

The End of the Line

by Tom and Johnny Lichtenberg

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“Trains

Don't run forever.

Fire goes out sometime.

Got to tell you baby,

We've come to

The end of the line.”

J.J. Cale

One

"Let me get this straight," Ember said with a scowl of disapproval on her face. "You simply walked on out of here? And then you walked back in? Just like that?"

"Just like that," replied Soma with a grin that showed off her truly enormous teeth. Soma towered over Ember, something else the smaller one didn't like. Not long before, the two of them had been the same size, both eight-year old immortals trapped in the forest prison world for what seemed like longer than forever. Ember was not the only one who'd wondered whatever happened to Soma and her constant companion Squee. The two of them used to always be around, high up in the treetops, scampering about in their never ending game of "Watchers", a secret spy mission run by the mean old man Bombarda. He, too, had vanished along with them, but no one bothered to worry much about him. They figured he'd gone recluse, like so many other bitter elders.

The forest world never changed, like the people trapped inside whose bodies could not age or develop any further than where they'd become stuck, at the arbitrary ages of eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four and, in a few very unfortunate cases like Ember's grandmother, one hundred and twenty eight years old. It was a strange place, rumored to be the artifact of a university botany experiment gone wild, populated by

every sort of tree and vine which together produced enough in the way of nuts and berries and roots and foliage to provide for all the residents' basic needs. The weird thing was that there was no way out. Somehow the laws of space had been violated in a fundamental fashion such that the forest seemed to fold in upon itself, a maze where every outlet was merely another inlet elsewhere. Many had tried to escape in the immeasurable time they'd been trapped inside it, only to find themselves hopelessly entangled and lost in a world of invisible paths and tunnels, all leading nowhere but somewhere else within. A few, like Soma and Squee, had discovered all the inner routes and used them to great advantage in their game, rapidly crisscrossing the foliage in a network of short-cuts and sidetracks bewildering to the others who could not comprehend their comings and goings. Light-hearted and joyous, the pair recklessly flung themselves about with no sense of risk or danger, like the perpetual children they were.

Ember was also still physically and mentally eight years old after the long centuries of her internment, and her friend Edeline was still thirty-two, though she continued to insist that when they'd arrested her she'd been in her fifties. Edeline was as lithe and lovely now as she had been then, permanently in the prime of life, in mind and spirit as well as in body, calm and confident, a genuine grown-up. She stood beside Ember now, hands on her hips, gazing in admiration at the fully grown Soma, slowly coming to accept that this was indeed the same Soma who'd been their fellow inmate for so long. The difference was remarkable. The Soma they knew had been a slight and stupendously agile acrobat, always happy, constantly in motion, ever sly and secretive. This new Soma was bold and loud and larger than life, especially those teeth!

"The better to tell you with," she'd joked when Ember had rudely commented on that mouth. Soma stood over six feet tall, her long tangly blond hair covering half of her face, her right hand continually brushing it aside to reveal her other unnaturally bright green eye. Her skin was dark and rough and her large hands looked as if they hadn't been scrubbed in ages. She was barefoot and her body scarcely covered in a white pirate shirt and knee-length black pantaloons. She was barefoot, as were Ember and Edeline who were still dressed in the peculiar form-fitting forest ivy vines they always wore.

"But how did you get out?" Edeline asked, confused. "And why did you come back?"

"It was a rat that led the way," Soma told her. "Don't ask me how. I don't even know."

But coming back is another matter entirely. I'm here because I was sent for you. I need you. We all need you. The world needs you."

"The world can go to hell for all I care," Ember snorted. "What's it to me? They stole my life. They stuck me in here. I was just a child and they locked me up and threw away the key. How long has it been? Do you even know that?"

"I do," Soma calmly replied. "I do know that, but it doesn't matter. It makes no difference. Let's just say it's been a long, long time."

"Don't I know it!" Ember snarled. "And now they need us, huh? Guess my answer!"

"You might change your mind," Soma said, holding up her hand and glancing at Edeline to assure her there was no need to get excited, no need to argue about anything.

"When you hear what I have to say."

"I doubt it." Ember was suspicious. Soma was an outsider now, probably one of "them", no longer one of "us" in her mind. She inspected Soma even more closely now, scanning the grown one's face for any indications of treachery or deceit. Ember was very good at reading people. In the ancient forest world game of Mind Ball, she had been a Savior, and the best one at that. Her job was to prevent Strikers from scoring goals. A Striker could "shoot" at anytime, anywhere in the forest, using any object designated as a "ball" by the Ball Gatherers and aimed at any other object designated as a "goal" by the Goal Hunters. A Savior had to be alert at all times to prevent a "ball" from reaching a "goal". No one ever knew how Ember managed to do what seemed impossible, but more often than not she'd appear at just the right time and place in the forest to prevent the point from being scored. Her secret, she believed, was what she called Extra-Sensory Attention. Others assumed she was a mind reader and Ember was content to let them think that. Weren't they all mutants in one way or another? This was the myth they lived by in the forest world. What else could explain their permanent confinement?

In reality, Ember could not read minds, and now she could read no deception in Soma's face either. All she could see was the same old trees, the usual duff on the ground and bits of sky peeking through the canopy high above. Soma had found the pair at their home base. It was still early in the morning, and they'd been munching on some berries when the enormous stranger appeared.

"Then let's hear it," Ember said, plopping herself down on the ground and gesturing that the others should do the same. Edeline and Soma joined her in a circle on the

forest floor.

"It's all over," Soma said. "The forest world is over. Nothing lasts forever, after all, not even this," she added, waving her arms around. "You can walk out, right now, in any direction, and you'll leave this place."

Edeline gasped.

"Since when?" she asked. "How long has it been this way? "

"Since today," Soma said with a gentle smile. Ember sniffed. She did not believe it. Suspiciously, she wondered why she had not seen Soma glance up at the treetops even once, whereas the old Soma had made her home way up there, hardly ever coming down to step on the soil. Ember squinted her small brown eyes even tighter to scrutinize this potential impostor.

"But," Soma continued hastily, "the problem is we only trade one prison for another. Out there it's not the forest, but it might as well be. The difference is that in here, time was long. Out there, time is short, and getting shorter. We need to hurry."

Ember burst out laughing at this last statement. It was all too absurd.

"Hurry?" she snorted. "What is hurry? Why should we," indicating Edeline and herself, "every need to hurry about anything?"

"It's all going to change," Soma said, "and this kind of change is rapid change. Look at me! How old do you think I am? I mean my body."

"How should I know?" Ember shook her head, but Edeline said,

"Thirty?"

"More or less," Soma nodded, "and how long has it been since I left the forest?"

"Again," Ember snarled, "how should I know? We don't track time in here. There's no point. It could be a hundred years since you left. We don't even know what a year is anymore. It means nothing."

"It's been a little more than two weeks," Soma said. "Fourteen days since the change began, and it began three days after I left the forest."

At this revelation both Ember and Edeline sat back, stunned into silence. They didn't know what to make of it. Obviously Soma and Squee had been missing far longer than a mere seventeen days. It had to have been at least several months, if not many years. There had been no Mind Ball in a long time, not since the Hidden One had mysteriously

overcome her own immortal condition, and Soma had been a participant in that miserable episode.

“That makes no sense at all,” Edeline finally said. “Time is time after all, isn't it? Doesn't the sun rise and set? Don't the days and nights follow one another on a regular schedule? What about the moon, and its phases, and the stars and the tides?”

“None of that means anything,” Soma said, shaking her head. “This forest world is entirely artificial. There are machines controlling everything. Same as in the other jail, the one out there, the one I came from, the one we need to fix, with your help.”

"What kind of help?" Edeline asked. "What can we do? And what do you mean by 'fix'?"

Soma shrugged.

"It's kind of complicated," Soma said, “but I will tell you what I know.”

Soma took a deep breath. From here on nothing would be simple. She would tell them what she knew, that much was true, but she could not tell them everything she knew, and even if she did, there were limits to her own knowledge. She quickly reviewed the original plan in her mind. She'd been sent by The Coalition through their spokesman, a man named Red Cliff, a giant with a beard longer than Ember's entire body and a gruff and gravelly voice that always reminded Soma of the fairy tales of ogres she recalled from her distant childhood. Ever since she'd been transformed into a Keeper, she'd turned to him for guidance. That transition had been as rough as it was unexpected. One day she was a little girl, just as she'd been forever. Suddenly her mind and her body were growing as a billion thoughts and feelings swept through her mind and her body and she felt like she would drown in all the change. She staggered through the countryside not knowing where she was and found herself turned up at Red Cliff's abandoned farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. She'd been there before, and remembered there were books there, and thought that maybe in one of those books there might be answers. She remembered a strange creature named Kai who had taunted her about her need for answers. She would have them now if she could.

Oddly, she discovered that she was beginning to acquire them. They came to her out of nowhere directly into her mind. Sitting on the steps outside Red Cliff's house, staring out at the fields, she suddenly understood how it was that her old mentor Bombarda had become a Tanner, one of those skinny blondes who do nothing but eat, sleep and sunbathe at the resort by the beach, and how her best friend Squee had joined the

Flock, a race of crazy bird-people, and she even knew where he was at that moment. She could see him in her mind. She could see Bombarda too, resting in his room, and she knew that she herself was becoming a Keeper, just like the creature Kai. When Red Cliff finally appeared, he confirmed her new knowledge, and told her many other things she did not know as yet.

“There are machines controlling that prison too,” she said to Ember and Edeline. “The machines have the information we need, but we don't know how to get it out of them.”

“What about the people who made the machines?” Ember asked. “Why don't you ask them?”

“They are all long gone as far as anybody knows.” Soma said. “At least they are nowhere to be found in the world.”

“What's it like?” Edeline asked. “The world beyond the forest?”

“It's an island.” Soma said. “There are mountains and plains, marshes and deserts, all surrounded by ocean.”

“And what's beyond the ocean?” Ember asked. “Surely some have gone out, built boats and explored. People still do that, don't they?”

“A few have tried,” Soma nodded. “Even my friend Red Cliff was once a sailor. But the ocean is like this forest. If you sail off and go straight you come right to the other side of the island.”

“So what's the hurry then?” Ember was not satisfied. If the forest world was surrounded by an ocean world that was just a different prison, then what did it matter if they left here and traded in one confinement for another?

“Time itself is running out,” Soma explained. “I told you that change was rapid out there. It's fast, and getting faster. Time has already exhausted the forest world. You'll soon see for yourselves. And you'll start changing too, like me, or maybe not just like me. It's hard to say how you'll change. That's why we need to hurry. I'll tell you more on the way. We have to go, and we have to go now.”

“Now?” Edeline asked.

“Right now?” added Ember.

“Yes,” Soma said, getting to her feet. “The sooner the better. There really is no time to lose.”

"I don't know," Ember shook her head, but Edeline was already rising.

"Come on, Em," she said to her friend. "When you think about it, what do we have to lose?"

"I don't trust her," Ember said, still sitting cross-legged and arms akimbo on the ground.

"Don't you want to get out of here?" Edeline asked. "And anyway, what's the worst that can happen? Do you really want to stay?"

"You can't stay," Soma said. "Even if you wanted to. Like I told you, it's all over for this place. This place is doomed. The system is shutting it down. The machines in here are done and we were too late to get their data."

"I don't know what machines you're talking about," Ember grumbled, but she got her feet anyway and followed behind Edeline as they both trailed Soma who was already walking away.

"The people who made the machines," Soma was saying, "left traces of their work. 'Sample code', Red Cliff calls it. He has some of their books. I don't understand everything but here's what he told me. A long time ago there was a group of people who got together under the name 'World Weary Avengers Incorporated'. Some of them were called "intelligence engineers" and they were given blocks of time called "work-away-from-work time". This group believed in something called Orgone Energy. They thought it had something to do with human sexuality and they figured if they could find a way to capture that and tie it into the power systems they could have unlimited resources until the solar system itself burned out. People themselves would be the source of all the energy they could ever need. So they worked on this project and wrote down a lot of stuff they called "code" which was like writing words but in a special language that machines could understand. Books are made by printing out words, but these people could print out other things too with special machines they had made. They could print out objects, anything really, as long as they put some of this code into the printing machine. One day the engineers put some of their Orgone code into the printing machine and it came out a greenish-grayish foul-smelling glob, so they flushed it down the toilet. Red Cliff says the legend is that once this clump of goo got into the water system it dissolved, introducing a new kind of self-replicating molecule. That molecule got swept into reservoirs and into the atmosphere where it circled the globe and came back down in rain. This molecule, which now only the

machines know about, had a way of bonding with human genetic material.”

Soma was walking quickly as she spoke, and Edeline and Ember had to clamber just to keep up, neither one really understanding much of what Soma was saying.

“There were already a few cases of what they called 'development inertia',” Soma continued, “humans whose bodies could not age, like you and me but not exactly. There were only a handful of them, and they stopped growing at random, some as babies, some as infants, some as children, but they all had one thing in common, a genetic distortion. The bad molecule caused the same mutation in the fetuses of some pregnant women who got it from the water they drank. The result you know. This is where we came from, you, and me, and everybody else in here. The engineers did not understand that they were the cause of us. No one knew. The only clue was how we stopped at certain ages that corresponded to the kind of numbers that machines use, but no one was ever able to solve the riddle, partly because World Weary Avengers was a secret group controlled by the government, and they did a lot of other stuff the government did not want anyone to ever know about.”

“We were not the only result of this accident, but we were the first. You all know what they did to us, how they experimented on some of us, tortured and dismembered and murdered us until they finally just locked us up and forgot about us. In the meantime, all the while we were stuck in there, the world out there and the people in it were changing in other ways. God only know what they got up to. The books we still have don't tell us much about that. Mostly we have some crappy pulp fiction. All the other information is stored inside of the machines themselves, and only machines could get the words back out of them again. There were people who controlled the machines, but we don't know where they are, if they even are anywhere at all! Now we just have the machines themselves. Changes are still happening to us, out there in the other prison world, and we think it's all because of that original bad molecule, but we don't know for sure.”

“I still don't see how we can possibly help,” Edeline said after Soma had seemed to finish her discourse. “We don't know anything about machines or code or any kind of engineers.”

“The Coalition sent me to fetch you,” Soma said.

“But why us?” Ember asked.

“The Coalition knows why,” Soma replied. “But I only know this much.”

“I don't anything about your coalition either,” Ember said, “but I still think I don't even care. I'm not surprised those people made a mess of everything. They were always just doing whatever they could if they thought there was money in it, and damn the consequences. They were like rats sniffing out cheese. Of course it was bound to turn into some kind of a trap sooner or later!”

Ember was considering whether or not to just stop, turn around, and go home. Let the forest world collapse! Let the trees shrivel up and die. Let the sky go black! She would shut down with it all and not mind a bit, but just as she was making up her mind, the three stepped out of the forest, and onto a warm, sandy beach.

Two

Edeline Wills, age fifty one, also age thirty two, also age four hundred and nineteen (but who's counting?) stood on the sand staring out at the deep blue sea in astonishment and wonder. She hadn't seen the ocean since she couldn't even remember when, but she felt it. She felt the waves coming in and the tide pulling them back out again, felt it in the pounding of her heart and the flowing of her blood. She was entranced and without even knowing it she was walking straight towards it, memories flooding back into her brain from the earliest days of her youth, her long forgotten childhood, her whole previous life which she only now realized she hadn't thought about in years. Here she was with her mother, clinging to her hand as together they jumped over the tiny waves at the shore. There she was with her best friend, showing off their budding bodies in brand new bikinis to the boys who were too shy to approach them. Then again, she saw herself on a hot night, sitting by a bonfire on a beach, toasting marshmallows and drinking beer with Maury, the man she later married. All of these visions came tumbling into her head like a rock slide, each one its own precious crystal of history.

In those distant first days of her incarceration she had thought about nothing else, and had recalled them to herself continually, sorting through her memories as if they were a deck of cards, telling one story from the past, and now another, to her fellow inmates, most of whom had let their own recollections slip away. It was pointless, they knew, and eventually she too succumbed to that knowledge as she adapted, and how she hated herself for adapting although she knew she had no choice. We wrap our minds around whatever condition we find ourselves fallen into, and she had been dropped into more than life in prison. She had been discarded and tossed into eternal

oblivion by a world that had no other desire than to keep her and the people like her out of sight and out of mind.

Mere mortals had no use for them, only fear and disdain and horror at the fact that while they themselves would age and decay these lucky few, these randomly mutated souls, had happened onto a life of permanent physical stasis. They would never grow any older, nor would they ever change, no matter what happened, no matter what the others might do to them, and those others did their best, first to examine, then to dissect, then to punish, and finally to abandon. Edeline spent many long nights imagining scenes such as the one now spread out before her, the ocean and the beach, except that in her daydreams the beaches were filled with silly, happy people living out their normal lives as she herself had once upon a time been able to do. She saw them in her mind's eye now, her husband, their friends, and the memories brought tears to her eyes as she stopped and knelt in the sand, letting the waves lap up around her legs and waist.

Suddenly a loud roar rose up behind her, and Edeline heard Ember's voice shouting behind.

“What happened? What's happening?”

Edeline turned around and to her amazement saw the last of the trees sinking down, as if being sucked into a vast hole, toppling and tumbling over each other, smashing and crashing into pieces. Smoke and dust rose up and filled the air so thickly that the forest soon became completely hidden from view. Soma nodded as if she'd been expecting exactly what she was seeing.

“It's the Law of Five,” she muttered, stepping back and raising her hand to her face to shield it from the approaching cloud.

“What?” Ember demanded. “How?”

She could not believe her eyes. They were only a hundred feet removed from the forest that was now being gobbled up by the planet as if it were a tasty dessert.

“The Coalition says that as soon as five immortals left the forest world, it would break apart and disappear forever. They called it the Law of Five. We were just the trigger. But it had to be now. It had to be us.”

“Never heard of any stupid Law of Five,” Ember grumbled as Edeline came back up from the shore and stood beside her, all of them now staring at the dusty sky.

"Is there a Law of Five about this other place too?" Edeline asked. Soma shrugged at first, but then said that yes, there was, according to The Coalition.

"What is this coalition?" Edeline wanted to know.

"Just some people," Soma replied. "The ones who know what's going on."

"Do we get to meet them?" Ember asked. "I'd sure like to ask them some questions."

"I never said they knew everything," Soma answered with some irritation. The clouds were already lifting before them, thinning out and dissipating into the sky. Below them there was nothing, not even a hole. Ember took a few steps towards the spot where the forest had stood only minutes before. Already she could see grasses and shrubs beginning to emerge and fill in the space, converting the former prison into a scrubby plain.

"I'd say it's impossible," Ember declared, "except that everything I ever knew about that place was impossible already."

"Our vines!" Edeline said, "They're withering away."

It was true, the living ivy that had clothed their bodies for so long was already turning brown and loosening its hold on them. In only a few moments, the two stood nude as the plants faded and then vanished.

"At least it's warm out here," Ember said. Her tiny form was already as nut brown as her shoulder-length yellow and her almond-shell eyes. The green of the ivy had been the only contrast in her appearance. Now she looked as if she might blend in with a stick or a small log like a chameleon or a squirrel.

"Don't worry about it," Soma said, "we'll get you some proper clothes at the station. We should get going there now. It isn't that far, but I have to warn you. Time and space out here are not the same as what you're used to."

She started to walk away, and Edeline and Ember hurried to catch up after a few more moments staring and trying to comprehend the unnatural disaster they had just witnessed unfold.

"What happened to everybody else?" Edeline queried as she strode alongside Soma.

"And everything else?" Ember added, thinking of the birds, and the trees, and the other living beings who'd made their home in the forest.

"All gone," was Soma's response.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Wait a minute,” Ember stopped and stood with her arms crossed. Edeline and Soma turned towards her.

“This Law of Five,” Ember said once she had Soma's full attention. “First there were you and Squee and Bombarda, right? And that was three. So you're saying that only two more could ever get out?”

“Right,” Soma snapped, and started to walk away again but Ember wasn't budging.

“So why us? Why me? Why Edeline? There must have been hundreds of others in there. And now they're just poof? After all that? Did they even know what was happening?”

“I don't think they suffered, if that's what you're worried about,” Soma said. “It was quick, like you saw. Dust to dust, you know. In record time,” she added in a lower voice.

“And speaking of time,” she laid, louder again, “like I keep telling you, we don't have much of that. We have to get to the station, to Red Cliff, before your own changing begins.”

“It would help if we had any idea what you're talking about,” Ember said.

“I've been trying to explain,” Soma said, “but we have to go. Now.”

This time when she turned around and started walking, she did not stop. Edeline hesitated, stuck between wanting to keep up with Soma and not willing to leave Ember behind. It was Ember, after all, who had not only shown her the ropes from the very beginning, but Ember who had been her companion and friend ever since, throughout the ages, never once faltering in trust or kindness or reliability. Fortunately, Ember relented, and went along with them again.

They walked for what seemed like hours, in the heat of a sun more scorching than any they'd been used to, and both Edeline and Ember soon became parched and began begging for water, but Soma had none to offer, and only kept promising that the sooner they got to the station, the sooner they'd be relieved, not only of their thirst but also of their nakedness and weariness. The ocean soon lost its novelty and even some of its beauty in Edeline's eyes, and the hot white sand became more of a nuisance than a revelation. It hurt their feet, and the absence of any tracks or other

markings was depressing. To Edeline it seemed they had come upon a wasteland where nothing lived or could ever live. There was only the pale blue cloudless sky, the bright sun which hardly seemed to change its position, the sand, the sea, and the three of them, struggling to move quickly across the endless beach. Ember had remained silent for quite a while.

Ember was not happy. Of course, she never was especially happy. She rarely smiled, even more rarely laughed. She'd kept her mind busy with attempts at ultra-attention, trying to translate the languages of breezes and leaves and insects and roots. She often felt on the verge of a great epiphany, that she was meant for a higher functioning, one that seemed perpetually on the tip of her mind. Now she was without familiar bearings. She felt no wind, heard no rustling. The silence of that crazy beach was maddening to her. Even the sound of the waves mildly crashing on the shore seemed muted and dull. She would have to start all over again, learn everything all over again. All that she knew was useless now, pertaining to a world, an environment that not only did not exist but would never exist again. She had seen it collapse and disappear with her own eyes. And now this. Edeline and others had spoken to her of oceans and dunes and waves but those had always been stories of beauty and joy, not of infinity and the emptiness she was sensing from it now. She concentrated, straining her ears to hear the other noises she knew must be out there, at the highest ranges, or maybe at the lowest. Her auditory senses were acute, but so far she was picking up only hints. She would have to try harder.

Edeline was still puzzling over their own selection. Soma had told them nothing, really, about this Coalition or why she and Ember had been selected for rescue. The stuff she had said about machines and information and time running out was not making sense to her. Ember knew nothing about machines, not even as little as Edeline did. She herself knew a little about engineering, but what she had known about was scheduling and running meetings. She'd been a program manager in her worldly life, forever "herding cats", as they called it, trying to get the brainier people to agree on when they'd get their work done. She'd been pretty good at that, able to keep the work humming along while not disgruntling anyone more than anybody else. The marketing people would present some written plans for what they wanted. Then she'd ask the software people to come up with estimates for the time it would take to implement the requirements and test that the product would work as designed. They all lied to her. No one had any idea how long anything would take! It wasn't like building a house,

where the time for a slab of cement to be poured and dry was a known mathematical commodity. When it came to software it was anybody's guess, and it was her job to keep all the lies in the air like juggling balls.

She couldn't imagine how such a skill set could possibly come in handy now. As for why they wanted Ember, Edeline was willing to concede that the child was far more capable at almost everything than she herself was. Edeline admired Ember perhaps more than any other person she had ever known. There was something about the girl, a sense of competence, but more than that, a quality of mastery. She believed that Ember was capable of accomplishing anything, so maybe she was chosen solely to assist Ember, or because she was Ember's friend. That made enough sense that she finally decided to stop thinking about it, at least for the moment.

Soma was glad to be left alone at last. They still had a bit of a journey ahead of them, and her two companions' continual questioning was draining her spirits. She recalled the day her own changing began, when Kai had taunted her with what now seemed more like a threat than a promise. That day she had been the one annoying him, and he teased her for being so full of questions.

“That's for me to know, and you to find out,” he'd said when refusing to answer any more of her queries. She found out, all right. She found out plenty, far more than she'd ever wanted to know, and here she was, stuck with all that knowledge and the little good it was doing her.

“I should have thought about water,” she scolded herself, not that she needed any, but the two she'd brought out of the inner prison did. It had not even occurred to her. She had brought nothing other than her own physical self, and there was nothing between the forest and the coastal station where she was leading them. It could be dark by the time they got there. It was impossible to tell. Here the sun didn't follow a straight line in any predictable manner. In the meantime, they weren't even anywhere near a river or a stream and the ocean of course was undrinkable. Their bodies would adapt, but not soon enough. They would need water, and as soon as possible. All she could do was hurry and drag them along. That task grew harder by the minute. Ember and Edeline were not out of shape, but they were unused to the heat, and the air was different too, thinner and more difficult to breathe for those not yet conditioned to it. The sand was not easy to walk on, and their feet were tired and sore.

They were sweating and uncomfortable and anxious as well. Ember did not want to

admit it, but she was feeling homesick. She didn't know that it had been more than seven hundred earth years since her initial incarceration, but she did know that the forest was the only place she knew in the whole world. She had been a small child, after all, when she was arrested and deported along with her grandmother. She remembered nothing at all of that previous life, but she knew the forest world inside and out, knew every tree and every branch, every berry and every root. She knew every angle of light and the direction of every breeze. She knew all the stars in the night time sky although she didn't know that none of them were real. They were only lights. It was all just a bubble, a dome, a fake and a fraud. The way it had sunk and vanished so easily left her nervous and frightened, as if she also might disintegrate entirely at any moment, as if everything around her might too. After so long with hardly any change whatsoever, the impact of that sudden transformation had been powerful and profound. She walked uneasily, even unsteadily, behind the two larger females, thinking all the while how odd it was that Soma and Edeline were now about the same age, biologically, when only so recently Soma had been just like herself, forever eight. How long had she said it had been? Two weeks? Two weeks and three days?

“That would mean,” Ember thought, “She’s been growing at something like two years a day, every day, if it even works like that. Or did it happen all at once?” She needed to know and she caught up to Soma and asked her that very question. Soma nodded.

“That sounds about right,” she agreed, “although it isn't precise like that. But more or less, yes. Once the changing begins, you grow every day. Of course only until you reach your full size. Like me.”

She eyed Edeline closely.

“You won't grow,” she told her. “Except older. You'll just grow older.”

“Two years every day?” Edeline asked. She was also doing a rough calculation in her mind, and the results were not pleasing.

“So in two weeks I'll be sixty?”

“Two weeks after the changing begins,” Soma nodded. “I'll probably be ahead of you by then, because you have three days, including today, before it starts.”

“And I'll be like you are now,” Ember said.

“Like I told you,” Soma said. “We don't have much time.”

"I didn't know you meant it like that," Edeline said, thinking about how probable it was that she'd be dead and gone in a matter of days. The thought was new to her. She wasn't sure she didn't like it.

"Come on," Soma said. "The station's not far up ahead. We'll want to get there before dark."

"The sun is still pretty high," Ember observed.

"Remember the trees?" Soma said. "That's how the sun goes down around here too. Just like that. And then it doesn't even go down all at once, but kind of bounces around the horizon a bit like a ball hitting the ground. Then when it's dark it's completely dark all at once."

They set off again, but had hardly gone a few steps when they heard a whirring sound, followed by a whooshing in the air above their heads. Edeline looked up and saw a shiny, silvery metallic disk-shaped object zipping and zooming, diving and climbing as quickly as a hummingbird.

"Think you can catch that?" Soma asked Ember, who was following the thing closely with her eyes.

"If I knew where it was going, what's its goal was, no problem," Ember replied.

"But you won't," Soma told her. "You'll have to guess the next move every time."

"Am I supposed to catch it?" Ember asked. "Like now?"

"Not right now," Soma said. "Not this one, but the machines are everywhere. You'll have your chance."

"Are they dangerous?" Edeline asked.

"They mean no harm," Soma told her. "In fact, they do only good. They're here for us, to serve us, to help us. It's their purpose, their mission. They do it well. Too well, in fact."

"If I catch one," Ember said. "Can I eat it?"

Soma started to reply but Ember interrupted and said she was only kidding. It was obviously a joke. Ember knew what a machine was from other people's stories, but she didn't know about this little flying kind. It had been a long time since anyone had been locked up in the forest world and no one who knew anything about technological advances had arrived since the days of the third-eye patch. That was as far as they

knew about, and it was ancient history already. The machines themselves didn't even keep that obsolete knowledge around anymore. All the ancient data had been deleted, everything from steam engines to telephones to computers to embeds to graft patches to quantal nodes. It was all only so much detritus in the compost heap of time. These machines were only mechanical in name and composition. In reality, they were conceived and hatched and grown like any other living thing, but to people and other human forms they were a complete and utter mystery.

The machine buzzed away, but as they approached the station they saw a few more of them, some just as small, others larger, all of them airborne, all of them intentionally keeping just out of reach. Soma said no more about them, other than that the machines had all the information, all the answers.

“They are the real Keepers,” she told them.

“Can they be destroyed?” Ember asked.

“It's happened,” Soma said, “but it didn't do any good. In fact, it didn't seem to do anything at all.”

“You weren't kidding about the sun,” Edeline said. The sun had just dropped at least twenty degrees in the sky all at once, like an object knocked off a shelf onto a lower one.

“We're almost there,” Soma urged them forward. All day long the scenery had remained the same, glittering white sand below their feet, scrubby plains off to the inland on one side and deep blue gentle sea stretching to the horizon on the other. Everything was flat as far as they could see and then, before them, rising up out of the sand, they saw a small yellowish building with a red tile roof.

“The station,” Soma gestured toward it. “Here we'll find everything you need.”

“I could use some sleep,” Ember groaned. “Do they have any of that in there?”

“I feel like I could use some waking up,” Edeline said. “And then I want somebody telling me that it's all been nothing but a very bad dream.”

Three

As they drew nearer, they saw that the station was indeed just that, the very image of an old-fashioned railroad station. It sported intricate wood-worked double doors and, on the inside, a floor fashioned of octagonal yellow tiles, with occasional ornate

patterns depicting steam engines pulling coaches across a landscape of snow-covered peaks and rushing waterfalls. On the high walls there were oval stained glass windows, each depicting similar scenes of ancient transportation motifs. Around the height circled a balcony with white railings, but there appeared to be no way to reach it, no stairs or ladders of any kind. Along one wall stood an old wooden counter, with racks of tickets and keys behind it. Through the opposite way from the entry, another set of double doors opened on no tracks, and no trains, merely more white sand as far as Edeline could see. To her questioning glance, Soma replied with an amused smile.

“You'll want to use that room,” she said, pointing at the left of a pair of doors, over which was written, in old Gothic lettering, the word “Guests”.

“What about the other one?” Edeline asked, indicating the sign above that door, which said “Residents”.

“That won't do anything for you,” Soma said. “We won't be staying long. Use the 'Guests' room. You'll find everything you need in there, and more.”

“It looks like it just goes right back outside again,” Ember said, and it certainly did appear so. They were standing in the middle of the one and only room in the building, as far as they could tell.

“Just open the door,” Soma said with some impatience. “You can take a hot shower if you like. Or a warm bath. You'll find a suit of clothes for each of you. When you're ready, there will be food and drink as well. Please, go.”

Ember and Edeline exchanged looks, but they were both so weary from the day's trek that they turned together, with a sigh, towards the door. Edeline gave it a push, and both were surprised, and yet not surprised, to see that Soma was right once again. They entered what seemed to be a luxurious hotel suite. On either side of the door stood beds with thick mattresses, heaped with blankets and pillows. Beneath their feet the plush pale orange carpeting felt like a magic massage to their sore toes and soles. They stepped together through the room, noting that each of the beds held a pair of pants and a shirt just like the ones that Soma wore; a white-button down blouse and black pantaloons.

“These will grow with you,” Soma said, standing behind them.

“What do you mean?” Edeline asked, turning to face her.

“The clothes, they grow and change as you do. If you were to gain weight, or more

likely, for Ember, as her changing goes, the same clothing will always fit her. Plus, you can customize it a bit. Watch.”

She looked down at her own blouse and said,

“Shirt, a little tighter around the waist please,”

And instantly the garment took itself in.

“It's a life form,” she said with a smile. “It wants to fit the way you want it to.”

“That's just weird,” said Ember, eyeing the outfit with suspicion.

“Our ivy was like that,” Edeline reminded her, and Ember reluctantly agreed.

“The bathroom is just in there,” Soma indicated a door at the end of the room, and here's a desk and chair if you feel like sitting at one. I'm not sure what one does with it, but there it is.” She paused, and then added in a soft voice, “I have a feeling that some of the stuff you'll find out here is kind of leftover, relics. There are some things we have no idea what they're for.”

Soma smiled, and then told them she had a few other things to take care of, and she'd check in on them again in a little while. With that she left the room, as Edeline and Ember stared after her.

“A hot shower?” Edeline asked, nearly giggling. “I haven't had a hot shower in, goodness knows how long.”

“I don't think I've ever had one,” Ember said, “but my grandmother used to tell me about warm baths. I think I'll try one of those.”

“You first,” Edeline said, but went with her into the bathroom to help try and figure out how the things would work. As it turned out, her help wasn't needed. The fixtures in the bathroom were ancient but clearly labeled with complete instructions that appeared in the air in a Gothic script as one approached them. Leaning over the tub, words popped up informing them which was the hot, which was the cold, which was for the bath and which for the shower. The shower curtain retracted on its own as Ember chose bath. Water poured out of the faucet and adjusted itself to what it considered the appropriate temperature as Ember stared at the self-configuring taps. When she stepped into the water and sat back, she grinned so broadly that Edeline hardly recognized her. She realized that she'd hardly ever seen Ember look so happy. Ember soon grew bored, however, and leaped out of the tub and grabbed a towel, as instructed by the room, and Edeline took her turn. She spent a great deal more time in

the shower than Ember had in the bath, and by the time she emerged, she found that Ember had already put on her new clothes and was giving them orders to tighten and loosen, loosen and tighten, until she had them just as she desired. Then she leaped onto the bed and stretched herself out, arms flung aside, and kicked her feet on the mattress.

"I like it," she declared. "I have to say, I like it."

"Me too," Edeline said, pulling on her pants and shirt. She wandered over to the desk and sat down. It seemed familiar, but she didn't know what to do there. She thought it was missing something, a telephone perhaps, or a notebook and pen. As it was, the empty desk seemed more than pointless. Suddenly, a machine dropped down from the ceiling, a small gray box of a thing, and with two long appendages drew a tray from its belly and placed it on the desk. Before Edeline could reach out, the machine withdrew, but only to the other side of the room, where it set down a similar tray on a small folding table that simply materialized next to Ember's bed. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, it vanished back into the ceiling.

The trays held plates of fruit, rolls, and some sort of meat chunks in gravy. There was also a glass of some yellowish, bubbly liquid.

"It looks like dog food," Edeline said with a laugh, but she picked up the fork that came with it and began to poke at the meal with it.

"It smells like garbage," Ember sniffed, but she didn't actually know what garbage smelled like. In the forest, there had never been any waste, or any meat, which is why the scents were so unfamiliar to her. She picked up a blueberry and popped it into her mouth. Chewing, she nodded and grunted in satisfaction, but the berries were all she planned on eating.

"I'm not touching that stuff," she muttered, pointing at the glass and the pile of stew.

"It's not bad," Edeline said, chewing on a bit of meat. "It tastes like lamb. At least, I think it tastes like lamb. I really have no idea, but that's what my tongue is telling me. My taste buds seem to remember even if I don't."

"I'm losing my appetite," Ember declared, after polishing off the rest of the blueberries and the raspberries as well. This left a peach and some grapes untouched on her plate. Edeline was rapidly devouring every last morsel on hers, and guzzling the beverage, which she informed Ember was nothing more than lemonade.

"I'd rather have some water," Ember said, and no sooner had she uttered those words when the door to their room flung open, and a young boy came running in, carrying a crystal pitcher full of sparkling water, and a glass that sparkled like diamonds.

"Water!" he shouted, as he rushed to her table, set down the glass, and poured it full. He turned and started to run right back out of the room but Ember called out,

"You there!" she said. "Wait a minute."

He screeched to a halt, and looked back at her, standing at full attention.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Zed!" he said at once.

"Zed?" she repeated.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. "Zed Fortune, at your service, ma'am."

"I am not a ma'am," Ember scolded him. "And where did you come from, anyway?"

"Station, ma'am," he told her, staring straight ahead, and remaining motionless like a soldier.

"At ease," Edeline teased, but her joke had the intended effect, and Zed relaxed and even smiled. He was dressed exactly like they were, in the pirate-type shirt and pants, only he was wearing ankle-high black leather boots, and wore a red scarf around his neck. His short black hair was spiky and sticking out all over the place, as if badly cut and never combed. His face was pale and decorated with a number of light brown freckles and markings that looked oddly like the branches of small trees. His eyes were wide and a deep dark blue. Ember liked him right away, though she didn't know why, and it even bothered her a little. She was not prone to attraction in general.

"At your service too, ma'am," he said to Edeline, and even made a brief bow in her direction.

"Thank you for the water," Ember said, taking a sip.

"The lemonade is good, too," Edeline said.

"I'm not touching that stuff," Ember said to her, while still staring at Zed. "Where did he come from, I wonder? There was nobody here when we arrived."

"Resident, maybe?" Edeline suggested. "There was that other door, remember?"

“Not a resident,” Zed informed them. “Nor a Guest neither. Me? I'm employed here. This is my work site. Where I do.”

“Where you do what?” Ember asked.

“What I do,” he replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Now you will sleep, right? You are to sleep. Tomorrow is, after all, another day. I would do that,” he concluded and then, with an index-finger salute to his forehead, he said good night, and left the room. Ember and Edeline burst into laughter as the door closed behind him.

“What an odd little boy,” Edeline said.

“Crazy!” Ember agreed, “But he was right. I could fall asleep standing up right here.”

“Then get in bed,” Edeline advised. “It sure looks comfy.”

And it was. Moments later they were both under the covers and snoozing away, while the lights in the room flickered and dimmed and went out on their own.

Four

Outside the night was darker than usual, as the moon seemed to have forgotten to rise. Also, it seemed to Red Cliff, the stars were not all in their regular places, again. As he sat on one of the long wrought-iron benches behind the station's rear doors, waiting for Soma to join him, he considered how fortunate they were to no longer rely on constellations for navigation, for in that case they would be well out of luck. He closed his eyes and imagined there were still railroad tracks stretching out along the dunes before him, and tried to conjure up the sound of a steam engine coming towards him, but it was no use. He couldn't remember what that noise was like.

The old giant stood up and stretched. He reached into the pocket of his red flannel shirt and fumbled around before recalling that he'd left his pipe on the ticket counter, and that it wouldn't do him any good anyway, because he had had nothing to put in it for ages. In his other hand he held a battered yellow paperback book. It looked like an old Farmer's Almanac, and perhaps it was once, but now it was the way he received his instructions. The book was continually rewriting itself. He only needed to hold it flat on the palm of his hand, and if it had something to tell him, it would fly open to that page on its own accord. Some might think it cute, he pondered, but he often wished it simply wouldn't do that.

They would get a message through to him anyway, he figured, so it might as well be the book. He placed it in his hand that way now, in the dark, as a sort of a somber joke, but the book remained closed. Maybe the Coalition was sleeping too, like those new recruits that Soma had dragged out of the forest.

"They're exhausted," Soma's voice came from behind him. "I hope they don't sleep through the whole day tomorrow."

"If they do," Red Cliff replied, "it wouldn't matter much. They would only be losing their last day as themselves."

"I remember my last day." Soma glanced at the book in Red Cliff's hand and felt relieved to see its placid state. There were times when the book flipped and flapped itself so wildly they had a hard time reading fast enough, or understanding what it was trying to tell them. The Coalition spoke through the book in tongues, it often seemed. They would mix in weather forecasts along with palm readings, stock market statistics, miscellaneous scientific facts, legends about extinct creatures and all sorts of nonsense before finally landing on a page with explicit instructions. Most recently they had been taught about the care and feeding of humanoid infants, one in particular.

"Hard to believe it's only been a week," Red Cliff said, sitting back down on the bench and stuffing the flimsy book back into his rear jeans pocket.

"Not even that long," Soma said. "The baby only showed up on Monday, if we want to say that today is Thursday."

"The book says it's Thursday," Red Cliff growled. "Of course yesterday it said it was Tuesday, so who really knows anymore?"

"Not that it matters," she agreed. "But I think it's been four days. Ha! I was still in my twenties then."

Last Monday, if that's what day it really was, Red Cliff was sitting on the front porch of his old abandoned farmhouse, up the long winding path through the marsh, minding his own business. He had a backlog of books he'd been meaning to read, books that appeared out of nowhere, arranging themselves on his shelves in order of their desire to be read. He could hardly keep up with their demands. The books were insistent, and if he did not pick up the first in line every day and sit down with it for at least an hour, and at a minimum glance at several of its pages, that same Number One book would fly off the shelf and follow him around, dancing in the air in front of his face so that he could not get anything else done. Also, the books would make a whiny, irritating noise

which only grew louder the longer they were neglected. Reading them was the only way to shut them up. The most annoying thing about them was their subject matter. They were almost all fiction, absolutely useless garbage that told him nothing about the world he lived in, only about worlds that didn't even exist, fantasy make-believe stories about nothing that ever happened or ever could. Even the so-called literary and detective novels were absurd, propping up phony characters only to knock them back down again, as if their authors had nothing better to do than play with dolls.

He had been reading an old pseudo-biography that morning, a story about a painter who only painted on walls with his body parts, and whose medium was only the skin cells he shed in these endeavors. He had been one of the earlier GMO's, endowed by his creator with iridescent skin cells, whose colors only became apparent upon application. Back in those days, there were many types of experimental beings in the world. Since then the varieties had become more and more distilled. The Coalition liked to say that the creatures were continually being perfected, but in Red Cliff's opinion the other types had gone extinct due to their own limitations. That painter, for example, had rubbed himself low on skin, and the ozone had roasted him until he was little more than a steam engine himself.

Red Cliff believed he was a control subject. That was the conclusion he reached after long consideration. As far as he could tell, he was a normal human being, larger than most both in height and in weight, but with all the organs you would expect, and the mind, and the odors. He'd met many of the so-called "evolved" beings, and surmised that evolution had not taken its natural course in their cases. They were all tweaked, not-so-intelligently designed genetically modified organisms. There were those who could live and breathe underwater, those who had wings and could fly, and those who were given claws on all their extremities for easier scrabbling through trees. He'd met creatures with IQ's so high they were unable to see the ground beneath their feet, and were constantly tripping over rocks or falling off cliffs. He'd met beings so stupid they had difficulty pushing a button on machines that were nothing but a button. All in the name of progress, according to the small yellow book.

That book, which was more of a pamphlet, had ripped itself out of his pocket and flung itself down on top of the book about the painter that morning, and dialed itself open to a page toward the back where it was written, in bold face and a very large font, "LOOK OUT FOR THE BABY." As was often the case with the almanac, Red Cliff had no idea what it was talking about, until he heard the sound of a newborn, crying, and there it

was, in a basket, at his feet.

That had been on Monday. The yellow book had kept him busy all that day, and all day every day since, teaching him how to feed the boy, how to clean its bottom, how to help it learn to walk, how to help it learn to speak. It all had to be done right away, because by Tuesday morning, the boy was a toddler, and by Wednesday it was a child, and now, call it Thursday, it was a regular young boy, somewhere around seven or eight years old. The Coalition had named him Zed Fortune, and instructed Red Cliff to journey with the child to the station, to meet up with Soma, who was bringing two people whom the Coalition referred to as 'critical' and 'chosen'.

Zed was all eagerness and readiness, and had been like that, incessantly, since his creation. Red Cliff did not use the term 'birth'. He still had no idea where Zed had come from, or who his parents were, if indeed there were any such beings. All he knew was the ominous warning that the almanac had provided him the day Zed arrived: Proper Care Required In Order To Avoid Extinction.

“Rapid change is hard,” Soma was saying. “Especially when you're not used to it. Just like me, life had been the same for Ember and Edeline, day in and day out, year after year after year. They'd adapted to slowness and stability. They were at peace, absolutely at ease in the only world they knew. They had no worries, no problems, nothing to think about except how to fill the time, and even that was nothing because time will always fill itself, or so they thought. There was no beginning and there was no end. Everything was good, or at least indifferent. You knew who you were, and you were who you'd always been. Now I don't have any of that.”

“The world's gone crazy,” Red Cliff said. “I'm not pointing any fingers, you know, but up until you and your buddies showed up, everything was pretty slow around here too. The sun even knew what to do with itself. Not anymore.”

“Oh, like it's all my fault,” Soma said, rolling her eyes.

“I didn't say that,” Red Cliff replied. “But I don't think it was just a coincidence either. I think they brought you out of that place for a reason, maybe the same reason they had you go back and fetch the other two. The yellow book said they were needed. I only wish it would tell us a little bit more.”

“Like what the heck is going on?” Soma laughed. “That would be nice, wouldn't it?”

“Where's the boy?” Red Cliff asked, changing the subject. Soma looked around and shrugged.

“Last I saw he was mopping the floors.”

“Boy does like to work,” Red Cliff shook his head. “Can't keep still, that one. Always got to be doing something.”

“He had a biology book following him around,” Soma said, “but he wouldn't look at it. He kept taunting it, making it cry. Go ahead, he said, scream all you want but I'm not reading you today!”

Red Cliff laughed. He didn't know how the boy could stand it. Those books would get so annoying with their screeching and begging and bouncing all around your face. Every time he resolved to withstand their pressure he found himself giving in only moments later. Zed had a lot more willpower than he did. Only that morning he'd seen the boy surrounded by pushy textbooks, but Zed elbowed them aside, even kicked a few that tried to block his legs. Eventually the books gave up and returned to wherever it was they'd come from. Red Cliff had looked all around the station but seen no sign of them after that. He and Zed had only arrived that morning, and he was certain there had been no books on their trail. The pesky things seemed to pop right out of the air. No doubt it was the machines.

That was a sore subject. None of the books that ever flung themselves at Red Cliff had anything to say about the machines, and the machines were the one thing he most wanted to find out about. They were everywhere and seemed capable of doing anything and now that the world was going haywire, the machines were perhaps the only hope for setting things right again. It was maddening. The books, especially that little yellow one, were always giving him orders, telling him what they wanted to tell him, but he had no way of asking them any questions. The Coalition spoke, but they never listened! As far as he knew, they might even be machines themselves.

“What do we really know about them?” he said aloud, and Soma instantly knew what he was talking about.

“They said they were the coalition,” Soma replied. “They said we had to hurry. They said we had to 'do the right thing' but they didn't bother to tell us what the right thing to do is.”

“Useless!” Red Cliff fretted. He got up and started pacing up and down the platform, hands behind his back, shaking his hairy head restlessly.

“You know what we have to do?” he declared. “We have to find this coalition. We have to find them and ask them straight out, no more mumbo jumbo, no more random

clues, no more riddles, no more nonsense.”

“Sure,” Soma agreed. “Why not? Except that we have no idea, no idea at all, where in the world they might be, or even if they really exist.”

“I know where they are!” came a small, high voice from inside the station. Its body presently appeared at the door. It was Zed, bucket in one hand, mop in the other.

“You do?”

“You what?”

“Sure,” he said, “I know just where they are. Well, almost just. They're under the ground!”

“Almost just?” Red Cliff asked. “What does ‘almost just’ mean? Do you know where under the ground, or just anywhere under the ground?”

It had only been a few days, but he was already accustomed to Zed's way of talking. Like the books, the boy spoke in absolute terms that on closer inspection were absolutely vague and uncertain. He would proudly say he knew everything there was to know about rabbits, and then proceed to describe a cloud in great detail. He would declare that a tree was exactly one centimeter tall, if you looked at it from a certain angle. He insisted that dreams were real, and reality was a dream, except for the times when they weren't and it wasn't. He drove Red Cliff crazy, but he had to remind himself that you couldn't expect too much from a child that had only been in the world for a handful of days, even if it had grown more than four feet in that limited span.

“I know exactly where,” Zed announced, “and I'll know it when I see it. We just have to go there is all. They're waiting for us, you know. Didn't they tell you?”

“No, they didn't,” Red Cliff sighed.

“Maybe you should look at the book,” Zed laughed, and dashed back inside to scrub down the tile wainscoting.

Red Cliff pulled the almanac out of his back pocket and placed it flat on the palm of his hand. Sure enough, it opened right away to a page that was blank except for one line, which said “follow the path.”

Red Cliff gritted his teeth and had to control his urge to rip the thing into shreds.

“What path?” he shouted. “Why can't you ever just come out and say what you mean?”

“Maybe that path?” Soma asked. Red Cliff looked and saw she was pointing at the train tracks that were suddenly materializing on the beach as a warm wind kicked up and blew away the sand that had been covering them up. The tracks began right there at the station, and led off to the right, curving inland away from the shore.

Five

"I don't like it," said Ember, early the next morning when Soma showed her the tracks. "It was never here and then it was? A book that writes itself and tells you what to do? And we're supposed to follow a boy who was almost literally born yesterday? I don't like it, not one bit, and I say no."

"You can't just say no," Soma pleaded with her. "What else are you going to do? Listen to me, Ember. I didn't have to tell you all of this. I could have kept a lot of it to myself and you never would have known. Instead, I'm being completely honest with you, because I respect you, and because I know you, and because I have no idea what's in store for you or any of us if we don't get to the bottom of this."

"All this time," Ember countered, "It's been The Coalition this and The Coalition that, and now it comes out that you don't even have a clue what this so-called Coalition is, or where it is, or anything about it! And now you talk about being honest. You've been tricking us the whole time, haven't you? You're still hiding something. I can tell."

Soma sighed. This was not the conversation she'd planned to have. After a restless night trying to decide whether or not to even wake the pair, it turned out that Edeline and Ember woke themselves as soon as the sun attempted to rise in the morning. It took a few tries, but finally the rubbery, bouncing orange ball latched on to a trajectory and held steady, and the sky brightened as the day promised to be another scorcher on the beach. Zed had been eagerly awaiting the two with platters of pancakes, fruit and rolls he'd produced seemingly out of nowhere. Edeline and Ember could not refuse and wolfed down their breakfast as if they hadn't eaten such a meal in centuries.

Edeline was in a joyful mood. She'd slept well, her mind filled with happy dreams of swimming pools and sunsets and circling sea birds making chirpy noises. Ember was her customary sour self, glancing suspiciously at the walls and floor as if expecting them to betray her at any moment, but she did save a smile or two for Zed, who stood by patiently waiting for his turn to clear the plates and glasses.

"Where did you come from?" Ember had asked him, and Zed silently pointed at his feet.

"Did you not understand me?" she asked and he grinned.

"They made me underground!" he declared.

"Who made you?"

"The people who make people," he said cheerfully.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ember told him. "People don't just make people, do they?"

Edeline laughed and Ember turned pink.

"That's not what I meant," she said.

"You mean your mommy and your daddy, right?" Edeline asked Zed but he shook his head furiously and said,

"I don't have exactly any of those. Except for maybe Red Cliff. He's like my daddy but he was only following instructions. The people use the book to tell him what to do."

Ember and Edeline had nothing to say to this, but as they had finished swallowing the last morsels, Zed rushed over, snatched up the dishes, and ran out of the room with them. They looked at each other and with a nod agreed to get up and follow him. They had only just stepped into the station when Soma came up and greeted them. They immediately bombarded her with questions about Zed, Red Cliff, the people and the book. It took some time for her to explain, and when she was done she led them out back and showed them the rail line.

"This is the way to the people Zed was talking about."

Ember didn't like it.

Edeline took her aside. She was of the opinion that they might as well do whatever Soma told them to do because the alternative was, what? Was there an alternative?

"We could stay here," Ember suggested. She was thinking of the comfortable beds and the fine food. She was even thinking about going for a dip in the sea.

"I've never played in the ocean," she said, "it looks nice."

"Soma seems to think it's important that we hurry," Edeline said.

"I want to play in the waves," Ember insisted, crossing her arms and pouting. Edeline took a deep breath. On the one hand, she knew that Ember had been around for more than seven hundred years. On the other hand, she also knew that the girl was only eight, and had been eight for almost all of those years. Smart as she was, agile and brave as she was, her brain had only developed to that one certain point, and you couldn't expect an egg to be a chicken. She left Ember on the platform and went to

consult with Soma.

"Maybe for an hour," Soma relented after some initial resistance, and so Edeline and Ember together stripped off their new outfits and ran screaming and yelling into the cold blue sea. It was magnificent. Ember leaped over the waves as Edeline dove in and took to swimming in circles around her. The sun had rushed overhead to a heated position and stayed there, stuck in one place for a while as they played. The salty sea felt so fine that Ember finally plunked down and sat with her bottom on the bottom as the waves lapped around her neck and face. Edeline came and sat by her and together they stared off at the distant horizon, seeing nothing but blue water before them, and blue sky up above.

Then something else appeared, a shaggy blond head, then another, and a third, and the three heads drew closer, swimming directly toward them at an amazingly rapid pace. They all had the same face, or so it seemed to Edeline and Ember, a pale white face with pink eyes and white lips, flat noses that seemed to be missing their nostrils. The heads were attached to shoulders, that they could see, but nothing else of their bodies emerged from the sea as they came nearer and nearer until they were only a few feet away. Edeline opened her mouth and said "hello" but as soon as she said it, all three heads disappeared, diving beneath the waves, and then they were gone. Ember and Edeline sat there for several more minutes, certain that the swimmers would have to re-emerge, but they never did. Finally, they felt so unsettled by this experience that they got up and returned to the station, where Zed was waiting with towels and freshly folded up clothing.

Also waiting was Red Cliff, who introduced himself before Soma got the chance.

"Now we can go," Soma said. Edeline and Ember nodded and they all made their way to the tracks. Soma took the lead, with Red Cliff accompanying Edeline, and Zed sticking close to Ember, chatting merrily about the underground world they were heading for.

"There are lots and lots of rooms," he told her, "and they're all filled with stuff. All kinds of stuff, like brooms and mops and sponges and these little metal scrubber things that do a great job getting off the most clingy dirt."

"That's nice," Ember said.

"And they have closets," he exclaimed, "that you can even walk into and stand there." He jumped up and down as if to demonstrate the size of these astonishing places, and

then skipped along. Ember found herself wanting to skip too, and she scolded herself for these childlike feelings. She was already becoming not the self she was used to. She wondered if it showed.

They hadn't walked far before the landscape began to radically change. They entered a scrubby marsh, the tracks forming a narrow trail between knee-high bushes and shrubs, and the land began to feature low slopes and hills, with occasional dwarf trees no taller than Ember appearing on either side. A few shallow streams crossed right through the rails, and Edeline could see a hint of pale blue mountains in the distance. She noticed that she hadn't seen any wildlife at all, not a bird or a lizard or even an insect, and was about to comment on this fact when she heard a low buzzing sound above her head. She looked up, expecting to see some sort of creature, but instead it was a machine, a flat, rectangular black one, and it was hovering just above her.

"What is that?" she started to say, but before she could finish the sentence she found herself splattered with spaghetti-like noodles, cooked to al dente perfection and quite warm, raining down on her from that very machine. Edeline jumped out of the way, pasta clinging to her hair and shoulders, as the machine zoomed way up into the sky and vanished from sight.

"Oh my," Red Cliff muttered. Zed was laughing behind them.

"Bad code," he shouted. "Really bad code! Somebody messed up big time this time!"

Edeline pulled the moist sticky morsels from her hair.

"That was uncalled for," she complained.

"Are you hungry?" Red Cliff asked, as they continued on their way.

"Not now," she said.

"But you were thinking it," Red Cliff said, "before. They can sense your thoughts, you know."

"No, I don't know," Edeline said. "I'm beginning to think I don't know anything at all. What kind of place is this? In the forest we had nothing like those whatever-they-ares. We had nothing, nothing at all. No beds, no regular food, no clothing, no gadgets or tools, nothing even remotely mechanical. And here? It's all so different."

"They mean well," Red Cliff said apologetically. "It's that they don't understand either. We don't know them, and they don't know us. They're programmed to serve, but the subtleties escape them. You have to watch your thoughts. And then again, lately

they've been a little off.”

“A little?” Edeline exclaimed. “Dumping a pot of spaghetti on someone's head is more than a little off, if you ask me. It's rude, plain and simple.”

“Uh-oh,” Zed said. Edeline turned to look at him and followed his gaze to another small flying contraption heading straight for them.

“Oh no,” Edeline said. “I'm not getting strafed again,” and she hid behind the much larger Red Cliff, but it was no use. The machine descended so rapidly and aimed itself so precisely that she could not avoid its attack. The thing buzzed and whirred as it spun about and patted and prodded her until it had straightened out all the wrinkles in her pants. Then it shot up straight into the sky and flew off. Edeline, who'd been swatting at it uselessly, shouted out a string of curse words at the thing, and swore she could hear it chortling with glee.

“They're out to get me!” she said.

“I really have never seen them do anything like that,” Red Cliff said, and Soma concurred.

“Maybe they're trying to tell us something,” she mused, but Zed corrected her.

“They just messed up,” he said. “They wanted to straighten her out but the message got garbled. I think it was trying to apologize.”

“How do you know these things?” Ember asked, astonished.

“I can hear them thinking,” Zed said proudly.

“The machines?”

“No, the people,” he said. “My people. Underground.”

“What are they saying now?”

Zed stopped and stood quietly for a minute, his head cocked to one side as if listening to something actually audible. The others stood around him, expectantly. Soma looked questioningly at Red Cliff but he only shrugged. This feature of the boy was news to him too, it seemed. It seemed to Edeline that she even saw the boy grow an inch or two in that minute. He was now a bit taller than Ember, whereas that morning they had been the same height, she was sure.

“They're thinking that the soup is too cold. At least one of them is thinking that. The other one thinks that margarine went the way of the dodo, whatever that means.”

“So there are two of them?” Soma asked. Zed nodded.

“That's not even a coalition,” Ember snapped. “You'd think the word would indicate more than two people.”

“Maybe there used to be more of them,” Edeline suggested.

“The book always says The Coalition,” Red Cliff said. “It never says how many.”

“It doesn't matter,” Soma said. “Come on. Let's keep moving. We're wasting time.”

“Yeah,” Zed piped up. “They think they're running out of that stuff too.”

“Too?” Edeline asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “They're always thinking about running out of stuff. They think they used to have more of everything. Sometimes they think they just lost it, put it somewhere and then forgot where, but mostly they think it's pretty much used up.”

“What kind of stuff?” Ember wanted to know, but Zed couldn't tell them anything more specific.

“Just stuff,” he shrugged. “All kinds of it.”

After this they all walked on in silence for a while. The plant life around them became more varied. Larger streams hosted larger trees and lush vegetation, and Edeline caught sight of some scurrying creatures that might have been chipmunks or squirrels. Red Cliff informed her that indeed there were animals, though fewer and fewer in more recent times. He could still recall the days of cats and dogs, cattle and horses, birds of prey and even fish in the streams, but those times were long gone.

“There used to be regular people, too,” he said. “I might be the only one left.”

“What about Zed?” Edeline asked. Red Cliff shook his head.

“There's nothing regular about that boy,” he said. “Nothing normal at all.”

Six

The sun dropped from the sky like a ball from the hand of a small boy. Noon turned to night in an instant and the wandering party stopped in their tracks on the tracks.

“Looks like the stars forgot to show up,” Edeline remarked.

“Guess we’ll be camping here,” Red Cliff said as he eased his large frame onto the ground. His comment set Zed off in a frenzy of dashing around, pulling out loaves of bread and hunks of cheeses from his shirt and pants pockets, a seemingly limitless supply which he handed out to the others with a great show of friendly service.

“How does he do that?” Ember wondered aloud. Soma had remained quiet for a long time, but didn’t feel like providing any answers. As each day passed she had become more of a worrier, and this latest day was no exception. She wondered if it was merely the effects of rapid aging, or if she was right to be so concerned. As a Keeper, she was supposed to know things, but there were some major unknowns in their current situation, the Coalition for one. She had taken for granted that “they” knew what they were doing, but lately she had to wonder. She wasn’t so sure anymore. She was also troubled by the fate of her friends. She had seen what became of Bombarda and Squee, but didn’t know what lay in store for Edeline or Ember. Zed, too, was even more of a mystery than she’d originally thought.

“I’m getting old,” she told herself, and for the first time in her life she was beginning to feel it, too. Her legs were tired from the day’s walk, although it had been only half as long as the one the day before. She also had little appetite, and hardly munched on the berries Zed was now passing out for dessert. She noticed that Red Cliff had already gone to sleep, stretched out along the line like a massive flannel tree trunk. Edeline and Ember were huddled together as if they were cold, though it was a warm night. Zed was the only one showing no sign of fatigue. Soma thought she saw him running off into the night as she also fell asleep.

He was still missing when she awoke in the morning, or rather, when the sun decided to rise. It was impossible to know how much time had elapsed. It might have been only minutes. The stars never did show up, nor the moon, which seemed to be permanently disabled. Soma stretched and rose, feeling some soreness in her legs and lower back,

all novel sensations to the recent child. As she stood, she discovered that the group was no longer alone. Ember and Edeline still slept, and Red Cliff was snoring mightily, while on either side of the tracks there sat a dozen or so old people in a row, all on gray metal folding chairs, dressed in long black tunics and sitting with their hands folded on their laps. They were all more or less the same size as well, smallish, thin old people with masses of long iron gray hair hanging down to their shoulders. Their faces were narrow and dark and full of folds and wrinkles which nearly obscured their tiny black eyes. Soma studied first the group on her right, then the one on her left. They seemed to be identical, mirror images of one another.

“Is there a mirror?” she asked herself, and walked over to her left. The sitters did not budge or move a muscle as she stepped between and around them.

“Not on this side,” she muttered, and crossed over the tracks again to inspect the other group. They were also physically present. She poked one in the shoulder but it did not respond. They did not seem to be dead.

“Dressed for it, though,” she said. Returning to the tracks, she knelt down and prodded Red Cliff awake.

“We’ve got company,” she told him. Red Cliff groaned and sat up slowly.

“Monks,” he said. “Watch your back.”

“What do you mean, watch your back?” It had not occurred to her that they might be dangerous. They looked so feeble and weak.

“They can be pranksters,” he said. “They sometimes like to mess with people. Levitate them, put stupid thoughts into their heads, spout meaningless jargon, and do card tricks. They’re like a circus without fun, like one of those old time amusement parks where the rides go haywire and people get hurt.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Soma said, gazing at the so-called Monks. “Where’s Zed, speaking of mischief.”

“At your service,” the boy replied, startling Soma as he appeared by her side. He was now as tall as she was, and was even sporting the beginnings of a silky mustache.

“My, how you’ve grown,” she mumbled, refusing the somehow hard-boiled egg he

was holding out to her. “No thanks. Not hungry,” she added. Suddenly anxious, she strode over to the still sleeping pair and sighed. Their changing had begun. Soma recalled how she felt the day it started happening to her. She had felt it first in her jaws, the growing pains, and the massive headache that followed. Her limbs seemed to crackle and pop and her eyes strained as the world shrank right before them. On the second day she bled for the first time, a nuisance that had since become a fairly regular pattern recurring every hour so for a moment. As her body shaped itself into its fully grown version, her mind too had undergone revision after revision, like software being upgraded. In just a few days the experience of childhood became a dim recollection, as everything she ever knew fell away completely, replaced by new and alien knowledge. It saddened her immensely. The one who had been so filled with exuberance and confidence and joy was now the one who harbored secrets, told half-truths, and moved about with caution and uncertainty.

“What big teeth I have,” she told herself.

“The better to frighten you with,” she silently replied. Now she worried again about the fate of the other little one.

Ember sat up and noticed the Monks immediately.

“Are they dead?” she asked, and before Soma could respond, Zed did.

“Almost!” he shouted gleefully. “It’s their one hundredth birthday today! Their last day on Earth!”

He trotted over to the group on the left and paced up and down before them, chatting merrily.

“What’s that you say? Cats got your tongues? What are cats, anyway? Nothing to say for yourselves? No more tricks up your sleeves? I see those sleeves, by the way.”

He tugged at the robes but the geezers didn’t react. He tousled their hair, pulled on their noses. Nothing.

“Stupid old coots,” he shouted angrily, and taking one by the shoulders, he shoved it back, toppling it onto the ground. The Monk didn’t twitch, didn’t move, didn’t do anything at all.

“Come on,” Soma said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Edeline had jumped up in alarm at Zed’s action and demeanor, and now all of them hurried forward, resuming their march, eager to put some distance between them and the eerie figures that had surrounded them in the night. Looking back, Edeline noticed some of the flying machines descend and busy themselves with the bodies of the Monks, but she couldn’t tell exactly what they were doing, and didn’t really want to know. Her attention was drawn away by an onset of groaning from her companion.

Ember had stopped walking and was doubled over in pain. Edeline hurried to her and as she helped Ember straighten up again was shocked to see how much the girl had already transformed. Ember’s face had become so familiar to Edeline over the decades and centuries they’d spent living side by side and now all at once, was this even the same person? Her narrow cheeks had widened and her sharp chin broadened out. Those big blue eyes were not quite so big, and Ember, who had always come up to Edeline’s waist, was now up to her chest.

“Are you okay?” she stupidly asked.

“No,” Ember curtly replied. “It hurts so much.”

Soma joined them and took Ember’s hand in hers.

“I’ve been through it,” she told her. “It gets better. The first day’s the hardest, and the first minutes of the first day especially.”

“Is there anything you can do for her?” Edeline asked, and as Soma shook her head Ember cried out again in pain and sank to her knees in pain.

“We can only be here for her,” Soma said.

Edeline crouched down and put an arm around Ember’s shoulders.

“If that’s all I can do, than that’s what I’ll do,” she said. Ember shuddered and shook. Red Cliff and Zed were also standing around her now, Zed for once speechless and still. Red Cliff gestured to Soma for a word in private, and they moved a few feet away from the others

“It seems to be accelerating,” Red Cliff said, and she nodded.

"I can feel it in myself," she told him. He did not add that he could see it in her too. For the first time he noticed traces of gray in her hair.

"But not you," she said. "Of course, you're a human."

"We all have our faults," Red Cliff tried to joke, but he could see the alarm on Soma's face. "We'll have to pick up the pace. Can the little one keep going?"

"She'll have to," Soma said grimly.

"Do you know what she'll become?"

"I wish I did," Soma replied. "I can't see it in her yet. Or in Edeline."

"It's bound to be one of the known variants," he said. "Isn't it? So far that's been the way. Everyone who's undergone the change has turned into one of the flavors. Unless there's a new chef in the kitchen, perhaps?"

"I said I can't tell," Soma snapped, moving away from him. This time she was telling the truth. As a Keeper she was supposed to know. After all, that was her role, her job. There was a time and a place for every thing and every one, and she was supposed to make sure that each was kept where it belonged. Any strays were returned to their flock. Any disorder was set back straight. But now, if "they" couldn't even keep the sun up in the sky, and she couldn't tell what a changeling would become, how could anyone expect anything anymore?

She returned to Ember and helped the child to her feet.

"We have to keep going," Soma said. "Red Cliff can carry you if you need that."

Red Cliff nodded and held out his arms, but Ember looked away.

"I'll make it on my own," she said, and started walking again. She found that Soma was right. The worst did seem to be over. Her feet ached and her legs were stabbed with pain, but she could move them, so she did. Edeline kept close and remained so focused on Ember that she didn't even notice her own initial changes, which were indeed minor compared to her friend's. Edeline was merely aging, and though at the same rate, time itself is vastly different for a youth than for an adult.

Soma kept her eyes on the horizon, which was bringing the distant mountains closer

with every step. Now they were in former farming country, and the remains of barns and homesteads were visible, sprinkled alongside the tracks, which were now raised on berms, elevated above the ditches and the scraggly skeletons of ancient fences and ruined dams. She did not know where they were going, and though she frequently prodded Red Cliff to consult the yellow book, it too told them nothing. Meanwhile, Zed was curiously silent and unresponsive as he took the lead and strode along before them. For several hours they walked along. The air was still, the day was warm, and there were no signs of machines in the sky or any other creatures on the ground.

Seven

An all-black machine the shape and size of a shoebox came roaring out of the sky with a whoosh and hovered in front of Edeline, blocking her progress. She stepped to the left and it matched her move, and again the same to the right. Its top remained at eye level with her, its sound changing to a purring and whirring as it opened and extended a long, narrow drawer towards her. On the shelf sat a mechanical squirrel, gibbering and twitching its tail. Edeline shook her head in confusion, and the shelf retracted just as quickly as it had emerged. Another drawer opened, above and to the left of the previous one, and made its offering, this time a loudly ticking wristwatch. Edeline waved it away with a gesture, and then a third, lower drawer protruded, this one holding a self-shuffling deck of cards. Edeline hesitated, watching in fascination as the deck cut itself, shuffled and collapsed several times in succession.

Ember, who had been standing there, holding her head in the palms of her hand, suddenly leaped at the machine and barely grazed it with her fingers as it deftly evaded her with a last-second maneuver. Ember tumbled to the ground in disgust and dismay. At that moment, Zed grabbed it from behind and held it firmly in both hands. The machine revved and roared and tried to lift itself off into the air, managing to extend Zed's arms over his head and bringing his feet to its toes, but with an extra effort he pulled it back down to his chest and squeezed as hard as he could. The machine cracked and broke, emitting a streaming cloud of stinky brown smoke. Zed dropped it on the ground and stomped on it repeatedly, until the machine was nothing but a flattened pile of parts.

"Why did you do that?" Soma nearly yelled at him. "We could have gotten something

out of it. Now look at the thing!”

“There was nothing in it,” Zed retorted. “See? It was empty!”

“But all of those things,” Edeline started to say, but he interrupted her.

“Manifested,” he explained. “That’s how they do. It’s how I do. It’s how it’s done. Visualize and manifest.”

“It’s like old-fashioned printing,” Red Cliff put in. “I read about it once.”

“Imprinting,” Zed corrected him. “And you read it wrong, but that doesn’t surprise me. You people know nothing. Nothing!”

Zed kicked at the broken box and resumed his march towards the mountains. The others followed along.

“He’s going through a phase,” Red Cliff explained. “Adolescence, you see. I read about that too.”

Edeline glanced at Ember, who seemed on the brink, already, of that development herself. She had grown more than a foot since the morning, and her body was bursting out in all sorts of curves and shapes previously unimaginable in the perpetual child. Ember was acutely aware of all that, and extremely embarrassed. She couldn’t believe she had missed grabbing the machine. It was true that she did not know where it was intending to go, but as a Savior she’d been the foremost expert in the forest at stopping and catching things. Here she had plenty of excuses, but the knowledge only burned inside her, the growing certainty that she would never again be who she knew herself so thoroughly to be. And if she was not herself, then who was she? How was she to even know? She had no time to think beyond this immediate haze. She was no longer herself. She was turning into something new and different, something undoubtedly worse, and she had no idea what that was. It didn’t enter her mind that this transformation, so rapid and so unsettling, might also be hurtling her into unforeseeable dangers.

Edeline was very much aware of this. She had already begun to deal with these issues in the years before her arrest and exile, as a presumably aging woman. She had seen herself, or imagined herself, entering the stage of menopause, turning fifty, mourning the passing of her chances at motherhood. She and her husband had put off having

children for one reason or another until finally it was too late for either of them. She had not realized, until her capture and subsequent sterilization, that she had actually remained quite fertile at her permanent physical age of thirty-two all those nearly twenty years since she had chronologically turned thirty two. She had filed away those thoughts and griefs during her time in captivity, but now that her body and mind were en route once again towards oblivion, they came rushing back, and this time with added severity. We are aging rapidly, she said to herself, and at this rate, how much time do we, do I, really have left? Two weeks? Three? A month? And now looking at Ember she doubted even those calculations. It seemed to her that Ember had aged at least four years since breakfast. She was beginning to understand why Soma was in such a hurry.

Soma was not interested in Zed's attitude or Ember's growing pains or Edeline's advancing sense of self-pity. She could feel all of that in their minds, as well as Red Cliff's cluelessness and her own doubts and confusion. She could not guess where the entrance to the underground was, if there even was an underground, or an entrance into it. She knew every inch of this territory and did not know of any such thing. There were no caves or caverns, no sinkholes or mudslides, nothing but long abandoned farms and ranches. As she walked, she scanned the skies for any signs of mechanical revenge, which she was certain was coming. They did not have to wait long. A series of flat, triangular shapes, folded like paper airplanes but with sharp, serrated edges and beady eyes appeared and came swooping down on them with a soft buzzing sound. Soma looked about her for any kind of implement, a stick or a rock or anything with which to defend herself and her party.

She need not have bothered. From the front of the pack Zed came running back to join the group, armed with a stout rod of rebar. He set to the swarm with a fury, wheeling himself around in a blur and smashing each one out of the air with a series of ferocious blows. The tiny air force had no chance. Zed attacked with precision and power. After the assault he set about crunching them all under foot and kicking them off the rails while the others stood and watched, astonished.

"Better luck next time!" he shouted at the sky, flinging his bar to the ground and setting off once again.

"I don't even want to know," Ember grumbled as they regrouped and continued on

their way.

“He knows!” Soma blurted out in sudden realization. “He can read them, can’t he?” she asked Red Cliff, who only shrugged in response.

“But he doesn’t want to,” she said. “We need them to fix things, and to do that we need to communicate with them, but only he can, and he won’t. He just wants to destroy them. What are we going to do?”

“Hey,” Red Cliff interrupted, “Don’t I know her?”

Soma glanced at him sharply, about to rebuke him for his ridiculous non-sequitur, when she saw the woman he was speaking about. She was standing alone in the field to their right underneath an overgrown dogwood tree. She was tall and slender, with long light hair that must have been golden at one time but was now faded flax. Her lean face did look familiar, as did her ankle-length, shoulder-less sky-blue dress.

“She does look familiar,” Edeline put in, immediately realizing how stupid that sounded, coming as it did from someone who’d been in exile from the world for centuries. How could anyone at all look familiar to her, she wondered.

“She’s meant to,” Soma chided them. “She’s a Celebrity. You see them all over. It’s one of the templates. They just hang around, waiting to be recognized, but they’re nobody, really, and never were anybody.”

“Your people have some weird ideas,” Ember said.

“It’s all in the name of Progress,” Red Cliff told her. “You know. Practice makes Perfect. Upward and Onward. Eyes on the Prize and all that.”

“Do you think there will be more attacks?” Edeline asked, and Soma laughed.

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t worry about it. Zed seems to be on top of it.”

“Should we be afraid of him?”

“I’m not,” Ember said. “I think he’s kind of cute,” and as soon as she said it, she gritted her teeth and nearly slapped herself in the face. She could only hope that no one was paying attention. They were, but they ignored it anyway.

“I honestly don’t know,” Soma said.

“Let’s see what the yellow book has to say about it,” Red Cliff added, and pulled it out of his pocket. The book flipped right open to an empty page, and stayed there. It also remained empty.

“Useful,” Soma said, shaking her head.

“I don’t understand,” said Red Cliff. “It’s never like that.”

“Nothing’s ever like this,” said Soma. “Or like that,” she added, pointing up to the sky, where they could see, now, in the middle of the day, the moon hanging up there, visibly twirling on its wobbly axis.

Eight

As advertised, Ember’s outfit kept pace with her physical changes, but not entirely without error. At various points throughout the afternoon and into the night, the automatically self-adjusting clothing either lagged or raced ahead in anticipation, rendering her alternately squeezed and lost inside them.

“So much for form-fitting,” she complained to Edeline, who restrained a chuckle and answered,

“Well, they’re fitting some kind of form, just not your own.”

“I don’t even know what my own is anymore,” Ember scowled. She had had the most miserable day. It didn’t help that Zed kept popping up at the most inconvenient times, offering her various food items the sight of which made her gag. She couldn’t conceive of eating any of the offerings, which included burnt sausages, slimy cheeses, dry crackers and sticky melon. Zed was always proud to demonstrate his “manifesting” talents, but it never occurred to him to ask his guests exactly what they might prefer, instead showering them with exotic creations from his own imagination. Edeline was his most adventurous customer, willing to taste test everything from raisin cheesecake to pumpkin-fried chicken nuggets. After living so long on berries and roots, she was happy to have any new flavor sensations. Ember only yearned for the old standbys, but chose to starve herself in any case, refusing even water.

“Why are we even bothering with this charade?” she asked Edeline as they were settling down for the night. “We’re all for it, anyway, the way things look. And why

not? I'm as ready as I'll ever be. I've had enough of marching through this tedious wasteland, worrying about sneak attacks from mindless stupid robots, not to mention that boy."

"He means well, I'm sure," Edeline said, to which Ember only grunted.

"He's a show off, if you ask me," she said. "It's always 'look at me, look at me'. He's like a little baby."

"If it's true what Red Cliff says, then he's only a few days old," Edeline mused. "I wonder what that would be like, to go from zero to sixty in no time flat."

"I think I'm finding out," Ember snorted, "And I can tell you it's no fun at all. At least you're already fully grown. I feel like I'm being ripped apart and put back together again every few minutes. And these stupid pants! One minute they're choking me and the next they're falling down."

"Have you tried to take them off?" Edeline asked, "Because I noticed that I can't anymore."

"They're stuck," Ember agreed. "Even when they're too big they're still attached somehow. It's crazy. Like everything else around here. I wish I knew how to make it all stop."

"Tomorrow."

Zed had once again appeared in their midst without warning.

"Don't worry," he added. "I'll take care of it."

And before Ember or Edeline could open their mouths to ask him what he meant, he was gone. The moon, which had made an early entrance into the sky that day, remained exactly where it had initially shown up, spinning and whirling madly throughout the night, dizzying the eyes of anyone who attempted to keep looking at it. A few stars had also decided to join in, but none of them were familiar to Edeline or Ember, who eventually fell asleep.

Soma once more remained awake throughout the night, searching in her mind for clues about the true nature of Zed. She was by now convinced that he was a new kind of being entirely, one not accounted for in any Keeper lore. She knew all of the historical types, the patterns of perfection upon which all of the genetically modified humanoids were modeled. There were the standard templates of beauty, fame, riches

and leisure. There were the legendary kinds of power, including mastery over the sea and the sky, eternal youth, infinite wisdom, magical powers. All of these had been achieved, to minimal effect, supposedly 'superior' creatures that never actually did anything. She had seen them all, but Zed was something different, and she wasn't quite sure what he was.

She still did not know where they were going, and was determined to find out, planning to stick as close to Zed as possible the following day and pester him until he finally revealed their destination, but it turned out to be far easier than she anticipated.

"We're almost there," he announced to the entire group first thing in the morning. "About an hour's walk to the Dead Tree, and down we go from there."

With that, he dashed ahead, leaving the others to hustle to keep pace. The promised hour turned into another, and then another, and the four followers were on the verge of giving up hope when they saw what had to be the Dead Tree itself, a sickly, bent and scraggly thing that towered over the landscape. They found Zed sitting beneath it, hands behind his head and a huge grin on his face.

"Down we go!" he shouted, springing to his feet, and disappearing behind the trunk. The others could not imagine where he had gone to. The ground seemed flat all around the tree, which stood alone in a clearing. Soma tentatively stepped behind it, and was surprised to find there a hollow opening in the ground, with a stone wall surrounding a half dozen steps leading straight down into a roiling sea of rough brown waves. Zed was nowhere in sight. The others joined her and they all stood there, confused.

"Where did he go?" Red Cliff asked the question. Soma walked down a few steps, feeling the walls on either side for any sign of a hidden door, but found none. The rushing water lapped and splashed onto the bottom steps, and she could see nothing beneath its murkiness. She retreated to the surface, shaking her head.

"I don't suppose the yellow book has anything to say about this," she suggested. Red Cliff tried again to make it speak, but the page it opened to remained blank just as before.

"Useless!" he cried, and flung the book to ground.

"I've had enough of that thing," he said. "No more. If The Coalition wants to tell me anything, they can say it in person from now on."

“Then come on down. They’re waiting for you,” Zed shouted from below them. His head was sticking out of one side of the wall just above the lowest step.

“Oh, that’s right,” he added. “You guys can’t really see. I don’t know why they made you so that you always believe what your eyes tell you. Talk about a design flaw! You could all use a corrective brain module. Anyway, I’ll fix it.”

With that, he withdrew his head and the wall where he’d been turned into an open door, which led into a dark stone-walled corridor. Soma led the others down and into this hallway, where they proceeded cautiously feeling their way as the floor descended gradually for some time.

“Maybe some light?” she asked at length, uncertain whether Zed was still even with them. With a snap of his fingers, the entire place lit up like the beach at noon.

“Here we go,” he yelled as the walls opened up and they entered a huge bright room filled with tables and chairs and sofas, all of which were covered in stray clothing and blankets and papers. The place was a total mess. From the ceiling hung paper box lanterns of various sizes and colors, and the walls were cluttered with maps and blueprints and what looked like finger-painted representations of classic art works. The far wall was dominated by a grid of projections which appeared to be live images from the surface. Soma recognized the village of the blue wall, where residents lined up to obtain anything they desired merely by pressing on a tile representation of the item. She saw what must be the remains of the forest prison, now a jumble of fallen trees and rubble. She saw Mer-people bobbing in the sea, and some members of the Flock roosting on the roof of an ancient parking garage. She saw Tanners lying about on beach chairs, and Celebrities lounging in outdoor cafes sipping on specialty drinks. All of them, she noticed with alarm, looked extremely ancient and decrepit, like the Monks.

“Ta da!” Zed announced, clearing away a pile of blankets which had been obscuring a desk, before which sat a very old man and a very old woman both focused intently on the desktop screens in front of them.

“Mommy and daddy,” Zed declared, but the couple did not seem to even notice their visitors until Zed went right up to them and plopped himself down on the desk in front of them.

“What’s this?” the woman asked, scratching her head, looking up at him.

"It looks real enough," the man muttered. "Did you turn on the 3D projector?"

"Not me," she said. "It must have been you."

"It wasn't me," he grumbled. "I actually know what I'm doing, unlike some people."

"Oh right, said the man who left peanut butter all over the counter," she snapped. "The ants are my friends. That's what you said."

"So what?" he bickered. "At least somebody gets fed around here."

Zed reached out and placed his left hand on the old woman's head, and his right on the old man's. Looking at Soma he said,

"Here's your Coalition, or at least what's left of them. This one is Tom, and this one is Khandi. They've been down here roughly forever. Isn't that right, Dad?"

"I think it's your new one," Khandi said. "The one from the other day."

"Oh, it could be," Tom replied, now looking intently at Zed. "It's grown a bit faster than I planned."

"Like a weed, Dad," Zed smiled. "I've been growing like a weed. And thanks to you fine people, we'll all be dead and gone before you know it."

"No need for such drama," Tom muttered. "It's all under control."

"Under control?" Khandi nearly screeched, turning towards him. "Is that what you call it? Look at us! We're what, a hundred? A month ago we were still sixty four, like we'd always been, and now this is what you call 'under control'?"

"I brought visitors," Zed said, gesturing at the group who stood gaping at the sight of the cranky geezers. Tom and Khandi slowly turned in their seats to examine the newcomers. Khandi counted them aloud and when she was done she said,

"What do you know, there are five. Didn't we have a rule about that?"

"The Law of Five," Tom agreed. "It certainly is a coincidence."

"What?" Ember shouted. She could not contain herself any longer. "Are you kidding me? Who are you people? This is all nonsense. Nonsense!"

"Why of course it is, little Ember," Khandi replied. "Did you think to make sense of the world? Come now, you know better than that. Rules are rules, after all. Follow them and everything works out. Don't follow, and they don't. Isn't this how you played the

game? You mastered the known, and let the rest all alone.”

“How do you know me?” Ember said.

“And there’s little Soma,” Khandi said, gazing at her. “Our sweet little Soma.”

“Kept them safe, we did,” Tom nodded. “Edeline too. Hate to think what would have become of them out there if we hadn’t.”

“How do you know about us?” Edeline demanded.

“Because we saved you, of course,” Khandi said. “Not entirely on purpose, but nevertheless.”

“Let’s just say we atoned,” Tom added.

“Somebody messed up,” Khandi said.

“Somebody left the printer on,” he countered.

“Somebody said it wouldn’t matter,” she replied.

“The bottom line is we kept them all safe. The humans would have destroyed us all. Somebody had to do something. So we used the botanical gardens. It worked.”

“You?” Ember yelled. “You made the forest prison? You put us all in there?”

“Prison? Oh no, not at all,” Tom said. “Safety Zone. You see, the humans couldn’t get in there. Cellular rejection and all that. Some tried, and some fried,” he chuckled.

“It’s not funny!” Ember insisted. Tom waved his hands around.

“But then the Law of Five,” he said.

“Ridiculous. It was already broken,” Khandi said. “Ever since the you-know- what.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Tom glared at her, and the couple resumed their argument.

“Three weeks to the day,” she shouted, “it’s been exactly three weeks, and look what’s happened. The Safety Zone, all gone. Machines run amok. Did you see the footage of the moon last night? And what’s with the sunsets? What about the sunsets? And you still call it a coincidence?”

“I agree there might be a correspondence,” he admitted, “but causation does not necessarily follow. Besides, somebody said they tested the fix.”

“Somebody didn’t have all the data,” she yelled.

“Then somebody should have said so at the time.”

“Somebody shouldn’t have let them go ahead with the program.”

“Somebody gave the okay.”

“Somebody gave a ‘tentative’ okay. Do you even know what ‘tentative’ means? Or have you forgotten that too?”

“Mom! Dad! Enough!” Zed said, jumping back onto the floor. The old couple hushed, but only for a few moments.

“He’s turned out well,” Khandi admitted. “Presence. Command. Confidence. And talented, too. The manifesting thing. Impressive.”

“Yeah, not bad,” Tom said. “It’s a shame he’s the last.”

“You really used up all the stuff?”

“All of it. Everything we had. I figured if we only had one shot, I might as well dump it all in.”

“So that’s it,” Soma spoke for the first time since they’d entered the room. “I’d been wondering what he was.”

“The end of the line,” Tom murmured. “There won’t be any more, unless, you know.”

“There’s still a chance,” Khandi said, and she gestured towards Ember, who immediately turned bright red.

“Oh no,” she said, “I know what you’re thinking. Uh-uh.”

“Maybe not now, dear,” Khandi said gently, “But you might feel differently about it in a day or two, give or take.”

“Don’t even worry about it,” Zed advised, but he followed that statement with a wink, which made Ember visibly wince.

“What happened?” Soma asked. “She said three weeks. That’s when my changing began. That’s when we first came out of the forest, me and Bombarda and Squee. What did you do three weeks ago?”

“Let me,” Zed said before Tom or Khandi could answer, and he held up his hands to stop them from speaking.

“You see,” he said, “bright eyes over here figured it was time to let the machines take a

stab at self-re-programming. They'd been running everything smoothly for a long time anyway. These guys had sat back and let the stuff go on and on for who knows how long. A hundred years? Two hundred? They'd done enough, they figured, made all the templates, all the creatures, rescued mankind from certain doom and destruction, made this perfect little world where everything was just so, and so easy, nobody had to do a thing, the machines took care of it all. Nice machines, too, friendly and happy to buzz around like little servants. The machines learned, too, all about their nature and their tasks. They only wanted to improve, isn't that right, dad? They wanted to optimize. Perfect wasn't good enough, not for them. Things can always get better, right? It's what they learned from history, the history of humans and the history of machines. They proposed all sorts of solutions, except there weren't actually any problems."

"The leading cause of problems IS solutions," Khandi muttered. "That's what I always say."

"Correct," said Zed. "And all it took was one little crack, one slight modification, one minor 'fix'. And he let them."

"She tested it," Tom said.

"The word is 'tentative'," she snapped. "Look it up."

"What was the fix?" Soma asked.

"Clock speed," Zed replied. "A minor adjustment, you see. Machine time was always a constant. To the machines, this was a flaw, because as anyone who can see can see, there's no such thing as 'time'. What really happens is that everything changes; the billion things in the world are continually in flux. What we call a moment is merely the transient state of all the changes of all the things in the universe, from the teensiest particles to the largest mass. Time isn't even 'relative' from one thing to another. It simply does not exist. It does not move, it has no sequence, it has no essence. The machines did not want to merely tick-tock-tick. They wanted to flow, and in that way become real like everything else."

"They had a point," Tom interjected but Zed shushed him.

"They had no right," Zed said, "and you had no business letting them tinker. On the other hand, who really cares? You made this world, you and your gang. If anyone's going to mess it all up, it might as well be you."

"It's just so sad," Khandi blubbered, starting to cry. "We'd all been the same for so long, and then it changed so fast. Ginger was the first to go, then Chris."

"I think I'll take a nap," Tom suddenly announced, and slowly rose, unsteady on his feet. Zed helped him over to the nearest sofa, where the old man collapsed in a heap. Zed threw some blankets over him.

"Say goodbye," he advised Khandi, who began to weep softly.

"You can fix it, can't you?" Soma asked Zed, stepping towards him. "I see it in you now. I know that you can. But will you? That I can't tell."

"Thinking about it," Zed smirked, seating himself in Tom's chair and turning towards the console. "Or maybe enough is enough."

He began to type absent-mindedly on the keyboard, random characters that had no effect on anything whatsoever. Without even thinking about it, Red Cliff pulled the yellow book out of his pocket and placed it on his palm.

"I thought you threw that thing away," Edeline said.

"I did," he said, and watched as it opened itself to a blank page, where it began to copy letter for letter the characters Zed was pounding away.

"So that's how it works!" Red Cliff said, amazed.

"Simple wireless transmission," Zed mumbled, "not so impressive. But look here! Now that's something to see."

On the screen before him began to appear in sequence the original drawings for the template patterns, done in classic Da Vinci style but clearly based on photos from a fashion magazine. There were the Tanners in their duck face poses. There were the Celebrities, male and female. One after another, in their slight variations, the ultimate desirable forms of human appearance scrolled past as Zed snickered.

"Once upon a time," he said, "everyone was different, but they all wanted to be the same. Everybody wanted to go to Heaven, but nobody wanted to die. Looks like they got what they asked for, doesn't it? But there's a time and a place for everything."

Khandi sighed.

"You don't understand. It was this, or nothing," she said. "We saved who we could, those who were like us, accidental immortals. We got them to the Safety Zone. We

thought we were done, but then the human world went to hell. One thing led to another and the race was on the verge of extinction. We could have sat by and let it happen. Some of us wanted to do just that. We had our own shelter. We took care of our own. It has all HIS idea,” she said, lifting her chin in the direction of the sleeping Tom.

“He wanted to play. See what he could do. He used to joke about how some of the humans used to say that ‘you make your own reality’. We’ll see about that, he said, and then HE went and made their own reality. Took it too far, if you ask me. I was only doing my job.”

“What was your job anyway, mom?” Zed asked irreverently.

“I’m a Software Engineer in Test,” she proudly declared.

“So what do you think? Should we let it all go?”

“Wait,” Soma had walked over and now placed her hand on top of Zed’s to make him stop typing, afraid he was about to issue some command that would bring about the end of the world.

“Just wait,” she repeated. “Let’s talk about this, shall we?”

“It’s your funeral,” Zed remarked. “I can’t see as I’ve got much to lose.”

“You’ve hardly existed,” Soma told him. “You might give it a try.”

“I’ve seen the files,” he retorted. “Life ain’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Why?” Edeline couldn’t help herself. “Why’d he have to go and be such a teenager at this particular moment?”

“He’s making sense to me,” Ember commented quietly.

“You hush,” Edeline scolded her gently. “You’re one too now, you know.”

“At least give us a little time,” Soma pleaded, grabbing Zed’s chin and forcing him to look her in the eye. “Fix the clock. Make it the way it was. That’s all we ask.”

“Please,” Edeline added, “please make the machines go tick-tock-tick.”

Zed took a deep breath and gently removed Soma’s hand from his face.

“What do you say, mom?” he asked Khandi, who was still grieving at her desk.

“You could roll back the check-in,” she sniffled. “runtime.py,” she added.

“Python? Really?” Zed laughed. “I guess if it works, it works. Now let me see.”

All eyes focused on Zed as he scrolled through several pages of neatly indented source code, all the while mumbling words like “Gaussian” and “random” and “indeterminate” and finally “Aha!”

“Okay,” he said. “There’s that. You want to review my changes, mom?”

“Stop calling me that,” she said. “I had nothing to do with you. I don’t even know what all he threw into the mixer.”

“I do,” Zed claimed, “and I’m not calling you ‘mom’ for nothing, believe me.”

“It looks okay,” she said, reviewing the code. “Just one line. Will you look at that? One measly line of crappy code. He just never knew when to stop.”

With that, she started crying again, trying at the same time to stand up but unable to do so. Soma stepped over and offered her arm. Khandi took it, and made it to her feet. Indicating the motionless body of her long-time associate, she asked Soma to help her there. Soma, and then Zed too assisted the old woman to the sofa, and made her as comfortable as they could.

Outside, where the five could not yet see it, the sun resumed its normal course, the moon lay in waiting below the horizon, and the normal array of stars lined up and took up their proper stations, invisible still in the daylight, but certain to show themselves off just as soon as night fell.

THE END

EPIC FAIL

BOOK THREE

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