Mei Lee means everything to me,” Collier said emphatically, blocking Murdock’s path. “It’s a debt I intend to repay, as soon as I can figure out how.”

“Just treat her right,” Murdock told him gently. “That’ll be repayment enough.”

On one of his circuits of the clearing, he found Collier’s clothes and handed them over. He accepted them and, after giving Mei Lee his shirt, they both got dressed as Murdock continued to pace.

A few hours later, after Collier was moving a little better, Murdock untied the prisoners as Rose covered them with the bow. He got them on their feet and tied their hands to the pole he had made, arms as far apart as he could. With the two of them tied to the same pole, facing each other, they were crowded together, which made walking or escaping difficult.

With the prisoners up and ready to travel, Murdock had Rose bring up the rear with Mei Lee holding on to Rose’s belt with one hand and supporting Collier with the other. Murdock walked directly behind the prisoners so he could control their path by steering the ungainly team.

Traveling in this fashion was slow and awkward, but even so, they soon

reached the stream. Murdock tied the prisoners' ankles to a tree and escorted Rose off the main path to talk to her privately. Mei Lee and Collier, still weak, rested where they were.

"So, you're finally going to tell me what's going on?" Rose asked in an accusing way.

"Hush, dear, and listen," Murdock told her, as he unloaded his weaponry and dropped them in the brush. "I love you with all my heart, Rose, and this isn't easy for me, either. I have to do what I have to do. I need you to respect that and do as I ask without protest or your lovable sass." He smiled at her lovingly.

"But you haven't told me what your plan is or what you want me to do," Rose protested. Murdock saw a tear starting to well in her eye.

"I want you to leave all weapons here, except four arrows and the bow," he said, after wiping the tear away with his soft touch. "If things go badly, you are to shoot as many as you can, center shots. Kill, not wound. Come here and gather what you can and head for home. Your skills are good enough that they'll never be able to follow you."

"I'll do what you ask," Rose said quietly, head down, "but why won't you tell me what your plan is?"

"Because you would try to stop me," Murdock began, "as I would try to stop you. I see no other way to do what must be done and live with myself afterward."

Rose stopped arguing and did as he asked. When Murdock and Rose returned to the others, he had only the two machetes he had taken from Burns and Metzger. Rose carried the bow and four arrows. Murdock cut the rope that held the prisoners' ankles, and all resumed their positions. Murdock marched the prisoners across the stream, toward the transport pod. Rose followed closely, but was slowed by Mei Lee and Collier. The trek was nothing for Murdock and Rose, but Mei Lee and Collier were still extremely weak from starvation and the beatings, Collier weaker still from blood loss.

Murdock didn't stop until he was well clear of the trees that lined the stream and fifty yards out from the transport pod. After he stopped, he waited for Rose, Collier, and Mei Lee to catch up.

“Stick three of the arrows in the ground here to hold them for quick access,” he told Rose as he took his buckskin shirt off. “Collier, you and Mei Lee wait here with Rose.”

Rose stuck three arrows into the ground just far enough to hold them upright. The fourth she nocked and then stood ready. Murdock walked ahead with the prisoners until he was ten yards or so in front of Rose.

The occupants of the transport pod, seeing the procession, came out, curious to see what was going on. As they approached, Murdock saw how gaunt everyone, except Whittier and one or two others, was. Whittier reached a point ten yards from Murdock, slightly ahead of the others.

“Friend Murdock,” he said jovially. “Come to renegotiate our little understanding?”

“Stow it, Whittier,” Murdock responded, with all the venom he could muster. He waited long enough for a few people to get close enough to hear. “I have never had a deal with you and never will!”

“He lies,” Whittier protested to the others.

“One more word, Whittier, and Rose will silence you — permanently,” Murdock warned, raising his arm and one finger to alert Rose.

Whittier glanced behind Murdock and the prisoners and saw Rose standing with the bow at full draw as she waited for a signal from Murdock. She aimed right at Whittier. He raised his hands in surrender, turned his back on Murdock and the prisoners, and retreated a little way into the crowd.

As Whittier retreated, Rose eased down the bow, and Murdock slowly dropped his arm.

“I have come,” Murdock began, after a majority of the remaining colonists entered hearing range, “to take care of some distasteful business. These two were caught violating my territory and spilling innocent blood.”

“Your territory?” Whittier questioned sarcastically. “We don’t recognize your authority over what is *your territory!*” Whittier looked around to the others, nodding. No one else appeared to listen to Whittier, except for a few in the back.

Murdock glared a warning at Whittier, who glanced at Rose. Rose was, again, at full draw.

“It’s true,” Collier said weakly, staggering closer to Murdock. “He saved Mei Lee and me from Burns and Metzger. We’ve been told that Murdock raped and killed Rose.” Collier pointed to Rose. “Yet, there she is!”

“Are you going to listen to a thief and a coward?” Whittier interjected with disdain.

“It’s true I violated Murdock’s territory twice,” Collier continued. “The first time was under orders from Whittier and Burns to kill Murdock by any means necessary. He didn’t kill me then, even though he could have. He just gave me a very stern warning. The second time was by invitation. I went to escape and to save Mei Lee. Burns and Metzger captured us over there and were going to kill us or leave us for dead. Did Murdock kill me? He treated my wound and gave me more food than most of us have seen in a month! That’s pretty damned nice for a *killer*, if you ask me!”

Murdock had not expected this, and he wondered how Collier had mustered the strength to speak up.

“Listen,” Mei Lee called out. “We women have been marked and told to do as we are told or else we’ll be handed over to Murdock. We’ve been led to believe that Murdock does Whittier’s dirty work, but none of that is true. Murdock rescued me from Burns and Metzger. He defended me when he could have just passed by. He treated me with compassion, kindness, and respect. He gave us food, as much as we could eat. *They* brought us pain and suffering,” she finished, pointing in the general direction of Metzger and Burns.

Murdock glanced over his shoulder at Mei Lee. Barely covered with Collier’s shirt, bruised and battered as she was; she stood proud.

“He told them what to say,” Metzger interjected forcefully. “He coerced them into telling these — these lies!”

Murdock walked over to Metzger and slapped his face, hard, with the back of his hand.

“More lies,” Rose chimed in. “I’ve heard that you think Murdock raped me. He didn’t! Whittier, Burns, and Metzger knocked me unconscious, beat, and raped me repeatedly, and carved words on my chest and back, then left me to die! Murdock found me, nursed me back to health, and taught me some of his

skills. I have known nothing but kindness, caring and respect from him.”

“He left us to starve!” Whittier yelled. “He deserted us when we needed him most! He assaulted me, Burns, Collier, and Metzger!”

Murdock heard the desperation in Whittier’s voice.

“Enough!” Murdock bellowed, and all fell silent. “I didn’t come here to debate. I didn’t come here for praise. I neither need, nor want, it. I came here to give back justice to two innocents. What I do now, I take no pleasure in doing. I could have killed these two for their crimes while they were defenseless, but I didn’t. I could have left them in the woods to die, but that would make me no better than they are.”

“Crimes? What crimes?” Metzger challenged, sneering. “We have heard no charges and see no proof of any crimes! And who appointed you as judge over us?”

“If any here think raping women, beating anyone, or leaving someone to bleed to death or to be eaten by animals, or that leaving anyone in the woods, unable to defend himself, is acceptable behavior, speak up,” Murdock commanded. “If anyone here is willing to defend these two or their actions, I want to hear it!”

Murdock remained stalwart, saying no more. He scanned the crowd, as did Burns and Metzger. No one came forward. No one spoke or even whispered to each other. Not even Whittier.

Murdock walked over to the two prisoners.

“Since no one here will speak in your defense, we will have a trial by combat,” he called out.

“Unfair!” Metzger screamed. “He’s armed, we’re not!”

“The rules are these,” Murdock continued, ignoring Metzger’s outburst. “You two will have the weapons that you were caught with.”

“He’s cheating,” Metzger yelled again. “He has that bitch back there to shoot us as soon as we move! And he has a lot more weapons than we do!”

“Should these two defeat me,” Murdock continued, “they are free to go. If they try to run, Rose will shoot them. Anyone who interferes in any way will also be shot. Their freedom lies by defeating me. I’m giving these men more of a

chance at survival than they gave Rose, Collier, and Mei Lee.” Murdock indicated the three behind him.

“Unfair! We’re injured, and he isn’t,” Metzger objected again.

“To ensure fairness,” Murdock continued, with a condescending glare at Metzger, “Rose can attest that the only weapons I have on me are the ones Metzger and Burns were caught with.”

When the crowd looked at Rose, she nodded to indicate that he spoke the truth.

“I,” Murdock continued, “will be unarmed and forbidden to use their weapons. This is to the death,” Murdock announced loudly, as he pulled a machete and started cutting the prisoners’ bonds.

“This is ridiculous,” Whittier hissed. “I refuse to watch this barbaric spectacle!” He walked to the back of the crowd.

“Rose,” Murdock yelled after cutting them loose, walking a few yards toward the crowd with the pole, and dropping it, “kill them if they cross to the transport side of the pole.”

As Murdock returned to the center, he stuck both machetes into the ground close to Metzger and Burns. After a few more steps, Murdock turned to face the two men.



As Burns and Metzger advanced toward their weapons, rubbing their wrists, Rose was nonplussed. *I didn’t expect this*, she thought. *This is crazy and reckless. It’s a foolish and dangerous gambit.* She knew now the reason for his earlier questions. Even so, she was nervous and feared for her husband’s safety. *I’ll stand firm and honor his request*, she vowed to herself. *No matter the outcome.*



As he faced his antagonists, Murdock appeared relaxed, assuming no detectible

stance. Burns and Metzger flapped their hands to get the blood flowing before taking up their weapons. Metzger limped somewhat from his sore foot and was also hindered by the arrow wound in his shoulder. As they bent to take their weapons, neither Burns nor Metzger broke eye contact with Murdock.

As he awaited their attack, Murdock saw by the way they held their weapons that neither man knew how to use them. He also saw that Metzger hung back behind Burns. *When Burns attacks, so will Metzger*, he thought. *He's hoping for a finishing blow from behind.*



Burns was not ready for this. At this moment, he realized what his greed and lust for power had gotten him. Then, to surprised murmurs from the crowd, he dropped his machete.

“I can’t do this,” he exclaimed. “I was just following orders. I was afraid. I was told to do it or they would kill me.” He indicated Whittier and Metzger. “Mercy, please,” Burns begged, throwing himself face down on the ground at Murdock’s feet.



Murdock, who didn’t take his gaze off of Metzger, saw that Burns’ knife was behind and out of reach for the prone man. Murdock kept his distance from Burns and noticed Metzger slowly advancing toward Burns.

“Either fight or get away,” Murdock barked at Burns. “I wouldn’t try to run, though,” he warned.

Burns started to crawl away from the combat.

Metzger lunged quickly and decisively, though his aim was off. He had intended to run Burns through from behind, cutting his spine. Instead, he stabbed him in the upper arm as Burns rolled to his side. Murdock backed away from the two men.

“What are you doing?” Burns screamed at Metzger as he pulled the machete

from Burns' arm. "You sta —" Burns' words were cut off as Metzger stabbed him in the throat.

"You see that?" Whittier yelled. "Murdock killed Burns. I told you he was a killer!"

Murdock's temper rose at hearing Whittier's voice. *Don't let him get to you! Focus,* he thought.

"Never could abide a coward," Metzger said, covered in blood, as he got up.

"Does that mean you're going to fall on your machete?" Murdock mocked. "It takes a brave man to kill someone who is unarmed and to beat and rape the defenseless!"

Metzger made a few low passes at Murdock with the machete, but Murdock was just out of reach, dancing back a few steps each time.

Even though he wasn't making contact, Metzger was backing Murdock away from Burns' machete, which still lay on the ground a few yards behind Metzger. Murdock faced away from Rose, Collier, and Mei Lee. Without warning, Metzger threw his machete at Murdock's face; Murdock ducked, and Metzger ran to grab Burns' machete before Murdock could move in.

Murdock, focusing on the armed man in front of him, had no idea where the thrown machete went.



Part of Rose's mind saw the machete coming her way; her brain hadn't registered that she should move.



Collier saw the machete sailing toward Rose. Instead of thinking, he reacted. With the last of his meager strength, he jumped across Rose's field of vision, arms outstretched as he tried and failed to catch the machete. The blade slammed into his throat.



The sudden flash of an object passing in front of her, the sudden thumping noise the blade made as it slammed into Collier's throat, and the sound of his body hitting the ground in front of her, startled Rose, and she yelped. Mei Lee called out to Collier.



Metzger, hearing Rose yelp, focused on Rose. Murdock saw Metzger's loss of focus and moved, slipping to the outside of Metzger's machete-wielding hand. As Murdock grabbed Metzger's wrist with one hand, he broke his elbow with the other. Metzger screamed in pain. Murdock then kicked his knee to the inside, dislocating it and dropping Metzger to one knee, the other leg outstretched behind him.

As Murdock slowly approached the other man from behind, he grasped Metzger's chin with one hand and the back of his head with the other. Murdock snapped his hands apart and Metzger's neck cracked. Murdock let him drop to the ground onto his belly; Metzger's face turned to the sky.

Only then did Murdock realize that Mei Lee was wailing. He glanced up and saw Mei Lee kneeling in front of Rose. Rose remained in her guard position, showing no signs of an imminent threat. Murdock checked Burns; he was dead, having bled out during Murdock's fight with Metzger.

As Murdock walked toward Rose, he noticed a burning sensation in his hand. One hand was sliced across the palm. The palm bled some, but with the adrenalin rushing through him, he hardly noticed. No one in the crowd spoke or moved. They were all in shock.

When he reached Rose and Mei Lee, he saw Collier lying dead on the ground with a machete in his throat. Mei Lee held his head and rocked back and forth, sobbing. Murdock looked questioningly at Rose.

"When Metzger threw the machete, I was too focused on the crowd and Metzger and didn't see it," Rose explained. "He did see it... and took it for me,"

she said, looking down at Collier's body, tears running down her cheeks.

Murdock looked down at Collier. Regret and remorse ran through him, as much for taking Metzger's life as for the loss of Collier.

"Debt paid," he said softly to Collier's corpse. "Debt paid."

As Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee said their last good-byes to Collier, the onlookers kept their distance, remaining respectfully silent. After a few minutes, Murdock went to the supplies, which were stacked where he had left them, and selected a shovel head. Then he found a tree of the proper size and cut it. After finishing a handle and affixing the shovel head to it, he returned to Collier's body. Rose saw her husband standing there, leaning on the shovel. As she studied Murdock's face, the only sign of emotion she could detect was a single tear rolling down his cheek.

"I'll do that," Rose murmured, voice trembling and cheeks wet with her own tears.

Murdock shook his head and said nothing. He focused on Mei Lee, who still sat on the ground holding Collier's head in her lap, gently stroking it and brushing stray hairs from his face. Her tears ran freely; though her wails had ceased, her deep grief was evident. After a long time, Murdock knelt beside Mei Lee, gently helped her to her feet, and moved her out of the way.

Murdock and Rose did their work silently. First, they removed the machete from Collier's neck. After studying the lay of the land, Murdock and Rose carefully moved Collier's body off to the side, then dug his grave where he had fallen. After that, Murdock dug another smaller hole at the head of the grave site. While Rose stripped Collier's body, Murdock went to Metzger's body and removed Collier's thumb from Metzger's shirt pocket. After lowering Collier's naked body respectfully into the grave, Murdock placed the nub of Collier's

thumb on his chest, under his crossed hands. Then Rose led Mei Lee to the side of Collier's grave.

Mei Lee, still wearing Collier's shirt, bruised, beaten, and covered in her husband's blood, stood proud and silent for a few seconds.

"Good-bye, my husband," she said softly. "You were a good, loving, and caring man. I was proud and honored to be your wife."

"When his time came, Collier faced it with great honor and sacrifice, without a thought for himself," Murdock said, still leaning on the shovel, the handle of which was now covered in the blood from his cut hand. "His sacrifice was not requested of him, but he freely gave it. We should count ourselves lucky if others can say the same of us when our time comes."

"You are gone," Rose said, her voice shaking with emotion, tears flowing down her cheeks, "but you will never be forgotten. Your sacrifice will always be remembered with honor and respect."

As Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee stood silently beside the grave, the others made no sound. After several minutes, Rose led Mei Lee away, and Murdock filled in the grave. When he finished, he took the machete that had taken Collier's life and drove it into the binding pole, using the shovel as a hammer. Then he dropped the pole into the small hole at Collier's head and then filled and packed the dirt around the pole. Finally, he set the shovel down and sat with his wife and Mei Lee, who had moved about fifty feet away from the grave.

After an hour of silence, throughout which the two women cried, a male colonist that Murdock didn't know came over.

"Excuse me for intruding on your grief," the man said quietly and waited.

"Yes?" Murdock responded gruffly, his mind still on Collier.

"A few of us were trying to find Mei Lee's clothes," the man continued. "One of the women said that the clothes are inside the transport pod, but we can't get them."

"Why not?" Murdock asked with more anger than he had intended.

"Looks like sometime during your fight with Metzger and Burns, Whittier and one or two of his friends locked themselves inside the transport pod," the man explained. "He has all the food inside with him and all of the water skins."

At the thought of Whittier, Murdock said with venom, "They can die in there, for all I care." Murdock took a good look at the colonist. The man was emaciated and looked as if a strong wind would lift him and take him away. Murdock stood and inspected the rest of the colonists. All were in much the same condition. Some were worse than others, but generally, all were in the same state of emaciation. The group looked as if they wouldn't last another day.

Murdock gently touched his wife's shoulder. "We need to get something for these people to eat," he said when she had turned around.

"I know," she said, looking around at the others with compassion.

"Get someone to sit with Mei Lee," he told the man, "and we'll see what we can do."

The man nodded and walked away. A few minutes later, a gaunt woman came over and assumed Rose's position of comforting Mei Lee. Lost in her grief, Mei Lee seemed unaware of anyone around her. Rose got up and followed Murdock as he walked toward the stream. After crossing it, they retrieved their equipment.

"Can you get them some fish from the stream?" he asked as he re-hung all the equipment on his belt and about his body.

"I'm not as good at it as you are, but I think so," Rose said, as she followed his lead.

"Do what you can," he told her as he handed her the water skins. "Give small bites to them raw. I don't think they could take a lot of food at one time. I'll be back as soon as I can with more and bigger ones. But be careful! I still don't trust any of them, and you'll have to be on your guard with Whittier still on the loose."

Rose nodded as she accepted the water skins. Murdock had turned to leave when Rose stopped him.

"That was a foolish and dangerous thing you did," Rose scolded. "But you were wonderful!" She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, "Wonderful and brave."

"I did what I had to," he said, shrugging. "There was nothing wonderful or brave about it. I'm sorry if I worried you. That wasn't my intention."

“I understand,” she said. Then taking a deep breath, she went on, “I’m just glad you’re okay. Knowing you, there are going to be more times like that in our life. I’ll always trust your judgment, though.”

They smiled at each other as they parted. Murdock trotted through the bower toward the river by the falls as fast as he could. He hadn’t gone far when Beron blocked his path. Murdock stopped and, catching his breath, tried to tell his friend that he was in a hurry.

“*We know,*” Beron flashed. “*Other way shorter/faster/better!*”

Beron took Murdock on a mental flight starting where he was now, but flying over the stream and the transport pod in the opposite direction he had been traveling. Murdock saw the transport pod and the field of grass in which he had killed the snake. Then he saw small stands of trees, herds of deer, and a river lined with larger trees. From the perspective Beron showed Murdock, it appeared to be half the distance he had yet to go. This way was much flatter and smoother, as well as easier to travel quickly. The snakes concerned him, as they struck quickly, with little or no warning.

“*Emergency! This time only! They not interfere!*” Beron flashed.

Feelings of safety and protection flooded Murdock. After thanking his friend, he turned to leave, but thinking of something he wanted to ask, he turned back. Beron wasn’t there. *Had Beron really been there or was he projecting himself onto my senses?* Murdock thought. He decided to file it away to ask later and began running in the direction his friend had indicated.

By the time he reached the stream, he stopped for another breather. Rose had thrown several fish on the bank and was gathering them up when he arrived.

“That was quick!” she said, shocked.

“I was *advised* to go the other direction,” Murdock told Rose, hoping that his choice of verbiage would indicate his source to her. “I’ll explain later,” he said as he ran off.

Murdock passed the transport pod without stopping. After he could no longer see the transport, he felt less winded, and his pace seemed to be too slow. *Faster. Run faster,* he thought as he broke into a run. He covered ground — with a lot less effort — faster than anyone else could have. Soon, he saw the riverbank and

slowed as fast as he had accelerated.

As he reached the river bank, he saw several fish flopping on the ground. *This has to be Beron helping*, he thought. He quickly strung eight good-sized fish. He set off and, as before, ran fast, for him, and effortlessly. Once again, he didn't slow until just before he saw the transport pod. By the time he arrived there, he had become very tired, with the fish growing very heavy. Yet his sense of time told him he was only gone thirty minutes, though it should have taken three or four hours for a round trip.

Rose arrived back at the transport pod shortly after Murdock left her. She dispensed water and the fish she had caught. Then she started a fire. Not long after, Murdock returned laden with fish, which shocked everyone, including Rose. Murdock, however, was too exhausted to explain himself.

After he had rested a while, Murdock cleaned the fish and began cooking some of it on the fire. The colonists smelled the fish cooking and gathered around Murdock and the fire. Murdock saw them all drooling at the smell. Mei Lee, however, sat covered only with Collier's shirt, staring at her husband's grave.

Murdock let Rose distribute the fish as she saw fit while he buried Burns and Metzger. After digging a larger grave, he dragged each body to the hole, stripped them, and dumped them into it. Then he filled in the hole. *I'm finally finished with them physically as well as emotionally*, he thought. After all the work and his run to the river, Murdock found he was famished.

After Rose had apportioned all the fish she had brought, she joined her husband and continued to supervise distributing the cooked fish. Murdock ate more than Rose had ever seen him eat, but she decided she would explore it at a later date. Dusk had fallen, and darkness would come soon. Some of the stronger colonists who had eaten and had gotten back some of their strength, had gathered wood; using Murdock's fire, they got their own fire started.

After everyone had eaten, Murdock saw two additional fires going, with all the colonists gathered around these fires. Rose and Mei Lee stayed by Murdock at their fire. Mei Lee was either indifferent or oblivious to everything around her. Rose had to try several times to get her to eat in order to keep up her strength. *I*

don't know what season it is — mid to late summer if I had to guess, I must've lost track of the days — these people are going to be in trouble when winter comes, he thought, watching the others. Since his and Rose's informational sharing with Beron, Murdock had been forced into thinking in the long term. *I know winter is coming,* he thought, *but how bad is it going to be? I know some won't see spring. If it's too hard, none of us may see spring.*

The next day, Murdock cut a tree that was about six inches in diameter, then removed all the limbs. He braced the ramp to the interior of the transport pod, trapping those inside. Then, with the help of the stronger of the colonists, Murdock showed them how to enclose the legs of the transport pod with some of the tarps. Finally, he laid sod inside of the tarps. Meanwhile, Rose showed some of the weaker ones how to fish.

Before night fell, Murdock set up a tent of sorts for Mei Lee. She needed it for her grieving.

At dusk, Murdock called all the residents together and announced that he and Rose would be leaving to hunt deer for them all.

“Mister Murdock, we have all decided that you should be the new leader,” one of the colonists said after Murdock's announcement.

Murdock was stunned. “Why do you need a leader?” he asked after a moment.

“Someone has to make the decisions that affect us all,” the spokesman replied.

“So, you're saying that none of you have learned anything from what Whittier did to you?” he asked, disbelieving. “None of you can get along in life without someone telling you what to do or how to do it?”

“We need someone to settle disputes — someone for protection,” the spokesman pleaded. “No one can agree on what to do first!”

“Like a federal marshal back on Earth?” Murdock baited the man.

“Yes, someone who will stand up for what's right even against unfair laws or rules.”

“You think I would be above such laws?” Murdock asked.

“I think you would do what's right without regard for them.”

Disturbed, Murdock addressed the group.

“No one is above the law,” he stated. “Earth history should have taught you that! If you don’t want unfair laws, then don’t pass any, and don’t be afraid to get rid of the ones you think are unfair. Don’t any of you have any common sense? Don’t any of you remember the Patriot Act back at the turn of the millennium? How it diluted rights for so-called security? After more than fifty years, the people of the United States still didn’t have their old rights back. You can’t trade freedom for security. If you try, you won’t have either!”

“But what about Whittier?” the spokesman asked.

“You elected him, so, you can depose him,” Rose chimed in.

“I have neither the time nor the inclination to be your leader,” Murdock said. “I do what I feel is right for me and mine. If I don’t like a law, then I avoid the jurisdiction it’s in until it’s repealed, but that’s something I do, and I don’t encourage others to do the same.” Murdock paced back and forth in front of the fire, thinking. “In the days of the expansion of the United States, settlers came together in common cause. They didn’t need someone to tell them that they needed a house or a barn. They just built it, either by themselves or with neighbors. So if you can’t agree on things, then maybe you need to learn to cooperate with each other. But you have to take responsibility and live with your decisions, good or bad!”

“But what about Whittier?” the spokesman repeated.

“I didn’t come here to depose Whittier,” Murdock told them. “I came here to give a few innocents justice. Nothing more. What you do with him is your affair. I don’t think he would be foolish enough to venture into my territory, though, because then I *would* deal with him.”

“But we lack the knowledge to know what to do,” the spokesman countered.

“So, figure it out,” Murdock chided. “How do you think humans advanced as far as we have? We did it through trial and error. Learn from others who do know something about it. Take a chance. Experiment. Do whatever it takes. Sure, you’re going to make mistakes, but learn from them and quit repeating them. Doing something, even if it’s wrong, is always better than doing nothing or leaving it for someone else to do. For those of you who like to complain and

blame others, stop it. You're adding to the problems when you do that."

"Murdock's right," Mei Lee said, finally joining the conversation. Her voice carried well into the crowd. Her vision had gotten better each day, and the bruises were healing. "We know more now than we did when we first arrived," she continued. "I think we should follow Murdock's suggestions for the time being. We'll have all winter to figure out what to do and how to do it, but for now, we need to get ready for winter. And we don't need to knuckle under to the likes of Whittier! Whittier has shown us that death isn't the worst thing that can happen. Lots of things are worse.

"Speaking for myself," she went on, facing Murdock and Rose, "your counsel will always be welcome and heeded. You'll both be forever welcome in my house. I owe you both a great debt of gratitude that can never be repaid." Then she kissed them each on their cheek.

Murdock and Rose blushed.

Later, after the colonists had retired to their own fires and with guards in place, Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee sat outside Mei Lee's tent.

"They'll learn, Murdock," Mei Lee told them. "I'll see to that. And I'll see to it that they also remember."

"You really don't owe me anything, Mei Lee," Murdock told her. "I still owe you for what Collier did." Murdock stirred the coals with a stick as he stared into the flames.

"You owe Tom nothing," Mei Lee said, speaking in her usual quiet tone. She placed her hand on his shoulder as she sat between Murdock and Rose. "He thought he owed you, and seeing Rose in danger, he did what he had to do. You owe me nothing. You owe him nothing."

"Some might say that I cost you your husband," Murdock stated.

"Some might, but I never will. You didn't ask him to die; he offered his life for Rose's! He'd be quite cross if he knew how you feel," Mei Lee told them.

"Well, *I* still owe him," Rose said.

Mei Lee looked at her with compassion "All Tom had to give was his life," she told Rose. "It was a gift."

"I didn't want it," Rose said, crying.

Mei Lee gently wiped away Rose's tears. "It was a gift. You don't get to choose to refuse it. Would you really dishonor his gift by refusing?" Mei Lee asked.

Rose stared at the fire, saying nothing. For a long time, none of them said anything further. All kept their thoughts to themselves.

"If you two are tired, go ahead and sleep," Murdock said, after an hour of silence. "I'm going to take a little walk."

Murdock headed toward the pod. As he approached, he heard knocking coming from the ramp. Murdock kicked away the log holding the ramp closed, and the ramp dropped slowly. By the time the ramp was completely down, Murdock had taken out his twelve-inch machete. Then, a blonde woman walked down the ramp with much trepidation.

Murdock got the attention of one of the other women. "Go get Rose." The woman went off toward his and Rose's site.

"I'm not armed," the blonde woman said, her voice trembling.

"Who else is up there?" Murdock demanded. He wasn't in the mood for any trifling.

"Just Whittier," the blonde said, in her high-pitched voice. "Can I please leave? I'm in dire need of relieving myself!"

Rose came up to Murdock.

"Rose, take this one out so she can relieve herself," Murdock said sternly. "Keep a close eye on her, and don't get too close to her. Don't trust her. When she's done, tie her hands behind her and bring her back."

"Let's go, Blondie," Rose commanded. She drew her own twelve-inch machete as she escorted the woman into the dark and away from the others.

Murdock watched Rose and the blonde. He also tried to watch the ramp, but no one else seemed willing to come out. Nevertheless, Murdock listened and watched. After some time, Rose and the blonde returned.

"Thanks," the woman said flirtatiously to Murdock. "I really needed that!"

"You said Whittier is in there?" Murdock asked. "Why doesn't he come out?"

"I'm supposed to negotiate for him," the blonde stated. Then, in a cold tone,

she asked, “What assurances are you willing to give that Whittier won’t be killed immediately?”

“I give no assurances at all to you or Whittier,” Murdock responded, in the same cold tone.

“You *are* the new leader, aren’t you?” the blonde asked. She was trying to be coy and provocative.

“Calm it down, Blondie,” Rose warned. “He’s taken!”

“I’m not the leader of this group,” Murdock said. “I would, however, like to have a private discussion with Whittier about a few counts of rape and assault.”

“Since you aren’t the duly elected leader, I seem to be negotiating with the wrong person,” the woman said, glaring at Rose. “Can someone direct me to the leader?” she asked to no one in particular, as she looked around.

“It’s a little late for this,” Murdock stated. “I may not be the leader, but I’ll give you the option of spending the night tied and bound, or spending it locked in the pod. Either option is fine with me.”

“You can’t bind me or restrain me in any way,” the blonde replied. “I’ve done nothing to warrant it, and I don’t recognize your authority. I know my rights.”

Murdock pulled out some leather ties and walked over to her.

“Now, just wait a minute,” she pleaded, hand out, as she backed up slowly.

Murdock said nothing and continued toward her.

“Stop! Will someone stop this madman?” she pleaded.

Murdock grabbed her wrist, spun her around, and started tying her hands behind her back.

“O-o-oooh, I could get used to this,” she whispered seductively.

After her hands were secured, Murdock inspected the underside of the pod around the ramp. He found what he was looking for — a small button — and pressed it. The ramp started to close slowly. When it was closed, Murdock replaced the log brace that locked the ramp closed.

“Take her over there by one of the legs and tie her to it, Rose,” Murdock directed.

“Gladly,” Rose said as she yanked the woman by her bound wrists. Rose got

the blonde by one of the pod legs and forced her to sit. Then Rose tied the woman to it.

“Who’s the guard?” Murdock asked. Two men, one from each of the two fires, came over to Murdock. “She is to stay tied until I decide to let her go, understand?” Murdock asked them. They both nodded. “See to it that you pass on the information to whoever relieves you. Under no circumstances is she to be freed, untied, or moved.” Both of the men acknowledged the orders.

“What a bimbo,” Rose said, shaking her head.

“Careful, dear, the green-eyed monster is starting to show itself,” Murdock chided.

“Good. Glad you recognize it when you see it,” Rose quipped.

“Who is she, and why is she clothed when no one else is?” Murdock asked Rose, as the two strode back to Mei Lee’s tent.

“I have no idea,” Rose told her husband as the blonde howled.

“Ask Mei Lee and see if she knows,” Murdock said.

“Ask her yourself,” Rose snapped back. Murdock looked at her, surprised. “Sorry, it’s been a long and trying day,” Rose apologized.

Mei Lee was inside her tent, lying down.

“What happened?” she asked, after Murdock and Rose were resettled around the fire. Rose informed her. “That would be Kryisia Oblonski. She was Whittier’s *main squeeze* and head of torture techniques. If there was a way to further dishearten or break down the others, she came up with it.”

“Why was she the only one with clothes?” Murdock asked.

“For most people, being naked makes you feel vulnerable. Whittier and crew were using it to break down our pride. So, for most people, when someone is clothed when you’re naked it would make you feel diminished.”

“Where did you learn that?” Murdock asked. “You’re a lot wiser than your years.”

“My parents insisted that I learn all I could about as many different subjects as possible,” she said, shrugging. “They felt too many people were specialized.”

Rose slid down a little, reclining somewhat. “I’m going to sleep! If you two jabber boxes want to continue, do it quietly,” Rose said facetiously.

“Would you like to sleep in here?” Mei Lee asked Rose. “I can sleep outside. I wouldn’t mind.”

“You stay put,” Rose told her. “I’ve got my old man, and the fire, to keep me warm.”

Murdock took the hint and lay on his side, pulling Rose into the front side of his body. Rose wiggled and giggled and got comfortable. Mei Lee looked at the couple; Murdock saw she missed Collier.

The next morning, all of the colonists held a meeting. Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee didn’t attend.

“I have no interest in your meetings and we have a hunt to plan,” Murdock said when he was asked.

“I agree with my husband,” Rose responded.

“Frankly, I feel like an outsider and I don’t trust any of you because of your nonchalant attitude during the Whittier regime,” Mei Lee said.

When they finished preparing for the hunt, Murdock and Rose went over to Krysia. Mei Lee stayed by her tent. The rest of the group passed Murdock and Rose, heading toward Mei Lee’s tent.

“Have you had a change of heart about who has the authority you’ll recognize?” Murdock asked Krysia.

The blonde, glaring at Murdock and Rose, said nothing.

“Okay, then, since you have nothing to say, I’ll leave you to simmer in your own juices.” Murdock grinned and turned to walk away.

“Wait,” Krysia pleaded. “I need some water and to relieve myself.”

“Rose?” Murdock asked.

Rose moved to untie Krysia.

“That isn’t what I meant,” Murdock said, stopping Rose. “I was asking if you thought we should allow her those favors, after all the guff she gave you last night.”

Rose scowled at Krysia, “I don’t know,” she said finally. “She was kind of mouthy last night. Especially after I was so nice and allowed her to go and everything.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” Krysia apologized. “Things got a little out of hand last

night. I'll behave."

Rose untied her and took her to relieve herself. Then, Murdock saw all the colonists walking over to him, Mei Lee in the lead. Though everyone else kept a respectful distance from Murdock, Mei Lee walked up to him.

"What's going on?" Murdock asked.

"It seems that sometime during the night," Mei Lee started, "everyone held a private discussion and voted this morning."

"What did they vote on this time?" Murdock asked suspiciously.

"It seems that they have voted me in as mayor," Mei Lee continued. Murdock's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "I told them I would, but I have a few conditions. I declined the mayor-ship, but only because I don't want to be the sole responsible person."

"Is it something you want?" Murdock asked.

"Not really, but the alternative scares me. I just want to be left alone to live my life, but they insist on having a mayor, or some such, and if I decline, they might install Whittier again, or someone worse."

Just then, Rose and Krysia returned.

"What's going on, dear?" Rose asked. Murdock and Mei Lee told her.

"What do you think, Rose?" Mei Lee asked.

"I go along with my husband. I'll abide by his judgment," Rose said sincerely.

"I understand and agree," Mei Lee replied with respect, waiting for Murdock to respond.

"You have to do what you think is right, of course," Murdock said to Mei Lee. "But you also have to be very careful to make sure you don't become another Whittier."

Mei Lee nodded and walked toward the crowd. "I will accept, but only as long as you feel I deserve the office," she said. Then she turned back to Murdock. "Is this *your* prisoner?" she asked him.

"Prisoner? No, not exactly," Murdock said. "I had her bound because of Whittier. I didn't want her to set him free, and I didn't want anyone to get their throats cut in their sleep."

“I understand and appreciate it. Release her, please?” Mei Lee asked.

Murdock thought and then shrugged. “Untie her, Rose.”

Rose’s mouth dropped open in surprise. Then she closed it. She looked at her husband, but said nothing and complied, untying Kryisia.

“Well, it’s about time,” Kryisia said, rubbing her wrists.

Mei Lee went to Kryisia and looked her in the eye. “If we had a court, I’m sure we could indict you for complicity,” Mei Lee said sternly to Kryisia. “As it is, I don’t like you, and I’m inclined to leave you in Murdock’s custody.”

“You can’t judge me on anything,” Kryisia yelled with derision.

Mei Lee smirked, snapped her hand out, grabbed Kryisia’s ear, and twisted it. Kryisia screamed and dropped to her knees.

“As I was saying,” Mei Lee continued, “you are being released. However, everyone will be watching you. You’re free to leave at any time and, in my opinion, sooner rather than later.” Mei Lee released Kryisia’s ear.

“But I’m supposed to negotiate —” Kryisia started, as she got back to her feet.

“There will be no negotiation,” Mei Lee stated, cutting off Kryisia’s protest and turning her head away. “We’ve already decided Whittier’s fate.”

Surprised, Murdock looked at Mei Lee.

“Murdock, would you be so kind as to release and open the ramp?” Mei Lee asked.

Murdock complied, still somewhat confused.

“Whittier!” Mei Lee yelled up the ramp. “You have ten minutes to leave the pod. If you don’t, we’ll assume that you don’t wish to surrender yourself, and the ramp will be closed and blocked until spring.”

“What guarantee do I have I won’t be killed on sight?” called Whittier, his voice muted.

“No guarantee whatsoever,” Mei Lee stated. She turned to Murdock. “I need your help. I need you to act as temporary constable. Are you willing?”

“I’m more than a little confused,” Murdock responded.

“You’re free to refuse,” Mei Lee said.

“Okay, I’ll play along a while longer,” Murdock said. “I’ll admit you have

me curious.”

“I won’t surrender to Murdock,” Whittier said from inside the pod.

“You *will* surrender to this colony,” Mei Lee commanded. “You’re quickly running out of time!”



Rose stood quietly by, watching. Mei Lee had been all but broken days before. Now, she stood dignified, confident, and definitely in charge. Her face was dirty, and Rose saw the small paths that the tears had cleared on her face. She still wore only Collier’s shirt, but that was more than the rest wore.



“Okay, Murdock,” Mei Lee said. “I’ve determined that Whittier’s time has run out. Please close and brace the ramp. It appears he’s made his decision,” she said as she turned away.

“Whittier. Whittier. Please, come out! They’re serious!” Krysia yelled as she started to lunge toward the ramp. At Krysia’s outburst, Mei Lee turned back to the ramp.

Murdock blocked her way and pressed the exterior button. The ramp started to close.

“Hold it! I’m coming out,” Whittier said weakly from inside.

Murdock pressed the button again, and the ramp re-opened. Whittier walked meekly down the ramp.

“Mister Murdock,” Mei Lee commanded as Whittier reached the bottom of the ramp. “Please take charge of the prisoner.”

Murdock stepped forward and tied Whittier’s hands behind him.

“Go inside, everyone, and unload everything that was stolen,” Mei Lee commanded over her shoulder.

“I stole nothing,” Whittier protested. “They freely gave it all to me. It’s all mine!”

“Mister Murdock, please gag the prisoner,” Mei Lee said matter-of-factly. “I’ll no longer tolerate his insolence.”

Murdock pulled out another leather tie and moved to put it in Whittier’s mouth. Whittier promptly closed his mouth tightly. Murdock stomped on the other man’s toes; when Whittier opened his mouth to yell, Murdock put the tie in and tied it tightly at the back of the prisoner’s head.

“You can’t do that! That’s cruel,” Krysia protested.

“Rose, would you mind?” Mei Lee asked Rose, indicating Krysia.

Rose grabbed a handful of Krysia’s hair and pulled. “I’d shut your trap, Blondie, unless you want to be bound and gagged like Whittier!”

Krysia complied.

“You’ve all spoken on the matter of Whittier,” Mei Lee said loudly. “The only one who hasn’t had her say is Rose.” Mei Lee indicated Rose. “I think we should hear what she has to say.” The colonists nodded. “Is there anything you would like to say about Whittier?” Mei Lee asked Rose.

“I’m confused,” Rose whispered to Mei Lee. “Is this a trial?”

“No, it’s not a trial. He has already been tried. This is to determine his punishment,” Mei Lee said in a cold tone.

“**W**hen did he have a trial?” Rose asked Mei Lee privately.

“All of us have had our say,” Mei Lee said loudly. “Everyone agreed that his guilt was not in question, but the severity of his punishment was in doubt.”

Whittier struggled repeatedly to get loose, but Murdock silently held him firm.

“What sort of punishment are you contemplating?” Rose asked.

“Some say death is too good for him,” Mei Lee said, her head bowed slightly and her eyes closed.

“What do you say, Mei Lee?” Rose asked.

“For me, personally, there have been too many deaths, all of them needless,” Mei Lee said loudly. “To me, Whittier is the most despicable person I’ve ever heard of. I would, however, like to see him work for the betterment of this colony for a change. I’m not saying that he should be freed to work more mischief. I’m saying physically work him, but under guard at all times. At night, lock him in the pod, but he should repay us for his past misdeeds!”

“And what happens when he escapes?” Murdock asked.

“If he does, then his life is forfeit,” Mei Lee stated. “He would have had his second chance. There’s no need to give him another.”

“Let me make sure I understand you,” Murdock said in disbelief. “You’re willing to put everyone at risk because you’re afraid of executing Whittier?”

“I’m not saying that,” Mei Lee retorted. “I’m saying that since we haven’t

had any hard evidence as to what particular crimes he has committed that are worthy of execution, he shouldn't be executed simply because we don't like him!"

The colonists all nodding and murmuring agreement with Mei Lee.

"I don't agree," Murdock stated.

"I don't either," Rose said, "but, as you say, we have no hard evidence."

"Anyone else have anything to say?" Mei Lee asked as she looked over the crowd. No one spoke up.

"Mister Murdock, remove the prisoner's gag, please," Mei Lee asked.

Murdock complied.

"Do you agree to do as you are told and not make any more trouble?" Mei Lee asked Whittier.

"I don't recognize your authority to overrule the duly empowered leader of the colony," Whittier said with derision.

The entire colony lurched forward as one, issuing a low growl.

"You seem to be of the opinion that this is a negotiation," Mei Lee asserted sternly. "It's not!"

"What about Krysia?" Whittier asked.

"She can do as she pleases, as long as she behaves and follows the rules," Mei Lee said.

"Can I have some time to think about it?" Whittier asked. "I need to consider my options."

"Is the pod emptied?" Mei Lee asked. A few of the colonists nodded.

"Put him back inside the pod to consider," Mei Lee commanded Murdock. "Rose, release Krysia, if you would, please."

"If you escape, you'll deal with me," Murdock warned Whittier in a low voice as they returned to the pod. In a voice dripping with venom, he continued, "I'm kind of hoping you do escape. If you hurt anyone else, I'll deal with you in my own way, and no one will stop me."

His face expressionless, Whittier said nothing as Murdock unbound the prisoner's hands. Whittier calmly walked up the ramp into the pod. After Rose had released Krysia, Krysia ran past Murdock and into the pod with Whittier.

When both prisoners were inside, Murdock closed and braced the ramp, then joined Rose, who was talking to Mei Lee.

“I don’t like the situation any better than you do,” Mei Lee was saying as Murdock walked up. “Like me, the rest want to give him another chance to make things right.”

“You do know you can’t trust him?” Murdock asked.

“Oh, believe me, I know,” Mei Lee asserted. “Personally, I wouldn’t trust him any farther than Murdock could throw him! I believe he could be trusted, maybe, about a week after he was buried. And I’m not even certain about that.”

“I don’t feel safe as long as he is allowed to walk around,” Rose said. She sidled toward Murdock, who automatically put his arm around her.

“Your objections are noted,” Mei Lee said. “Now to other matters; what can we give you for a couple of your spears? The colony needs weapons, and those would be the easiest to use as they require a much lower skill level to be effective.”

Murdock looked to Rose, who looked back, both surprised.

“We didn’t come here to trade,” Murdock said.

“I know you didn’t,” Mei Lee said. “You did what you had to do, and because of it, you’ve delayed your hunt. You’ve fed this colony, quite well, I might add, and gotten us started on some shelter. Surely, there’s something we can do to help repay our debt?”

“Well, we could use a few of the dishes,” Rose said sheepishly. “Until we figure out how to work clay and fire it, we have nothing.” She looked at Murdock and added, “Not that I’m complaining.”

“I’m sure we can figure something out,” Mei Lee said to Rose, with a good-natured laugh. “What about you, Murdock?”

“Kevin, please,” Murdock said. “You don’t owe me anything.” Murdock paused, thinking. Then he continued, “I don’t know how to accomplish it, but the colony, and we, could benefit from a cart to haul deer or fish or wood.”

“Hmm, yes, I see where that would come in handy,” Mei Lee agreed. “Let me ask around and see what we can come up with, Mur... Kevin.” Mei Lee grinned uncomfortably. “But is there anything that would help now?”

“I can’t think of a lot of things we would need, but it would be nice to be able to borrow tools, if we need to,” Murdock said.

“I give you my solemn promise that as long as I’m in authority, you can borrow anything you need,” Mei Lee assured them. “Yes, this colony owes the two of you a debt. One that we need to repay, even if the others believe they don’t owe one.”

They returned to Mei Lee’s tent while they talked, then sat by the fire.

“It would help more to send a couple of men with me to hunt deer,” Murdock said once seated. “That would be worth three spears to me.”

“I’ll see who is available to help,” Mei Lee said with enthusiasm. “It would help us out, too. Then we’d have some people who’d know how to hunt deer. I’m not sure what skills the others possess, but we all need to be taught how to live out here.” Mei Lee blushed. “I was hoping you and Rose could teach us, but I didn’t want to impose. Thankfully, your suggestion opened the door for me to ask.”

“Well, if they go, they can keep one deer, and we keep the other,” Murdock said. “Yes, all of you need to know how to survive out here. I’m still learning the specifics for this planet, but I do have the basic required knowledge.”

“All you had to do was ask,” Rose assured Mei Lee, patting the top of the other woman’s hand. “I don’t know much, but you’re welcome to what I do know.”

Murdock had picked up a stick to poke at the fire. Rose knew that whenever her husband did that, he was thinking about something important. But just then, a colonist approached with clothes for Rose and Mei Lee, startling them. Mei Lee ducked inside her tent and put on pants, shoes, and a shirt, then put Collier’s shirt on last.

“You can change in there, if you want,” Mei Lee offered to Rose.

Rose looked at her clothes. They still had her blood on them. She started to cry quietly. Both Murdock and Mei Lee came to her.

“What’s wrong?” Murdock asked, his concern evident.

“Nothing,” Rose blubbered. “I just realized that I’m not the same person who wore these clothes. I wouldn’t feel right in them. I know it’s silly!”

“Not silly at all,” Mei Lee said, gently rubbing Rose’s shoulder. “I would be surprised if you did put them on. What you wear now suits you much better!”

“Those are the clothes of a victim, and you’re no longer a victim,” Murdock asserted.



Once the ramp closed, only minimal light came on inside. Whittier had previously tried, unsuccessfully, to figure out how to turn all the lights off. He did know, however, that once the ramp was closed, no one could hear anything said inside. *I know Krysia is in here with me, he thought. I can smell her fear. Good. She needs to be afraid. She was attracted to my power and now it’s gone. Now, she’s lost.*

“What are we going to do?” Krysia asked, in a panicked voice.

“What do you mean, *we*?” Whittier asked coldly. “You’re here because you choose to be. I’m not.”

“I’m in this with you, Jim,” Krysia said. Whittier didn’t have to see her to know she was about to lose it.

“Good for you,” Whittier said sarcastically. “Now, shut up and let me think!”

She did as instructed, which relieved Whittier. *This is a big mess and I need to figure a way out, if I’m to survive, he thought. Murdock, obviously, still has a lot of animus toward me and will kill me as soon as I leave the immediate area of the pod. So, running is not an option. My tack of trying to convince the others that the situation here was not real was a bust as well.* After some time, he turned toward Krysia.

“Can I trust you, or are you going to turn against me as Metzger and Burns did?” he asked.

“You can always count on me,” Krysia said with conviction.

“Something tells me that we’re the only friends each other is likely to have,” Whittier said. *It doesn’t matter what she says, he thought. My training has been too complete to trust anyone other than myself.*



Mei Lee had gotten up and gone around to the other colonists.

“When did you want to go on the hunt?” Rose asked Murdock. She wasn’t about to leave her old clothes, so she had busied herself with securing them for transport. The time might come when she’d need them. She laughed to herself. Murdock had taught her not to waste resources, and she had learned. “Personally, I wish we were leaving now. It may sound silly, but I miss home. We both could use a bath.” Murdock continued to poke at the fire.

“What’s bothering you?” Rose murmured.

“Nothing.” Murdock spoke more to the flames than to Rose. “No one *here* can help me. I’m hoping,” Murdock paused to look furtively around, “that Beron,” he said softly, “will be able to help. I’m not a very sociable person.”

“No! Really?” Rose asked facetiously. “I am so shocked! I never would have guessed!”

Murdock couldn’t help but smile. “I’m going against all I know on this hunt,” he continued. “I’m comfortable with one other person, but I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

“Do we have a choice?” Rose asked seriously. “We need to take a deer, and we need help dragging it back home.”

“You and I can drag it home. They’re not going to know where we live,” Murdock vowed. “Hopefully, they can figure out a cart of some kind. It would be a big help to us.”

“Have you thought of where to go for the hunt?” Rose asked.

“Toward the river,” Murdock said. “I don’t want them knowing any more about our area than they already do, and I don’t want them to know anything about our hideaway.”

“Not even Mei Lee?” Rose asked. “She could sure use the experience.”

“What do you mean?” Murdock asked, looking at her.

“Since we found our hideaway, I’ve noticed that you’re more relaxed, and so am I. Also, I have healed faster. I don’t know why — it just is. And I think Mei Lee could use some of that healing.”

“Healing?” Murdock asked. “*Emotional* healing?”

“Yes. Most of the time, it takes longer to heal emotionally than physically,” Rose explained.

“I just don’t think it would be a good idea to let anyone know where we live or what our *relationship* is,” Murdock argued.

“Understood,” Rose said. “I was just thinking out loud.” *I have to admit that Kevin’s concerns are not misplaced*, she thought. “It just breaks my heart,” Rose finished, nodding toward the pod.



Murdock caught her gesture as he heard Mei Lee approaching. He knew that Rose keenly felt Mei Lee’s loss.

“I have some good news,” Mei Lee said as she came up to the pair. “I asked around, and some others would like to join you on the hunt whenever you’re ready. Some others are putting their heads together about the cart.”

As Mei Lee sat down at the fire, Murdock saw that she was armed. Looking around, he saw that everyone else was armed as well.

“Expecting trouble?” Murdock asked, glancing at Mei Lee’s weapons.

“No. We’ve noticed that you and Rose are always armed, and we think it’s a good idea to be prepared,” Mei Lee said, shrugging. “What do you think we should do with the extra weapons?”

“Rose and I use our knives for most everything,” Murdock explained. “But there are times that we aren’t armed. I wasn’t aware there was such a thing as *extra weapons*.”

“I feel less of a victim with a knife on my hip,” Mei Lee said, touching the knife hilt. “Some of the others feel the same way. I see what you mean about extra weapons; it was a bad choice of words. *Currently unused* might be better.”

Murdock thought about it. “I’d rotate them,” he said. “Assign someone to sharpen and maintain them and rotate them out with the rest. Everyone needs to know how to sharpen a knife. And you could use an armorer, but that can wait until you have a secured compound.”

“A secured compound?” Mei Lee asked.

“An area that would allow you enough time to gather weapons if defense was necessary,” Murdock said.

“I know what it is,” Mei Lee said. “I was asking how you would secure this compound.”

“Well, to me, the more secure it is, the longer you’ll have to get ready to defend it,” Murdock said. “Enclosing the underside of the pod will work for now, but you need to think about expansion. If it were me, I would build individual housing in a circle around the pod, with a wall between the buildings until the underside is enclosed. That would be more secure.”

“How do you build a privy?” she asked, after Murdock’s explanation.

“It would depend on how long you’re planning to use it,” Murdock said. “It’s basically a deep hole in the ground. If it’s permanent, then the hole should be deeper. Then you build a small building atop it. The building on top is tippable, and maintaining one means periodically refilling the hole. When it’s filled, you dig another one somewhere else.”

“That sounds like a perfect first project for Whittier!” Mei Lee said, with a touch of excitement.

Both Murdock and Rose laughed. Mei Lee chuckled as well and Murdock noted he had never heard her chuckle before.

Murdock untied three of the spears he had made and gave them to Mei Lee. He then kissed Rose and after telling her where he was going, went back to retrieve the travois.

Shortly after crossing the stream, Murdock became aware of Beron’s presence.

“Are you here?” Murdock asked aloud as he walked. An affirmative response flashed in his mind. “How is it Rose can communicate with the Oomah better than I can?” Murdock asked. “She also seems able to communicate with me the same way you and I do.”

“Both (you and mate) learning! Patience! It will come/be revealed!” Beron flashed, which confirmed Murdock’s suspicions.

“Are you aware of what’s going on with the others around the pod?”

Murdock asked. He received an affirmative response. By this time, Murdock had reached the travois and began dragging it toward the pod.

“*Why that way?*” Beron flashed.

“This is the only way I know,” Murdock said. He didn’t know how he knew what Beron meant; he just knew. Then the travois moved on its own. Murdock jumped a little and turned to see the travois floating just off the ground. “How are you doing that?” he asked in disbelief. Murdock immediately received images of *the sharing position*. But this confused Murdock. Then images showed himself and Rose exiting their tub. Murdock took this as *relax*. He then received images of the *major sharing* and saw himself floating with Rose.

“*Relax and concentrate,*” the Rose in his mind told him in Rose’s voice. “*Your physical body is not floating. Your astral body is. Let your astral body lift the travois.*”

“Is that you, Rose?” Murdock asked aloud.

“*Of course it is,*” she flashed. “*I’m sitting here with Mei Lee.*”

“*How are you doing this?*” Murdock flashed to Rose.

“*I’m doing nothing unusual,*” Rose said telepathically. “*Beron contacted me when he was having difficulty with you. I seem to be more of an adept than you, and he seems to be performing as a thought amplifier. I’m just acting as an interpreter for Beron. He could tell you were troubled and wanted to help, if he could.*”

Murdock looked at the travois. Its end remained on the ground, and he felt the weight of it. His eyes half closed as he concentrated. The back of the travois then floated and was lighter. He headed toward the pod.

“*You...*” The thought from Beron broke Murdock’s concentration, and the travois fell to the ground. Murdock understood that Beron was disappointed. “*Practice!*” came to Murdock’s mind.

Murdock was surprised that he moved it at all. He had a hunch that Beron had more than a little something to do with the success, but Murdock wasn’t sure.

“The people of the pod need to hunt deer. Do you know where they are?” Murdock asked Beron.

“*Clear your mind and use your astral senses.*” The thought came from Beron via Rose.

As he dragged the travois toward the pod, Murdock tried to do as instructed. *Was that deer grazing by the river?* he thought. *But that is on the other side of the pod. I could be imagining it all, too. Beron or Rose could have something to do with it.* As he neared the fording point at his side of the stream, he neither saw nor heard anyone around. He took a few deep breaths to help calm himself and then concentrated. As he forded the stream, the travois lightened until it was on the other side. *It feels like Beron is not as close as he was a few minutes ago,* he thought.

As Murdock’s feet touched the bank on the pod side of the stream, Beron’s presence cut off. Then Murdock realized that he had not seen Beron at all. He hadn’t gone far toward the pod when someone came to help drag the travois.

“Thanks for the help,” Murdock said as they entered the pod area. “How did you know I needed it?”

“Your wife sent me,” the man said. “She told me approximately where you were and said you could use a hand.”

They both dropped the travois outside Mei Lee’s tent, not far from the fire.

“Thanks again for your help!” Murdock yelled after the man, who had returned to his own business.

“Who was that?” Rose asked.

“I have no idea!” Murdock said. “*You don’t know?*” he asked her telepathically. He wasn’t sure whether any of it was real.

“*How would I know? I saw you coming, and you looked like you could use some help, so I sent some,*” the thoughts flashed through his mind and he knew they were from Rose. Murdock stared at Rose, dumbstruck. Rose turned away from him. “*Don’t stare like that, Kevin. It isn’t polite,*” she flashed. “*Besides, you’re embarrassing me.*”

Murdock sat down by the fire. “*When were you going to tell me?*” Murdock flashed. He saw Rose still conversing with Mei Lee, all the while communicating with him mentally.

“*I knew it was going to come up sooner than later,*” she flashed. “*I was*

hoping for later, though.”

Murdock had not thought it possible, but he would have sworn she blushed mentally without blushing physically. “*Who else has this ability?*” he flashed to Rose.

“*I think it’s just us,*” Rose flashed. “*I think the Oomah have more than a little something to do with this. Maybe that was something you accepted when you took on your job as guardian.*”

Murdock filed that away as something else he was going to ask Beron. The list just kept getting longer. *I don’t want to offend Beron,* he thought. *I suspect that Beron may be getting frustrated with the difficulty in communicating with me. Maybe this is Beron’s way of making the communication a little easier for himself and me.* Whatever the case, Murdock had more questions than answers.

“When did you want to go on your hunt?” Mei Lee asked Murdock.

“Early tomorrow will be soon enough,” Murdock said. “Why do you ask?”

“I need to let others know when to go,” Mei Lee said. “And I want our craftsmen to get a look at your travois. I’m hoping it will inspire a little creative thinking.”

“Sure, they can look, if you think it’ll help,” Murdock said. He doubted that it would help, though. Most individuals on Earth would not know anything about the primitive engineering required to make a simple cart. They were too sophisticated to think that simply. The term *educated idiot* was appropriate when he thought of them.

“Where did you get Rose’s dress?” Mei Lee asked Murdock.

“My husband made it for me,” Rose said with pride before Murdock could answer.

Mei Lee’s eyebrows lifted. “Impressive!” she said to Murdock.

“It wasn’t that hard,” he said sheepishly. He blushed a little.

“You know how to process the skins,” Mei Lee said. “You’re a wealth of knowledge that we’re going to need. I, for one, am glad to have you as a resource, assuming, of course, you’re willing.”

“Who’s going to help with the hunt?” Murdock asked, trying to get the focus off himself. “Do they have any experience?”

“I don’t think they have any experience,” Mei Lee said. “I think they’re just willing to learn.”

“Sometimes that’s enough,” Murdock said. He got up. “I think I’m going to go scout the area a little. I need to know where they are to harvest one.”

“Do you need me to go with you?” Rose asked Murdock as she got up.

“If you want, but you don’t have to,” Murdock said.

“What would you prefer?” Rose flashed.

“You can go with me, if you want,” Murdock flashed back.

Rose picked up the bow and the quiver of arrows. “I’m ready when you are, dear.”

“We should be back before dark,” Murdock told Mei Lee.

“Can I come with you?” Mei Lee asked quietly. “Or is it you two want to be alone?”

“What do you think?” Murdock flashed to Rose.

“Not my call, dear,” Rose flashed back.

“I’m going to have to get fairly close to them, so we need to be quiet,” Murdock told Mei Lee.

“I’ll do exactly as you say,” Mei Lee assured the pair. With a sheepish grin, she went on, “Truthfully, I need to get out of camp for a while.”

“Okay,” Murdock said after thinking about it. “I don’t think it’ll hurt anything. You’re going to need a water skin and to carry your weapons.”

“Give me a second to get a filled water skin, and we can go,” Mei Lee said enthusiastically as she ran toward the pod.

“You know the drill,” Murdock flashed to Rose. *“I want you to bring up the rear and keep your eyes and ears open.”*

“Yes, dear one, I do know the drill,” Rose flashed back. *“Are you expecting trouble?”*

“I always expect it,” Murdock flashed. *“I’m glad when it doesn’t come, but I always expect it. My concern is with Mei Lee. I don’t know how aware she is of her surroundings, so until we know, we have to be prepared enough for her and us.”*

Murdock tried again to find the deer using the technique Beron and Rose had

shown him. From what he could ascertain, the deer hadn't moved, and he had a general direction to travel in.

"Almost time to go," Rose flashed. *"Mei Lee is coming."*

Murdock saw Mei Lee coming, carrying the water skin and weapons. When she had reached them, Murdock took off the extra spear and handed it to her. Mei Lee hefted the spear and tested the balance.

"Once we start walking, walk single file and watch all around," Murdock told Mei Lee. "There are snakes around, rather large ones, so you have to be aware of your surroundings." Mei Lee nodded; Murdock knew she understood. "Rose will bring up the rear." Rose nodded in agreement.

The three started off. In the lead, Murdock could not hear any of them walking. He smiled with pride in Rose and how well she had learned her lessons. Mei Lee's skill of moving quietly impressed him as well.

Murdock monitored wind direction and also listened for the herd's location. After an hour, Murdock stopped just down from the crest of a small hill. Sipping from his and Rose's water skin, he looked back toward the pod to make sure no one was following. Then he tried to extend his consciousness back the way they had come to see if someone who wasn't in sight yet had followed. When he was satisfied no one was around, he squatted down.

"I don't think we were followed," he murmured as he handed the water skin to Rose. Mei Lee and Rose both drank some water while crouched down.



"Would it matter if we were followed?" Mei Lee asked quietly. Murdock was making a point of talking quietly out here as well as walking quietly. She figured he had a reason for it, even if she didn't know what it was. She had decided to copy his actions as best she could. She was sweating a little from the exertions and Murdock and Rose weren't, that she could detect. It made her a little self-conscious.

"If we were followed, it would indicate that the others weren't as trustworthy as you thought," Murdock said.

“It could mean there is an emergency,” Rose offered.

“If there were an emergency,” Murdock said, “they would be running and yelling. They wouldn’t be sneaky about it.”

“Could we stop again soon?” Mei Lee asked. “I need to discuss some things with the two of you.”



“We’ll see,” Murdock said. Then he instructed, “When we crest this hill, stay low and get over the crest quickly.”

Murdock didn’t stand up all the way, but ran hunched over to the crest of the hill. Mei Lee and Rose copied him. Once over the crest, Murdock called for another stop.

“You two wait here and stay low,” Murdock instructed. “I’ll be right back.” Murdock bent over again and went back to the crest of the hill. The two women watched. He moved quickly, still bent over, and then dropped to his stomach and crawled the rest of the way to the crest. He didn’t go over the crest, but looked intently back the way they had traveled. While he watched, he felt pleased that the women weren’t talking or moving unnecessarily. After a few minutes, Murdock backed down from the crest and rejoined the women.

“What was that all about?” Rose asked softly. “I haven’t seen you do that before.”

“We’ve always walked in the woods,” Murdock whispered. “We aren’t in the woods, so we have to try to be as invisible as possible. You do that by being quiet all the time, not standing on the crests of hills, or dilly-dallying when reaching a crest. That’s when you’ll be seen, outlined against the sky.”

Mei Lee and Rose both listened and nodded.

“I’m glad to see that I’m out here with two quick studies,” Murdock said quietly. The compliment made the two women smile proudly. Murdock turned and scanned the path he was trying to travel. He noticed a small section of low bushes close to the crest of the next hill across the small depression. “We’ll stop again when we get to the other side of those bushes,” Murdock said, indicating

the low bushes. “We do need to be quiet, now — very quiet. The deer should be on the other side of that hill. One or two may be close to the crest, so the closer we get, the quieter we get. And if I fall flat, do the same, quietly.” The two women nodded.

Murdock stood and started off down the slight grade. Mei Lee and Rose followed. All were as quiet as a gentle breeze. All the way across the depression, Murdock watched the crest. More than once, he found himself holding his breath. He also noticed that even though he was traveling fast, he didn’t hear the two behind him at all. When they started to get close to the bushes, he saw that the bushes were higher than he’d thought which was good. He slowed as he rounded one end, and seeing it was clear, quickly got around the end and lay down on the grass. The two women followed quickly. Mei Lee moved to sip some water, but Murdock frowned at her and shook his head.

Murdock crawled as quietly as he could up to the crest of the hill. As he peeked over the crest, he saw a nice buck about twenty-five yards away, slightly upwind. He froze. Rose joined him. Mei Lee had stayed at the bushes, so he motioned that she should join them. Neither he nor Rose had taken their eyes off the buck. Joining them, Mei Lee peeked over the crest. Her eyes widened in wonder.

“Do you want to take the shot?” Rose flashed to her husband.

“No, you take it,” Murdock flashed back. He sensed her hesitation. *“Don’t hesitate. You already know what to do, just do it calmly.”*

Rose slipped downhill a little to nock an arrow and then slowly came back up the hill to get a clean shot. The arrow flew, hitting the deer just behind the front leg. The deer had been slightly turned away from them, and the arrow landed true and hard in the deer’s lower chest. The deer ran away and down the hill, and the rest of the herd ran as well. Murdock slid back down the hill and lay back with a broad smile on his face. Mei Lee made to stand, inhaling to yell, when Murdock swept her legs out from under her. She fell next to him, on her back, and he clamped a hand over her mouth. Rose looked as if she would be sick.

“Why did you trip me?” Mei Lee whispered indignantly.

“You were going to yell,” Murdock said. “You would have scared it, and it would have run farther. You okay, Rose?”

“Not really, no,” Rose said, starting to shake.

“Well, relax,” Murdock said. “You did great. Stick an arrow in the ground where you are, Rose, and we’ll go down to the bushes to relax a little,” Murdock commanded as he moved down the hill the short distance to the bushes.

“Shouldn’t we go after the deer?” Mei Lee asked as she followed Murdock.

“If you want to chase it for a few miles,” Murdock said, “go right ahead. Rose and I will wait here.” Murdock chuckled.

“Why did you want us to be quiet coming here?” Mei Lee whispered. “And why didn’t you want me to drink?”

“Sound carries, especially downwind,” Murdock said. “The deer could have smelled the water, and knowing the water is the other way, they’d have been spooked.”

Mei Lee nodded. “Can we talk here?” she asked quietly.

“If you wish,” Murdock said. “*How are you doing, Rose?*” he flashed.

“*It’s just the adrenalin, I’ll be fine in a few minutes,*” Rose flashed back.

“It’s occurred to me that you and Rose would be a nice resource for the rest of the colony,” Mei Lee began. “But you haven’t agreed to it. Can I count on you or not?”

“I’m game,” Rose said, “for what it’s worth.”

“It would depend on the circumstances,” Murdock said after deliberating. “But you can always ask.”

“Just so I’m clear, did you mean me personally, or anyone in the colony?” Mei Lee asked.

“You personally,” Murdock said. He was impressed that Mei Lee didn’t assume anything. Most people didn’t understand that about him, or didn’t want to.

“If we needed to, how would we contact you?” Mei Lee asked.

“I’ll have to get back to you on that,” Murdock told her. “I need to figure out the logistics.”

“We could always use a string and two cans,” Rose quipped. “It would have

to be after we re-invent cans, though. Not to mention the string.” Murdock and Mei Lee smiled. They sat in silence for some time.

“It should be okay to assess the hit now,” Murdock said as he got to his feet. Rose and Mei Lee did the same as Murdock looked back at the path they had traveled.

Murdock and his companions quickly made it over the crest of the hill. Soon they located the spot at which the deer was standing when the arrow hit.

“Looks like a good hit,” Murdock said quietly, but with excitement.

“How can you tell?” Mei Lee asked.

“The amount and color of the blood,” Murdock said. He walked around the general area and found part of the broken arrow. He held it up for Rose. “Looks like a good part of the arrow is doing its job,” he said, carrying the arrow back to give to Rose.

“Doing its job?” Mei Lee asked, looking curiously at the partial arrow shaft.

“The deer ran with the arrow in its chest area and broke this much of the shaft,” Murdock explained. “What do you think the rest is doing while the deer is running and breathing hard?”

“I see,” Mei Lee said, after thinking about it.

“Well, we’re going to need help a little earlier than expected, and we need the travois,” Murdock said. “Which one goes back to get them?”

“I will,” Rose said. “It’s safer for me than Mei Lee.”

“I agree,” Murdock said. “You can leave the water skins. We’ll need them to help wash some of the blood off. You’ll have to bring as much as possible back with you.”

Mei Lee gave Rose the names of the individuals who said they would help. Soon Rose was ready to leave.

“If you want to run, trot,” Murdock cautioned. “You’ll get farther than with a full run.” Murdock gave his wife a quick kiss, and Rose was off toward the pod.

“How long will it take her to get to the pod and back?” Mei Lee asked, as she and Murdock watched Rose disappear over the crest of the hill on the other side of the depression.

“Not too long,” Murdock answered. “Long enough for us to find the deer and

maybe get it hung. Have you done any tracking?”

“No, I haven’t,” Mei Lee said quietly.

“See the blood? All you do is follow it and look around,” Murdock explained. “Be careful not to walk on the blood trail. You might need to start over.”

“Why do I look around?” Mei Lee asked as she followed the blood trail.

“Wolves or carrion birds will indicate the location of a dying animal, but you won’t see them unless you look,” Murdock explained. Mei Lee was doing quite well, considering she hadn’t tracked before. She took her time and didn’t rush things.

“You don’t trust me, do you?” Mei Lee asked, as she continued to follow the blood.

“It’s not you,” Murdock explained. “I trust you more now than I did a couple of days ago, and I trust you a lot more than I trust the others.”

“I guess that will have to do, for now,” Mei Lee said. “There’s the deer.” She pointed at the deer, which hadn’t gone too far before lying down to bleed out.

Murdock had seen the deer lying in the grass from fifty yards away, but hadn’t indicated it so Mei Lee could find it. Standing next to the kill, Murdock looked around. No tree to hang the deer grew nearby. And Mei Lee was moving up on the deer too quickly.

“Is the deer completely dead?” Murdock asked her, stopping her before she got too close.

“I don’t know,” Mei Lee said sheepishly.

“See the size of those hooves?” Murdock asked. “Looking at the size of the hooves and the size of the animal, I’d say he would break your leg at the least, if he had one more kick left and kicked you. You can’t be too careful out here.” He poked at the deer with the butt end of his spear. The deer kicked a few times, but didn’t hit anyone. “See?”

When the deer had ceased kicking, Murdock grabbed a leg and rolled the deer over so its belly was downhill. Then he started to gut it for transport. It took several hours, with Mei Lee helping where and when she could. Just as they finished, Murdock saw Rose with helpers and the travois. He raised and waved

his arms; Rose waved her arm high on the air to indicate she had seen them and headed toward them. As Rose approached Murdock, he brushed his hand against one of her cheeks, then the other, smearing blood on them.

“Thanks,” she said facetiously.

“You’ve been blooded, dear,” Murdock said, grinning, his pride apparent.

Several hours passed before the small group reached the pod. Dark had fallen, and the rest had fires going.

“Do you have a camp cook?” Murdock asked Mei Lee, as he and the helpers hung the deer quarters under the pod.

“No, do you think we need one?” Mei Lee asked in her quiet tone.

“You should have guards posted to protect the meat, at least,” Murdock said. “You may get a few wolves sniffing around. You might want to consider having one or two people do the cooking for everyone.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Mei Lee told him. “How should we proceed with tanning the hide?”

“Find someone who knows something about it, or someone willing to learn, and I’ll teach that person,” Murdock promised. “He can train others as needed. In the meantime, if I were you, I’d find out if the others have eaten and see about getting some of this venison cooking.”

Mei Lee left to find out who had eaten. She returned as Murdock finished hanging the venison.

“No one has eaten today,” Mei Lee reported.

Murdock cut off several chunks of the venison and handed it out to the colonists as they came under the pod. He instructed each on how to cook it and warned against waste. Mei Lee found a volunteer for the camp cook and also set up a camp guard mount. After passing out rations, Murdock cut off a few more pieces of venison for Rose, Mei Lee, and himself. Back at Mei Lee’s fire, Rose

began roasting their portion.

As Rose prepared the meat, Murdock went to refill their water skins. Even though it was night, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. To him, all was as it should be; the scenery appeared in the customary shades of grey. No one knew about his vision, because he assumed that everyone had the same capabilities. After all, it had never come up in normal conversation.

After filling the water skins and washing up a little, Murdock headed back to the pod. So, as he approached Mei Lee's fire, he closed one eye, as he usually did, to preserve his vision during the transition.

"Anything happen while I was away?" Murdock asked as he took a drink.

"Nothing much," Rose said in a very nonchalant manner. She waited until Murdock had a mouth full of water. Then she said, "Mei Lee released Whittier."

Murdock promptly spewed water. "What?" he asked in disbelief, choking on some of the water.

"Well, not really," Rose started. "She decided he should be let out to relieve himself and get something to eat." Rose looked sideways at Murdock. "I'm not at all happy about it!"

"Where is he now?" Murdock asked.

"Over by the pod ramp," Rose said. "Mei Lee is there along with three guards with spears." She handed the cooked venison to Murdock.

"Did Mei Lee eat?" Murdock asked as he ate the cooked meat.

"Yes, she ate some," Rose answered, eating as well. "Not nearly the amount she should, though."

Murdock thought as he ate. Whittier's being free infuriated him, but the pod area was not his domain. *I'm only an honored visitor here, at present,* he thought. *It's not my place to tell anyone that giving Whittier freedom is a bad idea. Since Rose and I don't like it, then we will be leaving; the sooner the better.* Rose fidgeted nervously, and he didn't like it. Soon, though, Murdock saw Mei Lee returning.

"Got all the wild animals caged?" Murdock asked facetiously as Mei Lee entered the campsite.

"Yes, he is secured," Mei Lee assured them. "He didn't give us any grief at

all.”

“What about his bimbo?” Rose asked with venom. “Is she secured as well?”

“Yes, they’re both secured,” Mei Lee told them. “We need to talk about this. I would like to think that you two are friends of mine, but letting Whittier out to eat, work, and relieve himself is part of this job. Am I or am I not supposed to be concerned with everyone’s welfare?”

“The issue is that I don’t feel safe with them out and about,” Rose said. “It has nothing to do with you personally.”

“I don’t trust them, either,” Murdock said.

“You two seemed to have cooled a bit since I chose to take this job,” Mei Lee said, with some tears welling. “I took it to try to help and was counting on you two for support.”

“We’ve given you, and the others, support,” Murdock said. “Personally, I don’t see why you would take the leadership when no one here helped you before. What is it that you think you owe them?”



Mei Lee saw that Murdock was more than a little miffed, which hit her hard, because he had rescued her and Collier.

“I’m not doing it for them,” Mei Lee tried to explain, looking into the fire. “I’m doing it so I can live with the fact that I tried to help them the best way I know how. I know they didn’t help prevent the problems that came before, but I think they are changing a little. I know you two aren’t happy with some of the decisions I’ve made, but they’re my decisions to make.” Mei Lee began crying quietly.

Rose looked to Murdock, who looked back at her.

“I didn’t intend to hurt your feelings,” Murdock began finally. “I was of the opinion that you and everyone else are taking the situation too lightly. Some people wouldn’t mind seeing him freed. Metzger and Burns may be gone, but were they the only ones supporting him? He got voted in somehow.”

Rose moved closer to Mei Lee and put her arm around the younger woman’s

shoulders to comfort her.

“It isn’t you, Mei Lee,” Rose murmured. “It’s just that we’re worried about what can happen if Whittier gets loose again.”

“And if we decide to turn him loose?” Mei Lee asked, tears still flowing, looking sideways at Murdock and Rose.

“Well, if I come here and find him the lone survivor, he won’t survive long,” Murdock spat. “And if he leaves this compound, he may not make it back.”

Mei Lee didn’t know Murdock very well, but she did know enough about him to know that his statement was more of a promise than a threat.

“That is your affair,” Mei Lee said coolly. “He’s been warned. Be that as it may, I’m concerned that on a personal level, this could cause a rift between us. That’s something I don’t want.”

“I’m only trying to point out that you’re free to make your own choices,” Murdock said, “just as we are free to make our own. I don’t require you to view things my way.”

“And how does that affect us personally?” Mei Lee asked.

“I don’t see that it does,” Murdock said.

“I agree,” Rose said, as Mei Lee looked at her.

“Good! I’m glad to hear that,” Mei Lee said, sounding relieved. “You didn’t get your deer yet, so I assume you’re going to be hunting soon.”

“I’d like to do that tomorrow,” Murdock said.

“From what my people tell me, your travois should have some wheels sometime tomorrow,” Mei Lee said. “So if you could delay a day, you’d have an easier time of it.”

“Really?” Murdock asked, raising his eyebrows. “That was quick!”

“I’m told that a cart for us will take a little longer,” Mei Lee told them, “but you’re a priority, so yours will be finished sooner. How long will it take to work the hide?”

“It shouldn’t take too long to train one person,” Murdock said. “But it’ll take some time to finish it. I can check in periodically and explain the next steps. Once the hide is tanned, then it can be worked.”

“Sounds good to me,” Mei Lee said enthusiastically. “Given any more

thought to the issue of our contacting you?”

“Not really,” Murdock said guardedly. “I’ll try to come up with something soon, though.”



“*What are you thinking?*” Rose flashed to Murdock.

“*I was thinking of building a house by the stream at the foot of the mountain,*” Murdock flashed back. “*It would give Mei Lee a way of contacting us without knowing about the cave.*”

“*Thus meeting Beron’s requirements,*” Rose continued his thought.

“Where are you going to hunt?” Mei Lee asked. Her voice made him jump a little.

“I was thinking of following the river upstream,” Murdock said, as calmly as he could. “I know there should be some deer up that way.”

“Does that mean that you won’t be coming back this way on your way home?” Mei Lee asked.

Was that an attempt to figure out where we live? Murdock wondered to himself.

“*You could be paranoid,*” Rose flashed.

Murdock started. He hadn’t expected Rose to answer him.

“Are you okay?” Mei Lee asked Murdock, concerned.

“I’m fine,” Murdock said sheepishly. “Just have a lot on my mind.”

“*It is late,*” Mei Lee said. “*Maybe a good night’s rest is what we all need.*”

When Murdock woke up a few hours later, Mei Lee was still awake and on watch.

“Go get some sleep,” Murdock said to Mei Lee. “I got it now.”

After taking watch, Murdock tried to think of a way for Mei Lee to come for visits without tipping anyone off about the cave or Beron. *I suppose I could blindfold her,* he thought, *but that won’t work for long.* One solution was building Rose and himself a house close to the path leading up to the cave. The only other solution was building a house some distance away, probably by the

river, but how long would it be before someone else found the cave?

For either solution, he would have to borrow tools to build a house. If the house was close to the river, he could get help from the others. But that would open Rose and himself to attacks or worse, unwelcome visitors and house guests. He had decided, in part, to explore the river to see what it offered for food, wood, and water. If supplies of those were plentiful, then a house at that spot might be viable, but he wouldn't know until he checked it himself.

I know that building a house alone is a tremendous amount of work added to what I have to do on a daily basis just to survive, he thought. Staying at the cave would be the easier solution, but what if Mei Lee needed him or Rose? Beron had been very specific as to who was allowed in the cave, and I've no intention of violating that trust.

Murdock continued to argue with himself while he kept watch over Rose and Mei Lee. By daybreak, he had only concluded that he needed to get Beron's and Rose's input, preferably sometime after he and Rose left the pod area and were a safe distance away. He also found coping with his newfound abilities of telepathy and telekinesis difficult and the list of things to try to talk to Beron about kept growing.

"Want to go for a walk and get some water?" Murdock asked Rose when she got up.

"Is that a hint that we need to talk?" Rose flashed.

"Yes, it is," Murdock flashed back.

"I would love to go for an early morning walk with you," Rose said enthusiastically.

"We'll be back in a bit," Murdock told Mei Lee, as he and Rose gathered their equipment.

"You are coming back, right?" Mei Lee asked, her voice betraying her concern as she watched the couple gather their equipment.

"Of course," Rose reassured her. "We have commitments here for at least today."

Mei Lee waved at the couple as they headed off to the stream.

Murdock and Rose did not speak until they reached the stream. Once there,

Murdock headed upstream.

“How far are we going?” Rose asked after the crossing was out of sight. Murdock stopped.

“This should be far enough,” Murdock said. “Are you in contact with Beron?”

“We both are most of the time,” Rose said. “You didn’t know that?”

Murdock shook his head. “Not until now,” he said. “I’ve been trying to figure out the issue that Mei Lee raised, and I’m unable to come to a reasonable conclusion.”

“And you need Beron’s input,” Rose finished.

“Not just his; yours too,” Murdock corrected.

“So, what’s on your mind?” Rose asked.

“When we weren’t interested in the others, living alone and in the cave was perfect,” Murdock started.

“And now, you don’t know how to keep our secret?” Rose asked, completing his thought.

“We do have to keep the secret of the Oomah. That part is not an option, but we also need some way of allowing the others to contact us,” Murdock continued.

“But I love our cave,” Rose complained, pouting. “It has all the amenities anyone could need!”

“Not to mention that it’s safe, secure, and temperature-controlled,” Murdock continued. “But how do we keep the cave and its treasures a secret, and how do we keep it a secret that the Oomah are intelligent?”

“Would a house at the base of the mountain work?” Rose asked.

“We would be closer, but we’d have to actually live in it,” Murdock explained. “If it was just a front, others might notice and suspect something else was going on. I think our best bet is to move away from the mountain and let Beron seal it as best he can from the others.”

“And us,” Rose completed his thought.

“Unfortunately,” Murdock said.

Rose sat down by the bank to think. Murdock stripped down and got into the

stream to bathe.

“What do you think would happen if someone harmed one of the Oomah?” Rose asked.

“Seriously, I don’t know,” Murdock said from the stream. “I believe it would not be good for any human on this planet.”

“That’s my thought as well,” Rose said. “So why don’t we tell the others about the Oomah, with an extremely stern warning?”

“I doubt that would work for long,” Murdock said as he got out of the stream to dry in the sun. “You tell children not to touch something hot, and the first chance they get, they touch it anyway.”

“But the others aren’t children,” Rose countered.

“I’m not so sure,” Murdock said with conviction.

Rose thought it over. Then she said, “I see your point.”

After taking baths and refilling their water skins, Rose and Murdock returned to Mei Lee’s campsite. There, they were greeted with a pleasant surprise. Murdock’s travois had been fitted with wheels, and when he tested it, it rolled easily. It resembled a heavy-duty rickshaw, without the canopy or spoke wheels.

“That’s really going to make things easier,” Murdock said with excitement as he continued to inspect the workmanship.

“It’s much more than I expected,” Rose said as she hugged Mei Lee.

“I’ll make sure we return it when we take our deer,” Murdock promised.

“Unnecessary,” Mei Lee said. “It’s yours. We’ll have our own cart in the next few days.”

“Thank you all, very much,” Murdock said to the craftsmen. Then he asked Mei Lee, “Have you selected someone to work the hides?”

“Yes, I have,” Mei Lee told him. “I’ll introduce you after you eat something.”

Murdock spent the rest of the day working with and training Corwin Smith, whom Mei Lee had asked to work the hides. Murdock thought him nice enough, and Smith had some hobby experience in working with leather before their displacement. He had no idea how to tan hides, though. More than once, Murdock showed Smith Rose’s dress. After he was satisfied that Smith had a

good grasp on the process, Murdock and Rose left on their hunt.

“How far upriver were you planning on going?” Rose asked in a low voice, after a rest to eat and scout the area.

“I was hoping to go as far as the entrance to our cave at least,” Murdock answered, barely loud enough for Rose to hear. “That way, if we find a suitable site to build on, it would be just traveling in a straight line during the move or to use the bathtub.”

“I’m hoping we can figure this out without moving,” Rose flashed. *“I was really enjoying our tub.”*

“I know you were,” Murdock flashed back. *“So was I, truth be told. I doubt we could find another place like that one. I will promise to do what I can to make sure you have a tub for a hot bath once in a while, though.”* Rose smiled broadly.

As the pair proceeded upstream, Murdock noticed that the ground was rising and the distance from the bank to the water increased significantly. As time and miles went on, the elevation had risen significantly, and the river bank had disappeared, to be replaced with a gorge. As they crested a hill, they saw a large stand of trees close to what had been the river bank. Then, as they approached the edge of the gorge, they saw what looked like an island in the middle of the gorge. Murdock suspected the river had eroded the ground between them and the island. As he walked farther upstream, he looked again at the island and could clearly see that it was a peninsula.

“That looks nice,” Rose said, indicating the peninsula.

“It would,” Murdock said, “if there were a way over to see if it would work. From here, it looks like we’d have to go all the way back and ford the river.”

“The river back by the pod was really swift and wide,” Rose said, concerned. “I’m not sure I’d like to cross it there.”

“There are ways,” Murdock said. “Ferries or bridges, but the first time across would be very difficult. Just not sure it would be worth it.”

“And making it too easy for others would defeat the purpose,” Rose said, finishing his thought.

As Murdock was looking toward the peninsula, he saw a big bear. He

thought it was Beron, but at that distance, he couldn't be sure. As he watched, though, the bear walked toward them. When it stepped from the land into the air, the bear didn't fall. It appeared to float as it walked across the open air. As he watched, everything in the bear's motion told Murdock that it was walking on a solid surface.

Rose had seen the bear as well and was watching it with rapt attention. Her mouth was agape as she followed the bear's progress.

Murdock, seeing the bear's direction, estimated its destination on their side of the invisible bridge. Murdock rushed over to where he guessed the bear would be and investigated their side of the gorge. He could only slightly detect the bridge, and upon inspection, he decided it was made out of some sort of crystal. The crystal was hard as stone but as clear as air. When the bear had almost crossed the bridge, Murdock saw that it was Beron.

"Hello, my friend," Murdock flashed. Beron flashed a friendly greeting back.

"Did you know he was in the area?" Murdock asked Rose.

"Yes, I did," she said. "He's come to help resolve some of your issues."

"How much does he know?" Murdock asked.

"Everything," Rose said, shrugging. "You've known him long enough to know that not much is hidden from him."

"Did he build the bridge for us?" Murdock asked. "I doubt the Oomah would need such a thing."

"No, he didn't," Rose said. "It's always been here. He does understand our need for our own kind, and he's not insulted about our need to move. We were, after all, led here, but you knew that."

"Did I?" Murdock asked. "I wasn't aware we were being led." Murdock, who was frustrated, was getting quite upset.

"Of course you were," Rose countered. "I've seen that in your mind since we left the pod."

Murdock flushed. "So, if he knows so much, why is he here?" he asked sarcastically.

"Don't get so testy," Rose said, trying to calm him down. "Beron is our friend and is here to help."

“Help us how? Supply us with another cave to live in?” Murdock’s sarcasm was getting surly.

“*Share!*” Beron flashed. Murdock knew that it wasn’t a request and flashed his agreement.



Rose watched as Murdock dropped as if struck dead. She knew Beron was angry with Murdock over his attitude, and she was afraid of what might be going on between the two. Beron looked like a statue. She could detect no movement or breathing from the huge bear. Rose checked Murdock as well. He was breathing deeply, as if he was asleep, but she knew he wasn’t.

Rose decided that her time would best be spent making camp here while waiting for Beron and Murdock to work out their issues, so she started a fire and ate some fish. Not being invited into the sharing was new for her. Previously, she had always been invited. Her exclusion this time meant that she was helpless to intervene in any way; she could do nothing but wait.

Rose decided to inspect the bridge more closely before it got too dark to see. She walked around the approach, feeling the deck and abutment, or as much as she could from the level of the deck. It fascinated her that the bridge was clear; it had to be crystalline.

Then, as the sun descended, the low-angle rays made the bridge visible. It appeared to be a closed spandrel deck arch, similar to pictures she had seen of old Roman bridges — except it wasn’t built. It looked to have formed naturally, through whatever means. The bridge lit up with a prismatic display in the waning light. *How magnificent*, she thought, *and very beautiful*. She turned to say something to Murdock, but he was still in the sharing with Beron. She turned back just in time to see the bridge disappear. It was only visible for a few minutes, but its image was seared into her memory.



Murdock started to stir not long after sun-down. "How long was I out?" he asked groggily.

"A few hours, I think," Rose said. "Hungry?"

"A little," Murdock said. "I'm more thirsty than hungry."

"This is all the fish we have left," Rose said, handing him the fish and the water skin.

"Well, then you should have the fish," Murdock said, trying to hand it back.

"I've eaten," she told him. "I did get to see the bridge."

"Really?" he asked around a mouthful.

"It was absolutely gorgeous," she exclaimed.

"When did you see it?" Murdock asked.

"Just before the sun went down," Rose said.

"Should be able to see it again around sun-up," Murdock said. "The light's about the same first thing in the morning and just before sunset." Murdock finished the fish and took a big drink of water.

"Where did Beron go?" Rose asked, looking around for the big bear.

"He was hungry and went to get a fish from the river," Murdock said. Then he looked at her, startled. "You didn't know where he was?"

"No, why would I?" she said. "He doesn't tell me things like that. He only talks to me when it's something you need to know."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Rose," Murdock said with contrition. "I just found out that I'm jealous of your abilities."

"You were?" she asked. "Why would you be?"

"I liked being the only one to communicate with the Oomah," Murdock said. Rose couldn't see him shrug but could hear it in his voice. "I was very frustrated with my lack of ability and forgot that we're a team."

"Beron told you that?" Rose asked, stirring the fire with a stick.

"You bet he did," Murdock told her. "He set me straight on a lot of things. I'm still processing most of it, but that did come out forcefully."

"What did he set you straight on?" Rose asked.

"I got told I was very arrogant," Murdock said. "I didn't know I was, but he told me I was when I assumed that the Oomah built anything for us."

“Like our cave?” she asked.

“Yes. As it turns out, that cave has been used by the Oomah for several hundred generations,” Murdock told her. “So, I got slapped down about that, too. He wasn’t angry. He was more like a concerned parent disciplining a young child who doesn’t know any better. That alone will really put you in your place, if you know what I mean.”

“What about the bridge?” Rose asked.

“We humans are free to use it, but not to deface or destroy it,” Murdock said. “It’s one of the things the Oomah value. Like art.”

“I can see why,” Rose said.

“He did agree with me about sealing the entrance to the cave, but he said there’s another way in, just in case we need to use the cave again,” Murdock said.

“Can I ask why I wasn’t invited?” Rose said.

“I have no idea,” Murdock said. “I think it has to do with him chastising me, and he didn’t want to do it in front of a female or in front of my mate. I still get the difference confused, though.”

“Can I ask what else you discussed?” Rose asked.

“You can ask,” Murdock said. “I’m not finished thinking about it all yet. So, I have no idea what it all means. You can either wait until tomorrow sometime, or you can ask Beron.”

Then Murdock got comfortable. “I’m tired, and we do need to get an early start in the morning.”

“Would you rather sleep alone?” Rose asked quietly.

“Why would I want to do that?” Murdock asked, surprised. “I would like you to be clear on one thing. My issues deal with me, not you. I am very content with you!”

“Your issues aren’t just yours. They’re mine, too,” Rose said as she kissed him and snuggled next to him. “Don’t we need a guard for the night?”

“Not really,” he said. “I doubt the others know where we are, and we have no fresh game. I think we’ll be okay for tonight.”

“Okay, I’ll trust you,” she said as she lay down and closed her eyes.

Murdock closed his eyes as well, but did not sleep soundly. His instincts were such that he was never totally relaxed and never slept soundly as long as he was exposed.

The next morning, as Rose and Murdock warmed themselves by the fire, the sun rose high enough to light up the bridge. Neither Rose nor Murdock said anything. They enjoyed the light playing over the surface of the crystalline bridge, as well as all the colors.

When the bridge was once more invisible, they put the fire out and packed their equipment onto the travois. Rose led, dragging the butt end of a spear along the edge of the bridge to indicate the edge to Murdock. Murdock had never been afraid of heights, but this crossing disconcerted him. He felt as if he were stepping off into nothing, instead of onto the solid surface of the bridge deck.

Both picked up their pace as they proceeded across the bridge. By the halfway point, both were sweating and close to running; neither wanted to stop to rest. After they were both across and on firm ground that they couldn't see through, they collapsed, out of breath.

"Glad that's over," Rose finally said with relief, still breathing heavily.

"It's only the first time crossing," Murdock corrected breathlessly. "If this is the only way to the other side, we'll have to get used to it. That was the longest two hundred yards I've crossed in a long time!"

"Did you look down in the middle?" Rose asked. Murdock nodded. "It would be quite a fall if you went over the edge!"

"It isn't the fall," Murdock joked. "It's the sudden stop at the bottom!" Both laughed nervously.

A few hours later, a stream crossed their path. Inspecting it, Murdock found that the stream was at the bottom of a deep fissure, but the fissure was only thirty or forty feet wide.

"Well, that tells me that we can't go any farther that way," Rose said as she looked over the edge of the fissure.

"Why?" Murdock asked. "It looks like the deer jump it, and probably the wolves as well." Murdock bent down to show her the tracks leading to the edge.

"We can't jump that," Rose complained. "Not with the cart!"

“I know, but a quick bridge wouldn’t be out of the question,” Murdock explained.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m getting hungry,” Rose said. “Do we really want to take the time to build a bridge?”

“If the deer are on this side,” Murdock began, “we just wait and get one when they cross again. Same thing if they are on the other side. It looks like they cross here a lot.”

As he looked more closely, he noticed that the difference in the ground level to stream level reduced the farther up the stream he looked. He also saw what looked to be a natural salmon ladder in the stream. He started pulling the cart upstream and away from the river. Rose followed without speaking.

Within an hour, they came to a rock wall. The water feeding the stream tumbled over the rock and fell about one hundred feet in a deafening roar. A natural pool lay at the foot of the falls; the pool’s surface was only five or six feet lower than the surrounding terrain. Murdock dropped the travois poles and inspected the pool. He saw all kinds of tracks on both sides of the forty-foot-diameter pool, but none went up to the edge of the water. He saw more than a couple of bear tracks as well. While still inspecting the tracks, Murdock jumped over the stream easily, although it was twenty feet wide downstream from the pool.



Rose, dumbfounded, watched him jump. “*What was that?*” she flashed to Murdock. She doubted he could have heard her over the roar of the water.

“*What was what?*” Murdock flashed back without looking up.

“*You and I definitely need to talk.*” Rose flashed to Murdock.

“*Sure, but not now,*” Murdock said. His attention remained on the different tracks all around the pool and surrounding area.

Rose bent down at the edge of the pool to take a drink.

“*I wouldn’t do that there,*” Murdock flashed. “*If you must, move down toward the pool outlet.*” Murdock pointed.

Rose dutifully moved downstream. After drinking the cold water, she saw Murdock searching all around the rock wall. He looked like a hunting dog on a scent, casting back and forth. After a while, he jumped back across the stream as easily as he had before.

“What are you looking for?” Rose flashed.



“I don’t know,” Murdock answered absentmindedly. *“Something doesn’t add up. No tracks go to the pool. All the tracks indicate crossing by the outlet of the pool. It’s all very odd.”*

“You have any theories?” Rose flashed, after checking all the tracks she could see. She saw no tracks where she had intended to drink.

“I prefer facts,” Murdock flashed. *“An unproven theory can get you killed. So, when in doubt, do what the animals do. Unless, of course, you see a bunch of dead animals or you can’t do what they do.”*

“Why were you looking at the rock wall?” Rose flashed.

“Knowing what I do about our mutual friends,” Murdock explained, *“I thought there might be a cave entrance that is not readily apparent.”*

“I take it you found nothing?”

“Nothing.” Murdock looked into the water at the edge of the stream. He saw some nice-sized fish, so he retrieved his spear and speared both. Rose started a fire, and they sat enjoying the fish and the scenery.

“What do you want to do?” Murdock flashed to Rose after they had finished eating. *“Do we continue downriver, or do we go back and see what we can find the other way?”*

“Can we get the cart on the other side of this stream?” Rose flashed.

“We should be able to without too much trouble, as long as we do so at the outlet of the pool,” Murdock flashed back, *“because it’s the shallowest and the narrowest part.”*

“If it were entirely up to me, I’d say go farther downriver,” Rose flashed. *“The river will make a good barrier for some time, and we would be closer to*

the pod.”

“*Do you have any other reasons?*” Murdock flashed.

She thought about it. “*I’d say we need to keep the crystal bridge a secret escape route,*” she flashed finally.

Murdock nodded. “*I don’t like having only one way out of a place,*” he agreed.

With some difficulty, they crossed the stream with the cart and turned back toward the river.

“Wait a minute!” Rose said at the river. “Can you jump across the stream here?”

Murdock looked at the other bank, measuring. “If I had to, probably,” he finally told Rose and started to proceed downriver. Rose grabbed his arm.

“I want to see you do it,” Rose insisted.

“And if I don’t make it?” Murdock asked warily.

“Oh, I’m quite sure you will,” Rose said. “I think there are a lot of things about yourself that you haven’t told me!”

“Are you serious about me jumping that fissure?” Murdock asked, indicating the stream.

“I am serious about your telling me what’s going on,” Rose said firmly. “You do have some explaining to do. We’re out here alone, so you have no reason not to.”

“Those are the issues I still have to work out,” Murdock said calmly. He indicated their intended direction. “Do we proceed?”

“I’m not going to let this go, Kevin,” Rose warned him. “I’ll persist until you tell me what’s going on!”

“The next time Beron and I have a sharing, I’ll insist that you be included,” Murdock promised in an undertone. “Maybe you can help explain it all to me, because I’m at a loss to explain any of it.”

Rose fumed as they walked downriver, but she kept her thoughts to herself.

The progress from the stream downriver was mostly downhill. Because he was pulling the nearly empty cart, Murdock had an easier time of it. Rose, who was some distance ahead, led the way as she looked for game. Because they were not in a hurry, it took them some time to go more than a few miles. As he progressed downriver, Murdock kept an eye on the river and the bank. Every so often, he dropped the cart to look at the bank. The water level was increasing, but the river appeared to cut through solid rock. He saw no obvious way down to the water yet. *The water looks to be kept in by the rock, he thought. It reminds me of what a moat would look like.*

He and Rose had been walking in the forest since they left the crystal bridge, but it wasn't all thick with trees. Some areas looked more like small meadows. When he saw that the trees were thinning a bit, he decided to check the river bank. The water was significantly closer and was composed of more dirt.

"Hold up a minute, Rose," Murdock flashed. He continued on until he was beside his wife. *"I want to get a better look at the surroundings."*

"What's up?" she asked after he was close enough.

"I want to check out the area," Murdock said softly, "and I want you to come with me." Rose nodded.

Murdock cast around the area slowly. Rose watched him sniff the air and then study the ground. They hadn't been following a game trail, but they weren't far off of one. Murdock periodically picked up a tuft of hair, poked around some droppings with a stick, checked the bark of trees, and meandered, looking at the

tops of the trees. Rose didn't know the specifics of what he was doing, but she knew enough to know that he was reading the area.

"Okay, we can go on a little farther," Murdock said finally.

"What are you looking for?" Rose asked in a soft voice.

"This is close," Murdock told her. "I want to build our house in the trees, but I'd like to be close to the river and lots of grass."

Rose nodded. "I take it you've done this before?" she asked.

"Not really," he said. "I have read about it, and I know the building techniques required, though."

"Well, then, we'll just figure it out as we go," Rose said with a shrug.

After traveling a bit longer, Rose called a halt.

"*I think we're home,*" she flashed. She waited patiently for Murdock to catch up.

Murdock dropped the cart and walked along the river to Rose. He took more than a passing interest in the river bank as he walked. Rose stood on a small knoll, and as he stepped up beside her, he saw that the trees were gone; in front of him lay a huge grassy meadow.

"Is this what you had in mind?" Rose asked quietly after he had taken in the view.

"I don't think we're going to find better," he told her.

"What were you looking at by the river?" Rose asked.

"I wanted to be in the middle part of the river," Murdock said. "Upriver, the water was too far down and ran too swiftly. Here, the bed is four or five feet down and the water flow is gentle." They both stood for a few minutes taking it all in. "I think this will work nicely," he said quietly to Rose.

Murdock began by exploring the immediate area. He cast about, looking at all the animal signs, checking the tree bark, looking up at the tops of the trees. He ended his explorations at the river. He found a rather large, clear pool that gave them easy access to the ice-cold water. Not far downriver was a spot that gave him a perfect view of the water. He saw some large fish and speared one. When he returned to Rose, he handed her the fish, which she began to cook on the fire she had built from twigs and grass. Murdock looked around with a

critical eye.

“I think the house should be back that way,” he said quietly, indicating a spot just inside a heavier stand of trees farther away from the river. “The ground is a little higher over there, and I want to use the trees to act as a windbreak and to help hide the house.” He talked out loud more to himself than to Rose.

“Are there enough trees to build a house?” Rose asked.

“More than enough,” he told her.

“How are you going to split it all into boards?” Rose asked.

“I’m not,” he said. “The most simple to build and keep warm is a log house.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen one,” Rose said, “except in books.”

“I’ve lived in them most of my life,” Murdock explained. “They’re very warm in the coldest winter and very sturdy against heavy winds.”

“How far do you think we are from the pod?” Rose asked.

“Not all that far, I think,” Murdock said, pointing in the direction he thought the pod was in. “The first problem to solve is getting to the other side of the river. Luckily, the river isn’t much over forty yards wide, and we have trees over here that are long enough. The problem is that we don’t have an ax or a saw. All we have are hatchets, and that’s going to be a lot of work to even drop one tree.”

Murdock and Rose ate dinner. Neither talked, and both were thinking of solutions. Then Murdock felt a very familiar presence. When he looked toward the river, he saw Beron on the far side of the river. As he watched, Beron levitated and floated across the river. Murdock’s mouth hung open in disbelief. Rose, too, watched in surprised silence.

“*Just cross!*” This thought came to Murdock’s mind. He had forgotten about the travois in the woods some days before.

“I don’t think I could,” Murdock said aloud to Beron. “I’d forgotten and haven’t practiced.”

“*Then jump!*” Beron flashed. Murdock fidgeted a little

“What did he mean?” Rose asked, looking at him skeptically.

“It’s something I’ve been trying to figure out,” Murdock said finally, giving in. “I think I’m not like the rest.”

“Of course you’re not,” Rose said enthusiastically. “You’re better than any

man I've ever met!"

"That isn't what I mean," Murdock said.

"Then explain it to me," she coaxed him.

"I think I'm enhanced," Murdock said finally.

"Enhanced? Like biomechanically enhanced?"

"No, not biomechanical," he said softly. "Genetic."

Rose looked at Murdock, concerned. "What kind of enhancements?" she asked after a long time.

"Remember when I ran to the river?" Murdock asked. When Rose nodded, he said, "I ran several miles in minutes,"

"Is that all?" Rose said, incredulous. "One explanation is that you're in really good shape."

"It's more than that," Murdock said in a soft voice. "I have no doubt I could jump that river without getting a run at it. My hearing range is greater than most ever dreamed. I have a sort of night vision." He had learned early in life that the lighter the grey, the warmer the object. He did, however, have to be careful during transitions to more light. He was blinded for a few seconds if the transition was too dramatic. "I'm also extremely fast with my hands and feet. Those are the ones I know of, at this point."

Rose looked at her husband. He wasn't pacing. He wasn't even standing. He just looked at the ground in front of him.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Rose asked, softly, after a little while.

"Most of those enhancements are ones I don't think about," Murdock explained, not looking up. "Others I've always kept to myself. And one I didn't know of until recently."

"You didn't answer my question," Rose said. "Don't you trust me?"

"That isn't it at all," Murdock said. "I'm used to dealing with things on my own. Other things I keep to myself out of habit. Add to that I may be unaware of other things."

Rose said nothing for a long time. She placed her hand on the side of his face, caressing it gently.

"*Why sad?*" came to Murdock's mind. He knew it was Beron. "*Happy time,*"

Beron intruded again.

“*What do you mean?*” Murdock flashed to his big friend.

“He means that I’m pregnant,” Rose said.

“*Yes! Happy time,*” Beron flashed. “*Two more your kind!*”

Both Rose and Murdock jerked their heads toward Beron. “*What? Twins?*” they both flashed. Both Murdock and Rose tried frantically to picture twin babies in the same womb. They couldn’t believe that Beron could be wrong, but they were confused.

“*No,*” Beron flashed. “*One this one, one other one.*” Both Rose and Murdock received one mental image of Rose and a separate image of Mei Lee.

“Do you think Mei Lee knows?” Murdock asked Rose aloud.

“I doubt she does,” Rose said. “But I’m sure she’ll have no doubt soon enough.”

“Do we tell her?” Murdock asked.

“If we say anything, it will cause her to question us even more,” Rose said to Murdock, “and that wouldn’t be too good right now. So far, we have avoided answering most of her pointed, and uncomfortable, questions.”

Murdock took Rose’s face in his hands. “I do trust you,” he told her, as sincerely as he could. “I trust you more than I’ve trusted anyone!”

Rose smiled at him. “I know. I’d like to table the discussion until some later date.”

“*This you den?*” Beron asked as he looked around a little.

“*Yes,*” Murdock flashed. “*This area.*”

“*No cave,*” Beron remarked. “*We can help! Share?*”

Both Murdock and Rose agreed and found a place to lie down. They both promptly entered into the *sharing* trance.

In the trance, Murdock and Rose saw Beron and his kind transforming this planet to suit their needs. Murdock tried to envision a log cabin. Then he changed the image to Beron working with Murdock on the logs.

“He can help with the building,” Rose said in the vision to Murdock. “He wants to help if he can and if you want his help.”

“Okay, Beron,” Murdock said in the vision. “I’d like your help.” Murdock

didn't know if Beron always understood him when he spoke in the trance, but it did help Murdock order his thoughts.

Rose tried to ask in the vision where they were in relation to the pod, but Beron summarily dismissed her. Then Murdock asked the same question, and a simple map showed where they were and where the pod was. The map lacked reference points that Murdock and Rose were familiar with, so it was useful only in showing a general direction. The direction was close to that which Murdock had pointed out earlier. Then the trance ended shortly after it began.

"You're supposed to let Beron know when you need his help," Rose said.

Murdock was a little disturbed that Rose's question had been dismissed out of hand. "*Don't worry about it,*" Rose flashed. "*It's a matter of culture.*"

"Maybe we should be thankful that they accept us at all," Rose said aloud. "It's their culture, and we have to respect it, even if we don't understand it."

"I suppose," Murdock said, after thinking it over for a moment. "You've done as much for them as I have. They should be more respectful!"

Rose laughed.

"Did I say something funny?" he asked, glaring a little.

Rose could tell he was miffed. "Just that you want gods to be more respectful," she said. "I know they aren't gods, but are we any less important, comparatively? It just struck me as a little ridiculous."



On the day that Murdock and Rose left the pod area, Mei Lee oversaw the release of Whittier and Krysia from the pod.

"I will assign the two of you work, for the benefit of the colony," Mei Lee told them seriously. "You'll be guarded at all times whenever you're outside the pod." Whittier looked askance at the guard closest to him. "I wouldn't recommend," Mei Lee continued, "that either of you try to escape. Murdock has said that should either of you escape custody, he'll hunt you down and *deal with you his way*, which doesn't sound too pleasant or healthy."

"How long do we have to endure this miscarriage of justice?" Krysia spat

with venom toward Mei Lee.

“You’re in custody,” Mei Lee answered coolly, “until such time as the rest of the colony votes to release you. Acting out won’t ingratiate you to anyone.” Mei Lee paced back and forth in front of the pair. “If you two would take some advice, do the work, and keep your noses clean.”

Mei Lee raised her head to address the guards. “Take Whittier to the digging task. Krysia will be hauling water.” She waved the guards off to their tasks and left for her campsite.

Her mind drifted to Murdock and Rose in camp. She didn’t always agree with Murdock, but found she enjoyed the company of both him and Rose. She enjoyed going on the hunt, which she found to be most instructive and very exciting. And she enjoyed their conversations around the campfire. Reflecting, she knew that some of her attraction to Murdock and Rose was due in part to her rescue. But she felt it went further than that; deeper somehow.

She hadn’t gotten very far when a man asked her for advice on enclosing the underside of the pod. She decided to go and see for herself what the issue was.



When Whittier and his guard arrived at the spot where he would work, the guard handed him a shovel and instructed him to dig.

“What am I digging?” Whittier asked as he hefted the shovel.

“Privies,” the guard told him with a sneer.

“You’re kidding, right?” Whittier asked in disbelief.

“What’s the matter?” the guard asked. “Are you too good to dig holes? You weren’t too good to have others do your raping and beating for you, though, were you?”

Whittier said nothing further. He turned to his task and tried to ignore the guard. As he dug, his thoughts turned to Murdock and the threat issued at his sentencing — the same threat Mei Lee issued when he was let out. *I could bash in this guy’s head with the shovel, he thought, but then what? Where would I go? I wouldn’t last long in the wild by myself. Besides, I want my power back more*

than anything else. This is your fault, Murdock.

Whenever his thoughts turned to Murdock and Rose, Whittier noticed that he dug with renewed fervor. *I must be working off my rage*, he thought. As he worked, he was putting together the beginning scraps of a plan. He wanted to make Murdock and Rose pay for his loss of status. He wanted to make everyone in the pod on the day it landed pay. It didn't matter that it was all highly unlikely from his current station, but he would wait and plan. He knew that an opportunity to advance his plan would present itself sooner or later, and he had to be ready to act when it did. *For now, I'll be a good boy and do as I'm told.* He would also either have to convince Krysia that he had changed or cut her loose completely. *I can't afford to have her disrupt my plans in any way.* He would do what he could, what he had to do, to convince the others that he had changed. *I need to win back their trust and confidence. Then I'll make them all pay*, he thought with a grin.



Though he and Rose had left the pod encampment only four days before, Murdock was already back. As he entered the encampment, the first person to see him ran off, probably to inform Mei Lee. The rest greeted him with smiling faces. Everyone appeared a lot happier than when he came into camp to deal with Burns and Metzger. As he made his way to Mei Lee's campsite, Mei Lee intercepted him. She greeted him warmly and then gave the slightest of nods and a slow blink of the eyes. He assumed the gesture was a sign of respect.

She turned to walk with Murdock, her hands clasped behind her. "I see that Rose is not with you this trip. She is well, I trust?"

"She is very well," Murdock said. "This really isn't a social call. I came to borrow some tools, if I could."

"Of course you can," Mei Lee told him. "We are implementing some of your suggestions and could use some advice before you leave, if you don't mind?" Mei Lee led him to the pod and the enclosure project.

As they entered the area under the pod, some men came up to Murdock to

ask questions about several issues they had encountered. Murdock walked around and explained his suggestions to solve the issues. Mei Lee followed behind, listening. She was very surprised and glad to see him, but was more than a little disappointed that Rose wasn't with him. She really would have enjoyed a few days with the two of them. When the men were finished, Murdock turned toward her.

"What tools do you require?" Mei Lee asked with a smile. She led him toward the tool storage area.

"A shovel, an ax, the two-man saws, a small tarp, draw knife, and some wedges," Murdock said.

"I don't see a problem with those items," Mei Lee said. "I don't even know what most of them are."

Then Murdock caught a glimpse of Whittier and froze in his tracks. Mei Lee could see the building rage on his face and slapped Murdock.

"Don't even think about it!" Mei Lee yelled at him, as he glared at her for the slap. "He's doing what the colony needs and hasn't given us any grief!"

"He will," Murdock said in a low, menacing tone. "And I hope someone survives so I can say *I told you so!*" Murdock turned away to gather the tools he needed and headed out of the encampment. Mei Lee stopped him just outside the edge of the encampment.

"You're always welcome here, Murdock," Mei Lee told him. "You and Rose are my friends, you know that!"

Murdock shut his eyes. "Yes, we know," he said, his voice tinged with sadness.

"I have to protect everyone here," Mei Lee continued, "even if that means protecting you from yourself!"

"We're building a house," Murdock told her, trying to change the subject. "When it's finished, we'll come and invite you to visit."

"I look forward to it," Mei Lee said warmly. Then, to Murdock's back, she said, "In the meantime, try to control your anger. I'm not saying it isn't justified, just try to control it."



A week after his visit to the pod encampment, Murdock was not quite half-finished with the cabin. Rose helped whenever and however she could with what Murdock would allow. Beron helped with uprooting the trees and getting the logs set. Murdock and Rose used the saws to cut them to length, and Murdock notched them in place. Beron, Murdock, and Rose subsisted on fish from the river, but Murdock and Rose had tired of fish.

“Do you think we could take a day or two and harvest a deer?” Rose asked Murdock, with pleading eyes.

“I don’t see why we can’t,” Murdock said.

“*Many?*” Beron flashed to them.

“We can only eat part of one,” Murdock said to his friend. “We could use more hides, though.” Beron gave Murdock an affirmative.

Within ten minutes, two large bucks walked into their work area and dropped dead, their heads twisted sharply. Beron helped Murdock get them hung so Murdock could skin them. By the time the first one was skinned, cleaned, and quartered, four other Oomah were there and carried off the excess meat.

Since skinning and cleaning the deer had taken the better part of the day, Murdock hung the hides so he could work them over the next few days and then went to the river to get cleaned up. Afterward, he stretched out to relax by the fire at which Rose was cooking the meat.

“That was a quick hunt,” Rose said aloud.

“That wasn’t hunting,” Murdock corrected her. “That was *shopping*. Beron knew we couldn’t really spare the time to hunt, so he made them present themselves somehow and dropped them.”

“Still, it is better than fish all the time,” Rose countered, “and we have two more hides.”

“True,” Murdock said. “Don’t really have the time to tan the hides, though.”

“I, for one, would like them to be blankets,” Rose said. “I’ve noticed the mornings are getting a bit nippy. Would that be easier?”

“Some, yes,” Murdock said. “Just means we leave the fur on, so that would

make it a little easier.”

“Since we started the cabin,” Rose said, “I have been doing what I can, but most of the time I just stand and watch. If you show me how, I can work the hides while you and Beron do the building.”

Murdock hadn’t been letting Rose do too much of the building because of her pregnancy. But from their discussions, he knew Rose liked doing her share and feeling useful.

“Sure,” Murdock said after a while, “that would work out just fine. The building would continue, and the hides would get tanned.”

“This place is going to work out,” Rose said, more to herself than to anyone. “I do miss our tub, though. I could use a hot bath.”

“I know,” Murdock replied. “I miss it, too.” He had noticed that Beron was strangely silent. When he looked over, Beron was nowhere around.

“Does that mean we’re done for the day?” Rose asked.

“Maybe he is,” Murdock said, “but I’m not.” Murdock took the wedges to try to split some of the logs for a door and shutters.

He spent the rest of the day making pieces for the door, shutters, and a bed. Rose was excited about the bed. She knew the time was coming when sleeping on the cold ground wasn’t going to work well. When the two were too exhausted to continue any longer, it was almost dark. Rose cooked some more of the venison, and as they ate, they walked around their new home.

“It’s starting to come together,” Murdock said as he looked over his handiwork.

“It’ll be quite cozy during the cold winter,” Rose said, smiling. “Are you going to have a fireplace and a chimney?”

“Yes, we need it for the heat,” Murdock said.

“You’re making the cabin big enough,” Rose said.

“It has to be,” Murdock said. “It has to be big enough for us and lots of kids. You really can’t add on to it easily. Better to make it bigger than you need.”

As night settled in, Beron returned just as Murdock and Rose went to sleep. They had no idea that he had returned and both slept soundly from their exertions.

After another few weeks, the cabin was finished. Murdock added the hearth and chimney last, and he and Rose had been living in the cabin for a week. Murdock had made a good-sized bed for himself and Rose. He had also added a root cellar accessible from inside the cabin. The cabin itself had a large and spacious main room with a loft covering over half of the bottom floor. Outside of the cabin, Murdock had built a smokehouse, but the meat hanging in it was left over from the last deer that Beron had struck down and needed to be replenished soon. With Beron's help, Murdock had also made a simple bridge a little farther upriver, where the river was well below the rocks it had cut through. And Rose turned the hides into blankets. They used one to lie on, and the other for covering themselves. Both knew they were going to need more skins for coats and boots for the winter. Luckily, they had more than fifty cord of wood for heat.

"I think it's time to return the tools and see if we can borrow others," Murdock said to Rose one morning. "I think it's also time to invite Mei Lee for a visit."

"I think so, too," Rose agreed. "Are we both going?"

"I would say so," Murdock said. "We may run across a deer on the way back."

"We could sure use it," Rose said. "And with the smokehouse, we can store more."

As they left their cabin, they saw Beron standing outside. Murdock and Rose greeted him.

"*Follow?*" Beron flashed. Murdock and Rose both followed after their huge friend.

They hadn't gone far from the cabin when they found a pool in the rock. It was away from the river and upriver from the cabin. Murdock saw steam coming off the pool, and when he stuck his spear into the water, he saw it was at least four feet deep. He and Rose looked at Beron, slack-jawed.

"*Thank you,*" both flashed with excitement. "*It's very much appreciated!*"

"*Is gift,*" Beron flashed to them both.

Murdock looked around the pool. *I'll have to get a roof on it before winter,* he thought. *I'm going to need a few logs, but not too many.* Rose stripped off her buckskin dress and climbed into the very warm water.

"This water feels heavenly," she said with excitement in her voice.

"I guess our trip is delayed," Murdock said with a slight laugh. He stripped off his clothes and joined his wife in the pool. Both lounged in luxury.

Beron waited, some distance away, for the pair to exit the pool.

After Murdock left the pool and had dried off, he received an image of a deerskin, then a mixture of rapid images. Murdock was puzzled.

"He wants to know if we want the hides of deer they take." Rose relayed from the pool.

Murdock flashed an affirmative to Beron.

"Yes, all we can get," he said aloud to Rose, who promptly relayed the information to Beron.

Beron flashed to Murdock and Rose that he understood and that he would relay the request to the rest of the Oomah.

Murdock felt that they just might be able to survive the winter with their friend's help and with luck hunting and fishing. Murdock was glad he had the help of the Oomah. *Otherwise, he thought, we wouldn't make it through the first winter.*

After their baths, Murdock and Rose left for the pod encampment. As they made their way on the other side of the river, they both looked across the river at their house.

“Looks pretty nice to me,” Murdock said, with more than a little pride.

“It looks like home,” Rose exclaimed as they walked past, “to me, anyway.”

They reached the pod encampment just before dark, where Mei Lee met them at the edge of the encampment. Mei Lee led the pair around to see all the improvements the colonists had made since Rose and Murdock’s last visit. Murdock returned the tools he had borrowed and picked out a few different ones to take back. All along the way, the colonists greeted Murdock and Rose with genuine sentiments of “Hope you’re well” and “Really glad to see you both.” This made the two feel appreciated.

“It looks like you’re going to have to hunt again soon,” Murdock said as they walked past the food storage area.

“Yes, it does look that way,” Mei Lee told them. “We have a hunting party out now, and they should be back tomorrow sometime; I hope they’re successful.”

“What weapons are they using?” Murdock asked.

“Spears are all we have,” Mei Lee told him.

“Do you have an armorer?” Murdock asked.

“Yes, we do,” Mei Lee said. “Tomorrow, I’ll introduce you to him. But you two must be tired and hungry.”

“We are a little tired,” Rose told her, “but we have our own food.”

“That’s up to you,” Mei Lee said cordially. “You’re both more than welcome to share what we have.”

Murdock dropped the cart when they reached Mei Lee’s camp-site and unpacked what they needed for the night. When Murdock dropped the blankets, Mei Lee noticed them and oohed and aahed as she ran her hands over them.

“Is this more of your work, Murdock?” Mei Lee asked.

“No, it’s mine,” Rose said with pride. Then, with a smirk, she added, “He has his own handiwork to be proud of!”

“We came to return the tools and invite you for a visit,” Murdock said.

Mei Lee looked at the pair for a moment. Then, with a slight laugh, she asked, “When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow is soon enough,” Murdock told her.

“I’m hoping the hunting party is successful, so I can go and enjoy myself,” Mei Lee said.

“If they aren’t, I’ll help when we come back,” Murdock said to ease her mind a little.

“I appreciate the offer, but I would feel better if I knew everyone was taken care of before leaving,” Mei Lee said in a soft voice.

“*What do you think?*” Murdock flashed to Rose while smiling at Mei Lee.

“*I think she is going to do what she wants when she wants to do it,*” Rose flashed back, also smiling.

“We need to hunt as well,” Murdock said to Mei Lee. “We were going to do ours on our way home, if the deer cooperate.”

They began eating and Murdock offered Mei Lee some of their deer meat.

“What is this?” Mei Lee asked after tasting it. “It’s really good!”

“Just venison that’s been smoked,” Murdock said.

That started the big discussion on the finer points of smoking meat and building a smokehouse; a discussion that lasted until all were tired and decided to go to sleep.

That night, Murdock took the first watch. While he sat awake, he planned how to get bow and arrow production going on a small scale. He and Rose could

use arrows, and he hadn't finished his bow yet, but he would have to wait until winter to work on them. He had little time to get as much deer and fish as he felt they needed into the smokehouse for winter. He had dug the root cellar for the purpose of hanging already smoked deer after the first hard freeze. He couldn't say exactly when the first freeze was, but it was coming, and he didn't want to be caught short.

I know we're going to need more hides, he thought, a lot more. He thought it likely that they would have a cold winter, so any ventures outside would require parkas, mittens, mukluks, and trousers. *I know the cold weather garments have to be doubled; one fur-side in and one fur-side out. Accounting for mistakes, we could get both pairs of mukluks and mittens out of one deer hide. Two hides each for trousers and parkas. I'd estimated five to seven hides per person for anyone venturing out very far in the cold. Then there is the tanning, the cutting, with sharp knives, and the sewing, with bone needles and dried back-strap tendons for thread. It'll take some time to get even one person outfitted for extreme cold. I'll have to get the hides from the deer kills the Oomah will get, so I'll have to rely on Beron to inform me of those kills so the hides can be harvested.* He made a mental note to discuss this with Beron sometime very soon. He hoped for a milder winter, but he had to prepare for the worst.

Just then, he got a telepathic message from Beron. No words, just a feeling that Beron understood and would do what he could. Murdock was then flooded with calm, and his worries were far less important. *I am broadcasting my thoughts or Beron is eavesdropping, he thought. Maybe it's both. How can I know?*

After a few hours, Murdock walked around the campsite to stretch his muscles. He had noticed that the nights were cooler than when they first arrived. He guessed it would be late summer or early fall in a few weeks. Then, thinking of Rose and their baby, he grinned unconsciously. *I've never given much thought to having kids, but the idea of it pleases me, he thought.*

"I'm glad to hear that," Rose flashed.

Murdock jumped a little. *"I didn't mean to wake you,"* he flashed back. *"I didn't know I was broadcasting my thoughts."*

“I have difficulty sleeping when my husband isn’t next to me,” Rose flashed. *“It isn’t that you’re broadcasting your thoughts, everyone does. It’s a matter of knowing what to listen for. You, Beron, and I know what to listen for when communicating with each other. With someone else, it’s hard to know what to listen for.”*

“So, you, Beron, and I can’t help but hear each other?” Murdock asked.

“That’s as good an explanation as any,” Rose flashed back. *“Of course, that’s just my speculation on how it works.”*

“What about others, like Mei Lee?” Murdock asked.

“I believe they could be taught, just as we were,” Rose theorized.

Murdock would have sworn that she shrugged; at least she did in his mind’s eye. Then Murdock heard movement behind him, which he assumed was Mei Lee. She was trying hard to be as silent as possible.

“There’s no need to be quiet, Mei Lee,” Murdock said, without turning around.

“How did you know it was me?” Mei Lee asked in a quiet voice. “I’ve been working hard on my stalking skills.”

“You’re a lot quieter than the rest,” Murdock said, “but you shouldn’t be discouraged if you can’t sneak up on me. I am notoriously difficult to catch unaware.”

“I was just coming out to assume the watch so you can sleep,” Mei Lee said.

Murdock had noticed that the entire camp was quiet. No other site had set a watch.

“Why is it no other sites have watches set?” Murdock asked as he stiffened a little.

“The only person we have to guard against is locked up in the pod,” Mei Lee said, shrugging. “No animals have come into camp, so we don’t feel there’s a need.”

“Then why are you out here now?” Murdock asked roughly. “Is it so Rose and I feel safe?”

“To be blunt, yes,” Mei Lee said.

“Then you don’t understand the need for the watches,” Murdock said, anger

tingeing his voice. “The purpose of the watches is to give the rest of the camp a chance to respond, should something come up. What would all of you do if a brush fire came through? They travel fast enough to take almost all of this in seconds.”

“It isn’t dry enough for brush fires,” Mei Lee countered.

Murdock spun around to look at Mei Lee directly. “How about a wolf attack?” he asked with sarcasm.

“We only have your word that there are wolves,” Mei Lee said. “No one else has seen one, except you. No one else has even seen any sign of wolves.”

“Do you think I would make up something like that?” Murdock asked, glaring down at her.

“I think you’re more than a little paranoid and very distrustful of others,” Mei Lee said, glaring back at him.

Murdock smiled dangerously. “Anything else?”

“You and Rose are my friends, and I’ll do whatever it takes to make you feel welcome and relaxed,” Mei Lee said, in a quiet voice.

Murdock breathed deeply to calm himself. “Just because you don’t see the immediate danger doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist,” he said calmly.

“Just because you think there is a danger,” Mei Lee said, “doesn’t make the danger real.”

I’ve done what I can to warn Mei Lee, he thought. If she chooses to ignore it, then I can leave it alone with a clear conscience.

“Okay, we both made our point, so forget it,” Murdock said. “For my part, you have been warned, and I won’t bring it up again.” Murdock turned to enter the small tent with Rose.

“One more thing, Murdock,” Mei Lee said after him.

“Yes?” Murdock said, turning his head slightly.

“Does the invitation still stand?” Mei Lee asked quietly

Murdock turned sharply. Mei Lee was apparently close to tears. “Of course it does,” he said in an off-handed way. Mei Lee’s expression changed to one of relief.

“I’m glad of that,” Mei Lee said. “Sleep well, my friend!”

“Thanks,” Murdock said and entered the tent.

“*Feisty, isn't she?*” Rose flashed.

“*Yeah, she is,*” Murdock flashed back with a smirk on his face, “*but I kind of like that!*”

“*Just so you don't like it too much,*” Rose warned, as Murdock lay next to her and she snuggled into him. “*I'm jealous of my position!*”

The next morning, Mei Lee took Murdock to meet the armorer. He was a slight man, thin and willowy, with long, nimble fingers. Murdock thought he looked painfully thin, as if a light breeze would blow him over. Murdock carried the bow Rose used and now showed it to the armorer. Murdock also showed the man the arrows. The armorer carefully inspected the arrow's straightness, fletchings, and flint point. He turned the bow over and over again and asked Murdock questions about materials and techniques. It was some time before Murdock let the man inspect the spear. Again, the man inspected carefully and asked questions.

When they had finished, the armorer did agree to work on making arrows and bows and a few spears. He made no commitment as to the length of time it would take, but they had agreed on a price for one bow, two dozen arrows, and two spears for Murdock and Rose. The rest would be for the other hunters in the colony and the armorer would have to work out payment with them.

By the time the two men had finished their conversation and haggling, it was only slightly past mid-day. Murdock struck out on his own, to find Mei Lee, whom he found at her campsite talking with Rose.

“Finally finished?” Mei Lee asked as Murdock approached.

“Yes, it turned out to be quite the conversation,” Murdock said. “Did the hunting party return?”

“Yes, they did,” Mei Lee said. “They returned a couple of hours ago. When did you want to leave for your place? I find myself getting excited about getting away from all the issues that go with leadership for a few days.”

“Do you need to let anyone know you're going?” Murdock asked.

“Already done,” Mei Lee said.

She seems to be fidgeting a lot, Murdock thought.

Murdock checked over their cart, noting its contents and making sure all was secure.

“All packed and ready to roll, dear,” Rose flashed.

“I see that; very efficient of you,” Murdock flashed.

“Wasn’t me,” Rose flashed back. *“Our guest has been anxious to leave for some time. I had to find things for her to do to keep her busy.”*

“Looks like we’re ready to leave,” Murdock said, as he picked up the poles and headed toward the river.

Rose and Mei Lee took the lead after leaving the encampment. Rose, bow at the ready, scanned for game or threats. Mei Lee was talking to her quietly about different things. Murdock thought it appeared that Mei Lee was genuinely glad to be going somewhere with them.

At the river, Murdock decided to look over the river bank, thinking of a bridge of some kind. *This part of the river, he thought, is much wider, two hundred yards at least, a little shallower, and is moving faster.* The river contained no sandbars or islands that could help support a bridge. However, some tall trees stood on both shores. *A ferry might work here, though.* He found himself thinking of the logistics necessary for a ferry crossing.

After a short rest, the three continued upriver. Mei Lee had finally gotten quiet and didn’t have a lot to say during the trek.

“Don’t say anything to Mei Lee about the house,” Murdock flashed to Rose. *“I want to see if she notices it.”*

Rose acknowledged his request without betraying their communication. It was close to sun-down when Murdock saw the house in the distance.

“What a nice house,” Mei Lee exclaimed.

“Where?” Murdock asked incredulously. He knew where the house was located, and he could barely see it.

“Over there,” Mei Lee said, pointing in the correct direction.

Rose heard the conversation, but showed no indication of her surprise.

“The bridge up ahead appears to be the only way to easily cross the river,” Mei Lee continued.

Murdock and Rose said nothing to each other either orally or mentally as

they continued on in a direct line to the house.

“I’m impressed with your skills, Kevin!” Mei Lee said, once they had arrived. This caused Rose to beam with pride. “Oh, my,” Mei Lee exclaimed when she saw the spa. “Where in the world did you get that?” Her mouth hung open while she walked around the tub, touching it periodically as if to be assured that she wasn’t dreaming.

“It just... appeared,” Rose joked. “Magically!” When Mei Lee turned to look at her with suspicion, Rose just grinned back at her.

“Well, wherever it came from, I plan on taking advantage of it while I’m here,” Mei Lee said with excitement, dipping her hand into the hot water.

Murdock, having gotten the fire going and unpacked the cart, had joined the women as they were finishing the tour of the outside.

“Could I see the inside of the house?” Mei Lee asked with humility. “I’m most curious to see how you built this magnificent home!” And then to Rose, “I’m very envious, you know!”

Murdock could see the pride on Rose’s face and in her body language. As Rose and Murdock showed their guest around the inside of the house, Mei Lee bombarded them with questions on construction and purpose for some features. Then, all three sat close to the fireplace eating smoked venison and drinking some of the cold, clear water from the river.

“We have a little announcement,” Rose began with excitement, holding Murdock’s hand. “I’m pregnant!”

Mei Lee raised her eyebrows, and she grinned broadly. “Congratulations, to both of you!”

“I think I’m going to need some assistance late winter or early in the spring,” Murdock said to Mei Lee. “I’ve never delivered a baby before.”

“You know you have my help,” Mei Lee said with excitement.

“I didn’t want to assume,” Murdock said, “or to presume upon our friendship.”

Mei Lee looked at him blankly. “I’ll also ask around and see if anyone at the pod has any experience with childbirth. I doubt anyone has, but I’ll ask. You were planning on the birthing being here?”

“Yes, I would prefer it,” Murdock said.

“I don’t blame you,” Mei Lee said. “This is much better than anything we are likely to have for some time.” Mei Lee fidgeted a bit.

“You have something to say?” Murdock asked.

“Like Rose,” Mei Lee started, “I’m also pregnant. It’s Tom’s.”

“I didn’t ask, nor is that my business to assume or inquire,” Murdock said.

“I know, but I mention it only because some of the others may not be as accepting as you and Rose. After seeing your house, I would also like my child to be born here, if you’ll allow it?” Mei Lee let out a deep breath. It took everything out of her just to ask.

Rose reached out to take Mei Lee’s hand. “Of course you can,” she said. Her simple statement contained the appropriate amount of empathy and caring one would expect from a blood sister. “You’re always welcome here. Always!”

Tears welled up in Mei Lee’s eyes. “I really appreciate that. I really do!”

Rose moved closer to Mei Lee and put her arm around her. “It’s okay, Mei Lee,” she said in a soft voice.

“Which do you want?” Murdock broke in to lighten the mood some. “We have a loft and a bed down here by the fireplace.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Mei Lee said in an undertone. She hadn’t moved away from Rose. “I would like to sleep with the two of you. It’s been a very long time since I’ve been close to another person. Part of the reason I came was to get away from the pressure of leading the others. I needed to just sit and talk with someone else, just to relax and be myself.”

Murdock had gotten up to make up the bed as best he could. “*Are you okay with that?*” he flashed to Rose.

“*Of course, she needs to feel like she’s part of something and not alone,*” Rose flashed back.

Murdock got into bed, and Rose cuddled with him. Mei Lee snuggled into Rose. All three felt safe locked inside the cabin with a small fire going and slept well.

The next morning, Murdock awoke first and coaxed the fire back to life, since it had almost burned out during the night. Neither Rose nor Mei Lee had

moved in their sleep, and he had been so exhausted that he hadn't moved, either. *That's different, he thought. I'm finding it difficult to rest when I'm away from the cabin. Since landing here, I found it difficult to rest anywhere, except the cave. Is my edge being blunted by creature comforts?*

"*It could be that you're comfortable in your situation.*" Rose flashed. He turned sharply and saw her looking at him, though she still hadn't moved, and Mei Lee appeared to still be asleep. "*You may be comfortable being wanted and needed and not being alone to face everything.*"

Murdock laughed to himself. "*Could be,*" he flashed back.

"You know, if you two want to talk privately, you may want to find a way that isn't quite so disturbing to others," Mei Lee said as she opened her eyes, rolled onto her back, and stretched.

Both Rose and Murdock stared at her with their mouths open.

"In my opinion, you're getting used to the idea of being a husband and father," Mei Lee said to Murdock.

"How long?" Rose asked, still surprised.

"I'm not sure," Mei Lee said. "It wasn't something that came on immediately. It was very gradual and only when you two were around."

"Did you know we were coming to visit you before we got to the encampment?" Murdock asked, recovering somewhat.

"No, I can only hear you two when you're close by," Mei Lee said.

"Have you tried to contact us telepathically?" Rose asked.

"I wouldn't know how to do that," Mei Lee said. "Would you two help me learn to communicate with you that way? I would really like that!" Mei Lee looked from Rose to Murdock and then back to Rose.

Rose looked to Murdock. He could tell by reading her face that she was pleading for some help or an opinion.

"That's something we need to discuss further," Murdock said, "but I would like to eat something and wake up before we do. We all need to be clear-headed." He wished he could talk to Beron and Rose privately.

"Who is Beron?" Mei Lee asked as they ate, looking at Murdock and taking another bite of fish.

Rose jumped as if someone used a cattle prod on her. Mei Lee turned to look at her. "It's what he was thinking," Mei Lee said, with a shrug.

As Murdock turned his attention to Mei Lee, she suddenly stopped eating. Going outside the cabin, he saw Beron in the yard, walking toward him. Rose had followed Murdock outside and smiled when she saw Beron over Murdock's shoulder. Without a word, all three entered into the *sharing state*.

"*Other female unique/special. Has accessible mind,*" Beron explained. "*Allow her to hear thoughts. I train to select who talk to.*"

"She is asking to be trained to communicate as we do," Rose said to Beron. "Is that permitted?"

"*Yes, but need to meet, but not alone,*" Beron explained.

"How did you freeze Mei Lee, but not Rose or me?" Murdock asked Beron.

"He did no such thing," Rose explained with a small laugh. "We aren't here. We're still inside. All this is taking place while we're inside eating, between the fractions of a second of passing time."

"Will Mei Lee know about this discussion?" Murdock asked quickly.

"No," Beron flashed. "*I hiding thoughts of us from her.*"

As quickly as it had started, the *sharing* ended and Murdock was surprised to find he was still inside the cabin, the cabin door still closed and bolted.

"Are either of you going to answer me?" Mei Lee was asking. "Who is Beron?"

Rose nodded to Murdock to proceed.

"You'll find out in due time," Murdock answered. "We have agreed to teach you how to send your thoughts. If it works out, you'll be able to send thoughts to us from the encampment." Mei Lee's mouth dropped open in disbelief.

"From that far away?" Mei Lee asked in awe. "Will it work both ways?"

"Yes." Murdock laughed. "It'll work both ways, and it's as easy to do as it is to speak aloud. But it will take time and lots of practice."



Over the next several days, Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee chinked the cabin with

mud and grass. While they worked, Rose and Murdock taught Mei Lee how to send her thoughts. At the end of each day, having agreed that nothing was more intimate than an individual's thoughts, all three took a bath together in their spa. Each night, Beron entered Rose's and Murdock's minds to train them on focusing thoughts they wanted to send while keeping other thoughts private.

Even though Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee shared the same bed, Mei Lee had no idea that instruction went on each night. Each day, Murdock and Rose taught Mei Lee how to control and focus her thoughts. Every few days, Murdock stopped work on the chinking long enough to catch some fish, clean them, and hang them in the smokehouse.

On one of those fishing days, Beron decided to show himself. Mei Lee was on her way to fetch Murdock from fishing and wasn't being very attentive to her surroundings. She was a fair distance from the cabin when she looked up and saw Murdock walking toward her. Directly behind him was the biggest bear she had ever seen, and it was closing in on Murdock.

"It's okay, Mei Lee," Murdock flashed to her, to soothe and steady her emotionally. "We aren't in any danger. He's a friend."

"Beron," Mei Lee said, still not moving. Beron flashed acknowledgment of her recognition.

"He's wanted to meet you," Murdock said aloud, in his most soothing tones. "As long as you respect him, you have nothing to fear."

"What does he want?" Mei Lee whispered, still skeptical. Murdock could tell by her tone that she was close to panic.

"Rose and I do something Beron calls *sharing* with him," Murdock reassured her, while he turned her around to walk with him toward the cabin. "He wants to share with all of us. With any luck, you will get some answers to some of the questions you've been asking."

"What does this... *sharing* entail?" Mei Lee asked.

"It's a way of sharing our thoughts," Rose, who had exited the cabin, said soothingly as she rubbed Mei Lee's shoulders, "and telling our stories. It's far more intimate and defies explanation." Rose felt Mei Lee trembling. "You'll be in control of what you want to share. No one is going to rip any memories from

you. Anything you wish to keep private will remain private. This is Beron's way of getting to know you, really know you, and for him to determine if he can trust you."

"I see that you've been through this," Mei Lee said, calming herself, "and you survived, obviously."

Rose laughed a little. "If you can trust us, you can trust Beron," she said.

After everyone was willing and ready, Beron initiated the *sharing state*. In the sharing, Murdock and Rose saw the abuse Mei Lee had suffered at the hands of Whittier and his men. They saw Mei Lee's grandfather teach her some of the old ways of behavior and respect. They saw Mei Lee's father insisting on her learning martial arts at a very young age. They saw how she loved Collier and the devastating effect his death had on her.

During the sharing, Mei Lee saw a brief history of Beron and the Oomah, as well as Murdock's history before coming to this planet. Then she saw Rose's history before she came to be with Murdock. Mei Lee also saw a recapitulation of Murdock and Rose after Beron contacted Murdock. She saw the inside of the cave in which Murdock saved the life of Beron's favorite mate, as well as the fairy bridge as seen at dawn.

All three humans discovered that the *sharing* was more than just an efficient method of distributing information. When someone entered the *sharing state*, all minds were attuned to each other. Sharing was the mechanism that allowed each one to communicate over large distances.

The *sharing* seemed to go on for days, but Rose and Mei Lee finally came out of it. Mei Lee stood up and looked down at Murdock and Beron.

"They seem to be quite close," Mei Lee observed, helping Rose to her feet.

"Yes, they are," Rose said. "Sometimes I think Beron is Kevin's father," she said with a slight laugh. Then she asked, "So, what was your impression of the *sharing*?"

"It was... different," Mei Lee said in a guarded tone. "How accurate are the images we saw?" she asked.

"How accurate were the images we saw concerning you?" Rose asked.

"Good point," Mei Lee said. "I had no idea Beron held Murdock in such high

esteem. Do you know firsthand how powerful they are?”

“Are you asking as the leader of the encampment,” Rose asked warily, “or are you asking as Mei Lee, the newest member of our family?”

“There’s no difference to me,” Mei Lee said in a soft voice.

“To be honest, I haven’t seen how powerful Beron and his kind are,” Rose said, “but I wouldn’t want to test them to find out. They made this whole planet to suit their needs, not ours. I, for one, would not want to be evicted from the planet, and I don’t doubt for a second that they could and would.”

“I was afraid of that,” Mei Lee murmured.

“What’s the problem?” Rose asked.

“What do they want from us?” Mei Lee asked.

“From what Murdock and I have been able to ascertain,” Rose said, “the Oomah want nothing from us but to be respected and left alone. If this was an issue for you, why didn’t you ask Beron yourself?”

“I don’t know Beron — not the way you two do,” Mei Lee said.

“Ask Kevin, when he finishes with Beron,” Rose suggested. “We should get some food together for them.”

Mei Lee shrugged, decided to drop the discussion for the time being, and help Rose.

When Beron and Murdock ended the *sharing*, Murdock awoke and picked up one of the fish that he hadn’t cleaned yet. He threw it over to Beron, who was also awake, and he snagged it skillfully out of the air and took it away to eat in private.

While Rose, Murdock, and Mei Lee ate, Rose talked to Murdock, explaining as best she could the conversation between herself and Mei Lee. When she had finished, Murdock called Mei Lee over.

“What’s wrong?” Murdock asked Mei Lee.

“Honestly, I don’t know for certain,” Mei Lee answered. “I just have some misgivings about the Oomah.”

“Like what?” Murdock asked.

Mei Lee frowned and thought for a moment. “What happens if they decide to evict us from this planet? What happens when they want something from us that

we're unwilling to give?" Mei Lee bit her lower lip, looking very concerned.

"What would happen," Murdock asked Mei Lee after a short pause "if a meteor hit the cabin tonight while we're sleeping? Or what if a huge earthquake happens and the cabin is swallowed?" Mei Lee shrugged and looked at the ground. "Would our worrying about those things change them in any way?"

"No, I don't think it would," Mei Lee said, still looking at the ground.

"So, wouldn't it be better to wait until something like that happens before we worry ourselves into an early grave over it?" Murdock asked. "We should be mindful of such things, but worrying about things you can't change is a waste of energy."

"I admit you may be right," Mei Lee agreed, "but I don't trust easily!"

"Then you have something in common with Beron," Murdock said. "He doesn't trust easily, either!" Murdock laughed to himself. "I'm not asking you to trust anyone blindly. I am asking you to give Beron a chance. That's all, just a chance."

Mei Lee looked at Murdock and came up onto the balls of her feet, obviously tense. "I will try... to keep an open mind."

"That's all anyone can do," he said to Mei Lee, smiling.

Over the next few days, Murdock was called to several places to collect deer hides while Rose and Mei Lee stayed at the cabin to work on a few things. Rose tried her hand at fishing as Murdock did, but with only moderate success. Mei Lee, however, did better at fishing when she tried it. And more than once, they both went out to see if they could harvest a deer. Rose had some idea of what to do should they get one. Mei Lee went with her more for moral support than anything else.

Rose found out that Beron had instructed Murdock on focusing his thoughts during the *sharing* session. Some of the instruction dealt with allowing other Oomah to communicate with Murdock, in order to let him know more hides were ready to be harvested. Beron had also instructed Murdock in communicating privately with Rose. Rose thought that was a good thing. She

thought of Mei Lee as a little sister, but there were times that a *little sis* listening in on conversations with her husband was decidedly inconvenient.

Rose and Mei Lee missed having Murdock around, especially at night. The two women would sometimes let their imaginations run wild and end up not sleeping that night. Murdock came home a few times to deposit the hides, rest, and eat, but soon they had more than enough hides. The number surprised Murdock, even though he had harvested them.

Once Murdock began bringing the hides to the cabin, Rose taught Mei Lee how to process them. Even with Mei Lee's help, Rose and Murdock could not keep up with all the hides that he had brought back. On the day that Mei Lee returned to the encampment, none of the fresh hides were ready, so Rose gave her the two hides they had slept on.

The walk to the encampment seemed longer than it was. Rose and Mei Lee cried for no apparent reason, and they had to stop walking until the women settled down. Murdock couldn't decide whether the crying was hormones, or whether they had just enjoyed each other's companionship and would miss it.

When they did arrive at the encampment, Murdock visited the armorer to check on his arrow order. After inspecting them and picking out the acceptable ones, he paid for them with two of the hides that needed only the smoking to be finished. Murdock showed the armorer how to smoke the hides. Then he went to Mei Lee's camp. He wasn't pleased when he saw her site. It looked as if others had gone through everything and taken whatever they found.

"What happened here?" Murdock asked as he handed the arrows to Rose.

"I have no idea," Rose said in a low voice as she stowed the arrows in her quiver. "It was like this when we got here. Mei Lee is looking for her second-in-command to find out what happened."

They didn't have to wait long. When Mei Lee returned, both Murdock and Rose could tell she wasn't happy. She began taking down the tent that Murdock had put up and stowed it on Murdock's cart.

"What's going on?" Murdock asked Mei Lee in low tones.

"It appears that I've been replaced as leader," Mei Lee snapped. "Apparently, everyone expected me to always be here and to not associate, socially, with the

two of you.” Murdock and Rose waited for Mei Lee’s anger to wind down. “They’ve released Whittier and Krysia on *good behavior* and have elected Richard Jameson to be Leader. I guess all that I’ve tried to do is well on its way to being undone. Any tools you need, you had better get them now, because something tells me that we’re not going to be welcome here after today.”

Murdock turned and went back to the main encampment. “*Get Mei Lee’s stuff packed up on the cart and be ready to leave in a hurry,*” he flashed to Rose. Then, to both Mei Lee and Rose, he flashed, “*I need to talk to some people. Wait for me at the edge of the encampment.*” Neither argued with him, which was a blessing. He had gotten worked up hearing what had happened to Mei Lee’s leadership role.

Murdock spoke privately with the cook, the armorer, and the tanner, asking each one what had happened in the ten days or so that Mei Lee was gone. He also asked each if they were willing to trade with him for raw materials or food, even if it went against any leadership decrees. He learned that Whittier had been talking to James for some time before Mei Lee left for her visit – no one was certain how long. Thus the takeover began two days after Mei Lee left. Though Whittier did not have direct control, he was an advisor, and they had determined that they would allow trade with Murdock for now. However, they could terminate that trade at any time, for any reason.

Murdock was careful not to let his anger get in the way and tip his hand to any of them. As he walked past the tool area, he picked up a few tools that he felt he would need. No one seemed to care what he was doing and no one tried to stop him.

“*Are you at the edge of the encampment?*” he flashed Rose and Mei Lee as he made his way out of the encampment.

“*Yes, we are safely away,*” Rose flashed.

“*Start toward the river by the straightest path. Move quickly, but don’t appear to be running away. I’ll intercept you,*” Murdock flashed to the two women.

Murdock was halfway through the encampment when a tall, thin man blocked his way.

“Mister Murdock,” the man greeted him with a fake smile. “I’m Richard Jameson. I doubt you remember me.”

“I remember that you didn’t seem to speak up very often,” Murdock retorted and decided to allow Rose to hear. Jameson’s jaw clenched and unclenched.

“I see you’re borrowing more tools,” Jameson continued, without shrinking. “Can I ask when you’ll be returning them?”

“I’ll return them when I’m finished with them,” Murdock said. “If there’s a problem, Mei Lee can vouch for me.”

“Mei Lee is no longer in a position of power, as you well know,” Jameson said. “If you can’t give me an answer, then I can’t allow you to leave with the tools.” Jameson raised his arm as if to signal someone.

“If you drop that arm,” Murdock said coldly and quietly, leaning into him a little, “I’ll remove it long before anyone here can do anything about it.”

The possibilities running through Jameson’s mind played across his face. Murdock cocked his head and grinned at him. Then he caught a slight movement out of the corner of his eye. He stepped to the side just as the spear passed him. The instrument that would have skewered his back caught Jameson full in the chest. Jameson stumbled back a few steps and Murdock continued on his way, stepping around the dying man and pulling the spear from his chest as he passed.

“Do you need assistance?” Rose flashed.

“I could use some cover,” he flashed back, *“but don’t allow anyone to get behind the two of you. You can tell Mei Lee that her replacement is dead.”*

“You didn’t...?” Rose flashed.

“I didn’t. The person who threw the spear should have had more target practice, though. Being around any of these people will be very dangerous for the three of us.”

“I know,” Rose flashed. *“And just when I was getting used to being welcomed, too.”*

No one else tried to stop Murdock as he exited the encampment. He was not far outside the boundary when Rose fell into step behind him. Neither looked back to the encampment, but Murdock used his enhanced perception to check for someone following them. When he and Rose got to the cart Mei Lee held, he

quickly loaded and secured the tools he had borrowed and assumed his place pulling the cart. Then they made a straight line for the river.

“Do you think they’ll follow?” Rose flashed to Murdock.

“Someone is following us now,” Murdock flashed back. “They’re far enough behind that we can’t see them easily. There are times that I wish I could disappear the way I’ve seen Beron disappear.”

“Even so,” Mei Lee chimed in aloud, “it’s only a matter of time before they find the cabin.”

“We could make hunting us an unhealthy proposition,” Rose added. “Unhealthy for them!”

“Do you really want to go down that road?” Murdock asked both women.

No one said anything more about it for some time. All three tried to decide on a proper course of action, one that would allow them some measure of security. Soon, Murdock could see the river in the distance. They had made very good time in their escape.

“When we get to the river, head downriver; away from the cabin,” Murdock told the two women.

“Why?” Rose asked. “Won’t they be able to follow?”

“I’m counting on it,” Murdock said. “There’s bound to be a place to cross the river further downriver. If we can get across unseen, they’ll think we just disappeared.”

“What are you playing at?” Rose flashed to her husband.

“It means showing Mei Lee some of the tricks Beron taught us,” Murdock flashed back, “but she is fully a part of our family now, so it doesn’t matter.”

When they reached the river, they all turned downriver. After they were out of the direct line of sight, Murdock used his astral-self to check behind them. Three of the men from the encampment followed them. Then he saw something that made him smile. He saw one moving out into the lead of the three pursuers, leaving the other two behind

“Well, I have some good news,” Murdock told the two women. “The pursuers have dropped to one, and that one is Whittier!”

“I know what you want to do, dear, but don’t,” Rose cautioned.

“How far back is he?” Mei Lee asked.

Murdock checked again and saw Whittier stopping. The other two men had already given up and were heading back to the encampment. He saw Whittier finally collapse from exhaustion. Seeing that, Murdock stopped.

“Why are you stopping?” Rose asked. She and Mei Lee had come back to see if something was wrong.

“Whittier has collapsed a mile or so back, and the other two have turned back,” Murdock said. “I think we can safely cross the river here, and if we’re careful, we can head for home unobserved by Whittier or any of the others.”

“How can we cross here?” Mei Lee asked. “We don’t have the tools or the time to build a bridge; or anything else, for that matter.”

Murdock didn’t answer her. Instead, he closed his eyes so he could concentrate. He felt himself as well as the cart being lifted slightly. He opened his eyes a little and saw that the cart, himself, Mei Lee, and Rose were levitated and moving across the two hundred yards of swiftly moving water. After a few minutes, they had all safely crossed the river with the cart.

After everyone stood on the ground, he looked back, astrally, over their escape route to check Whittier’s position, as well as to check to see whether anyone from the encampment had observed them. Whittier had given up the chase and was heading back to the encampment, and failing to find any sign of anyone else observing them, Murdock quickly pulled the cart away from the river and into a small depression hidden from view by a thick stand of trees.

“We can rest here for a while,” he told the two women. He sat on a log and took a few long pulls of water from the water skin.

Mei Lee looked at him; her mouth agape in disbelief.

“Rose and I decided to show you that little trick because you’re now part of our family,” Murdock explained as he handed her the water skin.

Mei Lee took the water skin, drank from it, and passed it to Rose without saying a word.

“I take it we were unobserved?” Rose asked, as she took the water skin from Mei Lee and drank deeply from it.

“Whittier was heading back and was too far behind to see,” Murdock answered. “Pretty bad when a man, pulling a loaded cart, and two pregnant women, walking beside, can outdistance three supposedly fit men!”

All three laughed at his quip.

“How did you do that?” Mei Lee asked, still surprised.

“That was a trick courtesy of Beron,” Murdock said. “I didn’t do it alone. Rose helped.”

“How is that possible?” Mei Lee asked skeptically. “How do you know where Whittier is? How did you know where the other two pursuers were? I just don’t understand.”

“Some of those things were learned by way of Beron,” Murdock said, as he took the water skin again and drank deeply.

“The rest are from his personal experience and skills,” Rose offered. Murdock looked at her with concern.

“That isn’t exactly true,” Murdock explained. “I’ve been physically enhanced. I don’t know when or by whom, but I’m what some would call a freak.”

“The father of my baby is not a freak,” Rose said, beginning to cry. “You’re using everything you know and everything you’ve learned to try to keep as many of the humans on this planet alive for as long as possible, even if they don’t appreciate it or deserve it. That doesn’t make you a freak!” Rose turned her back to the others and buried her face in her hands, crying quietly.

“If Mei Lee is to be part of our family, she needs to know what she’s getting into,” Murdock said in a quiet, somewhat sad voice. “We can’t hide such things from her.”

Mei Lee thought about what she had heard. “What am I supposed to do?” she asked. “Am I supposed to take off screaming? Am I supposed to go back to the encampment? You both say I’m part of your family. I say you two *are* my family. All the family I’m likely to have. With the two of you, I’ve felt cared for and looked after as never before. I’m not likely to turn my back on that.”

“You do need to make your own decisions,” Murdock told her, as he got up and assumed his position pulling the cart.

“Do you want me to fill the water skin in the river?” Mei Lee asked.

“No,” Murdock said. “We need to stay out of view of the other side of the river and try to get home without leaving too much of a trail. I don’t think anyone at the encampment could figure a way to cross the river, let alone follow a trail, but I’m not willing to risk it.”

As they started off, Rose wiped away the tears and took up her position with the bow at the ready. It would take a few more hours to reach the cabin.

“I need you two to figure a way to make the cabin more secure,” Murdock said.

While they walked, Murdock flashed to Beron, “*You are aware of the situation at the pod?*”

He received an affirmative from his large friend.

“*I think the Oomah should be warned away from the encampment.*”

About an hour before dark the little group reached the cabin.

After the cart was emptied, Murdock entered the cabin and sat by the fireplace. Rose handed him some venison as he sat.

“What have you come up with?” he asked both women as he ate.

“We should dismantle the bridge you made to cross the river,” Mei Lee offered. “It would make it difficult for the others to cross to this side; maybe difficult enough that they would give up.”

“That won’t happen,” Rose argued. “Those with a single-minded purpose would eventually conquer any obstacle that stood in their way. And knowing what I do of Whittier, he definitely has a single-minded purpose.”

“So, what would you suggest?” Murdock asked.

“Prepare,” Rose said, after thinking about the situation for a moment. “We

should dismantle the bridge to slow any advance, and we should prepare for a fight.”

“I agree,” Murdock said with a small grin.

“That’s what you’d come up with before you asked us to think about the situation,” Mei Lee said. “Why have the two of us come up with a solution you had already decided on?”

“I asked you to come up with solutions because I needed to make sure that what we do is not simply because it was my idea,” Murdock explained. “For all of us to get behind a course of action, we have to believe it’s the only acceptable solution open to us. We do need to prepare, and part of that preparation is making two more bows and a lot of arrows. Also, you two need to train, primarily in knife fighting.”

Both women could see the wisdom in what Murdock had said. They needed more weapons and they did need to know how to use them. They needed to prepare for winter as well as a possible attack. With an action plan in place, Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee felt better and could sleep in peace.



Whittier finally gave up the chase a few miles from the encampment. *I know I let my anger get the better of me, he thought, to the point that I have gone into the domain of my enemy, which is dangerous and stupid.* Now, he was lying in the middle of nowhere, too exhausted to move. *Murdock chose to hobble himself with two women, he thought, so it should have been easy to eliminate him, but, for whatever reason, Murdock has escaped.*

As he lay exhausted, he expected Murdock to double back and *deal with him*, as Murdock had threatened to do many times. But when he had caught his breath somewhat, Murdock still hadn’t arrived.

That’s just what I figured. Whittier thought. *You’re all talk, Murdock. All you do is intimidate others.* After some time, although he was still exhausted and his leg muscles hurt, he was able to stand and keep his feet. “No more! You can’t intimidate me anymore! Do you want me? I’m right here,” he yelled at the sky.

The yelling helped relieve some of his frustration. Then, when he was finally able, Whittier headed back to the encampment. He ran all sorts of scenarios through his mind. He would also have to deal with the failures of his henchmen.

“The plan was so simple,” Whittier said aloud to himself as he traveled. “Wait for Murdock to try to steal more tools after Mei Lee returned; after her *vacation*. Dick Jameson was to delay Murdock just long enough for Brian Scott to shove a spear in his back; use it like a pike. Is that what you imbeciles did? Did you stick to the plan? No-o-oo! You just had to do it your way.” Whittier got more livid as he walked to work off his anger. “Now, Jameson is dead, a waste of a perfectly good moron, Murdock has escaped, and to top it all off, he has stolen most of *my* valuable tools and two of my personal slaves!” He waved his arms and gestured as he walked back. “You just had to throw the spear, didn’t you, Mister Scott! You just had to give Murdock the weapon he used to kill poor Dick Jameson!”

As he proceeded to the encampment, he tried to decide the best way to correct this debacle. He leaned toward slitting Scott’s throat himself.

“*You can’t have blood on your hands,*” his father’s voice said inside his head. *Hire another to do it or allow Murdock to do it for me,* he thought.

“I’m too much your son to forget something like that,” Whittier said harshly to the voice inside his head.



For the next two weeks, Murdock, Rose and Mei Lee kept busy. Murdock dismantled the bridge he had built only a month before. He used the logs to build a small enclosure for the spa that Beron had provided, which would allow them to use it all winter long and keep most of the snow away. All three got the rest of the hides processed so that they could make winter wear. Mei Lee caught, cleaned, and got the fish into the smokehouse. Murdock took the bow and cart out, and after several tries, harvested two more deer. At night, Murdock worked on his bow while Rose worked on the mittens and mukluks. Mei Lee tried to make her own bow and some functional furniture for the cabin; she had

unilaterally determined that they needed, at least, a proper table.

When Murdock had finished his bow, he pulled it a few times before pulling it to full draw. When Rose and Mei Lee asked to see it, they tried to pull it, but couldn't manage more than an inch of deflection. This caused the women to speculate, to themselves, as to his abilities.

Rose made both pairs of Mei Lee's mukluks and mittens out of one deer hide with enough left over to make leather thongs, some of which Murdock used to finish his bow.

When Rose finished the first pair of mittens and mukluks, Mei Lee tried on the inner pairs. They fit perfectly — not so tight as to cut off circulation, but just loose enough to allow the hands and feet to breathe. When she tried on the outer pairs, they fit well and sealed out the air.

"Those are way too warm for inside the cabin," she said as she quickly removed them.

When Mei Lee finished the table, which was extremely sturdy, first Rose and then Mei Lee lay down on it. Murdock didn't have to tell them that this was where they both were going to birth their babies, which changed the mood in the cabin to one of quiet, concerned reflection. Murdock was the most concerned. *I have no idea how to birth a baby so my job is going to be that of a helpless spectator*, he thought, *while both women's lives were going to be in each other's hands.*

Murdock had been watching Rose and Mei Lee as their bellies swelled. Rose looked to be further along, but that could be from a myriad of factors. Rose would sometimes act like a silly model when she caught him looking at her. Mei Lee usually tried to hide her belly.

One night, Murdock awoke because of a bite in the air. He didn't think much of it. He just put some more wood in the fireplace and went back to bed. When he awoke again, at his normal hour, he went outside to find the ground covered in thick frost. He immediately tried to communicate with Beron.

"*When you go long-sleeping?*" Murdock asked.

"*Soon,*" Beron responded.

"*May we visit?*" Murdock asked.

“Yes,” Beron responded.

“Do we have anything major going on that can’t wait for a few days?” Murdock asked as he entered the cabin.

“Nothing that I can think of,” Rose said. “What’s going on?”

“The first frost is here, and Beron will be hibernating soon,” Murdock explained. “We need to ensure that no one knows where the cave is and that we can find a way in, should we need to.”

Mei Lee was confused as to what was going on.

“I’m up for a little walk,” Rose said with excitement. “When did you want to leave?”

“After breakfast, so the fire can burn down some,” Murdock said, going outside to get the cart ready.



During a rest, as they walked to the cave, Rose took a long drink from the water skin and then passed it to Mei Lee. “Are you in a big hurry or something?” she asked Murdock.

“I know we’re not being followed,” Murdock said as he surveyed the area, “but I’m still nervous and cautious.” He took the water skin from Mei Lee and had a long drink.

“You seem to be in a big hurry to me,” Rose said. “You’re walking a lot faster than you usually do. I don’t know if I can keep up.”

“How are you doing, Mei Lee?” Murdock asked, as he resituated some of the hides they had brought with them on the front of the cart.

“I’m a bit winded,” Mei Lee said, “but I think I’m okay.”

“Okay, I have a new job for both of you,” Murdock said, as he positioned the women in the center of the cart. “I want both of you to scan the horizon for possible threats. Since the ground is mostly flat, you should be able to see for quite a distance.” As he picked up the cart, both women squealed a little.

Murdock started off at a quick walk, then accelerated to a long, loping stride. Mei Lee’s and Rose’s hair flew back in the wind from the speed. When both

women tried to communicate with Murdock telepathically, they failed for the first time. Rose saw the trees in front of them quickly getting bigger as she felt Murdock slowing. After they reached the stream, Murdock stopped on the path and let the cart down easily. As she got off the cart, Rose handed Murdock the water skin.

“I haven’t felt that for a very long time,” Mei Lee said as she looked around. “I had an older brother who used to ride a very old motorcycle. He used to take me on short trips. That felt like thirty-five or forty miles per hour.”

“We were trying to talk to you,” Rose said. “Why didn’t you answer?”

“I needed all my concentration to not hit something and dump the cart,” Murdock said, after taking a drink and looking up and down the well-worn path, seeing no one. “Let’s get off the path,” Murdock said. He picked up the cart, levitated it across the stream and set it down under the trees.

He turned in time to see Rose and Mei Lee float in.

“We don’t have too far to go. Can you make it?” Murdock asked Rose.

“As long as we go at a normal pace,” Rose said. Mei Lee agreed.

Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee continued upstream, keeping in the cover of the trees. While they were walking, Murdock contacted Beron to find out where the concealed entrance was located. He got a picture of a strangely gnarled and tortured pine tree growing close to the mountain. He had gotten the feeling that it wasn’t too much further ahead. Murdock sent the images to Rose and Mei Lee and they spread out to try to locate the actual place from the image. It did take a little while, but Rose finally found the same gnarled pine tree.

Murdock felt around the wall, searching for an entrance but finding none. As he stepped back to see the bigger picture, he saw the entrance. It appeared to be about thirty or forty feet off the ground and was buried behind tree limbs from the gnarled pine tree.

“Did you find the entrance?” Mei Lee asked.

“Yes, I did,” Murdock said, pointing up. Rose and Mei Lee looked up the side of the mountain and saw the opening.

“How are we supposed to get up there?” Mei Lee asked.

She had no more gotten the words out than she started floating up to the

opening. Taken by surprise, her breathing was labored as she was lifted and deposited gently inside the cramped entrance. Rose followed, but without surprise, and Murdock floated in last.

“Which one of you did that?” Mei Lee asked, still panicked.

“It wasn’t me,” Murdock said, as he motioned for the women to move forward out of the cramped passage.

“Me neither,” Rose said as she moved farther into the cramped passage.

As they entered the room at the end of the passage, Murdock recognized it immediately and grinned. He moved quickly past the women, who hung back because their eyes hadn’t adjusted yet to the very dim light. After Rose’s eyes became accustomed to the very low lighting, she smiled and took Mei Lee’s hand. Then both followed Murdock, with Rose pulling Mei Lee along. After winding around the entrance, the women entered the chamber. Rose let go of Mei Lee’s hand and ran over to Murdock. Mei Lee could see her excitement. As Mei Lee watched, Rose jumped into Murdock’s arms, and he spun her around.

“Nothing has changed,” she said to Murdock.

“Yes, it’s just as we left it,” Murdock said to Rose, nodding.



Mei Lee stood off to the side, unsure of what to say or do. She looked around the huge cave, noticing some of the features. *This is the cave Murdock used when he helped Beron’s mate*, she thought. *This cave would always hold a special significance for Rose and Murdock.* As she looked around the cave, Beron showed himself. She was sure he didn’t walk in; it was as if he was there, but they had failed to see him.



Almost immediately, Murdock and Beron entered the *sharing state*. Rose and Mei Lee assumed they were excluded because Beron wanted to speak only to Murdock. Then, as Rose looked past Mei Lee, she saw Beron’s mate.

“We’ve been invited to a female *sharing*,” Rose told Mei Lee, indicating with her gaze the other bear-creature in the cave. “Are you game?”

“I don’t want to intrude,” Mei Lee said, as if apologizing. “I’m the new person in the group. You already have a history.”

“Oh, pooh,” Rose exclaimed. “Get over here and join us!”

Mei Lee went to Rose’s side, lay in the warm sand, and entered the *sharing state*.

While in the trance-like state, Murdock was shown, through images, or told outright, that winter would be upon them soon and the Oomah would be in *the long sleep* and couldn’t be disturbed by humans; they could be awakened, if it was dire, by the white bear, if they could find him and get his co-operation. Murdock didn’t think that was going to be possible. He was also given instruction on developing more of his mental powers during the winter. He was informed of the recent developments at the encampment.

“*More death/sorrow from there,*” Beron told him.

“I haven’t yet come to a permanent solution,” Murdock responded.

“*Better sooner,*” Beron said.

Murdock felt that Beron had some minor disappointment in his and Rose’s decision to move out of the cave, but he had agreed that Murdock had to be allowed to make his own decisions. Murdock did ask if it was possible for either he or the women to initiate a *sharing* state between them and how to go about it. Beron showed him how to do that and strongly urged him and his mates to develop their skills to their maximum as quickly as possible; the more they learned, the less vulnerable they would be.

While in their own *sharing state*, Rose and Beron’s mate were getting to know Mei Lee. Rose thought of Beron’s mate as *Bridget* and, once she explained the meaning was *exalted one*, she was pleased, and, in a good-natured way, accepted the name and said the two women could refer to her as *Bridget*.

Rose and Mei Lee got to see Murdock and Rose caring for Bridget from the bear-creature’s perspective. Both women saw and felt what the humans’ help meant to Bridget and then what it meant to Beron, as Beron relayed it to Bridget at the time.

Bridget and Mei Lee saw when and how Rose met Murdock and all that had passed before her rape.

Rose and Mei Lee saw what happened after the rape. Rose assumed that Beron and Murdock had shown her the information in previous *sharing* sessions.

Rose and Bridget saw all that had happened between Collier and Mei Lee, between Mei Lee and Whittier and his henchmen, and between Mei Lee and the rest of the people in the encampment.

Rose, Mei Lee, and Bridget decided to keep their *sharing* private between them. They had decided that the males didn't need to know what the females had discussed, or that they had discussed anything.

Rose, Mei Lee, and Bridget ended their *sharing* session just before Murdock and Beron ended theirs. After getting some water, as well as splashing some on his face, Murdock made a small fire in the fire ring. After Murdock had levitated all the items into the entrance, Rose and Mei Lee moved their gear into the cave. Then Murdock gathered more wood for the fire. When the cart was unloaded and the wood gathered, Murdock hid the cart skillfully not far from the entrance. At some point during their preparations, Beron and Bridget had left as quietly as they had arrived.

"I sure do miss our tub at home," Mei Lee said as they ate.

"There's no need to miss it," Rose said, grinning. She indicated the general direction of the different pools. "There's one right over there. And if you feel like a cold dip, there's a pool for that, too."

"I'd like a hot soak, personally," Mei Lee said. "Anyone else care to join me?"

Rose looked at Murdock with a questioning look.

"Go ahead, if you want to," Murdock told his wife. "I have some things to think about."

"You can't think in the tub?" Rose asked incredulously.

"Frankly, no," Murdock said. "You two being wet and naked is too distracting."

Rose kissed his cheek softly. "You say the sweetest things!" she said coyly as she followed Mei Lee to the tub.

While the women splashed in the tub, Murdock thought about the encampment. *I know I should've taken care of the Whittier issue rather than leaving with the tools*, he thought. *All I wanted to do was to protect Rose and Mei Lee, especially given their condition. I didn't want them to be used as leverage against me and I knew that Whittier would stop at nothing to hurt me as badly as possible and would do or say anything to further that agenda.* This caused great turmoil in him. *Do I tell Mei Lee and Rose that I need to bring justice to Whittier before anyone else is killed? The spear being thrown had surprised me a little. I could have grabbed it out of the air if my hands weren't full. If my new-found mental powers had been more developed, I probably could have stopped it before Jameson was killed.* Mei Lee knew the people at the encampment better than he did. To him, they all deserved what happened to them for falling for Whittier's lies again, but Mei Lee may not feel the same way about them. He was still trying to sort through his thoughts when both women came over, naked and wet.

"You really missed out," Rose said to Murdock. "We could have acted out the first time we found this place. I was telling Mei Lee about it, and after she finished laughing, she said she would have loved to see you fall in!"

"It wasn't funny to me," Murdock said. "I could've cracked my head on the rocks, and then where would you be?" he said facetiously.

Rose was playfully pouting. "I would be knocked up and husbandless!"

"I beg to differ," Murdock said, in a good-natured way. "You would not have been knocked up, as you say, and wouldn't have a husband — at least not me."

"Oh, you beast," Rose said with mock indignation. "See what I have to put up with, Mei Lee?" When the other woman didn't answer, Rose turned to look at Mei Lee, who sat with her head down.

Murdock heard Mei Lee crying quietly. "What's wrong, Mei Lee?" Murdock asked in a gentle voice.

Rose sat down and put her arm around Mei Lee. "You're still missing him a lot, aren't you?" Rose asked. Mei Lee nodded.

"*Anything we can do?*" Murdock flashed to Rose.

"*I'm afraid there is something,*" Rose flashed back, "*but I don't think you*

want to comfort a widow *and all that would entail. I'm not sure I would want you to.*"

"So, what do we do?" Murdock flashed. "*Her crying makes me feel guilty for what Collier did.*"

"*It bothers me, too!*" Rose flashed. "*All I can think to do is just be there for her.*"

"I'm going for a little walk," Murdock said in a soft tone. "I want to see the other entrance." Rose nodded and continued to console Mei Lee.

Murdock left the cave and proceeded up from the outer chamber. Soon, he was in the original room in which he had nursed Rose and met Beron for the first time. Murdock remembered all the events since coming here that had had such a great impact on him.

He walked out of the cave and smelled the moisture in the air. *It'll rain soon.* Night hadn't fallen yet, but would soon. Murdock looked down the path that ran along the side of the mountain. About ten feet from the entrance, the path was missing. He couldn't see around the bend of the mountain to see how much of the path was missing, though. Murdock laughed. *I know Beron has removed the path to prevent anyone from coming up to this point,* he thought. *Beron doesn't know how much that denial would be instrumental in someone, sometime, overcoming that minor obstacle.*

Murdock sat on the ground outside of the entrance, close to the edge. He looked over the valley stretched out before him, waiting for the light to fade. Then, just as darkness fell, Rose approached him.

"Did you get her calmed down?" Murdock asked his wife quietly, without turning around.

"Some, yes," Rose said, just as quietly. "Mei Lee is very fragile right now. Her husband was killed and then she stepped into the responsibility of leadership for a group of selfish people. Did you know they dismissed her because she wasn't there? Did you know that while she was there, no one talked to her, except for official business, or even acted friendly to her?"

"No, I didn't know," Murdock murmured. "I did suspect, though. She was rather talkative when we visited."

Rose sat next to Murdock, letting her feet dangle over the edge. Murdock slid over toward her and put his arm around her shoulders. Rose rested her head on his shoulder. They sat quietly, looking over the valley, while the last of the light disappeared. Thunder rolled through the clouds, but it was still a mile or two away. They had both gotten up and were turning to head into the cave when they saw Mei Lee standing in the opening, leaning against the rock with her arms crossed.

“Are you okay, Mei Lee?” Murdock asked.

“No, I’m not *okay*,” Mei Lee said. “I don’t think I’ll be okay for many years, if ever.”

“Is there something we can do?” Rose asked.

“There is,” Mei Lee told the couple. “Promise me that my child will always have a place in your home and will be treated as an equal to yours. That would help some. It would remove some of the fear I’ve been feeling.”

“I thought I’d made that clear a while ago,” Murdock said. “You’re a member of this family and so is your child.”

“Maybe we weren’t clear what we meant,” Rose apologized. “We were serious about family membership.” Mei Lee grinned a little.

As Murdock and Rose entered the cave, Rose reached out and Mei Lee tucked herself under her arm. The rain started outside just as they got inside. Then they stood just inside the entrance, looking out at the rain and smelling the clean, damp air. After some time, they disentangled themselves and headed down to the room in which they had established their camp. There, Murdock went to the hot pool for a soak and to relax. Rose joined him, quietly slipping into the pool and sidling up to him. Murdock leaned his head back, arms on the sides of the pool. Rose rested her head on his shoulder. Quietly, Mei Lee slipped into the pool and rested her head on his other shoulder. Murdock held them both as close as he could.

Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee stayed at the caves for a few more days before heading back to the cabin. None of them saw any more of the Oomah while they stayed in the cave. As they prepared to leave, Murdock checked to see whether anyone was observing them. After he was satisfied that no one saw them, the group left for their cabin.

Back at the cabin, Murdock spent the remaining days before the first snow gathering more wood for arrows and flints for points. He did most of his gathering downstream from the cabin, so he could explore more of the land and monitor the river in case someone found a way to cross it. No one appeared to have crossed the river yet. He found plenty of flint close to the cabin, as well as elsewhere. On one of his trips, he followed a herd of deer as it crossed the river. The deer were calm and didn't know he was trailing them. In order to finish filling the cabin larder, he took down one of the deer before it got completely into a sheltered meadow.

As Murdock explored, Rose and Mei Lee gathered grass from the meadow downstream from the cabin. Murdock had ordered them not to go out of the cabin alone, especially without weapons. They stored the grass they had gathered in the loft. Rose, who had shown Mei Lee how to braid grass into rope, was intending to braid it into rope while Mei Lee intended to make hammocks for them. She thought that they might be more comfortable and take up less floor-space, because when the hammocks were not in use, they could be hung up higher off the floor, something that was impossible for a heavy, wooden bed.

In the evenings, Murdock worked on arrows. Rose worked on winter wear, and Mei Lee helped by braiding rope. Murdock and Rose were concerned about Mei Lee. At times, she couldn't sleep and paced the cabin.

"What's wrong, Mei?" Rose asked,

"Nothing, really... I just feel like I should be doing something constructive. Some way to contribute more," she said.

No matter how hard Murdock and Rose tried to convince her otherwise, Mei Lee wouldn't allow herself to relax. Soon they gave up on trying to convince her and just let her exhaust herself.

The late fall weather turned out to be very rainy and foggy. Some days, the wind came up, and the cold, damp air cut through the clothes they had worn all summer. On those days, they threw another log on the fire and closed up the windows on the windward side. Rose argued that soon, the shutters would be closed for months, so she wanted the fresh air for as long as possible.

On colder days, Murdock astrally projected himself to the encampment. He couldn't hear, but he could see. He disliked getting too close; that made him feel like a voyeur. Sometimes, Mei Lee joined him to give him a detailed account of the progress in the others' winter preparations. Murdock monitored the encampment primarily to keep an eye on Whittier. Whittier was the only one with the will to keep coming after them, and he was charismatic enough to get others to follow him, some of them blindly.

Murdock had moved as much of the smoked deer and fish into the storage under the cabin as he possibly could. When the smokehouse was full of smoked deer, he left it there for storage. They had more deer than fish, so Murdock intended for them to use the fish to break up the monotony of venison at every meal.

Murdock routinely checked several places on the river bank to see if a colonist had crossed the river, as well as to monitor the river for freezing. With no idea how hard the freeze was going to be, he needed to know if it was hard enough to allow someone to cross without a bridge or boat. He was sure that the other humans who could harm them would not be able to get out in the weather for long periods of time. They would all be too cold to venture far from a fire.

No one knew what winter would be like, so all three of them designed the parkas, with Rose adding the huge hoods to help keep the wind off their faces when pulled all the way forward, but which could be pushed back a little to allow the wearer to see clearly with minimal skin exposure. By the time the first snow fell, they all had the first layer of mukluks, mittens, and parkas, which was enough for a while as the first few snowfalls melted. By the time the snow was no longer melting, they all had trousers. Rose and Mei Lee worked on the outer layers for Murdock and Rose. Since Mei Lee was the smallest of them, they finished hers first as a trial. Rose had planned well, making the women's trousers with laces to take in the garments when they were no longer pregnant, but which would allow them to be comfortably warm when they need to go out into the elements. To finish off their cold weather gear, Murdock had whittled them some snow goggles to help reduce the possibility of snow blindness.

Two months after the first snow, the snow outside the cabin was well over eight feet deep. The temperatures were bitterly cold, and the wind howled continuously for days. Murdock left the cabin occasionally to check the river, which had frozen enough for him to walk across, as well as checking on game tracks. He saw some game tracks, but not many. He saw no other human tracks. Because he wasn't sure how far along Rose and Mei Lei were, he tried to stay close to the cabin. Both women's bellies were severely swollen, and Rose looked as if she might have twins. Though her tortured feet needed support, Rose resisted wearing her tennis shoes because of the memories associated with her old clothes, though Mei Lee needed no encouragement to wear hers. Murdock finally persuaded Rose to wear her shoes, though.



“Mei Lee, how are your skills at blocking your thoughts from Kevin?” Rose asked one day, after Murdock had gone on his security rounds.

“I can do it without any trouble,” Mei Lee said. “Why do you ask?” Rose bit her lower lip a little. “Are you in labor?” Mei Lee asked.

“Not yet,” Rose answered. “At least, I don't think so. You need to promise

me something.”

“What would that be?” Mei Lee asked with caution.

“If it comes down to my life or my baby’s, promise me to save my baby,” Rose said quickly. “I don’t think Kevin is capable of making a decision like that. He cares too much to make a choice.”

“It won’t come to that,” Mei Lee said, though she was all too aware that that scenario was likely. “You should think positively!”

“That isn’t all,” Rose continued. “You have to promise to take care of Kevin for me, should something happen to me.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you,” Mei Lee tried to sound upbeat and confident, which was more than she actually felt.

“I said *if* something happens to me,” Rose said loudly. “I don’t mean to be short-tempered with you, but I need your promise. I think I can face anything, if I have your promise. I don’t think sisters could be closer than we are. If you promise, I’ll believe you!”

“I promise,” Mei Lee said in a quiet voice. Then Rose calmed down a little and relaxed.

“And you can’t say anything to Kevin about it, ever,” Rose added forcefully. She rubbed her swollen belly.

“Okay, I won’t ever say anything to Kevin about this,” Mei Lee said. That seemed to ease Rose’s mind. Mei Lee indicated Rose’s belly, which Rose was still rubbing. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, for now,” Rose said. “The kid is moving a lot, though. Thanks for promising. I’d been worried about it for a while now.”

“You know you didn’t need me to promise,” Mei Lee said in a quiet voice to Rose. “I would have taken care of Kevin and your baby without needing my promise. It’s what family does!”

“I know, it was silly of me,” Rose reassured Mei Lee. “I was raised to believe that a promise is a promise, and you have to do what you promise. It may be silly and unnecessary, but it made me feel better.”

“Glad I could help,” Mei Lee said. Her own baby was active as well, and she unconsciously rubbed her own belly just as Rose did.



When Murdock returned after finishing his security check, he saw both women sitting and rubbing their bellies.

“The kids are active today?” he asked, as he took off his mittens, goggles, outer mukluks, both parkas, and outer trousers. Both women had their own inner trousers and inner mukluks on.

“Mine is,” Rose said. “He’s been very active today.”

“He?” Murdock asked. “Last week it was a she, as I recall.” They both laughed. “How are you, Mei Lee?” Murdock asked.

“I’m fine. I do think Rose is close, though,” Mei Lee said.

Murdock said nothing, but he felt emotional turmoil. He didn’t know what to say or do.

“I don’t see any signs that spring is close,” he said, while warming his hands. “How can you be sure?”

“I’m not certain,” Mei Lee said. “She just looks like she could pop anytime. Without a real doctor, we have to rely on what we know. It’s all we have.”

Murdock continued to warm his hands, more for something to do to keep him from panicking. To help stave off the panic, Murdock had found a couple of big logs for the fire and started hollowing them out for cradles.

Two weeks later, Rose’s labor began in the middle of the night, and she finally delivered after sunset the next day. She had a hard time of it, but came through it with Mei Lee’s help. Murdock helped as well, by standing at the head of the table to give Rose something to grab onto as she needed to push, as well as wiping the sweat from her brow as needed. After many hours, Rose gave birth to a healthy boy. They had no means of weighing or measuring, but he looked to Mei Lee to be a full-term baby.

They named him Andrew, after Murdock’s father, James, after Rose’s father. Murdock smiled broadly when Mei Lee handed him his son. Little Andrew was thoroughly, and repeatedly, checked to make sure he had all the required fingers and toes before being given to his mother, after the delivery process was completed and Rose was cleaned up and had some water. She nursed little

Andrew after checking yet again, to be sure he had all his parts.

Over the next few weeks, Murdock's routine continued, and winter still showed no signs of abating. Little Andrew flourished, and Rose was truly being the watchful and protective mother. Mei Lee's belly continued to grow and Murdock and Rose noticed that she was more restive.

Murdock had also noticed that their meat stores were getting low enough that he was worried a little. He hoped the river would begin thawing soon. Fresh fish would ease his mind.

He had finished the first cradle a day after Andrew's birth; the second one was already finished. He hung them both somewhat close to the fireplace to help keep the babies warm. Both cradles contained a soft deer hide for the babies to lie on and be covered.

A week after Murdock had finished the second cradle, Mei Lee went into labor. Mei Lee's labor went a little easier than Rose's, but not by much. All three knew their job and how to do it, which helped the birth be less chaotic. A day later, Mei Lee gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, whom she named Chun Hua, after Mei Lee's mother.

When Chun Hua was a week old, Murdock saw the ice on the river starting to melt and knew winter was close to being done. When he returned to the cabin and told his news, Rose brightened a little. Mei Lee smiled and nodded.

For the rest of the quickly waning winter, Murdock continued to make his security rounds, and the women alternated going with him just to get some fresh air. The one remaining behind watched over the babies. Each trip produced improvements in their mood. They were shaking off the cabin fever, and Rose and Mei Lee spent the rest of their time making simple clothing for the babies.

By the time Chun Hua was a month old, something very familiar touched Murdock's mind. Then, when all the snow had melted, the river ran freely, and the meadows had greened up nicely, Beron showed himself at the cabin.

Murdock had just caught a couple of fish and tossed one to his friend. They communicated freely, telepathically exchanging greetings and letting each know how they fared since the last time they had seen each other. Rose and Mei Lee, sensing Beron's presence, had bundled the children and were bringing them out.

Each mother presented their child and told Beron their name telepathically. Beron looked at each one and smelled them gently. When each had been presented, Murdock asked after Beron's favorite mate and her young one. The humans could have sworn that the huge bear had displayed pride, albeit in mental communication.

Since the day was a nice spring day, only a small fire burned in the fireplace. Beron invited them all to a ceremony at the sacred place, to which they all agreed.

This was the first time any of them had seen a small sample of Beron's power firsthand. Beron whisked them away to the same place as before. They had just arrived when Beron's favorite showed herself; she had a cub with her, who was only small in comparison to its parents.

The human adults looked over and approved of the young cub, which seemed to be a little unstable on its feet. Mei Lee and Rose presented their children to Bridget and she sniffed and approved of the young humans. The other Oomah arrived as the friends finished.

The attendees were the same as those at the gathering at which Beron praised Murdock. Beron and Bridget presented their son to Beron's father, and then Murdock and Rose presented their son. When Mei Lee's turn came, Murdock went with her to present her daughter. Beron's father questioned Murdock about Mei Lee's daughter's parentage. Murdock explained that he was raising the child as his own because the baby's father had sacrificed his life for Rose. The old Oomah questioned Murdock about his kind's ceremonies for children and their welfare. Murdock explained as best he could what he intended for Mei Lee. When he had finished, all of the Oomah were silent.

"That was pretty good," Rose whispered to Murdock. "I'm getting the impression that it's unprecedented to talk directly to Beron's father."

"I-I don't know," Murdock stammered. "He asked me a question, and I did my best to answer. I had no idea what else to do."

"You did just fine, Kevin," Mei Lee said. "If you breached protocol, then so be it. I'm proud of you and what you said." A small tear started in her eyes.

"What do we do now?" Murdock asked.

“Apparently, we wait,” Rose replied.

After some time, Murdock was summoned to face Beron’s father again. Murdock advanced, waiting quietly in front of the bear-creature. Finally, Beron’s father asked if he was a good example of his kind.

Murdock thought for a moment and then said, “No. I’m a product of my parents and the ethics they taught me, as well as my own personal ethics I’ve learned over time. No one else can be expected to act as I do. Each human is independent of all others.”

The explanation provoked more thought for Beron’s father and for the rest of the crowd. All in attendance waited quietly while Beron’s father made a decision.

“*We declare,*” Beron’s father began once he had decided, “*Murdock and mates trusted friends. They present young, when age of understanding, to be recognized as friends.*” Rose was recognized for her part in taking care of Bridget. Murdock was recognized for everything he had done for the Oomah. Mei Lee was recognized because she had Murdock’s protection; Murdock would be responsible for her actions until she could be judged by her own actions.

Everyone, humans and Oomah, sighed in relief. After Beron’s father’s edict, a party atmosphere prevailed. All had a taste of the fish — after the king, of course. Each of the different Oomah came to view the human children. Rose had never been in a receiving line, but she imagined it was like that.

When the white bear came over, Beron, Bridget, Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee tensed. He sniffed the children, sniffed the adult humans, and then growled a warning. Then, Beron’s father and Beron gave him another stern warning.

The spring party finished several hours later. Beron and Bridget walked the humans to the edge of the meadow. Bridget said good-byes to the women and returned to her cub. Then Beron transported the humans back to their cabin. After their return, Beron disappeared.

“That was different,” Mei Lee exclaimed, once Beron had disappeared.

“That was only my second appearance, but I found it to be rather strange,” Rose said.

“It was some sort of springtime family rite,” Murdock said, as he prepared

for his security sweep. “Mothers present their offspring to the leader, and family affiliations are solidified and reaffirmed.”

Rose looked at him, surprised. “Was that a guess, or do you have some inside information?” she asked.

“Both,” Murdock said. “It was obvious to me what was going on, and Beron clued me in a little on what I should do while we were on our way.”

“You did seem to catch on better than the last time,” Rose said. “Was that you, or Beron?”

“Beron helped a lot,” Murdock said, shrugging. “Didn’t Beron’s mate help you?”

“Yes,” Mei Lee injected, “she did. What was that bit about you being responsible for me?”

“Well, as it was explained to me,” Murdock began, “no one can crash one of their ceremonies. Someone pretty high up has to invite you. Beron invited us. If any of us had embarrassed Beron or offended anyone, he would be responsible for making it right.”

“Mei Lee and I were invited,” Rose corrected him. “You didn’t need an invitation. You got your invitation the last time.” Murdock’s face reddened.

Mei Lee looked at Rose, confused, so Rose telepathically showed the other woman what had happened.

“Oh,” Mei Lee said, “we live with the *sheriff* so he is to keep us *under control*?”

“I haven’t had any control over anything since I got here,” Murdock said to the air. “And controlling you two is not possible!”

“And you wouldn’t change a thing!” Rose piped up.

“Nope,” Murdock said, laughing.

“You see?” Rose said to Mei Lee. “He still loves us and wouldn’t know what to do without us!” Both women laughed heartily.

As he was almost ready to leave, Murdock asked, “Mei Lee, have you been practicing with your bow?”

“Some, why?” she asked.

“I need to inspect the encampment —” Murdock said.

“What?” Rose shouted immediately, interrupting him mid-sentence. “You’ll do no such thing!”

“I have to,” Murdock insisted.

“And why do you think you need to do that?” Rose said harshly.

“First, because I am *the sheriff*,” Murdock explained. “Second, because I’ve been checking on them all winter from here, and I haven’t seen any signs of life for a while.”

“Why take Mei Lee?” Rose asked. “I’m a better shot than she is!”

“I agree,” Mei Lee said. “She is much better than I am. She should go.”

“Rose doesn’t know each person in the encampment,” Murdock countered with force, “and Mei Lee does.”

That ended the discussion. “Watch over him closely,” Rose whispered to Mei Lee as she helped her prepare for the trek.

“I’ll guard him as you would,” Mei Lee whispered back, as she and Murdock left.

“We have to be very careful,” Murdock said in a quiet voice during a rest stop. “Should the need arise, could you shoot any of the others?”

“I think I could,” Mei Lee said. As they talked, they drank from the water skin and ate some smoked venison. “Whittier? Definitely! The others, I’m not so sure,” she went on, as honestly as she could.

“Well, you need to think about it,” Murdock said. “Whittier won’t present himself without someone acting as a shield; undoubtedly an innocent.”

“Why are we doing this?” Mei Lee asked.

“If any colonists wanted to leave the encampment, where would they go?” Murdock asked. “How would they get away from Whittier if they think they’re trapped?”

Mei Lee nodded; the expression on her face told Murdock that she understood.

“From here on, we both need to keep watch astrally as well as physically,” Murdock explained. “We need as much advance warning as possible, so go out

as wide as you can.”

Mei Lee nodded, and they continued toward the encampment with as much stealth as they could manage. They did not follow the river, but instead proceeded diagonally across open country, using the slightly rolling hills as cover. Five hundred yards away from the encampment, Murdock lay down on his belly and crawled to the top of a small hill to peer over it. Though Mei Lee followed suit, she could barely see the transport pod.

“What can you see from this distance?” Mei Lee asked.

“You need to be quiet,” Murdock whispered. “What is the effective range of your bow?”

“It will shoot seventy-five yards, maybe a little further,” Mei Lee whispered, “but I can only hit when I’m aiming at twenty yards or less.”

“It will have to do,” Murdock whispered.

He saw no movement outside the enclosed base of the pod, even though it was well past midday. His localized astral surveillance showed no one in the area at all, but he backed down the hill the same way he went up, Mei Lee following.

“When we get close enough, all you have to do is to help keep anyone from getting behind either of us,” Murdock whispered. Mei Lee nodded. “I’ll post you where you need to stay, and you need to be ready to fire on anyone coming too close.”

“I’ll do the best I can,” Mei Lee said with conviction.

They continued on with as much stealth as they possibly could. Murdock posted Mei Lee thirty yards from the enclosed pod base, and she prepared herself mentally and physically, trying to stay as relaxed as she could. Murdock moved more into the encampment while staying somewhat behind cover. He knew they’d had plenty of time to create at least one bow and a few arrows, so he had to be aware of possible danger from a distance.

As he proceeded into the encampment, Murdock inspected the campsites for signs of recent use. Though he took some time to get within a few feet of the enclosed base of the pod, he had yet to hear or see signs of life. When he was within a few feet, he motioned for Mei Lee to come to him and to stay alert.

With Mei Lee posted in her new position, Murdock moved quietly around

the enclosed base, looking for an entrance inside the enclosure. After making a complete circuit and finding no entry, he crouched to contemplate the situation.

“Hey,” Murdock called out. “Is anyone alive in there?” He waited for some sort of noise or sound from inside the enclosure.

“*Stay here and stay somewhat hidden,*” Murdock flashed to Mei Lee. Then he moved around to the other side, posting himself to cover the area Mei Lee couldn’t see.

“Hey, inside the base,” Murdock yelled when he was in position. “Come out now!” He waited for some time listening and watching. As he waited, he looked over the seal on the enclosure. The join of the skin of the pod and the sod enclosing the base was a very tight fit.

“*Watch close. I’m going to make an opening.*” Murdock flashed to Mei Lee.

Murdock levitated each piece of the sod away, one piece at a time. He also stayed very alert for possible threats. Soon he had an opening large enough that he could see inside a little. He saw no indications of life. But the air underneath the enclosed base was fetid.

“*You remove a couple of pieces of the sod to let some light inside,*” Murdock flashed. “*Don’t use your hands, use your mind.*”

As he watched, he saw the underside of the pod lighten somewhat. He then projected his astral self inside the enclosure to check it. No one moved under the pod, so he withdrew his astral self.

“Start taking the enclosure down,” Murdock told Mei Lee. “Only go down about three feet. We need to be able to see more clearly, and it needs to air out before we can get inside.”

Dismantling the enclosure enough to see inside and airing it out took some time. After Murdock could see the closed ramp, he focused his attention on it while he continued to tear down the enclosure. Then he moved into the enclosure with caution. He looked along the base of the wall, inspecting the ground closely. He did find a part of a body and levitated it outside the enclosure. When he reached the ramp, he banged on it with a rock, then moved away to wait for it to open. After a few minutes, he activated the external controls.

The ramp opened slowly, significantly slower than he remembered, and

Murdock positioned himself to cover the entrance into the pod. When it was fully opened, Murdock walked up the ramp with caution.

The lights came on, but dimly. He looked around the pod and found another partial body, which he levitated outside the pod. After his inspection, he exited the pod, closed the ramp, and left the enclosure.

“Come over here, Mei Lee,” Murdock said. He indicated the bodies. “You know them?”

Mei Lee inspected them without getting too close. The stench was terrible. “They look to be two of the women,” Mei Lee said. She pointed to the first body. “That one may be Krysia Oblonski, but her head is too disfigured to be sure. I can’t tell who the other one is. What happened to them?”

“They’re hacked up pretty bad,” Murdock said, looking a little closer. “I’m not sure, but they look like they were eaten. I hope I’m wrong!”

“Where are the rest?” Mei Lee asked, looking around. “The thought of cannibalism is unnerving to me.”

Murdock didn’t say anything, but he did cast around for a trail of some sort. When he found it, he turned pale, his heart pounding.

“*Rose. Rose,*” he flashed, anxious. “*Lock up the cabin. Lock it up tight.*”

“What’s wrong, Kevin?” Mei Lee asked, concerned by Murdock’s expression. Murdock indicated the direction of the trail. Mei Lee became pallid.

“Leave everything. We need to get back,” Murdock said. “How fast can you move?”

“I’ll do what I can to keep up,” Mei Lee said. “Don’t wait for me! Get home now!”

“*Rose. Answer me.*” Murdock flashed, heading for home with Mei Lee following.

Mei Lee, struggling to keep up, had sent her astral self to the cabin to see whether what she and Murdock feared had happened.

“**W**hy would I close up the cabin?” Rose answered at last. “We’ve seen some disturbing signs, and I want the cabin secured immediately,” Murdock ordered.

“The cabin is secure and I’m armed,” Rose said. “So, tell me what happened?” Murdock knew by the speed she secured the cabin that she had done as commanded even as he had commanded it.

“We found no one alive at the encampment,” Murdock flashed. “We did find two bodies that appear to have been eaten.”

“What happened to the rest?” Rose flashed.

“We need to find them. The trail I found says they’re heading to the river. That is all we know, at present.”

“I’m not comfortable with either of you finding the others, but I understand the need.”

“We’ll be careful. You need to be more attentive to our calls and keep an eye on the cabin.”

“Why are you going after them?” Mei Lee asked, as the pair started to follow Whittier’s trail.

“Would you rather wake up one morning and find them in our yard?” Murdock asked.

The trail headed toward the river, and he and Mei Lee followed it. Both he and Mei Lee sent their astral selves ahead to locate any lurking threats. Neither of them spoke, in case Whittier and the rest should hear them following. Mei Lee

and Murdock followed the trail for hours.

“Any sign?” Murdock whispered when they stopped for water.

“None,” Mei Lee whispered.

“We need to find out where they are and where they’re going,” Murdock said, eating some dried venison.

“What are you going to do when you find them?” Mei Lee asked, joining him in eating.

“I don’t know,” Murdock said in a quiet voice. “I have a hard time abiding cannibalism and murder. What do you think we should do?”

“My first instinct is to kill them all,” Mei Lee said. “I can’t abide it, either!”

“Think about it long and hard,” Murdock told her. “After you kill someone, you can’t take it back. Ask yourself, what you would do to survive?”



At the end of winter, Whittier sent some men under the ramp to open up the enclosure. Everyone needed to leave the transport pod; they were all claustrophobic after so many months inside it. Whittier had reasoned that the pod could withstand the bitter cold of winter better than anything they could build. He would have preferred that they had more deer or fish, but the last two hunts, before the first snow, had been a bust and no one had spent any time fishing.

Upon reaching the exterior of the enclosure, each survivor migrated quickly upwind, lying on the grass to breathe fresh air.

Whittier took a few loud, deep breaths. “We made it through the winter,” he said, looking around to each one of the survivors with a plastic grin on his face. Only six women and four men of the original twenty had survived. Whittier knew the math was technically wrong, because if someone else counted, he made the fifth man. But he didn’t think of himself as one of the rest. *Damn you, Murdock.* Whittier thought. *We have survived to spite you. I personally will make you pay for poor Karen Powell and poor Robin Allen. They were too young to have their throats slit like that.*

“We don’t have much food, Whittier,” Krysia said quietly, as she gently touched Whittier’s arm.

“I know. We need to find more food and different shelter,” Whittier told her. Everyone else was looking to him for direction. “Everyone, pick up everything that we can take with us,” he said.

“Are we going somewhere specific?” Mark Hunt asked weakly. “Or do you just want us to wander in this wilderness?”

“No thanks to Murdock, we managed to survive after he and that witch Mei Lee left us all to starve,” Whittier said to everyone, glaring at Hunt for a few seconds. “In spite of that, we need to find food, quickly. I think we need to get to the river and decide which way to go from there. We should be able to catch a few fish to feed us all.”

“Murdock did nothing to us,” Mark Hunt said, loud enough for all to hear, though he was clearly talking to Whittier.

“Really?” Whittier said with sarcasm. “He killed our friends and murdered Dick Jameson right in front of everyone!”

“You tried to murder him when Mei Lee returned,” Hunt said. His words were having an effect on a few of the others.

“How can you murder a thief?” Whittier said with a grin, his hands outstretched. “He stole from every one of us. He corrupted Rose and killed Metzger. All after Metzger had lawfully claimed her. He corrupted Collier, killed him, and then corrupted Mei Lee. How can you defend someone who kills indiscriminately and steals whatever he wants?” Whittier asked Hunt loudly.

“You’re insane,” Hunt said weakly. He was too weak from starvation to argue with Whittier any longer.

“I’m insane?” Whittier asked with incredulity, as he strolled around the survivors. “I’ll leave it to the rest of you. You can either follow me or you can stay here. Anyone who feels the need to defend Murdock can stay here and wait for him to feed you.” Whittier kicked Mark Hunt’s foot lightly as he walked past. “Insanity is waiting for, or counting on, Murdock!”

“Murdock and Mei Lee did a lot for us,” Mark Hunt said to those within hearing range. He watched Whittier as he paced and fingered the handle of his

twelve-inch machete. Suddenly, Whittier pulled the machete and yanked Hunt's head back, putting the machete to his throat. "My dying now or an hour from now makes little difference," Hunt said with conviction. "To me, there is none. You can't kill your conscience, no matter how many bodies you manage to pile up." Even though he was weak, Hunt knew everyone heard his words.

Whittier thought about it for a long while before he released Hunt and replaced his machete. "Get everything gathered, and let's get going!" he commanded.

Hunt remained reclined in the grass as the rest gathered up all they could carry, re-sealed the enclosure, and started toward the river. No one attempted to help him to his feet. He knew he wouldn't last long out in the open, so with great effort, he finally got to his feet and followed. He wasn't counting on Murdock or anyone else, but he thought he could provide Murdock — or whoever would find his body — with an indication of the direction the rest of the survivors had taken.



Mei Lee and Murdock tracked the others to the river, at which point the trail turned downriver. The two then levitated across the river and then continued downriver. With the river between them and any threats from Whittier, Murdock and Mei Lee relaxed somewhat, Murdock followed the trail with his astral self, while Mei Lee provided over-watch with hers.

Another few miles on, they found another body. They crossed the river again, and Murdock inspected it. The body was the remains of a male with grey, wavy hair. Murdock remembered seeing him before, but he couldn't recall his name. He also saw the familiar thin, red line on the man's throat.

"Mark Hunt," Mei Lee added. "How did he die?"

"Starvation, most likely," Murdock said. "He seems emaciated and dehydrated."

"How long ago did he die?" Mei Lee asked, with sadness in her voice.

"Four or five hours would be my guess," Murdock said, looking around to

make sure they were still on the right trail. “See how he’s lying with his head and arm pointed downriver? I’d say he followed them for as long as he could to indicate where they went.”

“How can you be sure?” Mei Lee asked, noting the body position.

“I see no indication that he was killed, although someone had a knife to his throat,” Murdock said, shrugging. “We both know Whittier would have him killed if he knew Hunt was following.”

“Where are we?” Mei Lee asked, finally looking around.

“Several miles from the point at which we crossed the river,” Murdock told her.

“It’s getting late and they’re going the wrong direction for us to worry about it,” Mei Lee said. “Why don’t we just go home?”

Murdock turned to her, his surprise apparent.

“We can’t go home yet,” he said firmly. “At the very least, we need to bury the bodies we’ve found. And we need to know what the rest are up to. I, for one, don’t want to get stabbed in my sleep.”

“If we bury the bodies, won’t they know we’ve been following them?” Mei Lee asked. “I’m inclined to go home and worry about them when and if they survive. Not many can be left!” Exhaustion showed itself on Mei Lee’s face. “What are you planning on doing if you find them, Kevin?”

“I haven’t decided and I think that’s something we all need to discuss,” Murdock said.

“Well, if you want to keep going, then do so,” Mei Lee said definitively. “I’ve seen too much death today, and I’m extremely tired.” Mei Lee turned and levitated herself over the river.

She knew she was going against what Rose had asked, but she’d been through enough for one day. She hadn’t gone far when Murdock, following, grabbed her arm to stop her. He handed her his equipment. Then, after she had it all secured on her body, Murdock picked her up, as if he was giving her a piggyback ride and set off at a trot. He slowly picked up speed and the pair arrived home in a few hours.

It was close to dark when they reached the cabin. Neither said anything.

Murdock was exhausted from all of the exertions of the day. Mei Lee was more emotionally exhausted than anything else.

“How bad was it?” Rose asked after a prolonged silence. She looked from Murdock to Mei Lee.

“You have no idea,” Mei Lee said in a soft voice, without looking at Rose. “I’ve never seen anything to compare it to. I’ve never even heard of anything like it.”

Rose looked to Murdock. He shrugged and remained silent. Rose put an arm around Mei Lee’s shoulder to try to comfort her.

“So, what do we do?” Rose asked after a long pause.

Murdock tried to figure out how many had survived. As best he could figure, eleven were left. That put the three of them against eleven. Depending on who was left, Murdock figured two might refuse to fight; one or two would die of starvation before becoming a problem. That evened the odds some, but the aggressors still had a better than two to one advantage.

“We could fight as we had originally planned,” Murdock offered. “It would mean that we can’t forget about them at all, not as we have lately. We all have to be prepared to take their lives, should they attack us.”

“Are there any other alternatives?” Rose asked.

“We could retreat to the caves and turn the cabin over to them,” Murdock said.

“That option is not acceptable to me,” Rose said with sternness.

“Why not?” Murdock asked.

“I like the caves,” Rose answered, “and returning to them would be a viable alternative, but what happens if we retreat? Will they stop coming after us or will they take it as weakness and continue to chase us and hunt us? I think they wouldn’t stop until they killed us all, including the children!”

“Mei Lee?” Murdock asked.

“I can’t decide something like that right now,” Mei Lee snapped back. “I knew those people. All of them. I even liked most of them. I had to leave some friends unburied today, and that doesn’t sit well with me!” Tears ran down Mei Lee’s face as she spoke. “Why can’t they just leave us alone?” she asked, as she

buried her face in her hands and cried.

Murdock and Rose decided to leave the issue until later, but they had decided between them that they would do what they had to do to survive. They secured the cabin and then went to bed. Murdock didn't sleep soundly, but kept an ear open for any unusual noise.

The next morning, Murdock walked around the cabin and the immediate area again with an eye toward defending against a larger force. After checking the layout of the cabin, outbuildings, and all the topographical features, he decided that very little could actually be done. The cabin was already well-placed for defense, but the distances between features made it next to impossible to build a barricade with their available tools and manpower. He had a clear view of the meadow downstream from the cabin, so if someone came from that quarter, he could take out a few before they got too close to the cabin.

Murdock had built the cabin with windows on all sides, mainly for air flow. Those same windows would give the three inside a fortified place to fire from. *The only preparation necessary, he thought, is more practice with the bows. We all need to extend our maximum accuracy range.* The worst shot of the three needed to be able to get at least two well-placed shots in before someone was outside the door. Murdock thought his aim could bring down any attackers at two hundred yards from the cabin, if he was accurate enough. He hadn't had much of an opportunity to use his bow since making it.

When he re-entered the cabin, Mei Lee and Rose, who were feeding the babies, greeted Murdock.

"We need to go to the encampment," Mei Lee said to him in a low voice.

"Why?" Murdock asked, a little surprised, but pleasantly so.

"First, we need to bury the bodies we found," Mei Lee said with sadness.

"Second, we need to go through the pod and the enclosure for anything useful," Rose added.

"That will tip off Whittier to the fact that we are still coming around," Murdock said.

"Good," Mei Lee said with energy. "He needs to get the message that we go where we will!"

“That’s quite a change in attitude,” Murdock said. “What brought that on?”

“I just thought about the kind of place I want Chun Hua to grow up in,” Mei Lee said thoughtfully. “I’d rather she die than go through what Whittier has put everyone else through.”

“I’d rather Andrew not experience what you and I have because of Whittier,” Rose said with venom. “That does presuppose that he would let either of our children live.” Mei Lee nodded.

“Add to all that, Whittier is a coward,” Mei Lee said. “He’s only brave with plenty of people backing him up. A lot of people have died because of him, and I doubt he has the support he thinks he has. You face anyone, and they will either fight or run. Knowing Whittier, he’ll run.”

“And if he fights?” Murdock asked.

“Then we fight,” Rose and Mei Lee said simultaneously, their anger evident in their tone.

“Why are you so hesitant?” Rose asked Murdock. “I would’ve thought you would be chomping at the bit to get to Whittier.”

“I’m not hesitant,” Murdock said. “I’m just making sure we all know what we’re talking about, as well as the consequences of our choices.”

After making their decision, all three prepared to return to the enclosure. Murdock and Rose filled the cart with tanned hides, shovels, and extra food while Mei Lee watched over the babies. Then Mei Lee and Rose loaded the children and cradles and readied for traveling while Murdock secured the cabin. Finally, they headed downstream without crossing the river, Murdock pulling the cart, Rose leading, and Mei Lee following.

When they reached the river crossing that would take them to the transport pod, they continued downstream. Rose was a little taken aback by the unknown territory. Finally, they stopped across the river from Mark Hunt’s body.

“Do we bury Hunt here?” Murdock asked as he paused to eat.

“I’d prefer to bury him at the pod,” Mei Lee said

“How do we get him there?” Rose asked. “There isn’t room on the cart for him.”

“I’ll levitate him,” Mei Lee said.

“That’s a long way to levitate something,” Murdock warned her.

“If we can stop when I need to, I can do it,” Mei Lee promised in a quiet voice.

After a rest, Murdock levitated the cart over the river, and the women followed suit.

“Rose,” Murdock said, “you help Mei Lee with Hunt’s body and watch for anyone coming from downriver. I doubt anything will come up from here to the transport pod.” Rose nodded, and they all headed toward the transport pod.

After several rest stops, they arrived at the transport pod. The evening was coming, so they agreed to wait until morning to bury the bodies.

After they had made camp, Mei Lee took little Chun Hua to Collier’s grave and was talking aloud.

“I hope she’ll get over his death soon,” Murdock flashed to Rose.

“She never will get over it totally,” Rose flashed back. *“Chun Hua will always be a reminder.”*

Mei Lee finally joined them at the fire, but Murdock said nothing about her conversation with Collier.

“Are we digging three graves or one?” Murdock asked after Mei Lee had finished feeding Chun Hua and they had reclined to relax.

“Three,” Mei Lee answered.

“Any particular reason why?” Murdock asked.

“It’ll take time to dig three graves,” Mei Lee answered. Rose laughed.

“So?” Murdock asked.

“It would mean that we buried them and were in no hurry to do so and be gone,” Rose explained. “Unless I missed Mei Lee’s meaning.”

“Whittier needs to get the message, in a big way, that we’re not intimidated by him or anyone else,” Mei Lee said. “If we act as if Whittier is of no consequence to us, maybe he’ll start to get the message.”

Murdock started digging the three graves by Collier’s grave the next morning.

The stench coming from under the transport pod caused Rose and Mei Lee to

lose their appetites. They found a few more bones under the pod, all picked clean, but they could not determine who they belonged to. The two female bodies they had found were far from complete, even with all the unattached parts, so Murdock tried to even the remains out.

When Murdock finished digging the three graves, he put all the bodies into their individual resting places and covered them. The work had taken him the better part of the day. Covered with sweat, he collapsed near the fire and drank deeply from the water skin.

“We all need a bath,” Rose said. “Searching under the pod was much worse than searching inside it, but it’s all very unpleasant!”

“I agree heartily,” Mei Lee said as she joined them.

“Did you find anything?” Murdock asked.

“Nothing inside the pod,” Rose said.

“This place is picked clean,” Mei Lee said. “They left nothing, so that means they took it with them.” Mei Lee’s face became serious.

“What’s wrong?” Rose asked.

“Nothing, really,” Mei Lee said. “It just makes me sad having to bury people I know.”

“So, what’s next on our agenda?” Murdock interrupted, trying to change the mood.

“I suppose we hunt down the others to check on them,” Rose said, shrugging.



As Whittier and the rest walked downriver, they stopped periodically for a rest and to drink water, as well as to fish.

“What’s wrong with you?” Whittier screamed at one of the men, who had failed after the party’s third stop to spear a fish. “Murdock is an idiot and a total incompetent, and he managed it right away. How hard can it be? Keep it up, and I’ll have the women do it!”

Each man, in turn, tried to spear a fish for the rest to eat. All were getting very hungry. Finally, well after midday, Sam Thomas landed a fish. He

immediately tried to repeat the accomplishment and succeeded. Although two fish lay on the shore, no one was helping by cleaning them, so he bent to the task without saying anything. When both were cleaned, he started a fire and cooked the fish as Murdock had. That was when everyone came to claim their shares.

“Nice job,” Whittier, who was the first to take a share, told Thomas. “Next time, let me know when the meat is cooked. Better yet, get someone to serve me,” he said, talking around a bite of fish.

Thomas said nothing. Everyone else came around to claim their share, and no one said anything to him. Soon the cooked fish were gone.

“Is everyone ready to press on?” Whittier asked. He didn’t wait for answers. “Then let’s press on. Everyone keep up. We won’t wait for you if you lag behind!”

Thomas decided to stay long enough to catch a fish for himself. Soon, he speared another fish, cleaned, and cooked it. He had plenty of time to think while it was cooking.

Whenever Whittier spoke, Thomas immediately thought of his tyrannical father. “Do as you’re told! Keep your mouth shut!” his father would always say, usually after backhanding him. “Don’t even think of laughing at me! You will give me respect!”

He had often thought of getting even with his father, but the invasion had taken care of it for him. His father had been killed by the mobs that had risen shortly after the takeover, and Thomas didn’t shed a tear at the old man’s passing. To Thomas, the takeover was just a change of who was in charge. Upon the colony’s arrival here, no one in the group had asked him his name. He didn’t care much. He was so sick of people calling him “Sammy” that after he was revived, he had decided that he would only give his last name, if asked. The leadership changeovers meant nothing to him. No one knew him or showed that they wanted to know him. He was not one to speak first when meeting people, so he always came off as impersonal and cold. He did, however, prefer Mei Lee’s leadership to Whittier’s. Under Mei Lee, everyone had a job to do and knew what it was. Her term was far more organized and far less autocratically directed.

When the fish was cooked, Thomas put out the fire and ate while he walked

after the others. The fish was bland, but it was better than nothing, and it did quell his severe hunger. He wrapped what he didn't eat in a large leaf and put in his shirt pocket. Though he could have trotted and caught up to the rest more quickly, he assumed that he would catch up to them soon enough to suit him. He enjoyed walking by himself, observing the topography and flora.

Shortly after sunset, he caught up to the rest, who had stopped on the edge of what appeared to be a thirty-foot drop. As he looked out over the edge in the dwindling light, he saw several of these same drops. If he had been asked, he would have said that this was not natural. And when he looked at the river, he noticed that the river bed dropped in stages, while the one he stood on was a sheer drop.

He felt invisible. No one asked what happened to him when he turned in the spear he was carrying. No one looked at him when he found a tree a short distance away from the rest to sleep under. When complete darkness fell, he ate some of the leftover fish he had saved, thinking that he should keep some for breakfast. *I hope the animals leave me alone*, he thought as he drifted off to sleep. Whittier had previously confiscated all the weapons, decreeing that no one needed a weapon; he hoped that Whittier knew what he was talking about. Otherwise, no one would survive an animal attack.

After a very fitful night, Thomas woke to find no one around. He wasn't rested and hadn't heard the others leave. He was upset that no one had thought to wake him or leave him a weapon. He got to his feet, worked out a few of the kinks, and ate the remainder of the previous day's fish. Then, cupping his hands, he drank deeply from the river and splashed some of the cold water onto his face. Braced, he looked at the drop-off. He saw the others walking across the lower valley, and he looked along their trail back to his location. He saw a steep path that zigzagged across the cliff as it headed down to the valley floor.

As he progressed down the path, he noticed that a lot of the rocks were quite sharp and jagged. He pocketed one of the sharper ones on his way down. Then, when he reached the valley floor, Thomas drank from the river and rested on the grass. He took out the piece of rock, feeling its sharpness with his thumb. Turning it over, he saw that it was about five inches long and roughly triangular,

with the thick side about an inch thick and rounded. The shape reminded him of a prism or an elongated tear-drop. *This may come in handy*, he thought and returned it to his pocket after he regained his feet and proceeded on.

Continuing downriver, Thomas took in his surroundings, unconcerned with the rest of the group. *I've always lived on the edges of society*, he thought. *I guess it's better than being alone*. At one point, he found a somewhat straight stick and stripped off the limbs as he walked. Then he took out the rock and tested it on the thick end of the stick. Soon he had a makeshift spear that he could harvest more fish with, but would not do for much else.

Shortly after making the crude spear, Thomas decided to test it and quickly harvested another fish. He used the piece of rock to clean the fish and cooked it soon after.

He hadn't paid enough attention to the surroundings to notice just when the trees had thinned, but looking around as the fish cooked, he saw that he was on a huge plain with few trees on his side of the river.

After eating the cooked fish, he wrapped the extra fish in the same leaf he had used before and put it inside his shirt. Then he drank his fill, extinguished the fire, and proceeded on.

Dark was falling when he reached the rest of the survivors. They had set up a small camp close to the next ledge, and Whittier was complaining, as usual, about not having enough to eat. No one else was doing anything about the food situation.

"Hand it over," Brian Scott said, indicating Thomas' crude spear.

"Why should I?" Thomas said. "It's mine. I made it for my use." He wasn't smiling and spoke quietly.

"The Boss, as you well know, has said no weapons in camp. Now, hand it over," Scott insisted.

"No weapons in camp? This isn't a weapon. It's just a sharp stick." Thomas argued. "It's only a weapon if you're a fish!"

"You could poke someone's eye out with it. That makes it a dangerous weapon. Give it!"

"Okay," Thomas said after thinking for a moment, "I'll camp over there,

away from everyone else.”

“I don’t care where you camp. You aren’t going to have that dangerous weapon!”

Thomas could see Scott starting to shake a little. The other man wasn’t used to the power he had been given and wasn’t used to anyone standing up to him. Looking Scott over quickly, Thomas saw that the other man wasn’t armed, at least not so it showed. Arguing wasn’t going to do any good, so Thomas shrugged and turned back the way he had come.

He didn’t get far before Scott tackled him from behind. After a brief tussle, Thomas lay on the ground, on his back, with Scott sitting on him, pinning him. Scott had thrown the makeshift spear out of reach and was patting Thomas down. Soon Scott found the stone and the remains of the fish.

Thomas tried to struggle and get an arm free, but Scott kept his foot on Thomas’ wrist. Scott then punched Thomas in the face several times, hard enough to cause his mouth to bleed a little. Scott was helping himself to the fish when Whittier approached from behind and struck Scott in the back of his head with the handle of a hatchet. Though the blow didn’t knock Scott off Thomas, it was enough to let Scott know he was in trouble.

“What are you doing, Scott?” Whittier asked in a quiet and menacing voice.

“He was trying to get into camp armed!” Scott whined defensively.

“He had no weapons. All of the weapons are accounted for. What weapons are you talking about?” Whittier demanded.

Scott got off of Thomas to retrieve the makeshift spear and the sharp stone. Thomas tried to get up after Scott released him, but Whittier’s foot on his chest shoved him back down. Scott then placed the weapons in Whittier’s hand.

Whittier looked at each object and then handed them to Corwin Smith, who turned each over and inspected them. Whittier held out his hand to Scott and snapped his fingers. Scott sheepishly handed over the fish he had been eating.

“Mister Smith, what is the law pertaining to food?” Whittier asked without taking his eyes off Scott.

“All food is to be presented to you without fail and immediately,” Corwin Smith said.

“Did you not understand the law, Scott?” Whittier asked in the same quiet, menacing tone, leaning a little harder on Thomas’ chest.

“Yes, sir, I just tasted it to make sure it wasn’t poisoned,” Scott said in a weak voice.

“Really! And was it?” Whittier asked in a stern voice.

“No, sir!” Scott said, starting to shake.

“Are you used to lying, Scott?” Whittier asked.

“N-N-No, sir!”

“I thought not, you do it so poorly. Who is this?” Whittier asked, finally turning his attention to Thomas.

“He’s the one who caught the fish yesterday,” Scott said, trying to redeem himself.

“You have a name, boy?” Whittier asked him, letting up the pressure on Thomas’ chest a little.

“Thomas,” Thomas said with difficulty.

“Well, Tommy boy, you knew the law before coming into the camp. I seem to recognize you a little from our winter ordeal, so you should be well-versed in the law. Can you give me a good reason not to skin you for dinner?” Whittier let off the pressure a little.

“I’m the only one who could catch fish,” Thomas said.

“That’s true,” Whittier agreed, nodding a little with his eyes closed. “The law is the law, though. You don’t give me much of a choice.” Whittier finally removed his foot from Thomas’ chest and meandered away somewhat. “I’ll have to think about it. I’ll sleep on it and pass judgment tomorrow. Smith, tie him to a tree for the night. I don’t want him escaping!” Whittier walked off, eating the confiscated fish.

Scott and Smith dragged Thomas to a tree and tied him in a sitting position. “To make sure he doesn’t escape, I’ll watch him first,” Scott said to Smith, after securing Thomas.

“Suit yourself,” Smith said, going to his campsite with one of the women.

“You’re in big trouble, Tommy boy!” Scott sneered down at Thomas.

“My name is Sam. Sam Thomas!” Thomas corrected in an angry voice.

The next morning, after a long, uncomfortable night, Sam Thomas was awakened by Whittier kicking his foot. After Thomas became lucid, he felt the pain in his back and couldn't feel his legs.

"I've decided to be magnanimous and let the severity of your punishment be dependent on your skill," Whittier said, as he walked a crescent-shaped path in front of Thomas. "Untie him," Whittier told Smith. Smith complied. "For trying to smuggle in food, and because you're so good at catching fish, you're to catch enough for the rest of us to eat for the next couple of days." Whittier paused. "Say, two fish per person. You, however, will not be eating any. Each night, you will be tied and guarded."

Thomas got to his feet and tried to restore the circulation in his legs. "Won't a lack of food slow my reflexes?" he asked finally.

"You better hope not. You have to supply the rest of us for two consecutive days. Miss a day and you start over," Whittier said, looking down his nose at Thomas. "For Scott's failure to turn in the food he found, he'll be cleaning and cooking for one day." Whittier held up a hand when Scott started to protest. Then, extending just his index finger and pausing, he went on, "One more word from you, and I'll have you cleaning fish for as long as he catches them." Whittier turned to Thomas again. "I haven't decided what to do about the weapons charges. By rights, I should have you stripped, drawn and quartered, and then hung!"

Thomas bowed his head, accepting the inevitability of his punishment. He sincerely hoped he could last the two days and meet each day's quota.

The morning after the search of the pod, Murdock, Mei Lee, and Rose ate and drank sumptuously. After all the physical and emotional stress, they needed to recover their strength. Then the trio began pursuing the winter survivors. Murdock had estimated that Whittier and crew had a three- or four-day head start, but Whittier's group was much larger and wouldn't know how to move quickly. As Murdock and the women trekked to the river, all three projected their astral selves ahead to cover the widest possible area. Murdock didn't think Whittier capable of doubling back, but he wasn't about to put Rose, Mei Lee, or the babies at risk by underestimating him.

After reaching the river, they levitated over it and turned downriver. The trees covered them, and their astral selves made sure they were on the right track. As they proceeded past the area in which they found Mark Hunt, they were pleased to see a thick line of trees lining the river on their right. With the mountains on their left, they crossed a fairly smooth, grassy depression. Consequently, Murdock, who pulled the cart, covered a lot of ground. Rose led the way with Mei Lee guarding the rear. They saw no humans, but they did see a few deer.

After spotting the deer, Murdock decided to test his bow. Setting the cart down and taking up his bow, he crept forward quietly. The deer were at varying ranges; he decided to try for the farthest. Rose watched closely as he nocked an arrow silently.

"Which one are you trying for?" Rose flashed to him.

“*The older doe. The one about one hundred yards away, maybe a little more,*” Murdock flashed back. He saw Rose’s expression out of the corner of his eye. After taking a few deep breaths to calm himself, Murdock moved so that his target was in clear view. He drew the bow easily and held it. For a fraction of a second, he became a statue, and then he released.

Rose watched the arrow as best she could. She lost sight of it when the arrow was about halfway to the target. She saw the deer stumble and then run off. “Did you hit it?” she asked in a quiet voice, her disbelief evidenced by her tone.

“I think so,” Murdock said. “The bow appears to shoot a little to the left, though.”

Rose looked at him, mouth open, and shook her head slightly.

“What?” he asked her.

“You hit where you were aiming, at a target farther than I would even think of trying for, and all you can say is ‘it shoots a little to the left’. Sometimes, you’re unbelievable!” Rose returned to the cart to check on little Andy.

“How did he do?” Mei Lee asked.

“I don’t know. I think he hit it. It was *only* a hundred yards away,” Rose said flippantly.

“Only?” Mei Lee asked playfully.

Murdock returned shortly and took up the cart. Then they set off to the spot at which Murdock had shot the deer. Reaching the spot, Murdock tracked the deer along its blood trail. Rose followed him carrying her bow. Soon they found it — dead.

Murdock quickly processed the kill. Rose noticed that his arrow had hit perfectly, puncturing both of the deer’s lungs and then passing straight through. They repacked and redistribute the load on the cart to hold the fresh kill, and as darkness fell, they proceeded farther downstream.

“Why did you take the deer?” Mei Lee asked from behind the cart.

“I noticed our meat supply was getting low, and I wanted to test my bow,” Murdock said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Add to that, the others haven’t had much to eat all winter and could probably use some.”

“You aren’t going to give them any, are you?” Rose asked in an angry voice.

“I will if it’s to our advantage.”

Soon, they reached the first cliff. Though the dark was deepening, as he looked out over the valley below, Murdock saw no sign of a fire. Rose and Mei Lee levitated themselves down to the valley floor, and Murdock followed by levitating the cart and himself. There they set up a traveling camp.

“Why didn’t we camp up there?” Rose asked, indicating the cliff they had just left.

“I didn’t want to tip off Whittier,” Murdock said.

“How would that have tipped him off?” Rose asked in an innocent voice.

“You can see a fire that high up from a long way off,” Mei Lee chimed in, as she cooked some of the fresh deer meat.

“If he saw it, it may pressure him to move faster or travel longer,” Murdock explained.

“Like a deer you shoot,” Rose added.

“Exactly,” Murdock said.

“How far are they?” Rose asked.

“I have no idea,” Murdock said. “I saw no sign of a fire, and this plateau looks to end in a few miles, so he could be over the edge of the next cliff or even farther. These trees are a problem, though. Until now, we were somewhat secure because the thick trees growing on this side hid us. They’re thinning out considerably as we go downriver.”

Mei Lee began to eat, and Murdock and Rose did the same.

“I can’t imagine what they went through this past winter,” Mei Lee said, trying to promote conversation.

“I can’t, either,” Rose said. “We had a nice, warm cabin, a hot bath whenever we wanted, plenty to eat.”

“Did you find the arrow that hit the deer?” Mei Lee asked Murdock.

“No, I didn’t,” Murdock said. He had finished eating and was absentmindedly sharpening his six-inch knife. “It went all the way through, though.”

“You shot an arrow more than a hundred yards, and it still had enough energy to go all the way through the deer,” Rose clarified. “Does anyone else

find that a little disturbing?”

Mei Lee shook her head. “It tells me,” she said, “not to be on the business end of Kevin’s bow!”

“What’s the big deal?” Murdock asked after a short pause. “It didn’t hit any bone. Just went through soft tissue.”

Both women said nothing further, they only looked at him.



Scott woke Thomas roughly.

“Get your lazy ass up,” Scott said while untying him. “If I have to work with you today, you’re going to get started early and get it over with!”

Thomas heard the venom in Scott’s voice. He wasn’t intimidated, though; he was used to being addressed that way. Trying to work out the kinks, Thomas went to the river and splashed some water on his face. Even though it was cold, it felt good.

“Quit stalling,” Scott yelled as he tossed the sharpened stick to Thomas.

Thomas caught it and started harvesting fish. Though he soon had quite a few, he still had caught only half of the quota. He stopped a few times to show Scott how to clean the ones he caught, and Scott did manage to cook them. However, those that weren’t over-cooked were under-cooked. Then Scott half-heartedly served the others.

Whittier took a couple of bites. “This is raw, Scott, you imbecile!”

Scott didn’t know what to do or what to say. Whittier went to Thomas, who was still trying to get the rest of the quota for the day. Scott followed, concerned for himself. “You, whatever your name is. Come here,” Whittier commanded Thomas. “You can quit trying to fill the quota. Your partner has ruined the catch, so he will continue to serve his penance with you.”

“That’s not fair,” Scott protested in a loud voice.

“You best remember who decides what’s fair,” Whittier warned Scott. “Pack up! We’re moving! Bring him, Scott.”

Thomas was starting to get the impression that he would never fulfill the

quota. Scott tied Thomas' hands behind him, and they continued downriver. Because they brought up the rear, they waited while everyone else climbed down the cliff. When only Scott and Thomas were left, Thomas balked.

"I can't climb down with my hands tied behind me," Thomas said.

"Tough," Scott yelled, as he poked Thomas in the back with the makeshift spear.

"Who you gonna get to do the fishing if I fall and break an arm or a leg?" Thomas argued.

"Get a move on," Scott commanded. "We're being left behind. I don't want to be out here by myself!" Scott pushed Thomas closer to the edge, and Thomas turned his feet sideways and leaned back, away from the edge.

"You can either untie me, or I'll make sure we both fall off the cliff," Thomas threatened Scott. "The fall doesn't need to kill you. It just needs to injure you enough that you get left behind."

Scott thought about it for a moment. The others were continuing on, not waiting for the pair. Then he got an idea that would solve all his problems. He pulled Thomas back away from the ledge and forced him to sit against a tree. Then Scott tied him to it.

"There! Now, I don't have to clean or cook any more stinking fish," Scott justified himself aloud. "And I don't have to figure out how to get you down the cliff without killing us both!"

"You haven't thought this through," Thomas said in a cool voice. "What happens if I get free? All I have to do is show up, and Whittier will have your head!"

"You haven't had anything to eat or drink for a while, so I don't think I have to worry too much about you!" Scott countered him in a threatening tone. "I think you're going to be dead before long."

After making sure that Thomas was secured, Scott climbed down the cliff. The last thing Thomas saw as he struggled against his bonds was the top of Scott's head disappearing over the edge of the cliff. But Thomas continued struggling, even though he knew he couldn't get free.



The next morning, because Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee were used to traveling as a group, they prepared to leave without arguing or being told. As before, Rose was point, Murdock pulled the cart, and Mei Lee took rear guard. They seemed to travel best in these positions. They spent the day walking farther downriver while watching all around with their astral selves for some distance. Because of their efficiency and physical stamina, Murdock guessed they would be at the next cliff well before dark.

Murdock's astral self, who was on the other side of the river watching the trail, found Thomas first.

"We need to stop soon," he flashed to Rose.

"Why? I'm fine, and Mei Lee hasn't said she needs to stop," Rose flashed back.

"Someone is tied to a tree on the other side, fairly close to the cliff that's coming up," Murdock flashed to both women.

"How far away is he?" Mei Lee flashed back.

"It appears to be about a mile or so."

The trio walked on for a little while before stopping.

"Make camp here," Murdock said in a quiet voice. "I'll go over and check on things. I'll keep you both apprised of the situation."

As the women began setting the camp, Murdock headed toward the cliff, though he remained on their side of the river. Soon, he was at the cliff, which looked just like the previous one. As he looked over the edge, he saw no one else, no smoke, nor any other sign. Projecting himself astrally, Murdock checked the opposite river bank for signs of an ambush. Finding none, he levitated himself across without being observed. Then Murdock drew his eighteen-inch machete as quietly as he could.

He approached the tree in such a way as to hide for as long as possible. Then he quietly walked around the tree so he could see who was tied there, without being in striking range. When he saw the man, Murdock knew he had seen him before, but he didn't know the man's name. The prisoner appeared to be either

unconscious or dead, so Murdock checked his carotid for a pulse and found one.

“Hey,” he said, shaking the man roughly. The man’s head lolled to the side, and Murdock opened his eyelids to check his eyes, which were rolled back. Murdock splashed some water on the man’s face. Seeing the chapped lips, Murdock knew the man was probably dehydrated. While he untied the other man, he sent a telepathic message to Mei Lee asking that she join him. Once untied, the man fell over, limp, and after removing the rope and checking him for concealed weapons, Murdock laid him out as straight as possible in the shade.

Because of the man’s general build and unconscious state, Murdock assessed him as no or minimal threat. However, he did seem to be just above the starvation point. Murdock had just finished when Mei Lee came quietly up.

“*You know him?*” he flashed to Mei Lee.

Mei Lee looked the man over. “*He seems familiar, but I don’t think I know his name,*” she said. “*He was one who kept to himself a lot. Wasn’t friendly and didn’t associate with the others.*”

Murdock knelt down and splashed more water on the man’s face.

“*What do we do with him?*” Mei Lee asked. “*We’re on a mission, you know, and this is slowing us down.*”

“*If we can revive him, we could get a lot of needed information,*” Murdock argued. “*I’m unwilling, however, to expose the babies to him.*”

Mei Lee knelt down and slapped the man’s face lightly. “Hey, are you in there? Hello, is anyone home?”

The man moaned a little and was unable to hold his head steady. Mei Lee tried to give him small sips of water. He coughed a few times, some water coming back out, but most of it went in. Then his arms flopped uncontrollably as he jerked his legs, which appeared to cause him a lot of pain.

“Can you hear me?” Mei Lee asked after a while. “What’s your name?”

“T-Thomas,” the man murmured.

“Well, Thomas,” Mei Lee said, “we’re not here to hurt you. We’re trying to help you.” The man nodded. “Do you know who I am?” she went on.

“M-Mei... M-Mei Lee,” he said. “Y-you’re dead!”

Mei Lee leaned back as if struck.

“I didn’t know you were a Valkyrie,” Murdock said facetiously.

“Neither did I. I’m very much alive, thank you,” she said to Thomas.

After they’d given him a few more small sips of water, Thomas seemed to come around. Murdock helped him to a sitting position and gave him the water skin. Thomas was able to sip some water on his own. Then Murdock moved out of view and levitated back across the river to retrieve some fresh venison. Mei Lee started a fire and cooked it; when the smell of the cooking meat wafted in Thomas’ direction, he perked up.

“Can you answer some questions now?” Murdock asked. Thomas nodded. “How long have you been here?”

“Two days,” Thomas said in a weak voice, “maybe more. At least two days.”

“Why were you tied?” Murdock asked.

Taking food and water breaks, Thomas explained to Murdock and Mei Lee what had happened. Rose heard it by way of the mental connection that Murdock had established.

“I need to have a word with Mei Lee,” Murdock said to Thomas. “Help yourself to the food and water.”

Murdock moved out of earshot from Thomas.

“What do we do now?” Mei Lee asked.

“*I say send him back to the pod,*” Rose flashed to Murdock and Mei Lee.

“I don’t like sending him off by himself in his weakened condition,” Murdock said. They paused, trying to think of a solution.

“We could leave him here with enough food to last a few days and one of the spears for protection,” Mei Lee offered. Murdock nodded a little.

“Do we protect him?” Murdock asked after a short pause. “If so, how?”

“*I vote no,*” Rose flashed with no emotion. “*He managed to stay alive for two days tied to a tree, so he should be okay alone, armed, and untied.*”

“I agree with Rose,” Mei Lee said. “I don’t trust him.”

“Neither do I,” Murdock said. “So, we are agreed?” Neither woman argued.

When Murdock was back within earshot of Thomas, he asked the other man, “How are you doing, Thomas?”

“I’m doing better,” Thomas answered weakly. “I do need to try to get to my

feet, though.”

Murdock offered a hand, and Thomas took it, both men pulling until Thomas was unsteadily on his feet. Thomas leaned heavily against the tree and stomped his feet.

“We’re going on,” Murdock said. “We’ll leave you with a spear and enough food for a few days. You’ll have plenty of water with the river.”

“Are you coming back?” Thomas asked.

“Yes, we are,” Murdock said. “We don’t know exactly when or by what path, though. When you feel up to it, you can head back to the pod.”

“Can’t I come with you?” Thomas asked, his eyes pleading.

“We travel fast, and you can’t keep up,” Murdock said. “We’re going to find Whittier and the rest, so you could follow him, when you feel up to it. We won’t be close by, so you’ll be on your own. You can suit yourself as to what you want to do.”

Thomas noticed a distinct coolness in the way Murdock and Mei Lee talked to him. As the two were turning to leave, Thomas reached out and touched Mei Lee. Before he knew what happened, Mei Lee had him face down, his arm wrenched behind his back.

“No one gave you leave to touch me,” she said through clenched teeth.

“I’d be careful, if I were you,” Murdock warned Thomas, with a hand on his twelve-inch machete. “Mei Lee doesn’t tolerate such breaches in protocol, and neither do I!”

Mei Lee released Thomas and stood over him. Thomas struggled to his feet.

“I just wanted to warn you,” Thomas said weakly, “and to thank you.”

“Warn us that Whittier will kill us on sight?” Mei Lee snapped. “We’re well aware of that!”

“Yes, and warn you that Whittier is off his nut. He thinks he has more support among the rest than he actually has,” Thomas said, with downcast eyes.

“We figured that much already,” Mei Lee said sharply, as she turned to walk upriver and out of sight.

“Thanks aren’t necessary,” Murdock said. Then, warning Thomas, he went on, “Politeness, however, is. Politeness and respect are always necessary.”

As Murdock followed Mei Lee, he saw the tension in her back. Both levitated over the river when they could do so unobserved. At the camp, Murdock unpacked a spear and carved off a good-sized chunk of venison, then returned to Thomas.

“You do know how to use this?” Murdock asked as he handed the spear to Thomas. Thomas shook his head. “Use it like a pike. Don’t throw it.” Picking up the rope that had secured Thomas, Murdock threw the end over a limb. He then attached the chunk of venison to it, lifting it well off the ground, and tied the loose end around the tree. “That should last a few days. I’d wait at least that long to build up your strength before going anywhere.” Murdock pulled his six-inch knife from his boot sheath and handed it to Thomas. “I expect to get my knife back in good condition.”

“Would you tell Mei Lee that I’m sorry if I offended her,” Thomas said in a meek voice. “I didn’t intend to.”

“I’ll tell her, but I wouldn’t expect forgiveness if I were you,” Murdock answered, as he turned back upstream and disappeared.

“Does this change anything?” Rose asked Murdock when he returned to camp, indicating Thomas with her eyes.

“It only changes things in that we need to be aware that someone is behind us now,” Murdock explained. “As long as we are aware, we should be fine.”

“How far behind do you think we are?” Mei Lee asked.

“Three days, maybe a little more,” Murdock said, after thinking a moment. “Either of you look for a place to levitate down from this plateau without being seen?” Both women shook their heads. Murdock picked up the cart and headed off toward the plateau edge at a sharp angle away from the river. Rose was hard-pressed to catch up to him and resume the lead. Mei Lee, as usual, assumed the drag position.

“*Keep your astral eye on Thomas,*” Murdock flashed to Mei Lee. “*I want to know when he can no longer observe us.*” Mei Lee acknowledged his request.

“*What are you planning?*” Rose asked telepathically from her position.

“We need to make up a lot of ground,” Murdock flashed to both women. *“And there is only one way that I know of. We need to push our astral selves as far as we possibly can.”*

“We’re making better time than expected,” Mei Lee flashed back.

“Not good enough. The sooner we find Whittier, the better.” Murdock flashed. *“I do wish I could disappear as Beron can.”*

“You know that he really doesn’t disappear?” Rose flashed.

“Yes, I know. I meant the technique for telling a particular brain that there is nothing to see.”

A few hours after leaving Thomas, they stopped for a quick break to eat and drink.

“How far are we from the next cliff?” Rose asked as they ate.

Murdock stretched his astral-self downriver and on the opposite side. As that part of him reached the cliff, he spotted a body lying on the path, surrounded by copious amounts of blood. He shared his astral vision with the two women.

“I’m sensing a pattern here,” Mei Lee said sadly.

“Was that person dead?” Rose asked.

“Undoubtedly,” Murdock said, *“based on the amount of blood. So, do we stop and bury that person or proceed on?”*

“I’d say press on and bury it on the way back,” Rose said.

“I agree,” Mei Lee chimed in.

“Let’s get going,” Murdock said. *“I want to get to the edge of the cliff before dark.”*

A few hours later, the group reached the edge of the next cliff, looking out over the next plateau. Murdock saw a few more plateaus from his vantage point. Then, after checking for unwanted observers, he levitated the cart as well as himself down to the next plateau. Rose and Mei Lee followed. Reaching the next plateau, Murdock stretched his astral self as far ahead as he possibly could. He saw that it would be dark soon.

“How tired are you?” Murdock asked the two women.

“I’m okay,” Rose said. *“Why do you ask?”*

“So am I,” Mei Lee said.

“I want to rearrange the cart some,” Murdock said. “It needs to be repacked for passengers.”

Taking their cue from Murdock, the two women took care of the babies and helped rearrange the cart. Then Murdock picked up the front of the cart, and Rose and Mei Lee climbed aboard. He started off at a slow trot. Though he went faster than anyone else could run, it wasn't his top speed. Because he could see shades of grey, he avoided numerous boulders and anything that might upend the cart in the dark.

About an hour later, he slowed to a stop to drink some water. As he drank, he again sent out his astral self to check the trail on the opposite bank. He saw two people. One was trying to start a fire close to the next cliff.

“Just as I suspected,” Rose said, after Murdock had shared his vision with her and Mei Lee.

“At least they aren't dead,” Mei Lee said.

“How are we going to approach this?” Murdock asked.

“Well, how far away are they?” Mei Lee asked.

“If we all cross here and walk on the other side, it would take a couple of hours to get in their vicinity,” Murdock said. “If we go much farther on this side, they'll see a fire...”

“. . . and be aware that someone can cross the river,” Mei Lee finished.

“Don't want to tip them off to that bit of information,” Rose interjected, “at least, not yet.”

“Agreed,” Murdock said. “So, we cross here.”

“How are we going to cross when we can't see?” Rose asked.

“You two levitate yourselves, just float, and hold on to the cart,” Murdock explained. “I can see, so I'll guide you over.”

After levitating themselves over the river, they proceeded on. Then, Murdock heard the distant voice of someone ahead and stopped. There they made camp, though Rose and Mei Lee had their bows close at hand, as did Murdock. All three expected company, knowing the fire would bring the others in.

“Hello in the camp,” a female voice said in the darkness. Murdock, who had heard their approach, stood ready in case of a fight.

“Come in slowly,” Murdock ordered.

“There are two of us,” said the female. “The other one can’t walk. She’s been severely injured and is down the path a fair distance.”

“Okay, you come in slowly,” Murdock said. She approached the fire from the darkness. She was blonde, about five foot six, and looked battered and bruised. “You have any weapons?” Murdock asked roughly, when her back was to him. He saw her stiffen, probably in fear.

“Please, help us,” the woman pleaded with Mei Lee. “My companion is pregnant and badly injured!”

“Who are you? And who is your companion?” Mei Lee asked with skepticism. She recognized the other woman, or thought she did, but the person before her was emaciated and filthy, with torn and tattered clothing. Her long, blonde hair was a mass of tangles and looked as if it hadn’t been combed or brushed in years.

“Rebecca Hayes,” the woman answered. “My companion is Krysia Oblonski. Please, help her!”

“I’ll go,” Murdock said. “*You two keep a close eye on this one.*” he flashed to Rose and Mei Lee.

Murdock went off into the dark. He went only a hundred yards before he found an unconscious female. He picked her up carefully and carried her back into their camp. Then he laid her on one of the hides close by the fire. Mei Lee took over ministering to her while Murdock kept the water skin filled.

“So, what happened to you two,” Mei Lee asked as she tended Krysia.

“Krysia is pregnant, by Whittier,” Rebecca said. “When she told him, he started beating her. I tried to intervene and he started beating me.”

Rose sat between the new additions and the babies and listened. She kept her hand on the hilt of her twelve-inch machete, ready to defend the children with her life, if need be.

“Why are you out here with Krysia?” Rose asked with suspicion. “Why aren’t you with the rest of the cannibals?”

Rebecca looked as if someone had struck her across the face. Her mouth gaped in surprise.

“H-how did you hear about that?” she asked, with her head bowed.

“We aren’t stupid, sweetie,” Rose spat back, with such venom that Murdock was startled

“I-I decided to stay with Kryisia and try to help her,” Rebecca said. “No one else was willing to help her. Someone had to.” Rebecca was crying quietly.

“Are you hungry?” Murdock asked, offering Rebecca a cooked piece of venison.

“I bet she prefers it raw,” Rose spat.

“That’s enough, Rose,” Murdock scolded his wife as Rebecca gingerly took the offered meat. Rose said nothing else, but sat across the fire from Rebecca glaring. “How is Kryisia, Mei Lee?” Murdock went on.

“Unconscious. Also looks like a few cracked ribs, massive bruises, and contusions,” Mei Lee reported.

“Is she pregnant?” Murdock asked.

“It appears that way. I don’t know if she will be in a few days, though,” Mei Lee said in a soft voice.

Murdock got up to see for himself. He looked at Kryisia and felt a pang of déjà vu. “*You ask, once in a while, how bad you looked when I found you,*” he flashed to Rose. “*You looked worse, but not by a lot!*” Then, to Mei Lee, he flashed, “*Will she survive?*”

“*I don’t know for certain,*” Mei Lee flashed back. “*A lot depends on her.*”



Rose didn’t want to see Kryisia at any time, let alone beaten and unconscious. She didn’t want to see because she feared that the anger from all the pain she had endured so long ago would come flooding back. As she looked at Kryisia, she felt her teeth grind with anger. *I thought it was behind me,* she thought, *but it wasn’t.*



“Who beat her like this?” Murdock asked, looking at Kryisia.

“Whittier,” Rebecca said in a quiet voice, but with conviction.

“Anyone else help him?” Murdock asked in anger.

“No, just him. I did try to stop it,” Rebecca pleaded, still crying.

“Go over to the river and get washed up as best you can,” Murdock told Rebecca as he sat back down close to Rose.

“*I don’t like this one bit,*” Rose flashed to Murdock, after Rebecca had left for the river. He felt her considerable anger.

“*I know you don’t,*” he flashed back. “*I don’t like it, either.*”

“*Nor do I,*” Mei Lee flashed to them, “*but would you rather we left them alone to die?*” Mei Lee, who sat next to Rose, held her hand. “*Would that salve your conscience?*”

“*Don’t ask me that right now,*” Rose flashed. “*Neither of you would like my answer.*”

“You’ll have to be responsible for Krysia,” Murdock told Rebecca when she returned. She looked a little better, but not by much. “We have our own responsibilities, and we have neither the time nor the inclination to take care of either of you.”

“*Wow. That sounded like you almost care,*” Mei Lee chided him telepathically.

Murdock glanced at Mei Lee before returning his attention to Rebecca. “I’m not uncaring or mean. I’m just tired; tired of cleaning up after Whittier.”

Mei Lee gave Rebecca a couple of hides for herself and another to cover Krysia. Rebecca thanked them for doing what they could to help and made herself a place to sleep close to Krysia. Rose moved the babies away from the two newcomers and made a place for herself, Mei Lee, and Murdock. Murdock took the first watch and didn’t wake Rose until it was morning. He spent the night thinking.

What am I supposed to do with another three people? They could stay at the transport pod, he thought. That would give them immediate shelter, but how to transport them up the cliffs? I don’t want to levitate them; it would be better to keep that skill secret. I could blindfold them and do it at night, but I’m not sure it would be a good idea. He wasn’t the trusting type, and these three had done

nothing to warrant his trust. *I have to look after four people as it is. I'm not sure I want another three.*

In the morning, as Rose and Mei Lee woke up and started their morning routine, Murdock checked on Rebecca.

"How is she?" Murdock asked, indicating the still unconscious Krysia.

"I don't know," Rebecca said. "She appears to be breathing a little better, and I've managed to get some water into her, but she hasn't eaten anything."

Murdock nodded. He went to the river and splashed some cold water on his face, then ate some venison. The tension was very apparent in the camp. Murdock passed on Rebecca's assessment of Krysia to Mei Lee, who immediately went over to check for herself.

As Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee sat eating, they debated telepathically among themselves about the new charges. To Rebecca, who watched the trio, they just looked as if they were eating quietly, not talking and lost in their thoughts.

"What do we do with them?" Mei Lee flashed to Murdock and Rose.

"The only solution I see is to return them to the transport pod," Murdock flashed. "I'm unwilling to disclose the skills we have accumulated, but I'm at a loss as to how to get them over the cliffs."

"Why don't we leave them here?" Rose sniped. "Let them get what they deserve!"

"What is your problem with them?" Murdock asked Rose.

"They were all present when Mei Lee was abused," Rose started to rant. "They were all present when the attempt was made on your life. They have engaged in murder and cannibalism. Now, you expect me to trust them as if none of that has happened? I won't do it!"

"Do you know that they were there when Mei Lei was abused?" Murdock asked. "Were they present when the attempt on my life was made? And as far as the cannibalism goes, what would you do to survive?"

"I don't trust them any farther than you could throw them," Rose flashed with anger. "Since they did nothing to stop any of those things then, to me, they condoned it."

“I don’t trust them,” Murdock explained. *“To me, they all have a lot of proving to do before I would trust any of them. But I also can’t leave them out here to starve or worse. I’m not asking you to trust them, just to watch them and understand a little what they’ve been through. The more important issue, right now, is getting our cart up the cliff face without being observed.”*

“We could all climb the cliff, except Kevin, who would go inland until he was completely out of sight,” Mei Lee offered. *“Once he was up the cliff, we can converge by the river. The only issue I can think of is getting an unconscious person up that cliff.”*

Murdock looked over at Kryisia, who was still unconscious. *“She’s still out and I don’t know how long she will be,”* he said.

“We could always blindfold Rebecca of Sunny Brook Farm,” Rose offered. *“Murdock could climb the cliff and blindfold Who’s-or-what’s-it, then we could levitate everyone and everything.”*

Together, Murdock and Mei Lee looked at Rose, then at Rebecca, then back to Rose.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, as he got to his feet and headed off. Soon, he returned in a better mood. *“Well, we need to make a travois for Kryisia and tie it to the back of the cart. Once we do that, we can start back.”*

“What about Whittier?” Rose flashed.

“He’ll have to wait,” Murdock told Rose and Mei Lee telepathically. *“We need to get these three someplace safe to get them built back up again. We know he’s going the other way, so maybe Beron can help keep an eye on the cliffs — like an early warning system. I contacted him, and he’ll help us with the three who don’t need to see.”*

Both Rose and Mei Lee looked perplexed as they bent to their normal tasks while Murdock made a travois.

After Murdock built the travois and attaching it to the cart, he secured Krysia on it. As Murdock looked at the cart and travois, he found himself wishing for a horse or a mule. *With all the cart-pulling I've been doing of late, I'm surprised I don't look more like a mule*, he thought.

Rose and Mei Lee took their usual positions, and Rebecca's position was beside Krysia in order to keep her on the travois and check on her from time to time. They walked for most of the day before making camp.

"Can I give you a hand with that?" Rebecca asked Rose, who had begun cooking the venison.

"Nope," Rose said sharply without looking up. "This is for my family, and I don't want them poisoned." Murdock, who had just walked up behind Rose, overheard the exchange.

"She's just trying to do what she can to help," he said quietly as he brushed Rose's shoulder. "She probably feels like a third wheel."

"Then you find something for her to do," Rose snapped back, without averting her eyes from the sizzling chunks of meat.

"You can help by gathering more wood, if you'd like," Murdock said to Rebecca in a soft voice.

Rebecca nodded slightly, respectfully, and went off to search for wood.

"I'm feeling like a mule," Murdock said, after Rebecca left the area and Mei Lee joined them.

"I'm surprised you haven't captured a deer," Mei Lee asked as she sat.

“What would a captured deer do for me, besides getting what little brains I do have kicked in?” Murdock asked intrigued.

“Nordic tribes used reindeer as draft animals,” Mei Lee stated, as she nibbled on a piece of meat.

“The trick would be catching them,” Murdock said. “Then you have to break them to harness and make the harnesses.”

“As far as catching them goes, I’d read somewhere that South Americans used to throw this dingus that would wrap around the legs without causing injury,” Rose offered.

“Bolas,” Mei Lee piped up. “Specifically, boleadora.” Mei Lee picked up a stick and drew in the dirt. “Three weighted balls and three pieces of rope.” She indicated the picture she had drawn. “Looks like this. You throw it at the hind legs. It wraps around and makes it difficult for the animal to run or even walk.”

Murdock looked at the picture. He had neither seen nor heard of this. “It’s worth a try,” he said finally.

“Taming a deer may be a different matter, though,” Mei Lee said.

Rebecca returned with wood as they ate. Murdock had noticed that Rose hadn’t made any venison for Rebecca, so he cut her some and cooked it. Since no one asked Rebecca to join them, she wandered around the fire looking at the ground.

“I could make you a set of those,” she said in a quiet voice.

“What do you know about it?” Rose snapped.

“Not much,” Rebecca said sheepishly. “I did spend some time in Argentina as a child. Some of the kids I used to play with made some.”

“That would be fine,” Murdock interrupted. “How’s Krysia?” he said, changing the subject.

“There’s been no change,” Rebecca said, somewhat sadly.

“Where was Whittier leading you?” Murdock asked.

“He never said for certain,” Rebecca tried to explain. “During the bitterly cold winter, he used to rant about the selection of the landing site. He thought it should have been farther south.”

Rose and Mei Lee laughed.

“Which way is south?” Murdock asked, laughing too. Rebecca blushed.

“Water always flows south,” Rebecca said.

“Really? Who told you that?” Murdock asked.

“School, I think. It’s one of those rules that are always true,” Rebecca said innocently.

“Well, in my experience, water always flows downhill,” Murdock explained. “Downhill is not always south.”

“That was it,” Rebecca corrected herself. “I keep forgetting.”

“So, did Whittier ever say why he was heading downhill?” Mei Lee asked.

“He just said he wanted to escape the cold and head for the margaritas,” Rebecca said shyly.

“For my part,” Mei Lee said, “he can stay there!” Everyone else nodded.

After a good rest, the camp was struck, and the group continued upriver. When they saw the cliffs start in the distance, Murdock flashed to Mei Lee that she should keep a close eye on Rebecca. Then he flashed to Rose to view ahead on the plateau ahead of them, in case Thomas had felt frisky and had decided to follow them. As they neared the cliffs, first Rose, then Murdock and Mei Lee saw Beron approaching.

“Anyone who isn’t my family doesn’t need to see, Murdock flashed, “Including anyone up on the ridge.”

Murdock didn’t change his pace or indicate that Beron had joined them. After seeing Beron, Mei Lee moved a little closer to Rebecca, but was hard-pressed to levitate the other woman before she hit the ground.

“All sleeping,” Beron assured them.

Murdock and Rose levitated the cart and travois, and Mei Lee levitated Rebecca up the cliff face. Then Murdock and Rose set the cart and travois gently back to the ground and continued walking as if nothing had happened. Mei Lee was still levitating Rebecca an inch off the ground when she saw Rebecca coming around. Mei Lee stopped levitating and caught Rebecca as she stumbled.

“You okay?” Mei Lee asked with concern.

Once everyone was close to the body that was lying in their path, they stopped. Murdock recognized the man as the encampment armorer under Mei

Lee's leadership. Mei Lee, in turn, put a name to the body: Brian Scott. Inspecting Scott's remains, Murdock saw that he had been stabbed through one of his lungs. *Did Whittier do it himself or had someone done it for him?* Murdock wondered.

"Where are you going to bury him?" Mei Lee asked.

"Make it away from the river," Rose suggested. "If we come by here again, we don't want anything spoiled by the thought of someone buried so close to the river."

Murdock agreed. Rebecca didn't get a vote on the decision.

While Murdock dug the grave in a suitable spot, Rose and Mei Lee made a rest camp close by the river. The river bank was much lower than the level they were walking on and the river was wide and slow-moving at that point, so the women decided to bathe.

While Rose and then Mei Lee bathed, Rebecca stood close to the river's edge, but she seemed reluctant to bathe at the same time as Rose and unsure what to do when Mei Lee was bathing. Rose's actions and statements had made it very clear to Rebecca that she should not ask anything of her at any time, for any reason.

"You can bathe now, if you want," Mei Lee said to Rebecca when she had finished. "I'll stand guard."

Rebecca thanked her in low tones and did so. By the time all three women returned to the camp, Murdock had finished burying Scott.

"You stink," Rose told him. "There will be no food for you until after you bathe!" She pointed toward the river.

"Why does Rose hate me?" Rebecca asked Mei Lee, as the pair went toward the river.

"She doesn't hate you," Mei Lee said. "She doesn't even know you. How can she hate you?"

"I guess I don't understand," Rebecca said in a soft voice.

"It's not that she hates you," Mei Lee tried to explain. "It's just that you are *them*." Mei Lee could see from Rebecca's expression that she didn't understand. "To Rose, it's *us* and everyone else is *them*. You are *them*. Understand?"

“Not really,” Rebecca said, as she exhaled in exasperation.

“All of her experience and instincts tell her to trust *us* and distrust *them*,” Mei Lee explained.

“So, you’re saying she doesn’t trust me?” Rebecca asked.

“Yes, but it goes deeper than that,” Mei Lee said, piqued. “If I were you, I’d stay away from her until she gets to know you better. She’ll see how you are with me and Murdock and may want to get to know you better, but pushing it won’t help. Have you checked on Krysia?”

Rebecca got up and went over to check on the unconscious woman. Mei Lee began cooking some venison and was relieved for the break in the conversation. She was starting to get frustrated with Rebecca, who was clearly one of those people who quickly get on others’ nerves.

“How was the water?” Mei Lee asked Murdock when he returned.

“Refreshing,” Murdock said.

“Refreshing? We thought it was damned cold!” Rose exclaimed, looking at him sideways. Mei Lee grinned at the minor return to normality — normal for them, anyway.

“I remember a hunting trip to Alaska once,” Murdock said in a serious voice. “I think it was in late February or early March, and I was in dire need of a bath.”

“Don’t even,” Rose warned him. “I’m not in the mood for one of your tall tales!”

“What?” Murdock asked her, trying to look surprised. “You doubt the veracity of my tales? You deeply wound me, Madam!”

That worked to decidedly lighten the mood while they ate. Rose even cheerfully offered some venison to Rebecca, but her mood turned a little dour when Rose realized what she had done.

“Why was Scott killed?” Murdock asked aloud as he finished eating. He didn’t direct the question to anyone in particular, but everyone knew whom he addressed. “Do you know?”

“Scott had said that he had killed the guy who was catching all the fish for us,” Rebecca said, without looking at anyone in particular. “That made Whittier so angry that he killed Scott.”

“What a waste,” Murdock said, shaking his head slightly. “Well, we have dawdled long enough.” He got to his feet and wiped his hands on his leather pants. “We need to get to the cliff before dark. Let’s get packed up and moving.”

“*Same as before?*” Rose flashed to Murdock, after several hours of walking in silence. She saw the cliffs start in the distance.

“*The difference will be Thomas,*” Murdock said telepathically. “*Beron will knock him out before he can see. That assumes that he stayed where we left him. If he decided to head toward the pod, then he may not be incapacitated. Rose, have you tried to send your astral self up the cliff to see if he’s there?*”

“*I haven’t yet,*” she flashed back. “*It’s still too far, but I will as soon as I can.*”

“*Mei Lee, you need to be ready to catch Rebecca again,*” Murdock instructed the other woman. “*Find out how Krysia is doing.*”

“*She’s still out. I’ll check her when we stop again,*” Mei Lee flashed.

“*I’m not planning on stopping until we get up the cliff,*” Murdock flashed to Rose and Mei Lee. They both understood, knowing that if they needed water, Mei Lee was to catch up to the cart and take the water skin to Rose. Murdock would drink when he stopped. If he didn’t want to stop, they knew he wouldn’t.

After a few more hours, Rose saw Beron again. Mei Lee saw him too, and caught Rebecca before she hit the ground. Beron had communicated to Murdock that Thomas was unconscious on top of the cliff. With Murdock hardly breaking pace, they levitated up the cliff. After reaching the top, Murdock stopped when they reached Thomas, and there Mei Lee laid Rebecca across Krysia. As the group waited for Thomas and Rebecca to wake up, Rose set up camp, and Mei Lee checked on Krysia as best she could with Rebecca on top of her.

“Where did you come from?” Thomas asked when he awoke. He was startled that the others had scaled the cliff without his seeing them cross the valley.

“Not our problem if you can’t stay awake,” Murdock said gruffly. “If you had stood a proper watch, you would have seen us coming.”

“How did we get up the cliff?” Rebecca asked as she awoke. “What happened?”

“You fell asleep and landed on top of Krysia,” Mei Lee told her.

By the time the venison was cooked, the sun had gone down and Krysia looked to be coming around. Since her beating, her eyes had swollen shut and were covered in terrible shades of blue and purple.

“Where am I?” Krysia asked weakly, through swollen lips. She touched the side of her face gingerly.

“What do you remember?” Mei Lee asked in a quiet voice.

“Is that Mei Lee?” Krysia asked. She appeared close to tears as she spread out her arms and hands to try to touch Mei Lee.

“Please, tell me what happened and how much you remember,” Mei Lee murmured.

“It was horrible!” Krysia started crying. “All I did was tell Whittier that he was going to be a father, and he started hitting me all over. I called for help, but no one would help.” She gingerly touched her face.

“That’s what Rebecca told us,” Mei Lee said, nodding. “She said she tried to stop it, but was beaten as well.”

“If that’s true,” Krysia said through tears, “it wasn’t very early in! I don’t remember her doing or saying anything.” Sobbing, she held her ribs. “Why do my ribs hurt so much?”

“I think a few are cracked,” Mei Lee told her. “Rebecca will bring you food and water.” Mei Lee patted Krysia’s hand two or three times and then went to the fire. “Cut up her meat quite small so it won’t be so hard to chew, and give her all the water she wants,” she told Rebecca.

“How’s Krysia?” Murdock asked Mei Lee, after Rebecca left.

“At least she’s awake,” Mei Lee said. “I was getting concerned with the amount of time she was unconscious.”

“Will she make it?” Rose asked, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

“Will she be able to walk the rest of the way?” Murdock asked.

“I would say she should not walk that far just yet,” Mei Lee said. “She should take it easy for a few more days. I still don’t know if the baby will make

it or not.”

“Or even if there was a baby,” Rose muttered, as she poked the fire with a stick.

Murdock motioned Thomas, who had been sitting by the cart, over to the fire.

“Do you know what you’re going to do?” Murdock asked Thomas. “We’ll see you to the transport pod. After that, you’ll have to decide. The transport pod offers year-round shelter. The underside is good for storage, after it’s cleaned up.”

“So, we’re right back where we started,” Thomas said in a soft voice. “How will we survive?”

“Do you know what happened to all the tools that remained after my visit and Whittier’s attempt on my life?” Murdock asked. “You had plenty of machetes and hatchets.”

“He didn’t haul all of them off when we left,” Thomas said. “He didn’t seem to have that many with him, so a search of the pod area might turn them up, but what good would that do?”

“Do you like being at the mercy of whatever comes after you?” Murdock asked in disbelief. “You’re going to need weapons to hunt and a spear to fish and to protect yourself. Axes and saws for wood — we have those, and you can use them. You have everything you need to survive.”

“What good is all that stuff if you don’t know how to use them?” Thomas asked, not understanding.

“You learn,” Murdock snapped. “If it’s a case of not wanting to survive, I can accommodate you right now!”

“No, I think I can learn,” Thomas said, backpedaling a bit.

Murdock offered Thomas a cooked chunk of venison and gave him a look that told him *Get lost*.

“And people wonder why I don’t associate with strangers,” Murdock said aloud to himself after Thomas left the area.

“You do seem to gather strays!” Rose said, smirking.

“As I recall, you were one of those strays,” Murdock said, glancing sideways

at Rose and smirking back.

“True,” Rose said as she got up to check on Andy. “But you wouldn’t have it any other way!” She kissed his neck as she passed.

Mei Lee, taking a cue from Rose, hugged Murdock from behind. “We all owe you so much,” she said softly, as she released him and followed Rose to check on Chun Hua.

Murdock sat for a while feeling good, but then he began feeling bad. He went over to Thomas, who was talking to Rebecca. “Sorry for the way I talked earlier,” Murdock said somewhat sheepishly. “If you’re willing to learn, I’ll teach you what you need to know.” Then he returned to the fire.

The next morning, the small troop started off again toward the transport pod. Murdock and Thomas both pulled the cart, as Thomas had regained some of his strength. Though Murdock had said he didn’t need help, Thomas had insisted on helping as best he could for as long as he could.

Rebecca walked beside Krysia to keep an eye on her so she wouldn’t fall off the travois, as well as to give the injured woman water. The walk became easier as the day passed. When they finally stopped for a rest, they had reached the point in the river that Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee crossed to go home.

Rose and Mei Lee were pensive. Murdock had caught both of them looking off toward the cabin with longing looks that said they had been too long away from home and knew they were close.

“You can go on home with Andy, if you want,” Murdock murmured privately to Rose “I shouldn’t be here too long. Just have to get them started on cleaning up. That will take them a few days. You can take Mei Lee and Chun Hua with you, if she wants to go.”

“What about you?” Rose asked in a quiet voice. “I don’t like the idea of you walking home alone.”

“I won’t walk,” Murdock said, with a little chuckle.

“And be home a couple of hours after you leave?” Rose asked, laughing as well.

Rose went to Mei Lee, exchanged pleasantries, and cooed toward little Chun Hua. In reality, however, Rose telepathically explained to Mei Lee that they

could split off and go home with the kids. Mei Lee agreed, and both women informed Murdock. Mei Lee also passed on her recommendations for Kryisia's treatment.

Murdock went through the cart, pulled out one of the flint point spears, and handed it to Thomas. He cut off some more of the venison and put it on the travois with Kryisia. He then untied the travois from the cart and held it up while Rose pulled the cart away. Thomas and Rebecca watched as the two women went upstream. As he watched them go, Thomas' face revealed panic. Murdock initiated a mental link with Rose and Mei Lee so that they would know what he said. Then, loud enough for those present to hear, he said, "There are a few rules involved with this arrangement. The first one is this. If any of you are caught more than a quarter mile from this path —" He indicated the worn path heading toward the pod and then indicated Rose's and Mei Lee's direction, "on that side, without Rose, Mei Lee, or myself, your lives are forfeit. There's plenty of game downriver from the border, so you don't need to go that way."

"So, where are they going?" Thomas asked. His manner and tone told Murdock that Thomas was prying.

"They are going where I sent them to do things I asked them to do," Murdock said cryptically. Thomas looked at him with a question on his face. "To put it another way, in terms that even you can understand, it's on a need-to-know basis, and you don't need to know. Are we clear?" he asked, noting the surprised look on Rebecca and Thomas' faces. No one responded. "Are we clear?" he asked again with more volume, indicating that he expected an answer. He looked sternly from Thomas to Rebecca and back to Thomas.

"Crystal," Kryisia said firmly but weakly, startling Thomas and Rebecca.

Murdock and Thomas took up the poles of the travois and started off toward the transport pod, Rebecca solemnly following from behind. After a few more hours, they reached the transport pod. Then Murdock lowered the ramp, and the two men carried Kryisia into the pod. Rebecca picked up one of the hides and spread it on the deck for Kryisia to lie on.

"Mei Lee highly suggests that you stay off your feet as much as possible," Murdock told her, after setting her on the deck. "There's no guarantee that you

won't lose the baby, but staying off your feet may help." He turned to Thomas. "The pod's batteries are getting very low. I don't know if cleaning off the solar panels would help, but it won't hurt. Until then, I'd leave the ramp down, and you and Rebecca switch off, keeping watch at night."

Murdock exited the pod with Thomas and Rebecca on his heels. Murdock didn't stop until he was well past the pod's underside, on the upwind side.

"How long will Krysia need to take it easy?" Rebecca asked meekly, when they were out of Krysia's earshot.

"That I don't know," Murdock told her. "It all depends on her. I'd lead her everywhere and make sure she doesn't fall. After she can see, she should be able to do more on her own. You'll just have to play it by ear."

"What do you want us to do here?" Thomas asked.

Murdock looked sternly at him. "I don't care what you do! This isn't going to work that way. I give suggestions and you follow them, or don't. I'd *suggest* you cook all your food on the upwind side of the underside of the pod; at least, until you get the underside cleaned up. To clean it, you can try waiting for the rain to wash it out, or you can take a shovel and spread dirt over the entire underside. I don't know who had the idea to use the enclosure as a privy, but that was exceedingly stupid!"

Knowing that Whittier wouldn't have been able to carry all the tools without attracting notice, Murdock went back under the pod and found the storage compartments. As he opened them again, he saw that he was correct. He immediately found the extra water skins and handed quite a few to Thomas, who had followed him and was watching closely. He decided to dig out everything he could find. "Put all this stuff inside the pod. You'll need to know what you have," he told Thomas and Thomas did as he was told.

When Murdock had emptied all the storage compartments, he outfitted Thomas and Rebecca as he was. Then he posted Rebecca at the top of the ramp while he and Thomas gathered up all the water skins and walked to the stream Murdock had first used.

The walk was short.

"When you're away from the pod, you have to look everywhere all the

time,” Murdock explained. “You can’t defend against what you can’t see.” He tried to give him his first lessons in reading game sign and basic trailing. “You are not to cross the stream for any reason,” Murdock said sternly at the creek. “For that matter, you are not to cross the river, either.”

On the way back to the pod, Murdock tested and corrected Thomas on the information he had given him.

While Rebecca helped Kryisia out of the pod, Murdock showed Thomas the proper way to build a cooking fire and how to cook the venison.

“You have enough venison to last three or four days, you have plenty of water skins, and you know how to get water,” Murdock said, as he slung two of the filled water skins over his shoulder. No one asked why he took two. “Don’t go outside alone, and don’t go outside unarmed. If you see any animals other than deer, run. I’ll be back in three days to check on things.” Then he turned and headed for the river.

Murdock told Rose and Mei Lee telepathically that he was on his way home. After those at the pod could not see him, he broke into an easy trot. Soon, he reached the river, levitating himself over it without breaking stride. He was soon home, where Rose had prepared venison for him to eat.

“You need to get into the bath!” Rose said, in a voice that meant she would tolerate no arguments.

He didn’t argue. As he stripped down, he noticed Mei Lee in the tub.

“I’m not intruding, am I?” he asked, before proceeding.

“Not at all,” Mei Lee answered.

Once he was in the tub and relaxing, Rose came out and got in as well.

“This feels heavenly!” Mei Lee said, as she lounged with eyes closed, enjoying the healing heat on her tortured muscles. Everyone else grunted appreciatively.

“What is the plan with the trio at the pod?” Rose asked, after a very long, silent soak.

“I’ll check on them in three days,” Murdock said, without opening his eyes or changing his position.

“Do you think they can survive that long on their own?” Mei Lee asked

lazily.

“I’m not going to babysit them,” Murdock said in a firm voice. “They need to learn, and experience is the best teacher. They have enough food, and I found the extra weapons and water skins, so they are pretty well set for three days, anyway.”

“I want to go with you, so I can check on Krysia and assess her progress,” Mei Lee said. “Maybe Rose and I can trade off on your training trips.”

“Maybe,” Rose answered in guarded tones. “I think you may be going more often than I will.”

After bathing and eating, Rose and Mei Lee moved the babies closer to the bed. Murdock secured the doors and windows. While he lay cuddled with Rose and Mei Lee, he tried to mentally count the survivors, but his mind and body were worn out from the stress. Soon, all in the cabin were asleep.



By the time fall arrived again, Thomas’ hunting and tracking skills had vastly improved. He had become quite good at stalking deer and could harvest fish with little to no effort. Krysia had survived and was expected to deliver her baby in a month, at the earliest. Her ribs still bothered her, but only when she overworked. Rebecca had learned a lot about cooking and fire-building. Both women had learned how to tan and work hides. Thomas and Murdock built a large smokehouse, and the survivors had learned how to cut and smoke venison and fish. Rose had also taught them how to braid rope from the high grass that surrounded the pod.

Murdock and Thomas had enclosed the compound with a stockade of logs. The logs were all thirty feet long, and the walls were twenty-five feet high after they were set in the ground. At the closest point, fifty feet stretched from the outer edge of the pod to the stockade. The stockade featured a big, wide gate that swung out, with a large, counterbalanced log to hold the gate closed from the inside. It had taken them the rest of the summer and most of the fall to build the structure. Thomas, Rebecca, and Krysia spent the last weeks before winter filling

the smokehouse with fish and venison.

After Krysia could take care of herself somewhat, Thomas and Rebecca went for plenty of walks together to get water and to fish. They had many talks around the campfire as they cooked venison or fish. Before Krysia was able to walk down from the pod on her own, the two of them had talked more, and Thomas found that he missed talking to Rebecca. He had made sure that the watches were arranged so that Rebecca was awake while Thomas was.

“Are you trying to avoid me?” Rebecca had asked during one of their walks for water.

“No,” Thomas said clumsily. “I didn’t want to seem to take advantage of the situation. That would be Whittier’s way, not mine.”

“Well, it sure seems like it to me,” Rebecca said. “There’s you, me, and Krysia. Whittier is off somewhere abusing someone or searching for something he thinks is out there. The other men are either dead or acolytes of Whittier. The only other acceptable male is Murdock, and I think Mei Lee and Rose would have more than a little to say about that. So, if I don’t interest you, then I have to wait until the next pod, and that’s a long time to wait.”

Thomas’ mouth hung open. He hadn’t known anyone so forward. “I didn’t say I wasn’t interested in you,” he said when he spoke again. “I just didn’t want you to think I had any expectations. I had already resigned myself to waiting for the next pod. I’d prefer not to wait that long, but I will if I have to.”

“What about Krysia?” Rebecca asked. “Do you know the particulars of Rose, Mei Lee and Murdock’s relationship?” She slipped her arm around Thomas’ waist as they walked.

“I don’t know what their relationship is, and I think it would be rude to ask. To ask Murdock, anyway,” Thomas said, a little light-headed from Rebecca’s touch. “You may get further by asking Mei Lee. She does come around to check on Krysia quite a bit.”

“I’ll try to remember,” Rebecca said, half-smiling at him. “When they come around, the information comes very fast, and it’s hard to keep up sometimes. Usually, an hour or so after they leave I’ll remember something I meant to ask.”

“We do need to be discreet and not rub Krysia’s nose in our relationship,” he

sheepishly suggested. “She needs our support right now.”

Rebecca quickly removed her hand. “I’m sorry. I thought you might need my support or some comfort.”

Thomas saw a tear trickling down Rebecca’s cheek. “I do need your support,” he said in a soft voice. “I do like having you close. I just don’t want to upset Krysia right now.”

“I don’t care what Krysia wants,” Rebecca said loudly. “This is about me and us. If she wants to cuddle, then I am okay with it. I’m just tired of sleeping alone!”

Thomas decided he had better table the discussion until Rebecca could calm down a little. *Krysia should be included in that discussion*, he thought.



During the last few weeks before winter, Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee hunted deer and caught fish to set aside for winter. Together, they prepared the hides and gathered enough wood together to last the winter comfortably. Having learned from the previous winter, Murdock had decided to hang two extra deer in the main room of the cabin. They might be needed and they didn’t reduce the usable area in the cabin for very long, as he and the women would eat those deer first.

Murdock, Rose, and Mei Lee did not work all the time, however. They still took time to go for walks and usually brought back arrow material or grass to make rope. They spent their nights in their spa or playing with the babies. All three were quite happy and content, even though life was hard.

One night, when the babies were asleep and the adults were lounging in their spa, Mei Lee broached a matter that had bothered her for some time.

“Do you two mind if we have a little discussion?” she asked sheepishly.

“You should know by now that all you have to do is bring up whatever is bothering you,” Rose scolded Mei Lee, good-naturedly.

“Speak your mind, Mei Lee,” Murdock said, without opening his eyes.

“I have to say something that is... difficult,” Mei Lee said and then took a deep breath. “I love you both,” she blurted out.

“We love you, too, sweetness,” Rose said, her eyes closed as well.

“Same for me,” Murdock said nonchalantly.

“You don’t understand!” Mei Lee exclaimed. Both Murdock and Rose sat upright and looked at her with concern. Mei Lee had started crying.

“It’s okay, hon,” Rose said, sliding over next to her and putting her arm around Mei Lee’s shoulders. “You can tell us what’s wrong. Whatever it is, just say it.”

“Come on, Mei,” Murdock prompted her, his hands on her thighs to comfort her. “It’s okay.”

“Do you love Rose?” Mei Lee asked Murdock.

“Yes, I do, very much,” Murdock said with sincerity. “You know that.”

“Do you love me?” Mei Lee asked him pointedly.

“Yes, very much,” Murdock said. His expression showed his confusion.

“Is what you feel for me different to what you feel for Rose?” Mei Lee asked.

Murdock didn’t answer right away. He had to re-evaluate his feelings, which was something that he didn’t do very often. “Yes, it’s different only because you are not Rose,” Murdock explained. “You are a unique individual and I do love you, for you.” The words were the best he could do, but he felt they were sadly lacking, somehow.

“Do you love Kevin?” Mei Lee asked Rose, after turning slightly to look at her, which caused Murdock to draw his hands away from Mei Lee’s thighs without being mean or rough.

“You know I do,” Rose answered in a soft voice.

“What would you say if I wanted to have another baby with Kevin as the father?” Mei Lee blurted out.

Both Murdock and Rose gaped.

I don’t know what to say, but if I’m smart, I better not say anything, Murdock thought. *As far as I’m concerned, this is something for Rose and Mei Lee to work out between themselves.* He made his way to the edge of the pool and was starting to get out when Rose’s voice stopped him.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asked roughly.

“I-I was just going to check on the kids,” Murdock stammered.

“You stay put,” Rose warned. Then she asked Mei Lee in a soft voice, “Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know,” Mei Lee said, through tears. “I just want a man to hold me and nuzzle my neck once in a while.”



“Does it have to be Kevin?” Rose asked through closed eyes. She was afraid of Mei Lee’s answer.

“No, I wish it were my Thomas, but he is no longer with us,” Mei Lee said. “I do miss him, but it’s more than that. I miss the closeness. I don’t trust anyone else to get that close to me, except you and Kevin.”

“Okay,” Rose heard herself say. “It sounds to me that you don’t feel like an equal partner here. I mean equal to me.” Rose’s heart pounded in her head, and her eyes were still closed. “As far as I am concerned, you are an equal wife to me.” She was surprised that the words came out so easily. She had thought this for some time, but not knowing how Murdock would react, she had been reluctant to discuss it with him. Now, she was afraid to look at him. When she finally opened her eyes, she saw Mei Lee’s mouth agape. Rose finally turned enough to see Murdock, who also stared at her in shock.

“I need to get out before I totally dissolve,” Murdock insisted, as he got out of the spa and took his clothes into the cabin.

“Were you serious?” Mei Lee asked, once Murdock had left.

“If you want another baby, then our husband had better be the father,” Rose said in all seriousness. “That’s how I’ve felt for some time. I just hadn’t told Kevin. I didn’t know how to broach it with him.”

Rose moved to get out of the spa, but Mei Lee stopped her and gave her a big hug before they got out, gathered their clothes, and went into the cabin.

No one spoke until bedtime. Then, Rose finally spoke.

“Kevin, you’re in the middle with me and Mei Lee on either side,” she said. “Unless you would prefer a different arrangement?” she asked Mei Lee.

“No, that would be fine for tonight. We may want to change it a little for tomorrow night,” Mei Lee said.

“Do I have anything to say about this?” Murdock asked.

“Not really,” Rose said.



Murdock lay in bed. He had a beautiful woman on either side, and their hands were clasped over his belly. *Life is good*, he thought, *and surprising!* He drifted off to sleep.

For the next month, the snow fell, the wind howled, and the weather turned bitterly cold. Murdock was glad Rose and Mei Lee had made cold weather clothing during the previous winter. He continued his periodic checks of the pod area, but traveling to the encampment was very difficult and getting more so with each passing day. With Mei Lee's help, Krysia delivered her baby, a boy with no name that Murdock knew of, just before the snow fell.

One evening, Murdock was outside filling the water skins with the hot water from their spa. The snow had stopped, and the sun had already gone down. As he walked toward the door of the cabin, it occurred to him to take in some wood. Just as he reached for some, something grabbed him from behind and dragged him backward through the air by the collar of his coat.

Murdock couldn't see where he was going, but he did see the river pass below him, and he guessed he was twenty feet in the air.

The only entity on this planet that can do this is the Oomah, he thought. Judging by the roughness and the time of year, it has to be the white one.

"Rose, don't panic, but the Oomah needs to have words with me," he flashed. He didn't tell Rose what he'd surmised, as he didn't want her to worry. As he watched the ground below him pass by, he could tell nothing of his possible destination.

After a few hours, he stopped moving, but he was still suspended twenty feet off the ground. As he hung there, he did not see the face coming at him until it was right in front of him. The hot breath hit Murdock as the huge, white bear

stared at him with menace.

“Young one taken! Not find! You find, now,” the bear flashed.

Though being suspended above the ground was not the best place to try to compose himself, Murdock, lacking an alternative, did his best. *“Where was he when you lost him?”* Murdock asked his huge captor telepathically with as much authority as he could muster.

“No lost! Take,” the bear flashed emphatically.

“We don’t know that. I still need to see where the cub was.” Murdock knew that the white bear was upset, as he would be if it were Andy or Chun Hua. Protesting his treatment would accomplish nothing.

The bear started moving while still suspending Murdock beside him. As Murdock looked down, he saw the creek that ran close to the caves, which was the same creek that ran all the way to the pod area and the one Thomas, Krysia, and Rebecca used as a water source. Then, after a short time, the huge bear dropped Murdock, who was glad for the snow. He saw the tracks of a bear cub in the waning light. By the spread of the tracks, Murdock knew the cub was small, but even then he could tell it was about the size of a small man. The wind and blowing snow were starting to deteriorate the tracks.

“Rose, I need you to go to the pod,” Murdock flashed as he studied every detail of the tracks.

“What’s wrong?” she flashed back.

“I think we have a major problem,” he told her telepathically. *“We have a missing cub, and I’m dealing with an irate parent. Description of the cub is white in color with a black nose and eyes.”* Rose acknowledged him. *“I told everyone at the pod to leave the bears alone, and I’m hoping they did, but I need verification. I’m trying to determine if the youngster just wandered off or was taken, so the fastest would be best!”*



As Rose donned her cold weather clothing, she told Mei Lee what had happened. Between all the cursing and proclaiming the improbable parentage of the

occupants of the pod, Mei Lee got the general idea.

“I can go,” Mei Lee offered.

“You just got back from there yesterday and haven’t recovered yet,” Rose said firmly. “Kevin wants me to go to put the fear of God into them, because he knows I will. Take care of the kids until I get back.” After a quick hug, she was out the door.

Rose didn’t get very far before the snow blocked her progress. With each step, she sank three feet into the snow. With no snowshoes, it would take her weeks, if at all, to get to the pod. Her only alternative was to levitate herself the entire way. That seemed impossible to her, so she concentrated on going as far as she could, resting, and then going again. As she moved two inches above the snow, she felt as if she were dreaming. She found moving this way was easy at first, but the longer she moved, the harder it became, until she finally had to rest. She drank some water and tried to restore her mind so she could continue.

Rose was an hour out and had no idea where she was. She had opted for traveling cross-country rather than following the river. The occupants of the pod were blissfully unaware of Rose’s or Murdock’s special abilities, so her levitation would be hard to explain to them, but all that was secondary to the speed she needed. *My failure means instant death for those I love, she thought. The next victims of the white one’s anger would be every human on this planet. I refuse to fail!* After a little while longer, Rose was finally strong enough to levitate farther. All the while, she hoped that her navigation was correct. She didn’t want to miss the pod.



The longer Murdock studied the quickly degrading tracks, the more concerned he became. So far, he saw no sign of anyone or anything on the snow except the cub. *I know this irate parent won’t accept what I have to say so far, he thought, so I’ll continue to study and track and hope that Rose gets to the pod soon and tells me that the cub is not there.*

“Can scent you kind here,” the enormous bear flashed to Murdock.

“*How fresh is the scent?*” Murdock asked.

“*Same as young one.*”

That didn’t fill Murdock with confidence in the theory that the cub had wandered off. *Why anyone would venture so far from the pod during such a bad storm, he thought, is beyond me.* From the look of the tracks, the cub had disappeared close to the time that the storm stopped. That would mean that if it was taken, the person who had done so had been walking out here in the terrible storm, which was not the brightest thing in the world to do. Murdock could do little to hurry the search, as he was counting strongly on Rose.

“*Mei Lee, you do know what it means if the cub is harmed by a human?*” he flashed

“*I think so,*” she flashed, “*but I’m sure Rose will succeed and everything is going to work out okay.*”

Murdock believed her, and then he found an extra set of tracks, quickly filling, in the fresh snow. His heart sank. No mistaking them: human.



Shortly before Murdock found the human tracks, Rose arrived at the stockade. She saw no signs of life outside, so she assumed they were still inside the pod. As she walked toward the gate, she saw fresh tracks, as if something had been dragged. She also noticed the gate was not closed tightly, as it should have been. With caution and quietness, she drew her twelve-inch machete and crept forward. *I’m glad Kevin and Mei taught me how to handle myself,* she thought. *I’m sure I can hold my own against anyone on this planet.*

She listened as closely as she could while walking forward slowly. The crunch of the snow beneath her feet sounded as loud as a bass-drum as she crept forward through the gate. Inside the compound, the snow had drifted against the walls of the buildings and the stockade and so wasn’t much over a foot deep in most of the traveled pathways. Rose strained her eyes to peer into every shadow for an attacker. She had thought of contacting Murdock, but she was too mentally exhausted to accomplish it. She had arrived using the last vestiges of

her mental strength; she had nothing left. Periodically, she stopped and listened. Hearing only her own heartbeat — which sounded like thunder to her — she cautiously continued, following the drag marks in the snow. She noticed that they led toward the smokehouse.

Thomas had wanted the smokehouse close to the ramp of the pod, but not in the pod's shadow. They had built it with some room between the outside wall of the stockade and the smokehouse. That space was for extra wood storage, if needed, but as this was the first year, little wood was piled there. As Rose got closer to the smokehouse, she heard a weak growl, a choking sound, and then a light thud. She rounded the corner of the smokehouse and saw a white bear cub lying on the ground. As she watched, it got up, growled a little as it pulled against something, made a small choking sound, and then collapsed. She ran, as best she could, over to the cub, laid her machete on the ground, and inspected what held the cub. In the gloom, she recognized homemade rope. While the cub recovered from choking itself, she tried to reach around the struggling bear to untie the rope. Her gloves impeded her progress with the rope, so she took them off and put them on the ground next to her. Then, as she reached for the knot again, she heard the start of a crunch inside her head next to her ear. She didn't hear herself hit the snow-covered ground.



When Murdock first saw the human track in the deep snow, he immediately tried to contact Rose to warn her.

When he couldn't make contact, he contacted Mei Lee: "*I found human tracks, looks like a man's,*" he flashed. "*If you can make contact with Rose, you need to warn her. You need to keep trying.*"

"*I will keep trying and will pass on the information,*" Mei Lee flashed back.

Murdock tried to mentally instruct the huge white bear that they needed to get to the transport pod as quickly as possible. The white bear was too angry to understand, so Murdock changed tack and requested Beron with a high imperative. That did seem to get through.

When Beron contacted him telepathically, Murdock gave a quick, condensed version of events and asked if he could instruct the white bear to take him to the transport pod as quickly as possible. Beron didn't answer Murdock right away, but in what seemed like a short period of time, Murdock saw his large friend sliding through the air toward them at speed.

"*Get on,*" Beron instructed, stopping in front of Murdock. He complied, happily, and they were all off to the pod at a high rate of speed.



As Rose started to regain consciousness, her head throbbed as never before, and her arms ached. Without opening her eyes, which she was sure would be exceedingly painful, she could tell she was tied and suspended. She felt vertical logs against her back, but her feet hung off the ground.

"It took you so long to come to, I was beginning to think I'd killed you," Rose heard a voice say; dry, crackling, definitely male. She was sure she had heard it before, but couldn't place it.

She tried to force her eyes open and felt the pain of it, but once that subsided, she saw a formless bulk on the ground in front of her. She tried to see his face, but couldn't. His face was obscured by something over his head. It resembled a hide of some kind, but none that she recognized. The hide hid his shape and disguised any clues to his identity. Then she noticed that her outer coat was gone, as well as all the weapons she had. The cold was starting to creep through her inner coat. Her hands, which had been exposed for some time, were close to numb, not just from the cold, but from the rope that held her off the ground.

She saw the figure standing close to her feet, but not so close that she could kick him. Holding a twelve-inch machete in his hand, he was looking at the panicked cub.

"I find I'm in need of a new, white, fur coat," he said with menace.

"You really don't want to do that," Rose said, with as much authority as she could muster. She struggled against the rope, but it was quite sound. "The parent of that cub is sure to find you," she warned him, while trying to think of a way to

free herself.

“So what if it does?” he said in the same menacing voice. “You really can’t have too many white fur coats.” He chuckled with that same dry, cracked voice.

Rose glanced to the pod, but saw only the very top part of the ramp.

“You think they can help you?” he asked, catching her glance at the pod. “They can’t help you. They can’t help anyone.”

His voice, as much as what he said, chilled her.

“I bet you’d enjoy watching,” he went on. He untied the cub, dragged it over, and secured it so it was directly below her feet.

As Rose hung there, she saw the look of panic on the cub’s face. She tried to contact the cub telepathically, but couldn’t. *I’m still too weak*, she thought. *Kevin and Mei would have contacted me by now*. Then Rose heard the familiar scrape of machete against scabbard and tried to get loose again. The blade glinted a little in the gloom. Bracing her feet against the wall behind her, she tried to gain a little leverage. She jerked her weight against the rope; she felt as if her shoulders would be dislocated. The blade rose. She braced herself again and jerked on the rope; it gave a little. The shadowy man grabbed the cub to try to hold it still. As the cub struggled, so did Rose. The rope gave more each time. The blade reached its apex, and as it did, she jerked her weight on the ropes. The ropes gave; she pushed against the wall behind her. She flew through the air and hit the man full-on with her entire bulk.

Rose didn’t feel the blade enter her at first. She was too full of adrenaline and too cold to feel much of anything. She knew her weight had knocked the shadowy man over backward; then she realized his blade had entered her body. The farther it went in, the greater her pain. Breathing began to be extremely hard. As she lay on top of the shadowy man, Mei Lee contacted her telepathically. Then Murdock contacted her as well. Rose smiled inwardly.

“*I love you both*,” she flashed to them. She would not have been able to speak to them out loud. “*I want to thank you both for loving me the way you have. I have never felt so loved, wanted, needed as I have with the two of you. Love each other to the hilt, just as the two of you have loved me. I want you both to remember that no one took my life, I gave it freely!*”

As the connection broke, Rose was vaguely aware that the shadowy man had pushed her off him and was standing. The last thing her eyes saw was the jaws of a very large, brown bear turned sideways as it bit the back of the man's neck, severing his spinal cord.

"No-oo!" Murdock screamed.

The instant Rose died, a mental cry of anguish, loud enough to drown out everything else, went out to all who could perceive. The pain was so severe that though she was miles away, Mei Lee fell to her knees through the sheer magnitude of it. Murdock, who had jumped from Beron's back just before the creature struck the man, ran to his wife's side and held her close. He tried and failed to contact her telepathically, but he could see that her life had been poured out on the snow. His tears flowed freely as he lovingly picked up her body and carried it over to the pod's ramp, then laid her down gently. The smell of fresh blood permeated the inside of the pod. As he looked around, he saw that the throats of Thomas and Rebecca had been cut; they had bled out holding hands. He found Krysia with an eighteen-inch machete sticking out of her back. When he rolled her over, he saw that the blade had gone through her and into her infant son. From what he could ascertain, she had tried to shield the infant with her own body, but to no avail.

He exited the pod, went over to the shadowy man Beron had killed, and rolled the man over onto his back. Removing the hide that covered the man's face, Murdock saw the man was Whittier.

Murdock's anger was such that he was unable to speak or communicate in any way. *I want to pound what's left of Whittier, but what good would it do? Would it bring back Rose or any of his victims?* Somewhere, his conscious mind heard the growls of the cub, and Murdock went over and removed the rope, freeing it to rejoin its parent.

As he returned to the pod's ramp, he saw the white bear leaving with its cub. He saw Beron standing still, looking at Rose's body. Murdock joined him and stood gazing at Rose for a long time. Beron tried to touch Murdock's mind gently, soothingly, but Murdock would have none of it.

Murdock picked up everything he could find and placed it all a good distance

outside the stockade. He found all of Rose's cold-weather gear, placed it with her body outside the stockade, and asked Beron to watch over her. He pulled out all the bodies from inside the pod and placed them on top of the smokehouse. Then he gathered all the wood together and made a fire. By the time he had finished, the stockade was burning quickly. The fire would consume everything, leaving only the pod shell.

When Murdock exited the stockade for the last time, he saw Bridget guarding Rose's body. As Murdock walked silently toward his wife's body, Beron levitated him. Then Murdock was placed onto Beron's back. Bridget gently levitated Rose's body and all of her belongings. As Beron started off for Murdock's cabin, Murdock communicated that he would like to bury Rose's body by the caves she loved so much, if it was permitted. Beron moved slowly, twenty feet above the snow, toward the caves. His mate followed, levitating Rose's body next to Murdock.



After Mei Lee had recovered from the mental blast of pain and anguish, she tried to contact Murdock, but got no response. Given the circumstances, she really didn't expect one. *The cabin feels so... empty and alone*, she thought. She paced as she cried uncontrollably, going over to the babies and crying over them as well.

"I'll see to it that both of you always know your brave mother," she vowed. She wanted to know what had happened to the cub and who had killed Rose. And what had happened to Thomas, Rebecca, Krysia, and her baby? She wanted to know, but then again, she didn't. Knowing would mean accepting their deaths, and she didn't want to accept the death of her co-wife. She did, however, feel the strong need to help with her burial.

When she got a very tenuous grip on her emotions, she went outside the cabin. Two gigantic white bears stood in front of the cabin, along with a third considerably smaller one. The two bigger ones seemed to bow to her. Surely, Mei Lee was mistaken.

“*Please, Honored One. We take you and young ones to husband,*” they flashed to her.

“*Young one safe?*” she asked telepathically as she pointed to the little bear. She noticed that the paws of the little one were bloody, and she saw a ring around its neck. This bear was the little one Rose had defended. “*Please wait,*” she flashed, and went inside to get herself and the babies ready to travel.

Outside again, she was immediately levitated onto the back of the biggest bear. When she looked back, she saw the baby’s cradles levitated with the same care. All three of the bears levitated themselves and started off in what seemed to be the direction of the caves.

Mei Lee cried the entire trip. Her heart broke to know that Rose would no longer be there to help her figure things out or raise the babies. She couldn’t have explained it any better than to have said that a part of her was missing — an important part.

The trip to the caves seemed to take forever. It didn’t help that they were traveling in the dark and cold. When she felt the need to check on the babies, the slightly smaller bear levitated the cradles over so she could check them without having to stop. Close to daybreak, Mei Lee saw the mountain that housed the caves. They headed for the mountain in a straight line.

“*You there when Rose ceased?*” she tried to ask the bigger of the bears. She thought she finally wanted to know. She received a vision of the stockade around the pod. In the vision, it was night, and Rose lay dead on the snow-covered ground. She saw the face of the shadowy man when Murdock had rolled him over. Then she saw the bodies of Thomas, Rebecca, Krysia, and her baby. Mei Lei saw Murdock set the stockade afire.

When that vision was over, she saw what she thought was another vision. Two brown bears moved slowly toward the same mountain from the direction of the transport pod. “*Husband*” came to her mind.



It had taken the procession a long time to get to the caves. A part of Murdock

was glad to see Mei Lee and the kids, but a big part wasn't, and that part forced him to accept his loss when he didn't want to. When they reached the foot of the mountain, they were across the stream from it. Murdock looked up and saw that they were in direct line of sight to the entrance of the caves in which Murdock used to sit and look out at the valley with Rose. It broke his heart to know they would never do so again.

"Good?" Beron flashed to him. Murdock gave his assent. All of the humans were deposited on the snow-covered ground.

As he watched, several blocks of perfectly cut stone emerged from the mountainside and were formed into a sarcophagus big enough to hold Rose's body. The edges were laser-sharp. The bottom and top stones were two feet thick. Murdock and Mei Lee placed Rose's body on the base and positioned her hands over her belly, clasping one another. They placed Rose's belongings inside. Murdock kept one of her inside mittens; he had raised it up and smelled the inside. Smelling Rose, he placed the mitten inside his own coat. When Murdock and Mei Lee were finished, the rest of the stones formed around and were placed with such precision that no light or air could have penetrated the joints of the tomb. When they were in place, the top loudly boomed closed, signaling finality.

Murdock and Mei Lee remained in place for several minutes. Weeping, they allowed themselves to be taken inside the cave that Murdock and Rose had occupied so long ago, but the two were not set down where Murdock had expected. Instead, they were taken past the pools and falls through a concealed passage. Not far inside, Murdock and Mei Lee were placed in a small alcove accessible several feet off the floor of the cave. As they sat there, the Oomah filed past, giving condolences for the humans' loss. Bear after bear, type after type, they all filed past. Murdock recognized a few — Beron's father, Beron, and Bridget. Most of them he didn't know, and on this occasion, he didn't want to. The last to file by was the great, white bear that had been Murdock's bane.

"You mate gave all for my young one; for my kind. She deserves all honors. No more hate twixt us. You/yours require something, we do!"

"He said —" Mei Lee tried to interpret quietly for Murdock.

“I heard him,” Murdock said, cutting off what she was going to say in an undeservedly sharp way. “I’m sorry, Mei. You didn’t deserve that.” She said nothing, just squeezed his hand lightly to indicate that she understood.

With the procession ended, all the bears in the cavern bowed deeply to Murdock and Mei Lee.

After Mei Lee and Murdock left the secret part of the cave, they returned to the section that he and Rose had lived in. Mei Lee took care of the babies while Murdock got a fire going. They didn’t have enough wood for the night, but it didn’t matter. Unspeaking, they both sat for some time. At some point, Murdock laid his head on Mei Lee’s lap. She stroked his head gently and absentmindedly; both were lost in remembrance.

“She’s gone, Mei,” Murdock said finally, softly, as if the words were ripped from his soul.

Mei Lee said nothing for a very long time. “I know,” she said finally. Her tears dripped onto his cheek and his onto her lap.

The massive, white bear and his mate returned Murdock and Mei Lee to the cabin after Rose's funeral. Murdock tried to express his appreciation, but the bear wouldn't hear of it. Murdock equated the bear's response to a human's saying, "A real pleasure; don't give it another thought."

For the next few months, Murdock was inconsolable. Though he performed necessary tasks, the rest of his time was spent mourning, as did Mei Lee. Rose had helped her to get over the loss of Collier and all the pain that entailed. This new loss reopened an old wound that had never quite healed. They were like two robots doing what they had to do and avoiding anything that might cause pain to either of them.

"Mei, why did she have to die?" Murdock asked one evening in early spring. "I've never loved anyone until I met her. It's not fair that she had to die."

"She didn't have to," Mei Lee tried to explain. "From the message I received, she gave her life freely. She didn't have to, she chose to."

"But why did she choose to? I just don't understand."

"Did you get a good look at Whittier afterward?" Mei Lee asked.

"No, I was in too much shock. I barely remember what I saw that night."

"I would say that we need to enter a sharing, just you and me. It would be a good way to try to figure it all out."

Murdock was very quiet. "I'm not sure I'm ready for that, yet," he said finally.

"I'm not sure I'm ready, either." Mei Lee exhaled loudly. "I do know we

need a bath, though,” she said, changing the subject. “It has been far too long for both of us.” She got to her feet and offered him her hand.

Murdock looked at it for a few seconds and decided she was right. He got to his feet, took her hand, and allowed her to lead him to the pool. They both sat quietly in the water, taking neither pleasure nor joy in it. When they had finished their routine, they both went into the cabin and dried themselves at the fireplace. After a time, they both went to bed, which felt strange; there was too much room in it for either of their comfort.

“Kevin?” Mei Lee asked, cuddling next to him, her head on his shoulder and her back to him.

“Yes, Mei?” he answered.

“I’m scared without Rose. She helped me so much with the kids. What happens if I make a mistake?”

“The same thing anyone else does, try to learn from it.”

“I have a big request,” she said in a quiet voice.

“Yeah?”

“Would you tell me if I make mistakes with the kids? It would be a big help.”

“Sure.”

She cuddled a little closer to him. “Thanks. It helps knowing someone is watching and helping.”

Murdock rolled over with her on his shoulder and enveloped her completely with his other arm.

He woke up about an hour later and saw a bear in their cabin. The bear didn’t blot out the fire, so even in the dim light, he knew it was Beron’s mate.

“Mei, someone here to see you,” he whispered in her ear, so as not to startle her too much.

Mei Lee opened her eyes, saw Bridget, and began communicating with her telepathically. When they were finished, Bridget left with no sign that she was ever there.

“What did she want?” Murdock asked as he rolled over onto his back.

“She wanted to give us an invitation, sort of. It’s the spring ceremony again.”

“I don’t feel much like going.”

“I don’t either, and I told her so.”

“What did she say?”

“She reminded me of the way you were taken by the white bear, so I don’t think we have a choice.”

“Fine,” he snapped, more harshly than he intended. “When is it?”

“We have to leave tomorrow.”

The next morning, Murdock got out the cart and loaded it for their trip to the caves. Mei Lee arranged the babies, who were fat and sassy and just over a year old, on the cart. She warned them to stay on the cart, or they would be tied inside their cradles. Neither child liked that idea. Murdock locked the cabin, although he didn’t know why he bothered, and they left.

After levitating the cart over the river, he stopped.

“Fast or slow?” he asked Mei Lee.

“Are you up to it?” she asked. “Fast, if you are.”

He held the cart while Mei Lee got on. After she was settled, he took off at an easy lope. The kids giggled with the speed of their passage. Mei Lee even giggled a little as well. He didn’t know why, but he liked the sound of her giggle. But any joy he received from the giggling quickly turned to sorrow. During one of the several rest stops for water, he saw tearstains on Mei Lee’s cheeks. Murdock looked sad as she brushed his hair from his forehead with a little wistful smile. They didn’t have to communicate in any way to know the pain the other felt.

Soon, they reached the mountain that housed the caves. Murdock stopped at Rose’s tomb. Mei Lee took the kids and put them on top as she talked to Rose as if Rose were alive.

“You know,” Mei Lee said to the kids, “you two are very special. You have two mothers. The one sleeping here was very loving and caring. She was also very brave. She saved all our lives!” Mei Lee knew they didn’t understand fully, yet, but soon they would. When Mei Lee was finished, she gathered the kids and put them on the cart.

Murdock walked over haltingly and touched the cover of the tomb with his hand, then laid his head on the cover. He didn’t remain there for long, but Mei

Lee could see how hard it was for him to leave. Finally, when they were ready, Murdock levitated the cart and himself up the cliff face to the cave and went in. He saw Beron inside; after they exchanged pleasantries, he left to lead the way up the path. Murdock got the cart turned around and followed behind, and soon they reached the meadow. As they approached, Murdock saw that they were the last to arrive and felt bad. He tried to apologize, but Beron's father silenced him.

As the ceremony began, Beron presented his growing cub, now over a year old, another young cub, and Bridget. He then asked Murdock to come over by himself. *"This one is of my kind and my kin,"* he proudly announced, with Murdock standing beside him. Murdock was taken aback. As he moved to stand with Mei Lee, another head of a bear family presented his young and mates and then requested Murdock to stand with them. *"This one is of my kind and my kin,"* he pronounced. Murdock was more than surprised. He had never met that one.

"That one fed his family on what you gave when first we met," Beron corrected. *"Everyone here has been touched by your generosity, kindness, and wisdom in some manner."*

Murdock resigned himself to being named "kind and kin" to every family present except that of the white bear. But when the white bear's turn came, the bear presented his mate and cub and asked Murdock to join him. *"This my brother! Only we travel cold and snow! Only we hunt trails others can't!"* Murdock saw the others' surprise and awe.

Then Murdock was called upon. All he could think to say was, *"This is my mate and my cubs."*

"Are these mates and cubs of honored one?" Beron's father asked. Beron affirmed the question. The older bear stood and bowed to Murdock, Mei Lee, and the kids. Everyone else did the same. Murdock was embarrassed, and Mei Lee was teary-eyed and proud. *"It is law, when story of us relayed to young and strangers, the story of honored one and mates and cubs included."*

Murdock had presented his family last, so the ceremony then concluded reverently. Murdock and Mei Lee packed up and started down the path to the cave. When they reached the cave, Murdock expected to leave, but Beron stopped him.

“Share by pools important,” he said to Murdock telepathically. *“Bring all!”*

Murdock turned into the cave to help Mei Lee with the kids, and all went down to the cave that Murdock and Rose had lived in. When they arrived, Beron was waiting with Bridget and another smaller female.

“This one,” Beron indicated the other female, *“will watch and keep young ones safe while we share.”*

Murdock and Mei Lee reluctantly joined in the sharing.

They were immediately presented with an image of Rose standing before them. Murdock and Mei Lee instantly tried to break the sharing, but Beron stopped them.

“Message given by Honored One,” Beron explained. *“Her wish shown this way to both you.”*

“My family,” she began. Murdock thought she looked as beautiful as ever, and that made his heart ache. Startled, Mei Lee’s heart hurt as well. *“How did I die?”*

“You gave your life,” Mei Lee said quietly, reflexively.

The image of Rose smiled. *“Who would have thought that someone as shallow and selfish as I was before disembarking the first time would give up her life for something greater? I have all of you to thank for that.”* The image looked at Murdock. *“Kevin, you and I found each other when you rescued me. You taught me so much; more than you’ll ever know. Don’t mourn my passing for too long. If I know you, you have already. It isn’t good for you or for our kids.”*

The image looked to Mei Lee. *“Mei Lee, you are the most capable woman I have ever known. You are tough, but fair, and very caring. You care for others more than you care for yourself most of the time. You do need to care about yourself as well; if you don’t, who will? You are far more intelligent than you believe you are. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before now that you were a hero of mine. I’m counting on you to step up and take care of the kids and Kevin. He is very independent, but he needs to depend on a select few to even him out and give him balance.”*

Then the image turned toward the imposing, shadowy figures of Beron and Bridget. *“Beron and Bridget. I have considered you part of my family as well.*

You both were always there when we needed you, and I sometimes felt like we didn't appreciate you or your kind enough.

"All of you played your part in making my life more complete than I could ever have dreamed," the image went on. "I thank each and every one of you. Just know that I did appreciate each of you." The image faded and disappeared.

Though all present were stunned and silent, no one tried to break the sharing state. No one said anything for a long time.

"Can I see what Kevin saw the day Rose died?" Mei Lee asked finally.

"She can see," Murdock agreed.

A frozen, three-dimensional picture presented itself to Mei Lee. She saw the scene at the moment before Beron dispatched Whittier. She studied it closely as Beron closed in on certain aspects of the picture. The hide Whittier was wearing appeared to be an untanned deer hide that had not been properly removed. It looked tattered and didn't offer much warmth. She saw his free hand dripping blood, presumably that of the tenants of the pod. She also saw black patches on his exposed skin, which she assumed was frostbite. She studied the way he stood and saw that he favored one side; blood appeared to be dripping from his stomach area.

Then Beron changed the focus to the cub. Mei Lee saw immediately that the cub had blood on its claws, but that no blood appeared on the ground.

Beron changed the focus to Rose. Seeing her like this was very hard for Mei Lee; it broke her heart. She saw the rope burns on Rose's wrists, as well as the part in the rope. She saw the blood on the snow from the open gash on Rose's skull. She also saw that one of Rose's shoulders had been dislocated. And Mei Lee saw the bright red foam around the knife that had punctured her lungs.

"Isn't that enough?" Murdock cried. He couldn't look at it any longer. Mei Lee saw that it broke his heart all over again.

"From what I can see and what I know, this is what I think happened," Mei Lee explained, more for Kevin than anyone else. "Whittier, coming upriver, found the pod barricaded as we had designed and managed to get inside, probably by lying or playing on sympathies. He killed all the occupants of the pod, probably for not dying when he had intended them to; he was quite insane

after that first winter. He then went looking for Murdock and found the cub instead. The cub injured him, and as repayment, Whittier wanted to torture the cub, but wanted to get out of the storm to do it, so he dragged it back to the pod. Rose interrupted his fun, and he saw a way to strike at Murdock. Rose fought for the cub's life and was in a lot of pain when she finally got free. She did the only thing she could to try to stop Whittier."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Murdock asked.

"Are there any other messages?" Mei Lee asked, ignoring Murdock's remark.

"Yes, one, for the young ones when they are older," Beron said. He also nodded to Bridget who, at his signal, broke the sharing state for herself and Mei Lee. "*You are doing injustice to younger mate,*" Beron's image continued, as the images of Mei Lee and Bridget disappeared.

"I know," Murdock said, hanging his head. "*I just miss Rose so much!*"

"Why?" Beron asked. Murdock looked up at Beron as if slapped. "*Is she not part of young ones? Is she not part of younger mate? Is she not part of you? Do her honor by looking after those she cared for.*"

Murdock, who felt chastised, had nothing to say. He almost felt Rose trying to comfort him.

"*Younger mate hurt, too, and needs you badly. You both need help each other.*"

The images ended, leaving Murdock drained.

"Are there any other humans left here?" Mei Lee asked Beron and Bridget telepathically before they could leave.

Beron stopped and turned slightly to look back at her. All he said as he and Bridget left the cave was, "*Only those here.*"

After Beron and Bridget left, Murdock and Mei Lee loaded the kids onto the cart and headed for the cabin. Neither spoke the entire trip back.



Over the course of the next year, Murdock and Mei Lee finally stopped grieving

for Rose. Murdock continued his mental training and would often go to the mountains behind the cabin. Mei Lee never pried into what he was doing. The kids, who had gotten bigger, were walking well enough that Murdock started their outdoorsman training. Chun Hua had become ever more the apple of her step-father's eye.

The day came for the spring ceremony, and Murdock had filled the cart for travel. Mei Lee herded the kids onto the cart, and they left. Murdock had decided to enjoy the walk, so they had left a day early. Mei Lee enjoyed walking beside Murdock. The winter had been hard, but they all had passed through it without incident. Mei Lee and Murdock had communed with Beron and Bridget as much as possible and were starting to enjoy it again, which helped lift the heaviness from their hearts.

They arrived at Rose's tomb late in the day. As before, Mei Lee took the kids over and lifted them on top while she talked to Rose, telling her all about the last year. When she finished, she directed the kids back toward the cart. Murdock passed her, levitating a heavy, square block of stone. He gently laid it on the head of the cover. Curious, Mei Lee turned the kids around to see what he had done. She was startled and pleased to see the block was inscribed.

"What does it say, Mother Mei?" little Andrew asked. He and Chun Hua were just learning to read, but the words were, as yet, beyond them.

"Rosa Lea Murdock," Mei Lee read aloud, after clearing her throat. "Beloved wife, friend, mother." Mei Lee wiped away her tears. "She saved us all." After a long pause to compose herself, she asked Murdock, "How did you do the engraving? It looks very precise, almost as if you did it with a laser."

Murdock said nothing. He walked over to the stone and drew a small "K.M." on the corner of the stone with his fingernail. As he drew each symbol, Mei Lee saw the particles that made up the stone fly off, leaving behind an exact symbol.

Mei Lee raised an eyebrow as she saw what was happening.

As they all turned, they saw all the bears lying in the grass. They had neither heard nor felt them. Beron lifted his head a little.

"*Share?*" he asked Murdock and Mei Lee telepathically. Murdock assented.

They entered a sharing state. Rose's tomb, themselves, and all the shadows

that were the bears all around appeared in the vision. In turn, each bear presented a three-dimensional remembrance of Rose and what she had meant to each of them. When Murdock's turn came, he showed Rose and himself laughing and horsing around and her shoving him into the pool they had used at the cave. When Mei Lee's turn came, she showed Rose cooing at and rocking Chun Hua just after the baby's birth.

Then Beron informed Murdock and Mei Lee that Beron's father had decreed the spring ceremony would last two days. The first day would be the day before and be a remembrance for Rose.



The next two years passed much the same as had the year after Rose's death. In the late spring or early summer, Beron told Murdock and Mei Lee to come to the caves. They both were excited, yet apprehensive. Exactly five years had passed since the first transport pod had landed. Beron had told them that the next one would arrive momentarily and that Murdock needed to greet and warn whoever was in the pod.

While Mei Lee cooked food in the cave, Murdock walked up to the overlook ledge. Dawn was approaching when he stepped out onto the ledge. Andrew stood in front of him holding onto his leg, as four-year-olds do. Chun Hua was on his shoulder with her little arm around his head. The anticipation was palpable. Mei Lee came up behind him heavily. He turned to see her and smiled. He thought she looked beautiful, even though she was pregnant and didn't feel that way. Little Rosa Lea, who had been born the year before, stood beside her mother with raised arms, wanting to be lifted so she could see, too.

"Anything yet?" Mei Lee asked in a gentle voice, as she levitated little Rosa Lea onto Murdock's other shoulder.

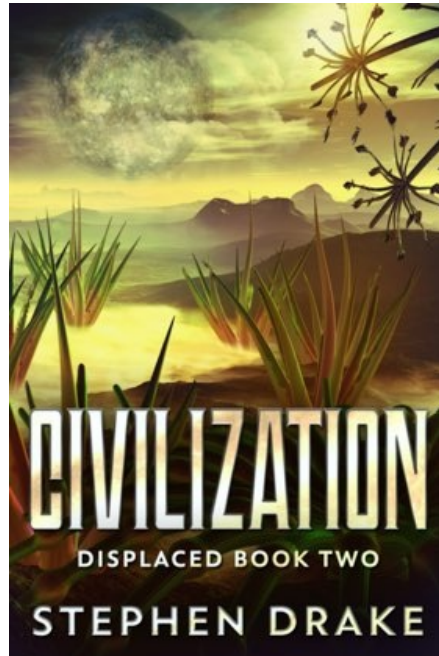
"Nothing," he said, "but Beron says it will be soon."

"Father!" Andrew said with excitement, pointing off a little downstream from Rose's tomb.

Just as dawn was about to break, they all turned to see the small space ship

drop from the sky.

Next in the Series:
Civilization
(Displaced Book 2)



Kevin Murdock, martial artist and outdoorsman extraordinaire, has survived his first five years on the planet Oomah. A new transport pod holding 200 more people has landed, and none of the new arrivals know what to expect.

The pod holds an unexpected surprise for him personally: Rose's brother, who brings with him his own issues. Conflicts also rage between Murdock and Phylicia Cunningham, a distaff cousin to James Whittier, who has her own lust for power.

Counseling common sense and self-reliance, Murdock begins training the arrivals in survival. But even with his knowledge of Oomah, they face overwhelmingly difficult odds in their quest for survival on the strange planet they now call home.

Civilization

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Stephen Drake, a retired computer programmer of 20+ years, is an American fantasy/sci-fi author. He is an avid Harley-Davidson Motorcycle enthusiast, and versed in many survival skills such as martial arts and bow hunting. He is also an avid reader of sci-fi especially that by R.A. Heinlein and John Scalzi.

Although he has been a long-time resident of Washington State, he was born in Iowa and has lived in Wisconsin, Nebraska, Iowa, Montana, and Virginia. He draws on his experiences to create gripping and believable stories.



To learn more about Stephen Drake, visit his [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).