

STRENGTH ALONE

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I am strength.

I am not smart, that is Moira. I cannot articulate, like Meda. I do not understand the math that Quant does, and I cannot move my hands like Manuel. My world is not the fields of force that Bola sees.

If to anyone, you would think I am closest to Manuel; his abilities are in his hands, in his dexterity. But his mind is jagged sharp; he remembers things and knows them for us. Trivial information that he spins into memory.

No, I am closest to Moira. Perhaps because she is everything I am not. She is as beautiful as Meda, I think. If she were a singleton, she would still be special. If the pod were without me, I think, they would be no worse off. If I were removed, the pod would still be Apollo Papadopoulos, and still be destined to become the starship captain we were built to be. We are all humans individually, and I think my own thoughts, but *together*, we are something different, something better, though my contribution is nothing like the others'.

When I think this, I wall it off. Bola looks at me; can he smell my despair? I smile, hoping he cannot see past my fortifications. I touch his hand, our pads sliding together, mixing thoughts, and send him a chemical memory of Moira and Meda laughing as children, holding hands. They are three- or four-years-old in the memory, so it is after we have pod-bonded, prior to Third State, but still in the crÃche. Their hair is auburn, and it hangs from their heads in baloney curls. Moira has a skinned knee, and she isn't smiling as largely as Meda. In the memory, in the distant past, Meda reaches for Bola, who reaches for Manuel, who reaches for Quant, who touches my hand, and we all feel Meda's joy at seeing the squirrel in the meadow, and Moira's anger at falling down and scaring it off. Here on the mountain, there is a pause in our consensus, as everyone catches the memory.

Moira smiles, but Meda says, "We have work to do, Strom."

We do, I know we do. I feel my face redden. I feel my embarrassment spread in the air, even through our parkas.

Sorry. My hands form the word, as the thought passes among us.

We are somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. Our teachers have dropped us by air car, here near the tree line, and told us to survive for five days. They have told us nothing else. Our supplies are those we could gather in the half-hour they gave us.

For seven weeks, we and our classmates have trained in survival methods: desert, forest, jungle. Not that we will see any of these terrains in space. Not that we will find climates of any kind whatsoever, except for deadly vacuum, and *that* we know how to survive.

On the first day of survival training, our teacher, Theseus, had stood before us and screamed in volleying bursts. He was a duo, the most basic form of pod, just two individual humans bound together.

"You are being taught to think!" yelled Theseus on the left.

"You are being taught to respond to unknown environments, under unknown and strenuous conditions!" continued Theseus on the right.

"You do not know what you will face!"

"You do not know what will allow you to survive and what will kill you!"

Two weeks of class instruction followed, and then week after week, we had been transported to a different terrain, a different locale, and shown what to do to survive. But always with Theseus nearby. Now, in our final week, we are alone, just the students on this mountain.

"Apollo Papadopoulos! Cold-weather survival! Twenty kilos per pod member! Go!" one of Theseus had yelled at us from our dorm-room doorway.

Luckily, the parkas were in the closet of our dorm room. Luckily, we had a polymer tent. Hagar Julian has only canvas coats with no insulation, we know. They will have a harder time of it.

Twenty kilograms is not a lot. I carry sixty kilos of it myself, and distribute the rest to my podmates. In the aircar, we note that Hagar Julian and Elliott O'Toole have split the load evenly among themselves; they are not playing to their strengths.

Strom! Once again, Meda chastises me, and I jerk my hands away from Manuel's and Quant's, but they can still smell the embarrassment pheromones. I cannot stop the chemical proof of my chagrin from drifting in the frigid air. I reach again for my place in the consensus, striving to be an integral part of the pod, trying to concentrate. Together, we can do anything.

Chemical thoughts pass from hand to hand in our circle, clockwise and counterclockwise, suggestions, lists, afterthoughts. Some thoughts are marked by their thinker, so that I know it is Bola who has noted the drop in temperature and the increased wind-speed, which causes us to raise the priority of shelter and fire. Consensus forms.

We have to rig our shelter before dark. We have to start a fire before dark. We have to eat dinner before dark. We have to dig a latrine.

The list passes among us. We reach consensus on decision after decision, faster than I can reason through some of the issues: I add what I can. But I trust the pod. The pod is me.

Our hands are cold; we have removed our gloves to think. In the cold of the Rockies our emotions' the pheromones that augment our chemical thoughts' are like lightning, though sometimes the wind will whisk the feeling away before we can catch it. With gloves on our touch pads and parkas over our noses and neck glands, it is hard to think. Almost, it is like working alone, until we finish some sub-task and join for a quick consensus, shedding gloves.

"Strom, gather wood for the fire," Moira reminds me.

I am strength, so the tasks that require broad shoulders fall to me. I step away from the others, and I am suddenly cut off from them: no touch, no smell. We practice this, being alone. We were born alone, yet we have spent our youth, from First State to Fourth State, striving to be a single entity. And now we practice being alone again. It is a skill. I look back at the other five. Quant touches Moira's hand, passing a thought, some shared confidence. The spike of jealousy must be the face of my fear. If they have thought something important, I will know it later, when we rejoin. For now, I must act alone.

We have chosen an almost-flat tract of land in a meager grove of wind-stunted pines. The rock slopes gently away into a V shape, a catch for wind and snow. The shallow ravine drops sharply into a ledge of rock, the side of a long valley of snowdrifts and rock that the air car passed over as we arrived. Above us is a sheer wall, topped with a mass of snow and ice. I cannot see the peak from here; we are many

hundreds of meters below it. Stretching in either direction are lines of jagged mountain tops, their white faces reflecting the afternoon sun. Clouds seem to bump against their western sides.

The snow is thin enough on the ground here that we can reach the rocky ground beneath it. The trees will shelter us from the wind and provide support for the tent lines, we hope. I walk down the gentle slope, along the line of pines.

We have no axe, so I must gather fallen logs and branches. This will be a problem. We cannot have a good fire with half-decayed logs. I file the thought away for later consensus.

I find a sundered pine branch, thick as my forearm, sticky with sap. I wonder if it will burn, as I drag it back up to the camp. I should have climbed up to find wood, I realize, so that I could drag it *down* to the camp. It is obvious now, and would have been obvious before if I had asked for consensus.

I drop my wood in the clearing the others have made and start to arrange it into a fireplace. I draw stones into a U-shape, the open end facing the wind down the mountain for a draft. The stones at the sides can be used for cooking.

Strom, that is where the tent will go!

I jump back, and I realize that I had been working without consensus, making decisions on my own.

Sorry.

Confused and embarrassed, I drag the stones and wood away from the tent clearing. I think that I am not well, but I suppress that as I sweep snow away and place the stones again.

We decide to gauge our classmates'™ progress, so I climb the trail above the tree line to see how the rest of our class is doing. There are five of us on survival training, all of us classmates, all of us familiar with each other and in competition. It is how it has always been among us.

Each is destined to be a starship pilot. Or so we think. How many master pilots can the *Consensus* have? Not more than one. Will there be other ships for the rest of us to pilot? None are being built. Will the rest of us be allowed a lesser rank or position in the ship? Would we want it? These are questions we have asked ourselves often.

How the rest are doing is important.

Above the tree line and to the west half a kilometer away, I see our classmate Elliott O'Toole's tent already up, with the pod inside it. To the east, a few hundred meters away, I see another student's™ Hagar Julian's™ working in the snow, instead of on an area of rocky slope. They are digging into a drift, perhaps to form a snow cave. They will have a long time to dig, I think. Hollowing out a space for six will expend much energy. They can't have a fire.

The other two pods are hidden in the trees beyond Hagar Julian. I cannot determine their progress, but I know from experience that our greatest competition will be from Julian and O'Toole.

I return, and pass the others memories of what I have seen.

We have begun pitching the tent, using the nearby pine trees to support it. We have no ground spikes, removed from the packs to reach the twenty-kilogram-per-person limit. There are many things we have removed to make our weight limit, but not matches. I kneel to start the fire.

Strom!

The scent call is sharp on the crisp wind. The pod is waiting for me to help pull and tie the tent support lines; they have consensed without me. Sometimes they do that. When it is expedient. I understand; they can reach a valid consensus without me easily enough.

We pull the spider-silk lines taut, and the tent stretches into place, white on white, polymer on snow, a bubble of sanctuary, and, suddenly, our shelter is ready. The thrill of success fills the air, and Bola enters and comes out again, smiling.

"We have shelter!"

Now dinner, Manuel sends.

Dinner is small bags of cold, chewy beef. Once we have the fire going, we can cook our food. For now, it's cold from the bag. *If we were really on our own in the mountains, we would hunt for our food*, I send. The image of me carrying the carcass of an elk over my shoulders makes Moira laugh. I mean it as a joke, but then I count the bags of jerky and dried fruit. We will be hungry by the end of the test. It is my job to see to the safety of the pod, and I feel bad that we did not pack more food.

"Another test," Bola says. "Another way to see if we're good enough. As if this mountain is anything like another world! As if this will tell them *anything* about us!"

Sometimes we feel manipulated. I know what Bola means. Everything we face is another test to pass. There is no failure, just success, repeated, until it means nothing. When we fail, it will be catastrophic.

"We can watch the sunset," I say.

We have loosened hoods and gloves in the tent, though it is still just above freezing inside. But the difference between inside and out becomes even more severe as the sun now hides behind the western peaks. The sunset is colorless, the sunlight crisp and white. It reflects off the bottom of the Ring, making the slim orbital torus brighter than it is at noon. Wispy clouds slide across the sky, moving fast, and I note to the others the possibility of snow. Before our five days on the mountain are over, we will see more snow, that is certain. Perhaps tonight.

Elliott O'Toole has managed to light a fire, and we smell the burning wood. He has finished his tent, and he has a fire. The smell of roasted meat drifts on the wind.

"Bastard!" Quant said. "He has steak!"

We don't need it.

I want it!

I say, "This is only about surviving, not luxury."

Bola glares at me, and I sense his anger. He is not alone. I cave before this partial consensus and apologize, though I don't know why I do. Meda has told me that I hate strife. I assume that everyone does. We are six and I am one. I bow to the group consensus, as we all do. It is how we reach the best decision.

With dinner finished and night upon us, we finish what chores we can outside: a fire, if we can start it, and a latrine. Manuel and I work on the fire pit, moving stones, breaking tinder, building up a steeple of wood. The wind is too strong, I realize, for a fire tonight. The flatness of the plateau made it a good place for a tent, but the wind whips down the ravine. The tent ropes sing.

We smell fear on the wind, child pheromones, and I think one of us is in danger, but then we smell it as a foreign fear: one of our classmates is in danger. Then, as the wind dies for a moment, we hear the heavy breathing of someone running through the snow drifts. The pod condenses around me, as it does in times of crisis. We touch, assess, but we have only the smell and the sound to base consensus on.

I move forward to help whoever it is. I smell the caution in the air, but ignore it. Now is the time to help. Sometimes we spend too much time being cautious, consensing on things. I would never share such thoughts.

It is one of Hagar Julian, just one. I don't know her name, but she is running in the cold, her hood down, her head exposed. She doesn't see me, but I catch her in my arms and stop her. In her terror, she would have run past us into the dark night, perhaps over the cliff.

The smell of her is alien. I force the hood over her head. The head is a heat sink; you must always keep it covered in the cold. That and the hands. Perhaps this is why the instructors have chosen the mountains for our final test; the organs that make us a pod are nearly useless in the cold.

"What is it? What's happened?" I ask.

She is heaving, releasing fear and nothing else. I don't know how much of her fear is from being separated from her self or from something else that has happened. I know that Julian is a close-knit pod. They seldom separate.

The night is black. I can't see O'Toole's fire, nor Julian's ice cave anymore. It is a miracle that she reached us.

I pick her up over my shoulder and carry her slowly through the snowdrifts to the open area around our tent. She is shivering. I push through the questions of my pod. Now is not the time for questions. Quant pulls open the tent for me.

Snow falls out of the woman's gloves. I take them off her hands, which are blue, and exchange them for my own. I check her boots and coat for more snow, and brush it out. By then, the rest of my pod has joined me, and I use them to access our survival instruction.

Hypothermia.

The shivering, the disorientation, and the lack of response are all signs of body-temperature loss. Maybe some of the disorientation is from being separated from her pod.

Hospitalize.

One of us glances at the transceiver in the corner of the tent. It is defeat to use it.

"Where's the rest of you?" I ask.

She doesn't even look at me.

I take a coil of spider-silk rope and begin cinching it to my coat.

No.

"Someone has to see what happened to the rest of her," I say.

We can't separate now.

I feel the pull to stay and consense. To wait for rescue.

"Keep her warm. Huddle close to her. Don't warm her quickly."

I pull the tent door open and close it, but not before Quant follows me out.

"Be careful. It's beginning to snow," she says. She takes the rope end from me and ties it to one of the D-rings on our tent. The end wraps around itself and knits itself together.

"I will."

The wind whips the snow into my face, needles of cold. I hunch over and try to make out Julian's tracks from her camp to ours. Snow has already started to fill in the prints. The moon glooms through scudding grey clouds, making the mountainside grey on grey. I continue, making this task my focus, so that I do not remember that I have left my pod behind. Even so, I count the steps I take, marking the distance of our separation.

I have to keep my face up to follow the tracks, and when I do, the wind freezes my nasal passages. The cold is like a headache. There is no smell on the wind, no trace of Hagar Julian.

The woman has walked across a slide of broken slate. Her footprints end on the jagged mounds of rock. I pause, knowing I am close to their campsite; they had been no farther than three hundred meters when I'd spied them.

I turn my back to the wind and tuck my head a moment. Still the snow finds a way into my eyes. The weather is worsening. I take a moment to memorize the feeling, the sting, the sound "for later.

I trudge on across the slate, slipping once and falling to one knee. The slate ends in a river of grey snow. I don't remember seeing this before. Then I realize that it's new. The snow bank above has collapsed, burying Hagar Julian's campsite in an avalanche.

I stand there, ignoring the cold.

I take one step onto the snow and it crunches under my boots. An hour ago, this area was clear, and now it is under a flood of rocks and snow. I look up at the mountain, wondering if more will follow, but swirling snow obscures it.

I climb up the side of the hill of snow. Ten meters into the slide, I see a flap of cloth, half covered. I pull at it, but the rest is buried too deep for me to extract it.

"Julian!" Sifting flakes muffle my voice. I yell again for my classmate.

I hear no reply, though I doubt I would have heard anything at all unless the speaker was next to me.

I pull my hands out of my pockets, hoping to catch a whiff of something on the pads on my palm. Nothing but needling cold. I am cocooned in a frozen, white mask. As isolated as the one part of Julian who made it to our camp.

I turn back. We will need digging equipment and many people to find Julian's corpses. I do not see how they could have survived. Except for the one.

But then I see something black against the grey of the swept snow. Just a smudge that catches my eye as I turn.

I stop and take one step up the slope, and I see that it is an arm. I am clawing at the ice, snow, and rock,

hoping, praying that below is a breathing body.

I scoop huge armfuls of snow behind me and down the slope, tracing the arm down, reaching a torso, and finding a hooded head. I try to pull the body out, but the legs are still trapped. I pause, and slowly pull back the hood. Male, a part of Julian, face and cheeks splotchy pink, eyes shut. The snow swirls around his mouth, and I think that it means he's breathing, but I can't be sure. I pass my palm under his nose, tasting for any pheromone, but there is nothing. I feel for a pulse.

Nothing.

My mind struggles to remember how to revive a victim with a stopped heart. Moira would know. Quant would know. They all would know. Alone, I know nothing.

I panic and just grab the body about its torso and heave backward, trying to free it from the snow. I pull but the body remains embedded. I sweep at the man's hips, feeling the futility of it. I'm useless here. Strength is useless now. I don't know what to do.

But now he is free to his knees, and I pull again. He comes free in a cascade of snow. I stagger under his weight, then lay him down.

I kneel next to him, trying to remember. My hands are red and stinging, and I stuff them into my pockets, angry at myself. I am useless alone. Moira would ... then it comes to me, as if Moira had sent it to me in a ball of memory. Compressions and breathing. Clear the throat, five compressions and a breath, five and a breath. Repeat.

I push at the man's coat, unsure if I am doing anything through the bundles of clothing. Then I squeeze his nose and breathe into his mouth. It's cold, like a dead worm, and my stomach turns. Still I breathe into his mouth and then compress again, counting slowly.

The cycle repeats, and his chest rises when I breathe into him. I stop after a minute to check the pulse. I think I feel something, and I wonder if I should stop. Is that his own diaphragm moving or just the air I've forced into him leaving his lungs, like a bellows?

I can't stop, and bend to the task again.

A cough, a spasm, but a reaction, and then he is breathing.

Alive!

The pulse is fast and reedy, but there.

Can he move? Can I get him back to the tent to warm him?

Then I hear the whine of the air car, and realize I won't have to carry him. Help is on the way. I fall back into the snow. Alive!

The whine of the car rises, and I see its lights coming up the valley, louder, too loud. I wonder at the fragility of the layers of snow on the ridges above and if the shrill engines will cause another wave of snow.

I can do nothing but wait. The air car reaches the edge of our camp and lowers itself behind the trees.

The engines die, but the sound does not. There is a deep rumble all around me, and I know what is happening. I know that the snow is coming down the mountain again. The first avalanche has weakened

the ledge of snow.

I stand, unsure. Then I see the wave of white in the air car spotlights.

"No!" I take one step toward the camp, then stop. The Julian here will die if I leave him.

The snow slams into my pod's campsite, flies up where it strikes the trees surrounding the tent. I see the twirling lights of the air car thrown up into the air. My pod! My body tenses, my heart thudding. I take one step forward.

The rumble is a crashing roar now. I look up at the snowbank above me, fearing that ice is about to bury us. But the outcropping of snow that has fed the first avalanche has uncovered a jagged ledge that is shielding us. The river of snow flows twenty meters away, but comes no nearer. If it had taken me, I would not have cared. My pod is in the torrent, and my neck tightens so that I can barely breathe.

I see something snaking on the ground, and think that the snow is chasing me uphill. I am jerked off my feet.

Dragged across the rock and ice, I realize that it is the line attached to my waist. The other end is attached to our tent, and it is dragging me down the mountain. Five, ten, twenty meters, I struggle to untie the rope, to find the nodule that will untwine the knot, but my chafed, useless hands can grip nothing.

I fall on my face, feel something smash into my nose, and in a daze I slide another few meters, closer to the avalanche. I thought it was slowing, but this close, it still seems to be a cascade of flying rock and snow.

I stand, fall, then stand again and lunge toward the avalanche, hoping to slacken the rope. I run, and I see a tree, at the edge of the river. I dive at it, haul myself around it once, then once more, wedging the line.

I pull and brace, and then the line is steel-taut.

My legs are against the trunk and I am standing against it, holding on, or else I'll be sucked into the vortex with my pod.

For a moment, the desperation whispers the question: how bad would that be? Is it better to die with my pod, or live on alone, a singleton, useless? A moment before, I had been ready for the avalanche to take me too.

But I cannot let go. A part of Julian still needs my help. I hold on, listening for the rumble to lessen.

Seconds, and then a minute, then two. Still I hold on, and the storm of snow slows, and the pull on my arms decreases. Sweat rolls down my cheeks, though the air is frigid. My arms shake. When the rope finally falls limp, I slump down and lie below the tree, unable to move. I am spent, and it takes minutes for me to recover enough to remove the rope. My fingers are raw and weak, and the spider-silk will not separate. Finally, the end unknits.

I stand and fall.

I shove my face into the snow to cool it, then realize how foolish that is. I stand again, and this time I make several steps before my legs shudder out from beneath me.

The snow is as soft as a feather bed, and I resolve to rest just a few moments.

It would be easy to sleep. So easy.

But I don't. The man is still on the mountain. A singleton just like me. He needs me. He needs someone strong to carry him down the mountain.

I glance at the rope. At the other end is my pod. How could they have survived the torrent? I stand and take one step onto the debris, but a cascade of tumbling snow drives me back. The snow ridge above is still unstable. I wipe my eyes with my raw hands, then turn and follow the trail I made as I was dragged down the mountain. It is easy to see the trail of blood I have left. I touch my lip and nose; I hadn't realized I'd been bleeding.

The Julian is still there, still breathing. And I cry aloud to see him alive, bawling like a child. I am anything but strength.

"What ... what are you ... crying for?"

The Julian is looking up at me, his teeth chattering.

"I'm crying because we're alive," I say.

"Good." His head drops back into the snow. His lips are blue and I know the chattering is a response to the cold and a precursor to hypothermia. We need to get him medical attention. We...

I am thinking as if I am still a pod. I cannot rely on Manuel to help me lift him. I cannot rely on Bola to show me the quickest way down. I am alone.

"We need to go."

"No."

"You need to get to warmth and medical aid."

"My pod."

I shrug, unsure how to tell him. "They're buried under here."

"I smell them. I hear them."

I sniff. Maybe there's a trace of thought on the wind, but I can't be sure.

"Where?" I ask.

"Nearby. Help me up."

I pull him to his feet and he leans against me, groaning. We take a step; he points.

I see the flap of cloth buried in the snow that I had noticed before.

He had survived several minutes in the snow. Perhaps his pod is trapped below. Perhaps they are in an air pocket, or in their hollowed out snow cave.

I kneel and begin to scoop away the snow around the cloth flap. He rolls next to me and tries to help clear. But he slumps against a mound of snow, too weak, and watches me instead.

The cloth is a corner of a blanket and it seems to go straight down.

For a while the going is all ice, and I claw at it with my numb fingers, unable to move more than a handful at a time. Then I am through that and the digging is easier.

Clods of snow bounce off my hood, and I am leery of more snow falling on top of us. I take a moment to push away all the snow from around us.

Two more scoops and suddenly the snow gives way, and I see a cavern of ice and snow and canvas, and within the cave, three bodies, three more of Julian. They are alive, breathing, and one is conscious. I pull them one by one out of the cave and put them next to their podmate.

The two that are conscious cling to each other and lie there, gasping for breath, and I am so tired I want to collapse into the hole.

I check each one for hypothermia, for breaks and contusions. One of them, a female, has a broken arm, and she winces as I move her. I have a loop of rope on my belt, not spider-silk, and I bind her arm across her chest. The fourth is unhurt.

"Wake up," I say. "Come on." The fourth one opens his eyes, begins to cough. The third, with the broken arm, is still unconscious. I gently slap her face. She comes awake and lunges, then gasps as the pain hits her. Her pod, what is left of it, surrounds her, and I step back, fall back on the snow, looking up into the sky. I realize that the snow is coming down harder.

"We have to get down the mountain," I say. "If another air car comes, it will start another avalanche. If another avalanche comes, we are doomed."

They don't seem to hear me. They cling together, their teeth chattering.

"We have to get down the mountain!" I yell.

Despair floods the air, then a stench of incoherent emotions. The four are in shock.

"Come on!" I say and pull one of them up.

"We can't ... our ... podmates," he says, words interspersed with chemical thoughts that I don't understand. The pod is degenerating.

"If we don't go now, we will die on this mountain. We have no shelter, and we are freezing."

They don't reply, and I realize they would rather die than break their pod.

"There's four of you," I say. "You are nearly whole."

They look among themselves, and I smell the consensus odor. Then one of them turns away angrily. They can't do it. No consensus.

I collapse onto the snow, head down, and watch the snow swirl between my legs. I am one who was six. The fatigue and despair catch me, and my eyes burn.

I am strength; I do not cry. But still my face is washed with tears for my pod, buried in the snow. My face is fire where the tears crawl. A splash falls into the snow and disappears.

We will sleep here in despair and die before the morning.

I look at them. I must get them down the mountain, but I don't know how to do it. I wonder what thoughts Moira would pass me if she were here. She would know what to do with these four.

They are four. Mother Redd was a four. Our teachers are fours. The Premier of the Overgovernment is a four. Why do they cry when they are no worse off than our greatest? I am allowed to cry, but not them.

I stand up.

"I've lost my pod too, and I am only one!" I shout. "I can cry, but *you* can't! You are four. Get up! Get up, all of you!"

They look at me as if I am mad, so I kick one, and she grunts.

"Get up!"

Slowly they rise, and I grin at them like a maniac.

"We will reach the bottom. Follow me. I am strength."

I lead them across the snow to the spill of the other avalanche. With the nanoblade on my utility knife, I cut a length of the rope that disappears into the snow. At the other end of the rope is my dead pod. I take a step onto the grey avalanche; perhaps I can dig them out as I have dug out Hagar Julian. I hear a rumble as the snow shifts beneath me. More snow tumbles down the mountain. It has not settled yet; more snow could fall at any moment. And I know that it has been too long now. If they are trapped under the snow, their air is gone. If I had turned at once, if I had followed the rope when the avalanche had stopped, perhaps I could have saved them, but I didn't think of that. Quant wasn't there to remind me of the logical choice. Bitterness seeps through me, but I ignore it. There are the four who are left to take care of.

I hand each of them a section of the rope, looping us together. Then I lead them down the mountain. It is nearly black, save the light reflected by the moon that splashes upon the snow. The ledge and gaping holes are obvious. It is the hidden crevasses that I fear. But every step we take is better than lying asleep in the snow.

Our path leads to a drop, and I back us up quickly, not wanting the four to gaze into the abyss. I begin to wonder if there is no way down. We were dropped off by air cars that morning. Perhaps the location is so remote that air cars alone can reach it. Perhaps there is no path down the mountain. Or worse, we will pass through the path of an avalanche and die under the piles of snow.

The snowfall is steady now, and in places we are up to our hips. But the effort is warmth. To move is to live, to stop is sleep and death.

The trees all look alike, and I fear we are stumbling in circles, but I know that if we continue downward we will reach the bottom. I see no signs of animal or human. The snow is pristine until we tramp through it.

The line jerks, and I turn to see that the last in the line, the one with the broken arm, has fallen.

I go to her and lift her onto my shoulder. The weight is nothing to the ache I already feel. What is another sixty kilograms? But our pace is slower now.

Still the others lag, and I allow rests, but never enough to let them sleep, until the fatigue is too much and I let my eyes droop.

Oblivion for just a moment, then I start awake. To sleep is to die. I rouse the four.

The four. I am thinking of them no longer as a pod, but as a number. Will they refer to me as the singleton? The one? There may be a place for a quad in society. But there is no place for a singleton.

After the Exodus of the Community, after the wars that followed, it was the pods who had remained in

control. The pods are now the care takers of the Earth, while the normal humans who are leftâ€”the singletonsâ€”are backward and luddite. The pods, just a biological experiment, a minority before, are the ones who survived cataclysm. Only now I am no longer a pod; I am a singleton, and the only place for me is in the singleton enclaves. Alone I cannot function in pod society. What could I contribute? Nothing. I look at the four. There is one thing I can contribute. These four are still a pod, still an entity. I can bring them to safety.

I stand up. â€œLet's go,â€• I say, but gently. They are too empty to protest. I show them how to put the snow to their lips and drink it as it melts.

"We need to go.â€• The one with the broken arm tries to walk. I walk beside her with a hand on her good arm.

The pine forest gives way to denser deciduous trees, and I feel warmer, though the temperature cannot have risen much. But the trees think it's warmer, so I think so too. The snow is less heavy here. Perhaps the storm is letting up.

"This mountain,â€• I say, â€œis less than seven kilometers high. We can walk seven kilometers easily, even in the cold. And this is all downhill."

No one laughs. No one replies.

The wind is gone, I notice, and with it the snow. The sky is grey still, but the storm is over. I begin to think that we might not die.

Then the last in our line steps too close to a ravine, and he's down the side, sliding from sight. The next two in line, unable or unwilling to let go, slide after him, and I watch the slithering rope.

Again, I think. Again with this damn rope pulling me away. I let go of it, and the rope disappears into the grey below. The woman at my side doesn't even know what is happening.

The ravine is three meters down, lined by a steep, but not vertical, slope. I see the three who have fallen at the base. I have no way to get them out, so I must follow.

I take the woman over my shoulder, and say, â€œHold on.â€• I slide down the hill, one arm to balance me, one arm to hold her, and my legs folded beneath me, lowering myself down the slope.

No hidden tree branches, I hope. There are none, and sooner than I think, we are at the bottom of the ravine.

The three others are there, sprawled at the edge of a small, unfrozen stream. Sometime in the past, water has carved a cave-like trough into the ravine wall. The woman on my shoulder has passed out, her face grey, her breathing shallow. How bad is her fracture? I wonder. How much worse have I made it? Manuel would have known an elegant way to get her down.

The air is warm here, in this grotto that is nearly below the ground. It is like a cave; the ground is a constant temperature a few meters below the surface, regardless of the blazing heat or the blowing snow. I squat. It may be five degrees.

"We can rest here.â€• We can even sleep, I think. No chance of frostbite. We can't get wet; the stream is too shallow.

A few meters down the streambed, I find an indentation. It is dry rock with roots overhanging. I carry the woman there and lead the others one by one to the cave.

"Sleep," I tell them.

My body is exhausted, and I watch the four fall asleep at once. I cannot. The female is in shock. I have made her arm worse by slinging her over my shoulder. She is probably bleeding internally.

I look at her grey face, and console myself that she would be dead if we were still a thousand meters up the mountain.

Unless they had sent another air car.

I sit there, my heart cold, not sleeping.

I have always been strong, even when we were children, before we first consensed. I was always taller, stronger, heavier. And that has always been my weapon. It is obvious. I am not about deception. I am not about memory, or insight, or agility. I am quick when threats are near, yes, but never agile.

I never thought I would outlive my pod. I never thought I'd be the one left.

I don't want to think these things, so I stand up, and use my utility knife to cut two saplings that are trying to grow in the gully. Using the rope, I fashion a travois. It will be easier on the female.

"You should have left us on the mountain." It is the one who I had first found in the snow. His eyes are open. "You're wasting too much energy on a broken pod."

I say nothing, though I could acknowledge the truth of it.

"But then you wouldn't know that. All your thinking parts are missing."

He's angry, and he is striking out at me because of it. I nod.

"Yes, I am strength and nothing more."

Maybe he wants to fight, I think, so I add, "I saved your life today."

"So? Should I thank you?"

"No. But you owe me your life. So we will walk down this mountain in the morning, and then we are even. You can die then, and I won't care."

"Pig-headed."

"Yes." I can't argue with that either.

He is asleep in moments, and I am too.

* * * *

I am stiff and cold in the morning, but we are all alive. I squat on the stones and listen for a few moments. The trickle of the water muffles all sound. I can't hear the whine of a rescue air car. I can't hear the shouts of searchers. We have traveled so far that they will not look for us in the right spot. We have no choice but to continue on.

A wave of doubt catches me unaware. My choice has doomed us. But more than likely staying on the mountain would have done the same, only sooner. These four want that, I know. Perhaps I should too.

I touch my pockets one by one. I am hungry, but I already know there is no food. I was just stepping out

of the tent for a moment. I had not prepared myself for a long journey in the cold. I check the pockets of the injured one, but she too is without food.

"Do you have food?" I ask the male, the one who argued with me. "What's your name anyway?"

"Hagar Jul ...," he starts to say, then stops. He glares at me. "No food."

I squat next to him. "Perhaps I can lead you back up the mountain, and then you'll forgive me for saving you."

"Saving™ is a debatable term."

I nod. "What's your name?"

We have been classmates for ten years, and yet I do not know his individual name. We have always interfaced as pods, never as individuals.

He doesn't say anything for a long moment, then says, "David."

"And them?"

"Susan is the one with the broken arm. Ahmed and Maggie. These three are still asleep on the ground."

"The others may still be alive," I say, and as I say it, I know it is what I wish for myself. But I saw the river of snow that carried them away.

"We didn't find Alia and Wren," he says, and then he coughs. It is to hide the sob.

I turn away, not wanting to embarrass him, and I say, "One of them found our tent. She may still live."

"That was Wren. Alia was near me."

"A rescue party?"

"Did you see a rescue party?"

"No."

"A body will survive for an hour in the snow if there's air. If there's no air, then it is ten minutes." His voice is savage. The other three stir.

"It was like swimming in oil. Like swimming in a dream while smothering," David says.

"David."

It is Maggie. She pulls him close, and I smell the tang of consensus. They gather near Susan and sit for minutes, thinking. I am glad for them, but I walk down the stream several meters, not wanting to be reminded. I am a singleton now.

The creek twists and turns. I pull myself across a rotten pine tree blocking the way, banging loose a rain of brown needles. My breath hangs in the moist air. It is not cold anymore, and I feel as if a thaw has passed through me.

The stream widens and opens up over a rocky basin where it spills in white spray. I see the valley before me, shrouded in mist. A kilometer below, the stream merges with a river. The ground to the river is rough

and rocky, but not as snowy as we have traveled until now. Nor is it as steep.

We'd left for the survival trip from a base camp near a river. I can only suppose that this is the same river. Following it would lead us to the camp.

I hurry back to the four.

They stand apart, their consensus concluded. David hoists Susan's travois.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

They look at me, their faces relaxed. This is the first time these four have consensed since their pod was sundered. It is a good sign that they can do it with just four.

"We're going back to find Alia and Wren," David says.

I stand for a moment, voiceless. They have reached a false consensus. It is something that we are trained to detect and discard. But the trauma and loss they have suffered has broken their thought processes.

David takes my silence for agreement, and he pulls Susan up the streambed.

I stand, unable to resist a valid consensus, unable to stop them from climbing back up the mountain. I take one step toward them, perhaps to fall in line with them, but I stop.

"No!" I say. "You'll never make it."

The four of them look at me as if I am a rock. It's not false consensus; it's pod instability. Insanity.

"We need to re-form the whole," David says.

"Wait! You've reached false consensus!"

"How could you know? You can't consense at all." The biting words jolt me.

They start walking. I run to intercept, placing a hand on David's chest.

"You will die if you go back up the mountain. You can't make it."

Ahmed pushes my arm away.

"We have to get back to Alia and Wren."

"Who was your ethicist?" I say. "Was it Wren? Is that why you're making faulty consensus? Think! You will die, just like Wren and Alia are dead."

"We had no ethical specialist," Maggie says.

"I saw the river from the end of this gully. We're almost to the camp! If we turn around, we will never find our way. We will be on the mountain at night. We have no food. We have no shelter. We will die."

No response but a step forward.

I push David hard, and he stumbles. Susan screams as the travois slams onto the rocks.

"You have reached a faulty consensus," I say again.

Pheromones flood the air, and I realize much of it is mine: veto, a simple pheromone signal we all know but rarely use. David swings at me, but I stop his fist. He is not strength.

"We go down," I say.

David's face is taut. He spins and the four fall into consensus.

I push David away from his podmates, breaking their contact. I push Ahmed and Maggie onto their backs.

"No consensus! We go now!"

I pick up Susan's travois and drag her down the streambed. Fast. I look back once and the three are standing there, watching. Then they come.

Maybe I am reaching false consensus too. Maybe I will kill us all. But it is all I can do.

The trek down the gorge is not easy on Susan, as the snow has disappeared in spots and the travois rides roughly across the ground. I find myself issuing soothing thoughts, though I know she cannot understand them. Only crude emotions can pass between pods, and sometimes not even that if they aren't from the same crèche. I change the thoughts to feelings of well-being. Perhaps she can understand the simple pheromones.

Each time I glance behind, I see the other three trailing. I have broken their re-formed pod again with trauma, and I hope that I have done no irreparable damage to them. The doctors of the Institute will be the judge of that. Perhaps they can save them. I am a useless case and will probably have to emigrate to one of the singleton enclaves in Europe or Australia.

A line of boulders face me, surrounded by smaller stones and rocks, too large for the travois to travel freely across.

"Take one end each," I say to Ahmed and David. The travois becomes a stretcher. If I walk slowly, we make awkward progress.

The forest has changed. The pines are gone, and we are surrounded by maples. I keep checking the horizon for any sign of search parties. Why aren't they frantically trying to find us? Had we passed too far beyond the search pattern? Do they already know where we are? Perhaps they found us in the night, noted that we were broken pods, and left us to fend for ourselves.

The paranoia drowns me, and I stumble on a loose rock. Even they would not be so callous. Everything is a test, Moira says. Is this just another? Would they kill a pod to test the rest of us?

That I cannot believe.

At the edge of a four-meter drop, our stream falls into the river, adding its small momentum to the charging rapids. I see no easy way down; we are forced to unlash Susan and help her down the jagged slope.

The rocks are wet and slimy. I slip, and we are flying to the ground, falling less than a meter, but the wind is knocked from me. Susan lands atop me, and she screams in pain.

I roll over and try to breathe. Then Ahmed and David are there, helping us up. I don't want to stand up. I just want to lie there.

"Up," David says. "More to go."

Everything is hazy in my vision, and I feel dizzy. The pain in my chest is not going away. I have a sharp sting in my ribs, and I prod myself. I have broken ribs. I almost collapse, but Ahmed pulls me up.

Susan manages to stand too now, and we limp along the flat stones of the shrunken riverbed. In a few months, the river will fill the entire wash.

We are an ad-hoc pod, all of us clinging together as we walk, step after step downriver. I am no longer strength. I am weakness and pain.

We pass a boulder and the smell hits me as we see it.

A bear, almost as big as the boulder. No, three bears pawing through the slow water for fish. We are not five meters from the biggest and closest.

Fear sweeps through the air; my fight response kicks in, and the pain washes out of me like cold rain.

We have surprised the bears.

The closest rears up on its hind legs. On all fours, it came up to my chest. Standing, it is a meter above me. Its claws are six centimeters long.

We back away. I know we cannot outrun a bear in this open terrain. Our only hope is to flee alone.

Separate, I send, then remember that the four are not of my pod. "We need to separate and run," I say.

The bear stops coming toward us. I think for a moment that it is reacting to my voice, but then I remember the smell I had caught as I passed the boulder. Pheromones.

The bears aren't a natural species.

Hello, I send, in the simplest of glyph thoughts.

The bear's jaws snap shut and it lands on its four legs again.

Not food, it sends.

The thought is more than simple. I can taste it like my own podmates'™ thoughts.

Not food. Friend.

The bear considers us with liquid brown eyes, then seems to shrug before turning away.

Come.

I start to follow, but fear emanating from the four stops me. I realize that they have not tasted the bear's thoughts.

"Come on," I say. "They aren't going to eat us."

"You ... you can understand it?" David asks.

"A little."

"They're a pod," he says, wonderingly.

My shock has faded with recognition. On the farm with Mother Redd, we have gone swimming with the bioengineered beavers. We have ourselves modified clutches of ducks into clusters. Now that I know, I can see the glands on the backs of the bears'™ arms. At the neck are slits that release the chemical memories. And to receive them, the olfactory lobe of their brain will have been enhanced.

That they are bears, that they are wild things, seems at first incongruent. The experiments on composite animals have been all on smaller, manageable beasts. But why not bears?

They amble along the riverbed, and I jog to follow them, though my ribs hurt. In a moment, I am among them, and I smell their thoughts, like silver fish in the river. Intelligent, not simple at all.

Sending *Friendship*, I reach out and touch the side of the bear who confronted us.

His fur is wet from his splashing at fish, and the smell is thick, not just pheromones and memories, but a wild animal's smell. I think I must smell worse. His mane is silver-tipped; his claws click on the stones.

I rub his neck just above the memory glands, and he pushes against me in response. I smell his affection. I sense deepness of thought and playfulness. I feel the power of his body. This is strength.

I catch images of topography, of places where fish swarm, of a dead elk. I see assessments of danger, and choices of path and best approach. I catch the consensus of decision. These three are a functioning pod.

The thoughts swirl through my head, but they shouldn't. I should not be able to catch their thoughts, but I can. Even humans can't share chemical memories between pods, just emotions sometimes.

I send an image of the avalanche.

The bears shudder. I understand their fear of the river of snow. They have seen it; it is part of their memories.

I ask them where the camp is. They know, and I see it on the edge of this river, near the rotten stump with the tasty termites.

I laugh, and they echo my joy, and, for a moment, I forget that I am alone.

Come on, they send.

"Come on," I call back to the four. Hesitantly, they follow.

The bears lead us through the trees, and, abruptly, we push through onto a trail, smashed flat by hikers'™ boots, a *human* trail. They sniff once, then amble across it and vanish into the brush.

I want to follow. Why shouldn't I? I have fulfilled my duty to Hagar Julian. Surely the bears would allow me to join them. My body shudders. I would still be a singleton. I would still be alone.

Goodbye, I send, though I doubt they are close enough to catch it. The chemical memories cannot travel far.

I lead Susan down the trail, supporting her. I hear the sounds of camp, the voices, the whine of an air car, before we round the last curve of the trail. We all stop. David looks at me, perhaps with pity, perhaps with thanks, then he leads the remainder of his pod into the camp.

I stand alone.

I fall to my knees, so tired, so weak. My strength can get me no farther.

Then I feel a push at my back, and it is the bear. He nudges me again. One arm around his steel-like neck, I stand, and we walk together into the camp.

The camp is awhirl, twice as many tents as when we left it, a bevy of air cars, and everyone stops to watch me and the bear.

Everyone but my pod, who are rushing at me, alive, and I feel them before I touch them, and we are one. Sweet consensus.

I see everything that has happened, and they see everything that I have done, and in one moment it is I who surfed the avalanche, dangling on the line Strom tied to a tree trunk, and it is we who walked down the mountain and communed with bears.

You saved us, Strom, Moira sends. Bola shows me how the tent dangling on my line of spider-silk, rode the top of the cascade of snow instead of plunging down the mountain. I hug Meda, Quant, and Manuel to my chest, squeezing. It hurts my ribs, but I don't let go.

"Careful!" Meda says, but she buries her face in my chest.

I am strength again, I think, as my pod helps me to the infirmary, not because they are weak, but because we are all strong.