

Whiptail

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Robert Reed is one of the finest and most prolific writers of short fiction in SF and fantasy. His stories appear in amazing profusion, six to ten or more of them a year, and at least five or six of them worthy of consideration for a year's best volume. What is particularly impressive is his range, which approaches such masters as Ray Bradbury or Gene Wolfe. And he writes about a novel a year as well (his first, *The Leeshore*, appeared in 1987). He has been publishing SF since 1986, when he won the grand prize in the annual Writers of the Future contest, but has only reached his present level of achievement in the mid-'90s. To date, his novels, though favorably reviewed, have not unfortunately lived up to the achievement of his short fiction, and so he is not as highly ranked nor as popular in the field as he deserves. This story is from Asimov's. Sex and gender roles were a concern to many writers in SF in 1998, but nowhere with more wit than here.

"What a beautiful morning," I was singing. "And so strange! Isn't it? This incredible, wonderful fog, and how the frost clings everywhere. Lovely, lovely, just lovely. Is this how it always is, Chrome...?"

"Always," she joked, laughing quietly. Patiently. "All year long, practically."

She was teasing. I knew that, and I didn't care. A river of words just kept pouring out of me: I was talking about the scenery and the hour, and goodness, we were late and her poor mother would be waiting, and God on her throne, I was hungry. Sometimes I told my Chrome to drive faster, and she would, and then I would find myself worrying, and I'd tell her, "Slow down a little." I'd say, "This road doesn't look all that dry."

Chrome smiled the whole time, not minding my prattle.

At least I hoped she didn't.

I can't help what I am. Dunlins, by nature, are small and electric. Nervous energy always bubbling. Particularly when they're trying not to be nervous. Particularly when their lover is taking them to meet her family for the first time.

"Have you ever seen a more magical morning, Chrome?"

"Never," she promised, her handsome face smiling at me.

It was the morning of the Solstice, which helped that sense of magic. But mostly it was because of the weather. A powerful cold front had fallen south from the chilly Arctic Sea, smashing into the normally warm winter air. The resulting fog was luscious thick, except in sudden little patches where it was thin enough to give us a glimpse of the pale northern sun. Wherever the fog touched a cold surface, it froze, leaving every tree limb and bush branch and tall blade of grass coated with a glittering hard frost. Whiteness lay over everything. Everything wore a delicate, perishable whiteness born of degrees. A touch colder, and there wouldn't have been any fog. Warmed slightly, and everything white would have turned to vapor and an afternoon's penetrating dampness.

The road had its own magic. A weathered charm, I'd call it. Old and narrow, its pavement was rutted by tires and cracked in places, and the potholes were marked with splashes of fading yellow paint. Chrome explained that it had been thirty years since the highway association had touched it. "Not enough traffic to bother with," she said. We were climbing up a long hillside, and at the top, where the road flattened, there was a corner and a weedy graveled road that went due south.

“Our temple's down there,” she told me.

I looked and looked, but all I saw was the little road flanked by the white farm fields, both vanishing into the thickest fog yet.

For maybe the fiftieth time, I asked, “How do I look?”

“Awful,” she joked.

Then she grabbed my knee, and with a laughing voice, Chrome said, “No, you look gorgeous, darling. Just perfect.”

I just hoped that I wasn't too ugly. That's all.

We started down a long hillside, passing a small weathered sign that quietly announced that we were entering Chromatella. I read the name aloud, twice. Then came the first of the empty buildings, set on both sides of the little highway. My Chrome had warned me, but it was still a sad shock. There were groceries and hardware stores and clothing stores and gas stations, and all of them were slowly collapsing into their basements, old roofs pitched this way and that. One block of buildings had been burned down. A pair of Chrome's near-daughters had been cooking opossum in one of the abandoned kitchens. At least that was the official story. But my Chrome gave me this look, confessing, “When I was their age, I wanted to burn all of this. Every night I fought the urge. It wasn't until I was grown up that I understood why Mother left these buildings alone.”

I didn't understand why, I thought. But I managed not to admit it.

A big old mothering house halfway filled the next block. Its roof was in good repair, and its white walls looked like they'd been painted this year. Yet the house itself seemed dark and drab compared to the whiteness of the frost. Even with the OPEN sign flashing in the window, it looked abandoned. Forgotten. And awfully lonely.

“Finally,” my Chrome purred. “She's run out of things to say.”

Was I that bad? I wondered.

We pulled up to the front of the house, up under the verandah, and I used the mirror, checking my little Dunlin face before climbing out.

There was an old dog and what looked like her puppies waiting for us. They had long wolfish faces and big bodies, and each of them wore a heavy collar, each collar with a different colored tag. “Red Guard!” Chrome shouted at the mother dog. Then she said, “Gold. Green. Pink. Blue. Hello, ladies. Hello!”

The animals were bouncing, and sniffing. And I stood like a statue, trying to forget how much dogs scare me.

Just then the front door crashed open, and a solid old voice was shouting, “Get away from her, you bitches! Get!”

Every dog bolted.

Thankfully.

I looked up at my savior, then gushed, “Mother Chromatella. I'm so glad to meet you, finally!”

“A sweet Dunlin,” she said. “And my first daughter, too.”

I shook the offered hand, trying to smile as much as she smiled. Then we pulled our hands apart, and I found myself staring, looking at the bent nose and the rounded face and the gray spreading through her short black hair. That nose was shattered long ago by a pony, my Chrome had told me. Otherwise the face was the same, except for its age. And for the eyes, I noticed. They were the same brown as my chrome's, but when I looked deep, I saw something very sad lurking in them.

Both of them shivered at the same moment, saying, "Let's go inside."

I said, "Fine."

I grabbed my suitcase, even though Mother Chromatella offered to carry it. Then I followed her through the old door with its cut-glass and its brass knob and an ancient yellow sign telling me, "Welcome."

The air inside was warm, smelling of bacon and books. There was a long bar and maybe six tables in a huge room that could have held twenty tables. Bookshelves covered two entire walls. Music was flowing from a radio, a thousand voices singing about the Solstice. I asked where I should put my things, and my Chrome said, "Here," and wrestled the bag from me, carrying it and hers somewhere upstairs.

Mother Chrome asked if it was a comfortable trip.

"Very," I said. "And I adore your fog!"

"My fog." That made her laugh. She set a single plate into the sink, then ran the tap until the water was hot. "Are you hungry, Dunlin?"

I said, "A little, yes," when I could have said, "I'm starving."

My Chrome came downstairs again. Without looking her way, Mother Chrome said, "Daughter, we've got plenty of eggs here."

My Chrome pulled down a clean skillet and spatula, then asked, "The others?"

Her sisters and near-daughters, she meant.

"They're walking up. Now, or soon."

To the Temple, I assumed. For their Solstice service.

"I don't need to eat now," I lied, not wanting to be a burden.

But Mother Chrome said, "Nonsense," while smiling at me. "My daughter's hungry, too. Have a bite to carry you over to the feast."

I found myself dancing around the main room, looking at the old neon beer signs and the newly made bookshelves. Like before, I couldn't stop talking. Jabbering. I asked every question that came to me, and sometimes I interrupted Mother Chrome's patient answers.

"Have you ever met a Dunlin before?"

She admitted, "Never, no."

"My Chrome says that this is the oldest mothering house in the district? Is that so?"

"As far as I know—"

“Neat old signs. I bet they're worth something, if you're a collector.”

“I'm not, but I believe you're right.”

“Are these shelves walnut?”

“Yes.”

“They're beautiful,” I said, knowing that I sounded like a brain-damaged fool. “How many books do you have here?”

“Several thousand, I imagine.”

“And you've read all of them?”

“Once, or more.”

“Which doesn't surprise me,” I blurted. “Your daughter's a huge reader, too. In fact, she makes me feel a little stupid sometimes.”

From behind the bar, over the sounds of cooking eggs, my Chrome asked, “Do I?”

“Nonsense,” said Mother Chrome. But I could hear the pride in her voice. She was standing next to me, making me feel small—in so many ways, Chromatellas are big strong people—and she started to say something else. Something else kind, probably. But her voice got cut off by the soft bing-bing-bing of the telephone.

“Excuse me,” she said, picking up the receiver.

I looked at my Chrome, then said, “It's one of your sisters. She's wondering what's keeping us.”

“It's not.” My Chrome shook her head, saying, “That's the out-of-town ring.” And she looked from the eggs to her mother and back again, her brown eyes curious but not particularly excited.

Not then, at least.

The eggs got cooked and put on plates, and I helped pour apple juice into two clean glasses. I was setting the glasses. I was setting the glasses on one of the empty tables when Mother Chrome said, “Good-bye. And thank you.” Then she set down the receiver and leaned forward, resting for a minute. And her daughter approached her, touching her on the shoulder, asking, “Who was it? Is something wrong?”

“Corvus,” she said.

I recognized that family name. Even then.

She said, “My old instructor. She was calling from the Institute...to warn me....”

“About what?” my Chrome asked. Then her face changed, as if she realized it for herself. “Is it done?” she asked. “Is it?”

“And it's been done for a long time, apparently. In secret.” Mother Chrome looked at the phone again, as if she still didn't believe what she had just heard. That it was a mistake, or someone's silly joke.

I said nothing, watching them.

My Chrome asked, "When?"

"Years ago, apparently."

Mine asked, "And they kept it a secret?"

Mother Chrome nodded and halfway smiled. Then she said, "Today," and took a huge breath. "Dr. Corvus and her staff are going to hold a press conference at noon. She wanted me to be warned. And thank me, I guess."

My Chrome said, "Oh, my."

I finally asked, "What is it? What's happening?"

They didn't hear me.

I got the two plates from the bar and announced, "These eggs smell gorgeous."

The Chromatellas were trading looks, saying everything with their eyes.

Just hoping to be noticed, I said, "I'm awfully hungry, really. May I start?"

With the same voice, together, they told me, "Go on."

But I couldn't eat alone. Not like that. So I walked up to my Chrome and put an arm up around her, saying, "Join me, darling."

She said, "No."

Smiling and crying at the same time, she confessed, "I'm not hungry anymore."

She was the first new face in an entire week.

Even in Boreal City, with its millions from everywhere, there are only so many families and so many faces. So when I saw the doctor at the clinic, I was a little startled. And interested, of course. Dunlins are very social people. We love diversity in our friends and lovers, and everywhere in our daily lives.

"Dunlins have weak lungs," I warned her.

She said, "Quiet," as she listened to my breathing. Then she said, "I know about you. Your lungs are usually fine. But your immune system has a few holes in it."

I was looking at her face. Staring, probably.

She asked if I was from the Great Delta. A substantial colony of Dunlins had built that port city in that southern district, its hot climate reminding us of our homeland back on Mother's Land.

"But I live here now," I volunteered. "My sisters and I have a trade shop in the new mall. Have you been there?" Then I glanced at the name on her tag, blurting out, "I've never heard of the Chromatellas before."

"That's because there aren't many of us," she admitted.

"In Boreal?"

"Anywhere," she said. Then she didn't mention it again.

In what for me was a rare show of self-restraint, I said nothing. For as long as we were just doctor and patient, I managed to keep my little teeth firmly planted on my babbling tongue. But I made a point of researching her name, and after screwing up my courage and asking her to dinner, I confessed what I knew and told her that I was sorry. "It's just so tragic," I told her, as if she didn't know. Then desperate to say anything that might help, I said, "In this day and age, you just don't think it could ever happen anywhere."

Which was, I learned, a mistake.

My Chrome regarded me over her sweet cream dessert, her beautiful eyes dry and her strong jaw pushed a little forward. Then she set down her spoon and calmly, quietly told me all of those dark things that doctors know, and every Chromatella feels in her blood:

Inoculations and antibiotics have put an end to the old plagues. Families don't have to live in isolated communities, in relative quarantine, fearing any stranger because she might bring a new flu bug, or worse. People today can travel far, and if they wish, they can live and work in the new cosmopolitan cities, surrounded by an array of faces and voices and countless new ideas.

But the modern world only seems stable and healthy.

Diseases mutate. And worse, new diseases emerge every year. As the population soars, the margin for error diminishes. "Something horrible will finally get loose," Dr. Chromatella promised me. "And when it does, it'll move fast and it'll go everywhere, and the carnage is going to dwarf all of the famous old epidemics. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind."

I am such a weakling. I couldn't help but cry into my sweet cream.

A strong hand reached across and wiped away my tears. But instead of apologizing, she said, "Vulnerability," and smiled in a knowing way.

"What do you mean?" I sniffled.

"I want my daughters to experience it. If only through their mother's lover."

How could I think of love just then?

I didn't even try.

Then with the softest voice she could muster, my Chrome told me, "But even if the worst does happen, you know what we'll do. We'll pick ourselves up again. We always do."

I nodded, then whispered, "We do, don't we?"

"And I'll be there with you, my Dinnie."

I smiled at her, surprising myself.

"Say that again," I told her.

"I'll be with you. If you'll have me, of course."

"No, that other part—"

"My Dinnie?"

I felt my smile growing and growing.

“Call up to the temple,” my Chrome suggested.

“Can't,” her mother replied. “The line blew down this summer, and nobody's felt inspired to put it up again.”

Both of them stared at the nearest clock.

I stared at my cooling eggs, waiting for someone to explain this to me.

Then Mother Chrome said, “There's that old television in the temple basement. We have to walk there and set it up.”

“Or we could eat,” I suggested. “Then drive.”

My Chrome shook her head, saying, “I feel like walking.”

“So do I,” said her mother. And with that both of them were laughing, their faces happier than even a giddy Dunlin's.

“Get your coat, darling,” said my Chrome.

I gave up looking at my breakfast.

Stepping out the back door, out into the chill wet air, I realized that the fog had somehow grown thicker. I saw nothing of the world but a brown yard with an old bird feeder set out on a tree stump, spilling over with grain, dozens of brown sparrows and brown-green finches eating and talking in soft cackles. From above, I could hear the ringing of the temple bells. They sounded soft and pretty, and suddenly I remembered how it felt to be a little girl walking between my big sisters, knowing that the Solstice ceremony would take forever, but afterward, if I was patient, there would come the feast and the fun of opening gifts.

Mother Chrome set the pace. She was quick for a woman of her years, her eyes flipping one way, then another. I knew that expression from my Chrome. She was obviously thinking hard about her phone call.

We were heading south, following an empty concrete road. The next house was long and built of wood, three stories tall and wearing a steeply pitched roof. People lived there. I could tell by the roof and the fresh coat of white paint, and when we were close, I saw little tractors for children to ride and old dolls dressed in farmer clothes, plus an antique dollhouse that was the same shape and color as the big house.

I couldn't keep myself from talking anymore.

I admitted, “I don't understand. What was that call about?”

Neither spoke, at first.

On the frosty sidewalk I could see the little shoeprints of children, and in the grass, their mothers' prints. I found myself listening for voices up ahead, and giggles. Yet I heard nothing but the bells. Suddenly I wanted to be with those children, sitting in the temple, nothing to do but sing for summer's return.

As if reading my mind, Mother Chrome said, “We have a beautiful temple. Did you see it in all my fog?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Beautiful,” she repeated. “We built it from the local sandstone. More than a hundred and fifty years ago.”

“Yes, ma'am,” I muttered.

Past the long house, tucked inside a grove of little trees, was a pig pen. There was a strong high fence, electrified and barbed. The shaggy brown adults glared at us, while their newest daughters, striped and halfway cute, came closer, begging for scraps and careless fingers.

I asked again, “What about that call? What' so important?”

“We were always a successful family,” said Mother Chrome. “My daughter's told you, I'm sure.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Mostly we were farmers, but in the last few centuries, our real talents emerged. We like science and the healing arts most of all.”

My Chrome had told me the same thing. In the same words and tone.

We turned to the west, climbing up the hill toward the temple. Empty homes left empty for too long lined both sides of the little street. They were sad and sloppy, surrounded by thick stands of brown weeds. Up ahead of us, running from thicket, was a flock of wild pheasants, dark brown against the swirling fog.

“Chromatellas were a successful family,” she told me, “and relatively rich, too.”

Just before I made a fool of myself, I realized that Mother Chrome was trying to answer my questions.

“Nearly forty years ago, I was awarded a student slot at the Great Western Institute.” She looked back at me, then past me. “It was such a wonderful honor and a great opportunity. And of course my family threw a party for me. Complete with a parade. With my mother and my grand, I walked this route. This ground. My gown was new, and it was decorated with ribbons and flower blossoms. Everyone in Chromatella stood in two long lines, holding hands and singing to me. My sisters. My near-sisters. Plus travelers at the mother house, and various lovers, too.”

I was listening, trying hard to picture the day.

“A special feast was held in the temple. A hundred fat pigs were served. People got drunk and stood up on their chairs and told the same embarrassing stories about me, again and again. I was drunk for the first time. Badly. And when I finished throwing up, my mother and sisters bundled me up, made certain that my inoculation records were in my pocket, then they put me on the express train racing south.”

We were past the abandoned homes, and the bells were louder. Closer.

“When I woke, I had a premonition. I realized that I would never come home again. Which is a common enough premonition. And silly. Of course your family will always be there. Always, always. Where else can they be?”

Mother Chrome said those last words with a flat voice and strange eyes.

She was walking slower now, and I was beside her, the air tingling with old fears and angers. And that's when the first of the tombstones appeared: Coming out of the cold fog, they were simple chunks of fieldstone set on end and crudely engraved.

They looked unreal at first.



Ready to dissolve back into the fog.

But with a few more steps, they turned as real as any of us, and a breath of wind began blowing away the worst of the fog, the long hillside suddenly visible, covered with hundreds and thousands of crude markers, the ground in front of each slumping and every grave decorated with wild flowers: Easy to seed, eager to grow, requiring no care and perfectly happy in this city of ghosts.

When my great was alive, she loved to talk about her voyage from Mother's Land. She would describe the food she ate, the fleas in her clothes, the hurricane that tore the sails from the ship's masts, and finally the extraordinary hope she felt when the New Lands finally passed into view.

None of it ever happened to her, of course.

The truth is that she was born on the Great Delta. It was her grand who had ridden on the immigrant boat, and what she remembered were her grand's old stories. But isn't that the way with families? Surrounded by people who are so much like you, you can't help but have their large lives bleed into yours, and yours, you can only hope, into theirs.

Now the Chromatellas told the story together.

The older one would talk until she couldn't anymore, then her daughter would effortlessly pick up the threads, barely a breath separating their two voices.

Like our great cities, they said, the Institutes are recent inventions.

Even four decades ago, the old precautions remained in effect. Students and professors had to keep their inoculation records on hand. No one could travel without a doctor's certificate and forms to the plague Bureau. To be given the chance to actually live with hundreds and thousands of people who didn't share your blood—who didn't even know you a little bit—was an honor and an astonishment for the young Chromatella.

After two years, she earned honors and new opportunities. One of her professors hired her as a research assistant, and after passing a battery of immunological tests, the two of them were allowed up into the wild mountain country. Aborigines still lived the old ways. Most kept their distance. But a brave young person came forward, offering to be their guide and provider and very best friend. Assuming, of course, that they would pay her and pay her well.

She was a wild creature, said Mother Chrome.

She hunted deer for food and made what little clothing she needed from their skins. And to make herself more beautiful to her sister-lover, she would rub her body and hair with the fresh fat of a bear.

In those days, those mountains were barely mapped.

Only a handful of biologists had even walked that ground, much less made a thorough listing of its species.

As an assistant, Mother Chrome was given the simple jobs: She captured every kind of animal possible, by whatever means, measuring them and marking their location on the professor's maps, then killing them and putting them away for future studies. To catch lizards, she used a string noose. Nooses worked well enough with the broad-headed, slow-witted fence lizards. But not with the swift, narrow-headed whiptails. They drove her crazy. She found herself screaming and chasing after them, which was how she slipped on rocks and tumbled to the rocky ground below.

The guide came running.

Her knee was bleeding and a thumb was jammed. But the Chromatella was mostly angry, reporting what had happened, cursing the idiot lizards until she realized that her hired friend and protector was laughing wildly.

“All right,” said Mother Chrome. “You do it better!”

The guide rose and strolled over to the nearest rock pile, and after waiting forever with a rock's patience, she easily snatched up the first whiptail that crawled out of its crevice.

A deal was soon struck: One copper for each whiptail captured.

The guide brought her dozens of specimens, and whenever there was a backlog, she would sit in the shade and watch Mother Chrome at work. After a while, with genuine curiosity, the guide asked, “Why?” She held up a dull brown lizard, then asked, “Why do you put this one on that page, while the one in your hand goes on that other page?”

“Because they're different species,” Mother Chrome explained. Then she flipped it on its back, pointing and saying, “The orange neck is the difference. And if you look carefully, you can tell that they're not quite the same size.”

But the guide remained stubbornly puzzled. She shook her head and blew out her cheeks as if she was inflating a balloon.

Mother Chrome opened up her field guide. She found the right page and pointed. “There!” At least one field biologist had come to the same easy conclusion: Two whiptails, two species. Sister species, obviously. Probably separated by one or two million years of evolution, from the looks of it.

The guide gave a big snort.

Then she calmly put the orange neck into her mouth and bit off the lizard's head, and with a small steel blade, she opened up its belly and groin, telling Mother Chrome, “Look until you see it. Until you can.”

Chromatellas have a taste for details. With a field lens and the last of her patience, she examined the animal's internal organs. Most were in their proper places, but a few were misplaced, or they were badly deformed.

The guide had a ready explanation:

“The colorful ones are lazy ladies,” she claimed. “They lure in the drab ones with their colors, and they're the aggressors in love. But they never lay any eggs. What they do, I think, is slip their eggs inside their lovers. Then their lovers have to lay both hers and the mate's together, in a common nest.”

It was an imaginative story, and wrong.

But it took the professor and her assistant another month to be sure it was wrong, and then another few months at the Institute to realize what was really happening.

And at that point in the story, suddenly, the two Chromatellas stopped talking. They were staring at each other, talking again with their eyes.

We were in the oldest, uppermost end of the cemetery. The tombstones there were older and better made, polished and pink and carefully engraved with nicknames and birthdates and deathdates. The

temple bells were no longer ringing. But we were close now. I saw the big building looming over us for a moment, then it vanished as the fog thickened again. And that's when I admitted, "I don't understand." I asked my Chrome, "If the guide was wrong, then what's the right explanation?"

"The lizard is one species. But it exists in two forms." She sighed and showed an odd little smile. "One form lays eggs. While the other one does nothing. Nothing but donate half of its genetic information, that is."

I was lost.

I felt strange and alone, and lost, and now I wanted to cry, only I didn't know why. How could I know?

"As it happens," said Mother Chrome, "a team of biologists working near the south pole were first to report a similar species. A strange bird that comes in two forms. It's the eggless form that wears the pretty colors."

Something tugged at my memory.

Had my Chrome told me something about this, or did I read about it myself? Maybe from my days in school...maybe...?

"Biologists have found several hundred species like that," said my Chrome. "Some are snakes. Some are mice. Most of them are insects." She looked in my direction, almost smiling. "Of course flowering plants do this trick, too. Pollen is made by the stamen, and the genetics in the seeds are constantly mixing and remixing their genes. Which can be helpful. If your conditions are changing, you need to make new models to keep current. To evolve."

Again, the temple appeared from the fog.

I had been promised something beautiful, but the building only looked tall and cold to me. The stone was dull and simple and sad, and I hated it. I had to chew on my tongue just to keep myself from saying what I was thinking.

What was I thinking?

Finally, needing to break up all this deep thinking, I turned to Mother Chrome and said, "It must have been exciting, anyway. Being one of the first to learn something like that."

Her eyes went blind, and she turned and walked away.

I stopped, and my Chrome stopped. We watched the old woman marching toward the big doors of the temple, and when she was out of earshot, I heard my lover say, "She wasn't there when Dr. Corvus made the breakthrough."

I swallowed and said, "No?"

"She was called home suddenly. In the middle of the term." My Chrome took me by the shoulder and squeezed too hard, telling me, "Her family here, and everywhere else... all the Chromatellas in the world were just beginning to die..."

A stupid pesticide was to blame.

It was sold for the first time just after Mother Chrome left for school. It was too new and expensive for most farmers, but the Chromatellas loved it. I can never remember its name: Some clumsy thing full of

ethanes and chlorines and phenyl-somethings. Her sisters sprayed it on their fields and their animals, and they ate traces of it on their favorite foods, and after the first summer, a few of the oldest Chromes complained of headaches that began to turn into brain tumors, which is how the plague showed itself.

At first, people considered the tumors to be bad luck.

When Mother Chrome's great and grand died in the same winter, it was called a coincidence, and it was sad. Nothing more.

Not until the next summer did the Plague Bureau realize what was happening. Something in the Chromatella blood wasn't right. The pesticide sneaked into their bodies and brains, and fast-growing tumors would flare up. First in the old, then the very young. The Bureau banned the poison immediately. Whatever was left unused was buried or destroyed. But almost every Chromatella had already eaten and breathed too much of it. When Mother Chrome finally came home, her mother met her at the train station, weeping uncontrollably. Babies were sick, she reported, and all the old people were dying. Even healthy adults were beginning to suffer headaches and tremors, which meant it would all be over by spring. Her mother said that several times. "Over by spring," she said. Then she wiped at her tears and put on a brave Chromatella face, telling her daughter, "Dig your grave now. That's my advice. And find a headstone you like, before they're all gone."

But Mother Chrome never got ill.

"The Institute grew their own food," my Chrome told me.

We were in bed together, warm and happy and in love, and she told the story because it was important for me to know what had happened, and because she thought that I was curious. Even though I wasn't. I knew enough already, I was telling myself.

"They grew their own food," she repeated, "and they used different kinds of pesticides. Safer ones, it turns out."

I nodded, saying nothing.

"Besides," she told me, "Mother spent that summer in the wilderness. She ate clean deer and berries and the like."

"That helped too?" I asked.

"She's never had a sick day in her life," my Chrome assured me. "But after she came home, and for those next few months, she watched everyone else get sicker and weaker. Neighbor communities sent help when they could, but it was never enough. Mother took care of her dying sisters and her mother, then she buried them. And by spring, as promised, it was over. The plague had burnt itself out. But instead of being like the old plagues, where a dozen or fifty of us would survive... instead of a nucleus of a town, there was one of us left. In the entire world, there was no one exactly like my mother."

I was crying. I couldn't help but sob and snifle.

"Mother has lived at home ever since." My Chrome was answering the question that she only imagined I would ask. "Mother felt it was her duty. To make a living, she reopened the old mothering house. A traveler was her lover, for a few nights, and that helped her conceive. Which was me. Until my twin sisters were born, I was the only other Chromatella in the world."

And she was my Chrome.

Unimaginably rare, and because of it, precious.

Five sisters and better than a dozen children were waiting inside the temple, sitting together up front, singing loudly for the Solstice.

But the place felt empty nonetheless.

We walked up the long, long center aisle. After a few steps, Mother Chrome was pulling away from us. She was halfway running, while I found myself moving slower. And between us was my Chrome. She looked ahead, then turned and stared at me. I could see her being patient. I could hear her patience. She asked, "What?" Then she drifted back to me, asking again, "What?"

I felt out of place.

Lonely, and lost.

But instead of confessing it, I said, "I'm stupid. I know."

"You are not stupid," she told me. Her patience was fraying away. Too quietly, she said, "What don't you understand? Tell me."

"How can those lizards survive? If half of them are like you say, how do they ever lay enough eggs?"

"Because the eggs they lay have remixed genes," she told me, as if nothing could be simpler. "Every whiptail born is different from every other one. Each is unique. A lot of them are weaker than their parents, sure. But if their world decides to change around them—which can happen in the mountains—then a few of them will thrive."

But the earth is a mild place, mostly. Our sun has always been steady, and our axis tilts only a few degrees. Which was why I had to point out, "God knew what she was doing, making us the way we are. Why would anyone need to change?"

"My Chrome almost spoke. Her mouth came open, then her face tilted, and she slowly turned away from me, saying nothing.

The singing had stopped.

Mother Chrome was speaking with a quick quiet voice, telling everyone about the telephone call. She didn't need to explain it to her daughters for them to understand. Even the children seemed captivated, or maybe they were just bored with singing and wanted to play a new game.

My Chrome took one of her sisters downstairs to retrieve the old television.

I sat next to one of the twins, waiting.

There was no confusing her for my Chrome. She had a farmer's hands and solid shoulders, and she was six months pregnant. With those scarred hands on her belly, she made small talk about the fog and the frost. But I could tell that her mind was elsewhere, and after a few moments, our conversation came to a halt.

The television was set up high on the wooden altar, between Winter's haggard face and Spring's swollen belly.

My Chrome found an electrical cord and a channel, then fought with the antenna until we had a clear picture and sound. The broadcast was from Boreal City, from one of the giant All-Family temples. For a

moment, I thought there was a mistake. My Chrome was walking toward me, finally ready to sit, and I was thinking that nothing would happen. We would watch the service from Boreal, then have our feast, and everyone would laugh about this very strange misunderstanding.

Then the temple vanished.

Suddenly I was looking at an old person standing behind a forest of microphones, and beside her, looking young and strange, was a very homely girl.

Huge, she was.

She had a heavy skull, and thick hair sprouted from both her head and her face.

But I didn't say one word about her appearance. I sat motionless, feeling more lost than ever, and my Chrome slid in beside me, and her mother sat beside her.

Everyone in the temple said, "Oh my!" when they saw that ugly girl.

They sounded very impressed and very silly, and I started laughing, then bit down on my tongue.

To the world, the old woman announced, "My name is Corvus. This is my child. Today is her sixteenth birthday."

The pregnant sister leaned and asked her mother, "How soon till we get ours?"

Mother Chrome leaned, and loud enough for everyone to hear, she said, "Very soon. It's already sent."

I asked my Chrome, "What's sent?"

"The pollen," she whispered. "We're supposed to get one of the very first shipments. Corvus promised it to Mother years ago."

What pollen? I wondered.

"I'll need help with the fertilizations," said her mother. "And a physician's hands would be most appreciated."

She was speaking to my Chrome.

On television, the woman was saying, "My child represents a breakthrough. By unlocking ancient, unused genes, then modifying one of her nuclear bodies, we have produced the first of what should be hundreds, perhaps thousands of special children whose duty and honor it will be to prepare us for our future!"

"I'll stay here with you," I promised my Chrome. "As long as necessary."

Then the hairy girl was asked to say something. Anything. So she stepped up to the microphones, gave the world this long, strange smile, then with the deepest, slowest voice that I had ever heard, she said, "Bless us all. I am pleased to serve."

I had to laugh.

Finally.

My Chrome's eyes stabbed at me.

"I'm sorry," I said, not really meaning it. Then I was laughing harder, admitting, "I expected it to look

prettier. You know? With a nice orange neck, or some brightly colored hair.”

My Chrome was staring.

Like never before, she was studying me.

“What's wrong?” I finally asked.

Then I wasn't laughing. I sat up straight, and because I couldn't help myself, I told all the Chromatelas, “I don't care how smart you know you are. What you're talking about here is just plain stupid!”

I said, “Insane.”

Then I said, “It's my world, too. Or did you forget that?”

And that's when my Chrome finally told me, “Shut up,” with the voice that ended everything. “Will you please, for once, you idiot-bitch, think and shut up!”