

A BILLION EVES, by Robert Reed

1

Kala's parents were thrifty, impractical people. They deplored spending money, particularly on anything that smacked of luxury or indulgence; yet at the same time, they suffered from big dreams and a crippling inability to set responsible goals.

One spring evening, Father announced, "We should take a long drive this summer."

"To where?" Mom asked warily.

"Into the mountains," he answered. "Just like we've talked about doing a thousand times."

"But can we afford it?"

"If we count our coins, and if the fund drive keeps doing well. Why not?" First Day celebrations had just finished, and their church, which prided itself on its responsible goals, was having a successful year. "A taste of the wilderness," he cried out at the dinner table. "Doesn't that sound fun?"

To any other family, that would have been the beginning of a wonderful holiday. But Kala knew better. Trouble arrived as soon as they began drawing up lists of destinations. Her brother Sandor demanded a day or two spent exploring the canyon always named Grand. Father divulged an unsuspected fondness for the sleepy, ice-caked volcanoes near the Mother Ocean. When pressed, Kala admitted that she would love walking a beach beside the brackish Mormon Sea. And while Mom didn't particularly care about scenery—a point made with a distinctly superior tone—she mentioned having five sisters scattered across the West. They couldn't travel through that country and not stop at each of their front doors, if only to quickly pay their respects.

Suddenly their objectives filled a long piece of paper, and even an eleven year-old girl could see what was obvious: Just the driving was going to choke their vacation. Worse still, Mom announced, "There's no reason to pay strangers to cook for us. We'll bring our own food." That meant dragging bulky cooler everywhere they went, and every meal would be sloppy sandwiches, and every day would begin with a hunt for fresh ice and cheap groceries to replace the supplies that would inevitably spoil.

Not wanting to be out-cheaped by his wife, Father added, "And we'll be camping, of course." But how could they camp? They didn't have equipment. "Oh, we have our sleeping sacks," he reminded his doubting daughter. "And I'll borrow gear from our friends at church. I'm sure I can. So don't worry. It's going to be wonderful! We'll just drive as far as we want every day and pull over at nightfall. Just so long as it costs nothing to pitch a tent."

To Kala, this seemed like an impossible, doomed journey. Too many miles had to be conquered, too many wishes granted, and even under the best circumstances, nobody would end up happy.

"Why don't you guys ever learn?" Kala muttered.

"What was that, darling?"

"Nothing, Father," she replied with a minimal bow. "Nothing."

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Yet luck occasionally smiles, particularly on the most afflicted souls. They were still a couple hundred miles from the mountains when the radiator hose burst. Suddenly the hot July air was filled with hissing steam and the sweet taste of antifreeze. Father invested a few moments cursing God and the First Father before he pulled onto the shoulder. "Stay inside," he ordered. Then he climbed out and lifted the long hood with a metallic screech, breathing deeply before vanishing into the swirling, superheated cloud.

Sandor wanted to help. He practically begged Mom for the chance. But she shot a warning stare back at him, saying, "No, young father. You're staying with me. It's dangerous out there!"

"It's not," Kala's brother maintained.

But an instant later, as if to prove Mom correct, Father cried out. He screamed twice. The poor man had burned his right hand with the scalding water. And as if to balance his misery, he then blindly reached out with his left hand, briefly touching the overheated engine block.

"Are you all right?" Mom called out.

Father dropped the hood and stared in through the windshield, pale as a tortoise egg and wincing in misery.

"Leave that hood open," Sandor shouted. "Just a crack!"

"Why?" the burnt man asked.

"To let the air blow through and cool the engine," the boy explained. He wasn't two years older than Kala, but unlike either parent, Sandor had a pragmatic genius for machinery and other necessities of life. Leaning toward his little sister, he said, "If we're lucky, all we'll need is a new hose and fluid."

But we aren't lucky people, she kept thinking.

They had left home on the Friday Sabbath, which meant that most of the world was closed for business. Yet despite Kala's misgivings, this proved to be an exceptional day: Father drove their wounded car back to the last intersection, and through some uncommon fluke, they found a little fix-it and fuel shop that was open. A burly old gentleman welcomed them with cornbread and promises of a quick repair. He gave Father a medicating salve and showed the women a new Lady's Room in back, out of sight of the highway. But there wasn't any reason to hide. Mom had her children late in life, and besides, she'd let herself get heavy over the last few years. And Kala

was still wearing a little girl's body, her face soon to turn lovely, but camouflaged for the moment with youth and a clumsy abundance of sharp bone.

Sharing the public room, the mother and daughter finished their cornbread while their men stood in the garage, staring at the hot wet engine.

Despite being the Sabbath, the traffic was heavy—freight trucks and tiny cars and everything between. Traveling men and a few women bought fuel and sweet drinks. The women were always quick to pay and eager to leave; most were nearly as old as Mom, but where was the point in taking chances? The male customers lingered, and the fix-it man seemed to relish their company, discussing every possible subject with each of them. The weather was a vital topic, as was sports teams and the boring district news. A glum little truck driver argued that the world was already too crowded and cluttered for his tastes, and the old gentleman couldn't agree more. Yet the next customer was a happy salesman, and in front of him, the fix-it man couldn't stop praising their wise government and the rapid expansion of the population.

Kala mentioned these inconsistencies to her mother.

She shrugged them off, explaining, “He's a businessman, darling. He dresses his words for the occasion.”

Kala's bony face turned skeptical. She had always been the smartest student at her Lady's Academy. But she was also a serious, nearly humorless creature, and perhaps because of that, she always felt too sure of herself. In any situation, she believed there was one answer that was right, only one message worth giving, and the good person held her position against all enemies. “I'd never dress up my words,” she vowed. “Not one way or the other.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Mom replied, finding some reason to laugh.

Kala decided to be politely silent, at least for the present time. She listened to hymns playing on the shop's radio, humming along with her favorites. She studied her favorite field guide to the native flora and fauna, preparing herself for the wilderness to come. The surrounding countryside was as far removed from wilderness as possible—level and open, green corn stretching to every horizon and a few junipers planted beside the highway as windbreaks. Sometimes Kala would rise from her chair and wander around the little room. The shop's moneybox was locked and screwed into the top of a long plastic cabinet. Old forms and paid bills were stacked in a dusty corner. A metal door led back into the lady's room, opened for the moment but ready to be slammed shut and locked with a bright steel bolt. Next to that door was a big sheet of poster board covered with photographs of young women. Several dozen faces smiled toward the cameras. Returning to her chair, Kala commented on how many girls that was.

Her mother simply nodded, making no comment.

After her next trip around the room, Kala asked, “Were all of those girls taken?”

"Hardly," Mom replied instantly, as if she was waiting for the question. "Probably most are runaways. Bad homes and the wrong friends, and now they're living on the street somewhere. Only missing."

Kala considered that response. Only missing? But that seemed worse than being taken from this world. Living on the street, without home or family—that sounded like a horrible fate.

Guessing her daughter's mind, Mom added, "Either way, you're never going to live their lives."

Of course she wouldn't; Kala had no doubt about that.

Sandor appeared abruptly, followed by Father. Together they delivered the very bad news. Their old car needed a lot of work. A critical gasket was failing, and something was horribly wrong in the transmission. Repairs would take time and most of their money, which was a big problem. Or maybe not. Father had already given this matter some thought. The closest mountains weren't more than three hours away. Forced into a rational corner, he suggested camping in just one location. A base camp, if you would. This year, they couldn't visit the Grand Canyon or the Mormon Sea, much less enjoy the company of distant sisters. But they could spend ten lazy days in the high country, then return home with a few coins still rattling in their pockets.

Mom bowed to her husband, telling him, "It's your decision, dear."

"Then that's what we'll do," he said, borrowing a map from the counter. "I'll find a good place to pitch the tent. All right?"

Full of resolve, the men once again left. But Mom remained nervous, sitting forward in her chair—a heavy woman in matronly robes, her hair grayer than ever, thick fingers moving while her expression was stiff and unchanging.

Kala wanted to ask about her thoughts. Was she disappointed not to see her sisters? Or was she feeling guilty? Unless of course Mom was asking herself what else could be wrong with a car they had bought for almost nothing and done nothing to maintain.

The sudden deep hissing of brakes interrupted the silence. A traveler had pulled off the highway, parking beside the most distant gas pump. Kala saw the long sky-blue body and thought of a school bus. But the school's old name had been sanded off, the windows in the front covered with iron bars, while the back windows were sealed with plywood. She knew exactly what the bus was. Supplies were stuffed in the back, she reasoned. And a lot more gear was tied up on the roof—bulky sacks running its full length, secured with ropes and rubber straps and protected from any rain with yellowing pieces of thick plastic.

A man stepped out into the midday glare. He wasn't young, or old. The emerald green shirt and black collar marked him as a member of the Church of Eden. Two pistols rode high on his belt. He looked handsome and strong, and in ways Kala couldn't quite define, he acted competent in all matters important. After glancing up and down the highway, he stared into the open garage.

Then he pulled out a key chain and locked the bus door, and he fed the gas nozzle into the big fuel tank, jamming in every possible drop.

Once again, the fix-it man had stopped working on their car. But unlike the other interruptions, he started to walk out toward the pump, a long wrench in one hand. The always-friendly face was gone. What replaced it wasn't unfriendly, but there was a sense of caution, and perhaps a touch of disapproval.

"No, sir," the younger gentleman called out. "I'll come in and pay."

"You don't have to—"

"Yeah, I do. Keep your distance now."

The fix-it man stopped walking, and after a moment, he turned and retreated.

The younger man hit the bus door once with the flat of his hand, shouting, "Two minutes."

By then, everybody had moved to the public room. Father glanced at the Lady's Room but then decided it wasn't necessary. He took his position behind Mom's chair, his sore red hands wrapped in gauze. Sandor hovered beside Kala. The fix-it man stood behind the counter, telling the women, "Don't worry," while opening a cupboard and pulling something heavy into position.

"It was a gun," Sandor later told his sister. "I caught a glimpse. A little splattergun. Loaded and ready, I would bet."

"But why?" Kala would wonder aloud.

"Because that green-shirt was leaving us," her brother reminded her. "Where he was going, there's no fix-it shops. No tools, no law. So what if he tried to steal a box of wrenches, you know?"

Maybe. But the man had acted more worried about them, as if he was afraid somebody would try to steal his prized possessions. Entering the room carefully, he announced, "My brother's still onboard."

"Good for him," said the fix-it man.

"How much do I owe?"

"Twenty and a third."

"Keep the change," he said, handing over two bills. The green-shirted man tried to smile, only it was a pained, forced grin. "Tell me, old man: Anybody ask about me today?"

"Like who?"

"Or anybody mention a bus looking like mine? Any gentlemen come by and inquire if you've seen us...?"

The fix-it man shook his head, nothing like a smile on his worn face. "No, sir. Nobody's asked about you or your bus."

"Good." The green-shirted man yanked more money from the roll, setting it on the plastic countertop. "There's a blonde kid. If he stops by and asks ... do me a favor? Don't tell him anything, but make him think you know shit."

The fix-it man nodded.

"He'll give you money for your answers. Take all you can. And then tell him I went north from here. Up the Red Highway to Paradise. You heard me say that. 'North to Paradise.'"

"But you're going somewhere else, I believe."

"Oh, a little ways." Laughing, the would-be Father turned and started back to his bus.

That's when Sandor asked, "Do you really have one?"

"Quiet," Father cautioned.

But the green-shirted man felt like smiling. He turned and looked at the thirteen year-old-boy, asking, "Why? You interested in these things?"

"Sure I am."

Laughing, the man said, "I bet you are."

Sandor was small for his age, but he was bold and very smart about many subjects, and in circumstances where most people would feel afraid, he was at his bravest best. "A little Class D, is it?"

That got the man to look hard at him. "You think so?"

"Charged and ready," Sandor guessed. He named three possible manufacturers, and then said, "You've set it up in the aisle, I bet. Right in the middle of the bus."

"Is that how I should do it?"

"The rip-zone reaches out what? Thirty, thirty-five feet? Which isn't all that big."

"Big enough," said the man.

Just then, someone else began pulling on the bus horn. Maybe it was the unseen brother. Whoever it was, the horn was loud and insistent.

"You're not taking livestock," Kala's brother observed.

This time, Mom told Sandor to be quiet, and she even lifted a hand, as if to give him a pop on the head.

"Hedge-rabbits," the man said. "And purple-hens."

Both parents now said, "Quiet."

The horn honked again.

But the green-shirted man had to ask, "How would you do it, little man? If you were in my boots?"

"A Class-B ripper, at least," Sandor declared. "And I'd take better animals, too. Milking animals. And wouldn't bother with my brother, if I had my choice."

"By the looks of it, you don't have a brother."

"So how many of them do you have?" Sandor asked. Just the tone of his voice told what he was asking. "Six?" he guessed. "Eight? Or is it ten?"

"Shush," Mom begged.

The green-shirted man said nothing.

"I'm just curious," the boy continued, relentlessly focused on the subject at hand. "Keep your gene pool as big as possible. That's what everybody says. In the books, they claim that's a good guarantee for success."

The man shook his longest finger at Sandor. "Why, little man? You think I should take along another? Just to be safe?"

In an instant, the room grew hot and tense.

The green-shirted man looked at both women. Then with a quiet, furious voice, he snarled, "Lucky for you ladies, I don't have any more seats." Then he turned and strode out to the bus and unlocked the door, vanishing inside as somebody else hurriedly drove the long vehicle away from the pump.

For several moments, everybody was enjoying hard, deep breaths.

Then the fix-it man said, "I see a pretty miserable future for that idiot."

"That's not any way to leave," Father agreed. "Can you imagine making a life for yourself with just that little pile of supplies?"

"Forget about him," Mom demanded. "Talk about anything else."

Alone, Kala returned to the poster displaying photographs of all the lost women. It occurred to her that one or two of those faces could have been onboard the bus, and perhaps not by their own choice. But she also understood that no one here was going to call the proper authorities. The men would throw their insults at the would-be Father, and Mom would beg for a change in topics. But no one mentioned the idiot's poor wives. Even when Kala touched the prettiest faces and read their tiny biographies, it didn't occur to her that some strong brave voice should somehow find the words to complain.

2

No figure in history was half as important as the First Father. He was the reason why humans had come to this fine world, and every church owed its existence to him. Yet the man remained mysterious and elusive—an unknowable presence rooted deep in time and in the imagination. No two faiths ever drew identical portraits of their founder. A traditional biography was common to all schoolbooks, but what teachers offered was rather different from what a bright girl might find on the shelves of any large library. The truth was that the man was an enigma, and when it came to his story, almost everything was possible. The only common features common were that he was born on the Old Earth in the last days of the 20th century, and on a Friday morning in spring, when he was a little more twenty-nine years of age, the First Father claimed his destiny.

Humans had only recently built the first rippers. The machines were brutal, ill-tempered research tools, and physicists were using them to punch temporary holes in the local reality. Most of those holes led to hard vacuums and a fabulous cold; empty space is the standard state throughout most of the multiverse. But quantum effects and topological harmonics showed the way: If the ripper cut its hole along one of the invisible dimensions, an island of stability was waiting. The island had separated from the Now two billion years ago, and on the other side of that hole were an infinite number of sister-earths, each endowed with the same motions and mass of the human earth.

Suddenly every science had a fierce interest in the work. Large schools and small nations had to own rippers. Biologists retrieved microscopic samples of air and soil, each sample contaminated with bacteria and odd spores. Every species was new, but all shared the ingredients of earth-life: DNA coded for the same few amino acids that built families of proteins that were not too unlike those found inside people and crabgrass.

The Creation was a tireless, boundless business. That's what human beings were learning. And given the proper tool and brief jolts of titanic energy, it was possible to reach into those infinite realms, examining a miniscule portion of the endlessness.

But rippers had a second, more speculative potential. If the same terrific energies were focused in a slightly different fashion, the hole would shift its shape and nature. That temporary disruption of space would spread along the three easiest dimensions, engulfing the machine and local

landscape in a plasmatic bubble, and that bubble would act like a ship, carrying its cargo across a gap that was nearly too tiny measure and too stubborn to let any normal matter pass.

Whoever he was, the First Father understood what rippers could do. Most churches saw him as a visionary scientist, while the typical historian thought he was too young for that role, describing him instead as a promising graduate student. And there were always a few dissenting voices claiming that he was just a laboratory technician or something of that ilk—a little person armed with just enough knowledge to be useful, as well as access to one working ripper.

Unnoticed, the First Father had absconded with a set of superconductive batteries, and over the course of weeks and months, he secretly filled them with enough energy to illuminate a city. He also purchased or stole large quantities of supplies, including seeds and medicines, assorted tools and enough canned goods to feed a hundred souls for months. Working alone, he crammed the supplies into a pair of old freight trucks, and on the perfect night in April, he drove the trucks to a critical location, parking beside No Parking signs and setting their brakes and then flattening their tires. A third truck had to be maneuvered down the loading dock beside the physics laboratory, and using keys or passwords, the young man gained access to one of the most powerful rippers on the planet—a bundle of electronics and bottled null-spaces slightly larger than a coffin.

The young man rolled or carried his prize into the vehicle, and with quick, well-rehearsed motions, he patched it into the fully charged batteries and spliced in fresh software. Then before anyone noticed, he gunned the truck's motor, driving off into the darkness.

Great men are defined by their great, brave deeds; every worthy faith recognizes this unimpeachable truth.

According to most accounts, the evening was exceptionally warm, wet with dew and promising a beautiful day. At four in the morning, the First Father scaled a high curb and inched his way across a grassy front yard, slipping between an oak tree and a ragged spruce before parking tight against his target—a long white building decorated with handsome columns and black letters pulled from a dead language. Then he turned off the engine, and perhaps for a moment or two, he sat motionless. But no important doubts crept into his brave skull. Alone, he climbed down and opened the back door and turned on the stolen ripper, and with a few buttons pushed, he let the capacitors eat the power needed to fuel a string of nanosecond bursts.

Many accounts of that night have survived; no one knows which, if any, are genuine. When Kala was eleven, her favorite story was about a young student who was still awake at that early hour, studying hard for a forgotten examination. The girl thought it was odd to hear the rumbling of a diesel motor and then the rattling of a metal door. But her room was at the back of the sorority house; she couldn't see anything but the parking lot and a tree-lined alley. What finally caught her attention was the ripper's distinctive whine—a shriek almost too high for the human ear—punctuated with a series of hard little explosions. Fresh holes were being carved in the multiverse, exposing the adjacent worlds. Tiny breaths of air were retrieved, each measured against a set of established parameters. Hearing the blasts, the girl stood and stepped to her window. And that's when the ripper paused for a moment, a hundred trillion calculations made before it fired again. The next *pop* sounded like thunder. Every light went out, and the campus vanished, and a sphere of ground and grass, air and wood was wrenched free of one world. The

full length of the house was taken, and its entire yard, as well as both supply trucks and the street in front of the house and the parking lot and a piece of the alley behind it. And emerging out of nothingness was a new world—a second glorious offering from God, Our Ultimate Father.

The girl was the only witness to a historic event, which was why the young Kala found her tale so appealing.

The First Father saw nothing. At the pivotal moment of his life, he was hunkered over the stolen ripper, reading data and receiving prompts from the AI taskmaster.

The girl started to run. By most accounts she was a stocky little creature, not pretty but fearless and immodest. Half-dressed, she dashed through the darkened house, screaming for the other girls to wake up, then diving down the stairs and out the front door. Kala loved the fact that here was the first human being to take a deep breath on another earth. The air was thick and unsatisfying. Out from the surrounding darkness came living sounds. Strange creatures squawked and hollered, and flowing branches waved in a thin moonlight. The girl thought to look at the sky, and she was rewarded with more stars than she had ever seen in her life. (Every sister world is a near-twin, as are the yellow sun and battered moon. But the movement of the solar system is a highly chaotic business, and you never know where inside the Milky Way you might end up.) Standing on the sidewalk, the girl slowly absorbed the astonishing scene. Then she heard pounding, and when she turned, she saw the long truck parked against a tangle of juniper shrubs. On bare feet, she climbed into the back end and over a stack of cold black batteries. The First Father was too busy to notice her. One job was finished, but another essential task needed his undivided attention. Having brought a hundred young women to an empty, barely livable world, the man had no intention of letting anyone escape now. Which was why he wrenched open the hot ripper, exposing its intricate guts, and why he was using a crowbar to batter its weakest systems—too consumed by his work to notice one of his future wives standing near him, wearing nothing but pants and a bra and a slightly mesmerized expression.

3

For more than a week, Kala's family lived inside a borrowed tent, and without doubt, they never enjoyed a better vacation than this. The campground was a rough patch of public land set high on a mountainside. Scattered junipers stood on the sunny ground and dense spruce woods choked an adjacent canyon. A stream was tucked inside the canyon, perfect for swimming and baths. A herd of semi-tame roodeer grazed where they wanted. Rilly birds and starlings greeted each morning with songs and hard squawks. Their tent was in poor condition, ropes missing and its roof ripped and then patched by clumsy hands. But a heat wave erased any danger of rain, and even after the hottest days, nights turned pleasantly chilly, illuminated by a moon that was passing through full.

Kala was the perfect age for adventures like these: Young enough to remember everything, yet old enough to explore by herself. Because this wasn't a popular destination, the woods felt as if they belonged to her. And best of all, higher in the mountains was a sprawling natural reserve.

Where her brother loved machinery, Kala adored living creatures.

By law, the reserve was supposed to be a pristine wilderness. No species brought into this world could live behind its high fences. But of course starlings flew where they wanted, and gold-weed spores wandered on the softest wind, and even the best intentions of visitors didn't prevent people from bringing seeds stuck to their clothing or weaknesses tucked into their hearts.

One morning they drove into the high alpine country—a risky adventure, since their car still ran hot and leaked antifreeze. The highway was narrow and forever twisting. A shaggy black forest of native trees gave way to clouds, damp and cold. Father slowed until the following drivers began to pull on their horns, and then he sped up again, emerging into a tilted, rock-strewn landscape where black fur grew beside last winter's snow. Scenic pullouts let them stop and marvel at an utterly alien world. Kala and her brother made snowballs and gamely posed for pictures on the continental divide. Then Father turned them around and drove even slower through the clouds and black forest. In the same instant, everyone announced: "I'm hungry!" And because this was a magical trip, a clearing instantly appeared, complete with a wide glacial stream and a red granite table built specifically for them.

Lunch was tortoise sandwiches and sour cherries. The clouds were thickening, and there were distant rumblings of thunder. But if there was rain, it fell somewhere else. Kala sat backwards at the table, smelling the stream and the light peppery stink of the strange trees. Despite a lifetime spent reading books and watching documentaries, she was unprepared for this divine place. It was an endless revelation, the idea that here lived creatures that had ruled this world until the arrival of humans. If the local climate had been warmer and the soil better, this reserve couldn't have survived. She was blessed. In ways new to her, the girl felt happy. Gazing into the shadows, she imagined native rock-lambs and tomb-tombs and the lumbering Harry's-big-days. In her daily life, the only animals were those that came with the Last Father—the roodeer and starlings and such. And their crops and a few hundred species of wild plants came here as seeds and spores that people had intentionally carried along. But these great old mountains wore a different order, a fresh normalcy. The shaggy black forest looked nothing like spruce trees, bearing a lovely useless wood too soft to be used as lumber, and always too wet to burn.

A narrow form suddenly slipped from one shadow to the next.

What could that have been?

Kala rose slowly. Her brother was immersed in a fat adventure novel. Her parents glanced her way, offering smiles before returning to the subject at hand: What, if anything, would they do with the afternoon and evening? With a stalker's pace, Kala moved into the forest—into the cool spicy delicious air—and then she paused again, eyes unblinking, her head cocked to one side while she listened to the deep booming of thunder as it curled around the mountain flanks.

A dry something touched Kala on the back of the calf.

She flinched, looking down.

The housefly launched itself, circling twice before settling on her bare arm. Kala never liked to kill, but this creature didn't belong here. It was one of the creatures humans always brought—by chance, originally, and now cherished because maggots could be useful disposing of trash. With

the palm of her right hand, she managed to stun the creature, and then she knelt, using eyes and fingers to find its fallen body, two fingertips crushing the vermin to an anonymous paste.

Sitting nearby, studying Kala, was a wild cat. She noticed it as she stood again—a big male tabby, well fed and complacent, caught in a large wire trap. Cat-shaped signs were posted across the reserve, warning visitors about feral predators. These animals were ecological nightmares. During its life, a single killing machine could slaughter thousands of the native wisp-mice and other delicate species; and a male cat was the worst, since it could also father dozens of new vermin that would only spread the carnage.

Kala approached the cat, knelt down and looked into its bright green eyes. Except for the tangled fur, nothing about the animal looked especially wild. When she offered her hand, the cat responded by touching her fingertips with the cool end of its nose. Exotics like this were always killed. No exceptions. But maybe she could catch it and take it home. If she begged hard enough, how could her parents refuse? Kala studied the mechanism of the trap and found a strong stick and slipped it into a gap, and then with a hard shove, she forced the steel door to pop open.

The cat had always been wild, and it knew what to do. As soon as the door vanished, Kala reached for its neck, but her quarry was quicker. It sprinted back into the dark shadows, leaving behind a young girl to think many thoughts, but mostly feeling guilt mixed with a tenacious, unexpected relief.

"Find anything?" Father asked on her return.

"Nothing," she lied.

"Next time," he advised, "take the camera."

"We haven't seen a tomb-tombs yet," her mother added. "Before we leave, I'd like to have a close look at them."

Kala sat beside her brother, and he glanced up from his book, investing a few moments watching her as she silently finished her sandwich.

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Later that day, they visited a tiny museum nestled in a wide black meadow. Like favored students on a field trip, they wandered from exhibit to exhibit, absorbing little bits of knowledge about how these mountains were built and why the glaciers had come and gone again. Display cases were jammed with fossils, and in the basement were artifacts marking these last centuries when humans played their role. But the memorable heart of the day was a stocky, homely woman who worked for the reserve—a strong, raspy-voiced lady wearing a drab brown uniform complete with a wide-brimmed hat and fat pockets and an encyclopedic knowledge on every imaginable subject.

Her job was to lead tourists along the lazy trail that circled her museum grounds. Her practiced voice described this world as well as each of its known neighbors. From the First Father to the Last, seventeen examples of the Creation had been settled, while another fifty worlds had been visited but found unsuitable. The Old Earth and its sisters belonged to one endless family, each world sharing the same essential face: There was always a Eurasia and Africa, an Australia and two Americas. The North Pole was water, while islands or a single continent lay on the South Pole. Except for the fickle effects of erosion, landmasses were constant. Two billion years of separation wasn't enough to make any earth forget which family it belong to.

But where stone and tectonics were predictable, other qualities were not. Minuscule factors could shift climates or the composition of an atmosphere. Some earths were wet and warm. Kala's earth, for instance. Most had similar atmospheres, but none were identical to any other. A few earths were openly inhospitable to humanity. Oxygen cycles and methane cycles were famously temperamental. Sometimes life generated enough greenhouse gas to scorch the land, lifting the oceans into a cloud-born biosphere. Other earths had been permanently sterilized by impacting comets or passing supernovae. Yet those traps were easy to spot with a working ripper; little bites of air warned the Fathers about the most deadly places. What the woman lecturer discussed, and in astonishing depth, were worlds that only seemed inviting. Everyone knew examples from history. After a hard year or two, or in the case of Mattie's House, a full ten years of misery, the reigning Father had realized there was no hope, and gathering up his pioneers, he used the ripper's remaining power to leap to another, more favorable world.

"We have a wonderful home," the woman declared, leaning against one of the native trees. "A long Ice Age has just released this land, giving us a favorable climate. And the northern soils have been bulldozed to the warm south, making the black ground we always name Iowa and Ohio and Ukraine."

Her praise of their world earned grateful nods from tourists.

"And we're blessed in having so much experience," she continued. "Our ancestors learned long ago what to bring and how to adapt. Our culture is designed to grow quickly, and by every measure. Ten centuries is not a long time—not to a world or even to a young species like ours—but that's all the time we needed here to make a home for five billion of us."

Smiles rode the nodding faces.

"But we're most blessed in this way," she said. Then she paused, letting her wise old eyes take their measure of her audience. "We are awfully lucky because this world is extremely weak. For reasons known and reasons only guessed at, natural selection took its sweet time here. These native life forms are roughly equivalent to the First Earth during its long ago Permian. The smartest tomb-tomb isn't smart at all. And as any good Father knows, intelligence is the first quality to measure when you arrive at a new home."

Kala noticed the adults' approval. Here was the central point; the woman was speaking to the young men in her audience, giving them advice should they ever want to become a Father.

One hand lifted, begging to be seen.

"Yes, sir," said the lecturer. "A question?"

"I could ask a question, I suppose." The hand belonged to an elderly gentleman with the pale brown eyes of the First Father as well as his own thick mane of white hair. "Mostly, I was going to offer my observations. This morning, I was hiking the trail to Passion Lake—"

"A long walk," the woman interjected, perhaps trying to compliment his endurance.

"I was bitten by mosquitoes," he announced. "Nothing new about that, I suppose. And I saw rilly birds nesting in one of your false-spruces." The rillies were native to the Second Father's world. "And I'm quite sure I saw mice—our mice—in the undergrowth. Which looked an awful lot like oleo-weed when it's gone wild."

Oleo-weed was from the First Father's world, and it had been a human companion for the last twenty thousand years.

The lecturer adjusted her big-brimmed hat as she nodded, acting unperturbed. "We have a few exotics on the reserve," she agreed. "Despite our rules and restrictions—"

"Is this right?" the white-haired man interrupted.

"Pardon me?"

"Right," he repeated. "Correct. Responsible. What we are doing here ... is it worth the damage done to a helpless planet...?"

More than anything, the audience was either puzzled by his attitude or completely indifferent. Half of the tourists turned away, pretending to take a burning interest in random rocks or the soft peculiar bark of the trees.

The lecturer pulled the mountain air across her teeth. "There are estimates," she began. "I'm sure everybody here has seen the figures. The First Father was the first pioneer, but he surely wasn't the only one to lead people away from the Old Earth. Yet even if you count only that one man and his wives, and if you make a conservative estimate of how many Fathers sprang up from that first world ... and then you assume that half of those Fathers built homes filled with young people and their own wandering hearts ... that means that by now, millions of colony worlds have been generated by that first example. And each of those millions might have founded another million or so worlds—"

"An exponential explosion," the man interjected.

"Inside an endless Creation, as we understand these things." She spoke with a grim delight. "No limit to the worlds, no end to the variety. And why shouldn't humanity claim as much of that infinity as he can?"

"Then I suppose all of this has to be moral," the white-haired man added, the smile pleasant but his manner sarcastic. "I guess my point is, madam ... you and those like you are eventually going to discover yourselves without employment. Because there will be a day, and soon, when this lovely ground is going to look like every other part of our world, thick with the same weeds and clinging creatures we know best, and the exactly the same as the twenty trillion other human places."

"Yes," said the woman, her satisfaction obvious. "That is the future, yes."

The lecturer wasn't looking at Kala, but every word felt as if it had been aimed her way. For the first time in her life, she saw an inevitable future. She loved this alien forest, but it couldn't last. An endless doom lay over the landscape, and she wanted to weep. Even her brother noticed her pain, smiling warily while he asked, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

She couldn't say. She didn't know how to define her mind's madness. Yet afterwards, making the journey back to the parking lot, she thought again of that wildcat; and with a fury honest and pure, she wished that she had left the creature inside that trap. Or better, that she had used that long stick of hers and beaten it to death.

4

The most devoted wives left behind written accounts of their adventures on the new world—the seven essential books in the First Father's Testament. Quite a few churches also included the two Sarah diaries, while the more progressive faiths, such as the one Kala's family belonged to, made room for the Six Angry Wives. Adding to the confusion were the dozens if not hundreds of texts and fragmentary accounts left behind by lesser-known voices, as well as those infamous documents generally regarded to be fictions at best, and at worst, pure heresies.

When Kala was twelve, an older girl handed her a small, cat-eared booklet. "I didn't give this to you," the girl warned. "Read it and then give it to somebody else, or burn it. Promise me?"

"I promise."

Past Fathers had strictly forbidden this testament, but someone always managed to smuggle at least one copy to the next world. *The First Mother's Tale* was said to be a third-person account of Claire, the fifty-year-old widow whose job it had been to watch over the sorority house and its precious girls. Claire was a judicious, pragmatic woman—qualities missing in her own mother, Kala realized sadly. On humanity's most important day, the housemother woke to shouts and wild weeping. She threw on a bathrobe and stepped into slippers before leaving her private ground-floor apartment. Urgent arms grabbed her up and dragged her down a darkened hallway. A dozen terrified voices were rambling on about some horrible disaster. The power was out, Claire noticed. Yet she couldn't find any trace of cataclysms. The house walls were intact. There was no obvious fire or flood. Whatever the disturbance, it had been so minor that even the framed photographs of Delta sisters were still neatly perched on their usual nails.

Then Claire stepped out the front door, and hesitated. Two long trucks were parked in the otherwise empty street. But where was the campus? Past the trucks, exactly where the Fine Arts building should be, a rugged berm had been made of gray dirt and gray stone and shattered tree trunks. Beyond the berm was a forest of strange willowy trees. Nameless odors and a dense gray mist were drifting out of the forest on a gentle wind. And illuminated by the moon and endless stars was a flock of leathery creatures, perched together on the nearest limbs, hundreds of simple black eyes staring at the newcomers.

The First Father was sitting halfway down the front steps, a deer rifle cradled in his lap, a box of ammunition between his feet, hands trembling while the pale brown eyes stared out at the first ruddy traces of the daylight.

Women were still emerging from every door, every fire escape. Alone and in little groups, they would wander to the edge their old world, the bravest ones climbing the berm to catch a glimpse of the strange landscape before retreating again, gathering together on the damp lawn while staring at the only man in their world.

Claire pulled her robe tight and walked past the First Father.

No life could have prepared her for that day, yet she found the resolve to smile in a believable fashion, offering encouraging words and calculated hugs. She told her girls that everything would be fine. She promised they'd be home again in time for classes. Then she turned her attentions to the third truck. It was parked beside the house, its accordion door raised and its loading ramp dropped to the grass. Claire climbed the ramp and stared at the strange, battered machinery inside. The young woman who had heard the ripper in operation—the only witness to their leap across invisible dimensions—was telling her story to her sisters, again and again. Claire listened. Then she gathered the handful of physics majors and asked if the ripper was authentic. It was. Could it really do these awful things? Absolutely. Claire inhaled deeply and hugged herself, then asked if there was any possible way, with everything they knew and the tools at hand, that this awful-looking damage could be fixed?

No, it couldn't be. And even if there was some way to patch it up, nobody here would ever see home again.

"Why not?" Claire asked, refusing to give in. "Maybe not with this ripper-machine, no. But why not build a new one with the good parts here and new components that we make ourselves...?"

One young woman was an honor student—a senior ready to graduate with a double major in physics and mathematics. Her name, as it happened, was Kala—a coincidence that made one girl's heart quicken as she read along. That ancient Kala provided the smartest, most discouraging voice. There wouldn't be any cobbling together of parts, she maintained. Many times, she had seen the ripper used, and she had even helped operate it on occasion. As much as anyone here, she understood its powers and limitations. Navigating through the multiverse was just this side of impossible. To Claire and a few of her sisters, the First Kala explained how the Creation was infinite, and how every cubic nanometer of their world contained trillions of potential destinations.

"Alien worlds?" asked Claire.

"Alternate earths," Kala preferred. "More than two billion years ago, the world around us split away from our earth."

"Why?"

"Quantum rules," said Kala, explaining nothing. "Every world is constantly dividing into a multitude of new possibilities. There's some neat and subtle harmonics at play, and I don't understand much of it. But that's why the rippers can find earths like this. Two billion years and about half a nanometer divide our home from this place."

That was a lot for a housemother to swallow, but Claire did her best.

Kala continued spelling out their doom. "Even if we could repair the machine—do it right now, with a screwdriver and two minutes of work—our earth is lost. Finding it would be like finding a single piece of dust inside a world made of dust. It's that difficult. That impossible. We're trapped here, and Owen knows it. And that's part of his plan, I bet."

"Owen?" the First Mother asked. "Is that his name?"

Kala nodded, glancing back at the armed man.

"So you know Owen, do you?"

Kala rolled her eyes as women do when they feel uncomfortable in a certain man's presence. "He's a graduate student in physics," she explained. "I don't know him that well. He's got a trust fund, supposedly, and he's been stuck on his master thesis for years." Then with the next breath, she confessed, "We went out once. Last year. Once, or maybe twice. Then I broke it off."

Here was a staggering revelation for the living Kala: The woman who brought her name to the new world had a romantic relationship with the First Father. And then she had rejected him. Perhaps Owen still loved the girl, Kala reasoned. He loved her and wanted to possess her. And what if this enormous deed—the basis for countless lives and loves—came from one bitter lover's revenge?

But motivations never matter as much as results.

Whatever Owen's reasons, women sobbed while other women sat on the lawn, knees to their faces, refusing to believe what their senses told them. Claire stood motionless, absorbing what Kala and the other girls had to tell her. Meanwhile a sun identical to their sun rose, the air instantly growing warmer. Then the winged natives swept in low, examining the newcomers with their empty black eyes. A giant beast not unlike a tortoise, only larger than most rooms, calmly crawled over the round berm, sliding down to the lawn where it happily began to munch on grass. Meanwhile, houseflies and termites, dandelion fluff and blind earthworms, were beginning their migrations into the new woods. Bumblebees and starlings left their nests in search of food, while

carpenter ants happily chewed on the local timber. Whatever you believe about the First Father, one fact is obvious: He was an uncommonly fortunate individual. The first new world proved to be a lazy place full of corners and flavors that earth species found to their liking. Included among the lucky colonists were two stray cats. One was curled up inside a storage shed, tending to her newborn litter, while the other was no more than a few days pregnant. And into that genetic puddle were three kittens smuggled into the sorority house by a young woman whose identity, and perhaps her own genetics, had long ago vanished from human affairs.

On that glorious morning, two worlds were married.

Each Testament had its differences, and every story was believable, but only to a maybe-so point. Claire's heretical story was the version Kala liked best and could even believe—a sordid tale of women trapped in awful circumstances but doing their noble best to survive.

"Hello, Owen," said Claire.

The young man blinked, glancing at the middle-aged woman standing before him. Claire was still wearing her bathrobe and a long nightgown and old slippers. To Owen, the woman couldn't have appeared less interesting. He nodded briefly and said nothing, always staring into the distance, eyes dancing from excitement but a little sleepiness creeping into their corners.

"What are you doing, Owen?"

"Standing guard," he said, managing a tense pride.

With the most reasonable voice possible, she asked, "What are you guarding us from?"

The young man said nothing.

"Owen," she repeated. Once. Twice. Then twice more.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, watching a single leather-wing dance in the air overhead. "There's a gauge on the ripper. It says our oxygen is about eighty percent usual. It's going to be like living in the mountains. So I'm sorry about that. I set the parameters too wide. At least for now, we're going to have to move slowly and let our bodies adapt."

Claire sighed. Then one last time, she asked, "What are you guarding us from, Owen?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You don't know what's out there?"

"No." He shrugged his shoulders, both hands gripping the stock of the rifle. "I saw you and Kala talking. Didn't she tell you? Yeah, I saw you two chatting. There's no way to tell much about a new world. The ripper can taste its air, and if it finds free oxygen and water and marker molecules that mean you're very close to the ground—"

"You kidnapped us, Owen." She spoke firmly, with a measured heat. "Without anyone's permission, you brought us here and marooned us."

"I'm marooned too," he countered.

"And why should that make us feel better?"

Finally, Owen studied the woman. Perhaps for the first time, he was gaining an appreciation for this unexpected wildcard.

"Feel how you want to feel," he said, speaking to her and everyone else in range of his voice. "This is our world now. We live or die here. We can make something out of our circumstances, or we can vanish away."

He wasn't a weak man, and better than most people could have done, he had prepared for this incredible day. By then, Claire had realized some of that. Yet what mattered most was to get the man to admit the truth. That's why she climbed the steps, forcing him to stare at her face. "Are you much of a shot, Owen? Did you serve in the military? In your little life, have you even once gone hunting?"

He shook his head. "None of those things, no."

"I have," Claire promised. "I served in the Army. My dead husband used to take me out chasing quail. When I was about your age, I shot a five-point whitetail buck."

Owen didn't know what to make of that news. "Okay. Good, I guess."

Claire kept her eyes on him. "Did you bring other guns?"

"Why?"

"Because you can't look everywhere at once," she reminded him. "I could ask a couple of these ladies to climb on the roof, just to keep tabs on things. And maybe we should decide who can shoot, if it actually comes to that and we have to defend the house."

Owen took a deep, rather worried breath. "I hope that doesn't happen."

"Are there more guns?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

His eyes tracked to the right.

"In that truck?" Claire glanced over her shoulder. "The women checked the doors. They're locked, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"To keep us out? Is that it?"

He shifted his weight, and with a complaining tone said, "I can't see much, with you in the way."

"I guess not," Claire responded. Then she pushed closer, asking, "Do you know the combinations of those padlocks?"

"Sure."

"Are you going to open them?"

Silence.

"All right," she said. "I guess that's just a little problem for now."

Owen nodded, and pretending to be in complete control, he set his rifle to one side and looked at her and said, "I guess it is."

"You're what's important. You are essential."

"You bet."

"And for reasons bigger than a few locks."

The young man had to smile.

"What's inside the trucks?"

He quickly summarized the wealth brought from the old world, then happily added, "It's a great beginning for our colony."

"That does sound wonderful," Claire replied, her voice dipped in sarcasm.

Owen smiled, hearing the words but not their color.

"And if you could please tell me ... when do you intend to give us this good food and water? Does your generosity have a timetable?"

"It does."

"So tell me."

Owen offered a smug wink, and then he sat back on the hard steps, lifting a hand, showing her three fingers.

"Excuse me?"

"Three girls," he explained. Then the hand dropped, and he added, "You know what I mean."

Here was another revelation: In every official Testament, the First Father unlocked ever door and box in the first few minutes. Without exception, he was gracious and caring, and the girls practically fought one another for the chance to sleep with him.

"You want three of my ladies...?"

"Yes."

Rage stole away Claire's voice.

Again, Owen said, "Yes."

"Are you going to select them?" the housemother muttered. "Or is this going to be a job for volunteers?"

Every face was fixed on Owen, and he clearly enjoyed the attention. He must have dreamed for months about this one moment, imagining the tangible, irresistible power that no one could deny ... and because of that strength, he could shrug his shoulders, admitting, "It doesn't matter who. If there's three volunteers, then that's fine."

"You want them now?"

"Or in a week. I can wait, if I have to."

"You don't have to."

The smile brightened. "Good."

"And you get just one woman," Claire warned, grabbing the belt of her bathrobe and tightening the sloppy knot. "Me."

"No."

"Yes." Claire touched him on a knee. "No other deal is on the table, Owen. You and I are going inside. Now. My room, my bed, and afterwards, you're going to get us into those trucks, and you'll hand over every weapon you brought here. Is that understood?"

The young man's face colored. "You're not in any position—"

"Owen," she interrupted. Then she said, "Darling," with a bite to her voice. And she reached out with the hand not on his knee, grabbing his bony chin while staring into the faint brown eyes that eventually would find themselves scattered across endless worlds. "This may come as news to you. But most men of your age and means and apparent intelligence don't have to go to these lengths to get their dicks wet."

He flinched, just for an instant.

"You don't know very much about women. Do you, Owen?"

"I do."

"Bullshit."

He blinked, biting his lower lip.

"You don't know us," she whispered to him. "Let me warn you about the nature of women, Owen. Everyone here is going to realize that you're just a very ignorant creature. If they don't know it already, that is. And if you think you've got power over us ... well, let's just say you have some very strange illusions that need to die..."

"Quiet," he whispered.

But Claire kept talking, reminding him, "In another few weeks, a couple months at most, you will be doomed."

"What do you mean?"

"Once enough girls are pregnant, we won't need you anymore."

All the careful planning, but he hadn't let himself imagine this one obvious possibility. He said as much with his stiff face and the backward tilt of his frightened body.

"You can have all the guns in the world—hell, you do have all the guns—but you're going to end up getting knifed in bed. Yes, that could happen, Owen. Then in another few years, when your sons are old enough and my Deltas are in their late thirties ... they'll still be young enough to use those boys' little seeds..."

"No," he muttered.

"Yes," she said. Her hand squeezed his knee. "Or maybe we could arrive at a compromise. Surrender your guns and open every lock, and afterwards, maybe you can try to do everything in your power to make this mess a little more bearable for us..."

"And what do I get?"

"You live to be an old man. And if you're an exceptionally good man from here on, maybe your grandchildren will forgive you for what you've done. And if you're luckier than you deserve to be, perhaps they'll even like you."

5

When Kala was fourteen, her church acquired the means to send one hundred blessed newlyweds off to another world. United Manufacturing had built a class-B ripper specifically for them. Tithes and government grants paid for the machine, while the stockpiles of critical supplies came through direct donations as well as a few wealthy benefactors. A standard hemispherical building was erected in an isolated field, its dimensions slightly smaller than the ripper's reach. Iron and copper plates made the rounded walls, nickel and tin and other useful metals forming the interior ribs, and secured to the roof were a few pure gold trimmings. The ground beneath had been excavated, dirt replaced with a bed of high-grade fertilizer and an insulated fuel tank set just under the bright steel floor. No portion of the cavernous interior was wasted: The young couples were taking foodstuffs and clean water, sealed animal pens and elaborate seed stocks, plus generators and earth-movers, medicine enough to keep an entire city fit, and the intellectual supplies necessary to build civilization once again.

On the wedding day, the congregation was given its last chance to see what the sacrifices had purchased. Several thousand parishioners gathered in long patient lines, donning sterile gloves and filter masks, impermeable sacks tied about their feet. Why chance giving some disease to the livestock or leaving rust spores on the otherwise sterile steel floor? The young pioneers stood in the crisscrossing hallways, brides dressed in white gowns, grooms in taut black suits, all wearing masks and gloves. One of the benefits born from the seventeen previous migrations was that most communicable diseases had been left behind. Only sinus colds and little infections born from mutating *staph* and *strep* were a problem. Yet even there, it was hoped that this migration would bring the golden moment, humanity finally escaping even those minor ailments.

The youngest brides were only a few years older than Kala, and she knew them well enough to make small talk before wishing them good-bye with the standard phrase, "Blessings in your new world."

Every girl's mask was wet with tears. Each was weeping for her own reason, but Kala was at a loss to guess who felt what. Some probably adored their temporary fame, while other girls cried out of simple stage fright. A few lucky brides probably felt utter love for their husbands-to-be, while others saw this mission as a holy calling. But some of the girls had to be genuinely terrified: The smartest few probably awoke this morning to the realization that they were doomed, snared in a vast and dangerous undertaking that had never quite claimed their hearts.

Standing near the burly ripper—a place of some honor—was a girl named Tina. Speaking through her soggy mask, she said to Kala, "May you find your new world soon."

"And bless you in yours."

Kala had no interest in emigrating. But what else could she say? Tina was soon to vanish, and the girl had always been friendly to Kala. Named for the first wife to give a son to the First Father,

Tina was short and a little stocky, and by most measures, not pretty. But her father was a deacon, and more important, her grandmother had offered a considerable dowry to the family that took her grandchild. Was the bride-to-be aware of these political dealings? And if so, did it matter to her? Tina seemed genuinely thrilled by her circumstances, giggling and pulling Kala closer, sounding like a very best friend when she asked, "Isn't this a beautiful day?"

"Yes," Kala lied.

"And tomorrow will be better still. Don't you think?"

The mass marriage would be held this evening, and come dawn, the big ripper would roar to life.

"Tomorrow will be different," Kala agreed, suddenly tired of their game.

Behind Tina, wrapped in thick plastic, was the colony's library. Ten thousand classic works were etched into sheets of tempered glass, each sheet thin as a hair and guaranteed to survive ten thousand years of weather and hard use. Among those works were the writings of every Father and the Testaments of the Fifteen Wives, plus copies of the ancient textbooks that the Deltas brought from the Old Earth. As language evolved, the texts had been translated. Kala had digested quite a few of them, including the introductions to ecology and philosophy, the fat histories of several awful wars, and an astonishing fable called *Huckster Finn*.

Tina noticed her young friend staring at the library. "I'm not a reader," she confided. "Not like you are, Kala."

The girl was rather simple, it was said.

"But I'm bringing my books too." Only the bride's brown eyes were visible, dark eyebrows acquiring a mischievous look. "Ask me what I'm taking."

"What are you taking, Tina?"

She mentioned several unremarkable titles. Then after a dramatic pause, she said, "*The Duty of Eve*. I'm taking that too."

Kala flinched.

"Don't tell anybody," the girl begged.

"Why would I?" Kala replied. "You can carry whatever you want, inside your wedding trunk."

The Duty was popular among conservative faiths. Historians claimed it was written by an unnamed Wife on the second new world—a saintly creature who died giving birth to her fifth son, but left behind a message from one of God's good angels: Suffering was noble, sacrifice led to purity, and if your children walked where no one had walked before, your life had been worth every misery.

"Oh, Kala. I always wanted to know you better," Tina continued. "I mean, you're such a beautiful girl, and smart. But you know that already, don't you?"

Kala couldn't think of a worthwhile response.

With both hands, Tina held tight to Kala's arm. "I have an extra copy of *The Duty*. I'll let you have it, if you want."

She said, "No."

"Think about it."

"I don't want it—"

"You're sure?"

"Yes," Kala blurted. "I don't want that damned book." Then she yanked her arm free and hurried away.

Tina stared after her, anger fading into subtler, harder to name emotions.

Kala felt the eyes burning against her neck, and she was a little bit ashamed for spoiling their last moments together. But the pain was brief. After all, she had been nothing but polite. It was the stupid girl who ruined everything.

According to *The Duty*, every woman's dream was to surrender to one great man. Kala had read enough excerpts to know too much. The clumsy, relentless point of that idiotic old book was that a holy girl found her great man, and she did everything possible to sleep with him, even if that meant sharing his body with a thousand other wives. The best historians were of one mind on this matter: *The Duty* wasn't a revelation straight from God, or even some second-tier angel. It was a horny man's fantasy written down in some lost age, still embraced by the conniving and believed by every fool.

Kala walked fast, muttering to herself.

Sandor was standing beside the ripper, chatting amiably with the newly elected Next Father. Her brother had become a strong young man, stubborn and charming and very handsome, and by most measures, as smart as any sixteen year-old could be. He often spoke about leaving the world, but only if he was elected to a Next Father's post. That was how it was done in their church: One bride for each groom, and the most deserving couple was voted authority over the new colony.

"It's a good day," Sandor sang out. "Try smiling."

Kala pushed past him, down the crowded aisle and out into the fading sunshine.

Sandor excused himself and followed. He would always be her older brother, and that made him protective as well as sensitive to her feelings. He demanded to know what was wrong, and she told him. Then he knew exactly what to say. "The girl's is as stupid as she is homely, and what does it matter to you?"

Nothing. It didn't matter at all, of course.

"Our world's going to be better without her," he promised.

But another world would be polluted as a consequence: A fact that Kala couldn't forget, much less forgive.

* * * *

The marriage was held at dusk, on a wide meadow of mowed spring fescue. The regional bishop—a charming and wise old gentleman—begged God and His trusted angels to watch over these good brave souls. Then with a joyful, almost giddy tone, he warned the fifty new couples to love one another in the world they were going to build. "Hold to your monogamy," he called out. "Raise a good family together, and fill the wonderland where destiny has called you."

A reception was held in the same meadow, under temporary lights, the mood slipping from celebration to grief and back again. Everyone drank more than was normal. Eventually the newlyweds slipped off to the fifty small huts standing near the dome-shaped building. Grooms removed the white gowns of their brides, and the new wives folded the gowns and stored them inside watertight wooden trunks, along with artifacts and knickknacks from a life they would soon abandon.

Kala couldn't help but imagine what happened next inside the huts.

A few sips of wine made her warm and even a little happy. She chatted with friends and adults, and she even spent a few minutes listening to her father. He was drunk and silly, telling her how proud he was of her. She was so much smarter than he had ever been, and prettier even than her mother. "Did I just say that? Don't tell on me, Kala." Then he continued, claiming that whatever she wanted from her life was fine with him ... just so long as she was happy enough to smile like she was smiling right now...

Kala loved the dear man, but he didn't mean those words. Sober again, he would find some way to remind her that Sandor was his favorite child. Flashing his best grin, he would mention her brother's golden aspirations and then talk wistfully about his grandchildren embracing their own world.

Kala finally excused herself, needing a bathroom.

Abandoning the meadow, walking alone in darkness, she considered her father's drunken promise to let her live her own life. But what was "her life"? The question brought pressure, and not just from parents and teachers and her assorted friends. Kala's own ignorance about her future was the

worst of it. Such a bright creature—everyone said that about her. But when it came to her destiny, she didn't have so much as a clue.

As Kala walked through the oak woods, she noticed another person moving somewhere behind her. But she wasn't frightened until she paused, and an instant later, that second set of feet stopped too.

Kala turned, intending to glance over her shoulder.

Suddenly a cool black sack was dropped over her head, and an irresistible strength pushed her to the ground. Then a man's voice—a vaguely familiar voice—whispered into one of her covered ears. “Fight me,” he said, “and I'll kill you. Make one sound, and I'll kill your parents too.”

She was numb, empty and half-dead.

Her abductor tied her up and gagged her with a rope fitted over the black sack, and then he dragged her in a new direction, pausing at a service entrance in back of the metal dome. She heard fingers pushing buttons and hinges squeaking, and then the ground turned to steel as her long legs were dragged across the pioneers' floor.

Her numbness vanished, replaced with wild terror.

Blindly, Kala swung her bound legs and clipped his, and he responded with laughter, kneeling down to speak with a lover's whisper. “We can dance later, you and me. Tonight is Tina's turn. Sorry, sorry.”

She was tied to a crate filled with sawdust, and by the smell of it, hundreds of fertile tortoise eggs.

When the service door closed, Kala tugged at the knots. How much time was left? How many hours did she have? Panic gave her a fabulous strength, but every jerk and twist only tightened the knots, and after a few minutes of work, she was exhausted, sobbing through the rope gag.

No was going to find her.

And when they were in the new world, Tina's husband—a big strong creature with connections and a good name—would pretend to discover Kala, cutting her loose and probably telling everyone else, “Look who wanted to come with us! My wife's little friend!” And before she could say two words, he would add, “I'll feed her from share of the stores. Yes, she's my responsibility now.”

Kala gathered herself for another try at the ropes.

Then the service door opened with the same telltale squeak, and somebody began to walk slowly past her, down the aisle and back again, pausing beside her for a moment before placing a knife against her wrists, yanking hard and cutting the rope clear through.

Off came her gag, then the black sack.

Sandor was holding a small flashlight in his free hand, and he touched her softly on her face, on her neck. "You all right?"

She nodded.

"Good thing I bumped into that prick out there." Her brother was trying to look grateful, but his expression and voice were tense as could be. "I asked him, "Why aren't you with your bride?" But he didn't say anything. Which bothered me, you know." He paused, then added, "I've seen him stare at you, Kala."

"You have?"

"Haven't you?" Sandor took a deep breath, then another, gathering himself. "So I asked if he'd seen you come this way. And then he said, "Get away from me, little boy.'"

Sandor began cutting her legs free. In the glare of his light, she saw his favorite pocket knife—the big blade made sticky and red, covered as it was with an appalling amount of blood.

"Did you kill him?" Kala muttered.

In a grim whisper, Sandor said, "Hardly."

"What happened?"

"I saved you," he answered.

"But what did you do to that man?" she demanded.

"Man?" Sandor broke into a quietly, deathly laugh. "I don't know, Kala. You're the biologist in the family. But I don't think you could call him male anymore ... if you see what I mean..."

In a personal ritual, Kala brought *The First Mother's Tale* out of hiding each spring and read it from cover to cover. She found pleasure in the book's adventures and heroisms, and the tragedies made her reliably sad, and even with whole tracts memorized, she always felt as if she was experiencing Claire's story for the first time. That strong, determined woman did everything possible to help her girls while making Owen behave. She made certain that every adult had a vote in every important decision—votes that were made after her console, naturally. Claire always spoke for the dead at funerals, and she oversaw a small feast commemorating the anniversary of their arrival. Hard famine came during their third winter. The local tortoises had been hunted to extinction while the earthly crops never prospered. It was Claire who imposed a ration system for the remaining food, and after six Wives were caught breaking into the last cache of canned goods, Claire served as judge in the bitter trial. Each girl claimed to have acted for the

good of a hungry baby or babies. But there were dozens of children by then, and whose stomach wasn't growling? Twelve other girls—some Wives, some not—served as the jury. In a ritual ancient as the species, they listened to the evidence before stepping off by themselves, returning with a verdict that found each defendant guilty as charged.

The housemother had no choice but order a full banishment.

The original Tina was one of the criminals. After some rough talk and vacuous threats, she and the other five picked up their toddlers and started south, hoping to hike their way to fresh pastures and easy food.

There was no doubt that the Six Angry Wives existed. But no consistent tale of crimes was told about them, and no Testament mentioned Claire as the presiding judge. What was known was that six women wandered through the wilderness, and when they returned ten years later, they brought blue-hens and fresh tortoise eggs as well as their four surviving children—including one lovely brown-eyed boy, nearly grown and eager to meet his father.

The truth was, no important church recognized Claire's existence, which was the same as never existing. Even the oddest offshoot faiths denied her any vital role in their history. According to *The First Mother's Tale*, the housemother lived another seven years and died peacefully in her sleep. Owen borrowed one of his Wives' Bibles to read prayers over her grave. With the relief of someone who had escaped a long burden, he thanked the woman's soul for its good work and wise guidance. And then *The First Mother's Tale* concluded with a few hopeful words from its author, the brilliant and long-dead Kala.

Except of course nothing is ever finished, and considering everything that had happened since, most of the story had barely begun.

According to most researchers, it took a full century for the pioneers to find their stride. Owen lived to be eighty—a virile man to the end—and borrowing on his godly status, he continued sleeping with an assortment of willing, fertile granddaughters. Claire's grave was soon lost to time, or she never even existed. But Owen's burial site became the world's first monument. Limestone blocks were dragged from a quarry and piled high, and the structure was decorated with a lordly statue and praising words as well as the original, still useless ripper. Worshippers traveled for days and weeks just for a chance to kneel at the feet of the great man's likeness, and sometimes an old wound felt healed or some tireless despair would suddenly lift, proving again the powers of the First Father.

Four centuries later, enough bodies and minds were wandering the world to allow a handful to become scientists.

Inside a thousand years, humanity had spread across the warm, oxygen-impooverished globe, keeping to the lowlands, erasing the native species that fit no role. Cobbler-shops became factories, schools became universities, and slowly, the extraordinary skills necessary to build new rippers came back into the world.

In 1003, a wealthy young man purchased advertisement time on every television network. “The bigger the ripper, the better the seed,” he declared to the world. And with that, he unveiled a giant Class-A ripper as well as the spacious house that would carry him and a thousand wives to a new world, plus enough frozen sperm from quality men to ensure a diverse, vital society.

He found no shortage of eager young woman.

What actually became of that colony and its people, no one could say. To leave was to vanish in every sense of the word. But thousands of rippers were built during the following centuries. Millions of pioneers left that first new world, praying for richer air and tastier foods. And after six centuries of emigration, Kala's descendants gathered around a small class-B, read passages from the Bible as well as from the Wives' Testaments, and then together they managed their small, great step into the unknown.

7

At nineteen, Kala applied with the Parks Committee, and through luck and her own persistence, she was posted to the same reserve she once visited as a youngster. She was given heavy boots and a wide-brimmed as well as an oversized brown uniform with a Novice tag pinned to her chest. Her first week of summer was spent giving tours to visitors curious about the native fauna and flora. But the assignment wasn't a rousing success, which was why she was soon transferred to exotic eradications—an improved posting, as it happened. Kala was free to drive the back roads in an official truck, parking at set points and walking deep into the alien forest. Hundreds of traps had to be checked every few days. Native animals were released, while the exotics were killed, usually with air-driven needles or a practiced blow to the head. At day's end, she would return to the main office and don plastic gloves, throwing the various carcasses into a cremation furnace—fat starlings and fatter house mice, mostly. If they died in the trap, the bodies would stink. But she quickly grew accustomed to the carnage. In her mind, she was doing important, frustrating work. Kala often pictured herself as a soldier standing on the front lines, alone, waging a noble struggle for which she expected almost nothing: A little money, the occasional encouragement, and of course, the chance to return to the wilderness every morning, enjoying its doomed and fading strangeness for another long day.

One July afternoon, while Kala worked at the incinerator, another novice appeared. They had been friendly in the past. But today, for no obvious reason, the young man seemed uncomfortable. As soon as he saw Kala, his face stiffened and his gait slowed, and then, perhaps reading her puzzlement, he suddenly sped up again. “Hello,” he offered with the softest possible voice.

Kala smiled while flinging a dead cat into the fire. “Did you hear?” she began. “They found a new herd of Harry's-big-days. Above Saint Mary's Glacier.”

The young man hesitated for an instant. Then with a rushed voice, he sputtered, “I've got an errand. Bye now.”

Long ago, Kala learned that she wasn't as sensitive to emotions as most people. Noticing something was wrong now meant there was a fair chance that it really was. Why was that boy nervous? Was she in trouble again? And if so, what had she screwed up this time?

When Kala was giving tours, there was an unfortunate incident. A big blowhard from the Grandfather Cult joined the other tourists. His personal mission was to commandeer her lecture. One moment, she was describing the false spruces and explaining how the tom-toms depended wholly on them. And suddenly the blowhard interrupted. With an idiot's voice, he announced that the native trees were useless as well as ugly, and all the local animals were stupid as the rocks, and their world's work wouldn't be finished until every miserable corner like this was turned into oak trees and concrete.

Kala's job demanded a certain reserve. Lecturers were not to share their opinions, unless those opinions coincided with official park policy. Usually she managed to keep her feelings in check. She endured three loud interruptions. But then the prick mentioned his fifteen sons and twelve lovely daughters, boasting that each child would end up on a different new world. Kala couldn't hold back. She was half his age and half his size, but she stepped up to him and pushed a finger into his belly, saying, "If I was your child, I'd want to leave this world too."

Most of the audience smiled, and quite a few laughed.

But the blowhard turned and marched to the front office, and by day's end, Kala was given a new job killing wildcats and other vermin.

The last carcasses were burning when her superior emerged from the station. He was an older fellow—a life-long civil servant who probably dreamed of peace and quiet until his retirement, and then a peaceful death. Approaching his temperamental novice, the man put on a painful smile, twice saying her name before adding, "I need to talk to you," with a cautious tone.

A headless starling lay on the dirt. With a boot, Kala kicked it into the incinerator and again shut the heavy iron door. Then with a brazen tone, she said, "Listen to my side first."

The man stopped short.

"I mean it," she continued. "I don't know what you've heard. I don't even know what I could have done wrong. But I had very good reasons—"

"Kala."

"And you should hear my explanation first."

The poor old gentleman dipped his head, shaking it sadly, telling her, "Kala, sweetness. I'm sorry. All I want to say ... to tell you ... is that your brother called this morning. Right after you drove off." He paused long enough to breathe, and then informed her, "Your father died last night, and I'm very, very sorry."

* * * *

Thrifty and impractical: Father was the same in death as in life.

That was an uncharitable assessment, but it happened to be true. Father left behind a long list of wishes, and Mother did everything he wanted, including the simple juniper box and no official funeral procession. The tombstone was equally minimal, and because cemeteries were expensive, he had mandated a private plot he had purchased as soon as he fell sick—a secret illness kept from everyone, including his wife of thirty-one years. But the burial site had drawbacks, including the absence of any road passing within a couple hundred yards. Kala's parents hadn't been active in any church for years, which meant it was their scattered family that was responsible for every arrangement, including digging the grave to a legal depth, finding pallbearers to help carry the graceless casket, and then after the painful service, filling in the hole once again.

"It's a lovely piece of ground," Sandor mentioned, and not for the first time. Then he dropped a load of the dry gray earth, watching it scatter across a lid of tightly fitted red planks, big clods thumping while the tiny clods scattered, rolling and shattering down to dust, making the skittering sound of busy mice.

"It is pretty," Mother echoed, sitting on one of forty folding chairs.

Everyone else had left. Barely three dozen relatives and friends had attended the service, and probably only half of them had genuinely known the deceased. If Father died ten years ago, Kala realized, two hundred people would have been sitting and standing along this low ridge, and the church would have sent at least two ministers—one to read Scripture, while the other sat with the grieving family, giving practiced comfort. But the comfort-givers abandoned them soon after that terrible wedding night. For maiming one of the grooms, Sandor had been shunned. And once Kala and her parents didn't follow suit, the congregation used more subtle, despicable means to toss them away.

For months, Kala continued meeting old friends in secret. A little too urgently, they would tell her that nothing was her fault. But then they started asking how Kala could live with a person who had done such an awful thing. After all, Sandor had neutered one of the leading citizens of their congregation—an act of pure violence, too large and far too wicked not to be brought to the attention of the police. It didn't matter that he was protecting his only sister, which was normally a good noble principle. And it didn't matter that decent men always defended their women, or that if a girl was abducted when she's fourteen, some family member was required to send a message to those horny fools lurking out there: Hurt her, and I'll take your future generations from you!

None of that meant anything to her friends. And once Kala admitted that she felt thankful for her brother's actions, those same friends stopped inventing tricks to meet her on the sly.

Of course her brother wasn't the only person needing blame. Parents were always culpable for the sins of their children, it was said. Didn't Sandor's father and mother give him their genes and some portion of their dreams? He was technically still a child when the crime occurred, still

possessed by them, and supposedly answering first to God and then to them. Wasn't that how it was supposed to be?

The kidnapping was an unfortunate business, said some. The new husband shouldn't have done what he did, and particularly with one of their own. But even in a faith that cherished monogamy, his actions were understandable. Twenty thousand years of history had built this very common outlook. One deacon—a younger man devoid of charm or common sense—visited their house after Sunday service. Sitting in the meeting room with Kala's father, the deacon asked, “Where lies the difference? A young man takes two brides to a fresh world, while another lives with his first wife for twenty years, then holds a painless divorce and starts a new family with a younger woman?”

“There's an enormous difference,” Father had responded, his voice rising, betraying anger Kala had rarely heard before. She was sitting in her bedroom upstairs, listening while her other great defender said, “My daughter is a young girl, first of all. And second, she had no choice in this matter. None. She was tied up like a blue-hen and abused like cargo, thrown into a situation where she would never see her family or world again. Is that fair? Or just? Or at all decent? No, and no, and no again.”

“But to cut the groom like he was cut—”

“A little cut, from what I've heard.”

Which was the greater surprise: Father interrupting, or insulting the penis of another man?

The deacon groaned and then said, “That vicious animal ... your darling Sandor ... he deserves to sit in jail for a few years.”

“Let the courts decide,” Father replied.

“And you realize, of course.” Their guest hesitated a moment before completing his thought. “You understand that no worthy group of pioneers will let him into their ranks. Not now. Not with his taste for violence, they won't.”

“I suppose not.”

“Which is a shame, since your son always wanted to be a Father.”

Kala heard silence, and when she imagined her father's face, she saw a look of utter shame.

Then the stupid deacon had to share one last opinion. With a black voice, he announced, “I came here for a reason, sir. I think you should appreciate what other people are saying.”

“What others?”

“Women as well as the men.”

"Tell me," Father demanded.

"The girl looks older than fourteen. Her body is grown, and that voice of hers could be a woman's. Any healthy man would be interested. But there's a problem in the words that Kala's uses ... and that smart, sharp tone of hers..."

"What are you telling me?"

"Many of us ... your very best friends ... we believe that somebody should knock your daughter down a notch or two. And give her some babies to play with, too."

Father's chair squeaked—a hard defiant sound.

"Go," Kala heard him say. "Get out of my house."

"Gladly," the deacon replied. "But just so you know my sense of things, realize this: Your daughter had an opportunity that night. It might not seem fair or just to us. But if she and that brother of hers had a wit between them, she'd be living today on a better world. But as things stand, I can't imagine any reputable group will accept trouble like her. Her best bet for the future is a sloppy abduction by a single male who simply doesn't know who she is."

There was a pause—a gathering of breath and fury. Then for the only time in her life, Kala heard her father saying, "Fuck you."

That moment, and the entire nightmare ... all of it returned to her at the gravesite. The intervening years suddenly vanished, and her lanky body was left shaking from nerves and misery. Sandor and their mother both noticed. They watched her fling gouts of earth into the hole, and misunderstanding everything, Mom warned, "This isn't a race, sweetness."

Kala felt as if she had been caught doing something awful. She couldn't name her crime, but shame took hold. Down went the shovel, and she knelt over the partly filled grave, staring at the last two visible corners of her father's casket.

Sandor settled beside her.

With what felt like a single breath, Kala confessed the heart of her thoughts: A single night had torn apart their lives, and despite believing she was blameless, she felt guilty. Somehow all the evil and poor luck that had followed them since was her fault. Because of her, they had lost their church and friends. Father died young, and now their mother would always be a widow. And meanwhile, her brother was a convicted criminal, stripped from what he had wanted most in life—the opportunity to become a respectable Father to some great new world.

After a difficult pause, Mom broke in. "I wouldn't have liked that at all," she maintained, "losing you without the chance to say, 'Good-bye.'"

Kala had hoped for more.

"You're being silly, sweet," would have been nice. "You aren't to blame for any of this at all," would have been perfect.

Instead, the old woman remarked, "These last years have been hard. Yes. But don't blame yourself for your father's health."

Sandor drove his shovel into the earth pile behind Kala. Then with a weighty sigh, he said, "And don't worry about me. I'm doing fine."

Hardly. Because of his stay in prison, her brother had missed his last years at school. The boy he had been was gone, replaced by a hard young man with self-made tattoos and muscles enough for two athletes.

Kala disagreed.

"You're wrong," she said with a shake of her head.

Then Sandor laughed at her, kicking a clod or two into the hole and staring down at their father, quietly reminding everyone, 'Respectable' is just a word." His face was tight, his eyes were enormous, and his voice was dry and slow when he added, "And there's more than one route to reach another world."

8

Kala's world was settled by a confederation of small and medium-sized churches. Two million parishioners had pooled their resources, acquiring a powerful class-A ripper—a bruising monster capable of stealing away several city blocks. Each congregation selected their best pioneers, and the Last Father was elected to his lofty post, responsible for the well being of more than a thousand brave souls, plus three stowaways and at least fifteen young women kidnapped on the eve of departure. A farm field on the Asian continent was selected, in a region once known as Hunan. Where wheat and leadfruit normally grew, a huge, multi-story dome was erected. Every pioneer wore plugged his ears with foam and wax. The giant ripper shook the entire structure as it searched across Creation; and with a final surge, machine and humans were dragged along the hidden dimensions, covering the miniscule distance.

Rippers had no upper limit to their power, but there were practical considerations. Entering another world meant displacing the native air and land. With its arrival, that class-A ripper shoved aside thousands of tons of dirt and rock, erecting a ring-shaped hill of debris instantly heated by the impact. Wood and peat caught fire, and deep underground, the bedrock was compressed until it was hot enough to melt. The Last Father ordered everyone to remain indoors for the day, breathing bottled air and watching the fires spread and die under an evening thunderstorm. Then the survey teams were dispatched, racing over the blackened ground, finding pastures of black sedge-like grass where they caught the native mice and pseudoinsects as well as a loose-limbed creature with a glancing resemblance to the lost monkeys in the oldest textbooks.

Experience promised this: If intelligence evolved on a new world, chances are it would live in Asia. Competition was stiffest on large landmasses. That's how it had been on the original earth. Australia was once home to opossums and kangaroos, and dimension-crossing pioneers might have been tempted to linger there, unaware that lying over the horizon were continents full of smart, aggressive placental creatures, including one fierce medium-sized ape with some exceptionally mighty plans.

But the vermin brought home by the survey teams had simple smooth brains, while the monkey-creature proved to be an intellectual midget next to any respectable cat. The Last Father met with his advisors and then with his loving wife, and following a suitable period of contemplation and prayer, he announced that this was where God wished them to remain for the rest of their days.

The new colony expanded swiftly, in numbers and reach.

The Last Father died with honor, six of his nine children carrying his body into a granite cathedral built at the site of their arrival.

By then villages and little cities were scattered across a thousand miles of wilderness. Within ten generations, coal-fired ships were mapping coastlines on every side of the Mother Ocean, while little parties were moving inland, skirting the edges of the Tibetan Plateau on their way to places once called Persia and Turkey, Lebanon and France.

The original churches grew and split apart, or they shriveled and died.

And always, new faiths were emerging, often born from a single believer's ideals and his very public fantasies.

The original class-A ripper served as an altar inside the Last Father's cathedral. A cadre of engineers maintained its workings, while a thousand elite soldiers stood guard over the holy ground. The symbols were blatant and unflinching: First and always, this world would serve as a launching point to countless new realms. Human duty was to build more rippers—a promise finally fulfilled several centuries ago. By Kala's time, the thousand original pioneers had become five billion citizens. Tax codes and social conventions assured that rippers would always be built. Experts guessed that perhaps fifteen billion bodies could live on these warm lands, and with luck and God's blessing, that would be the day when enough rippers were rolling out of enough factories to allow every excess child to escape, every boy free to find his own empty, golden realm, and every girl serving as a good man's happy Wife.

Sandor hated that his sister traveled alone. Every trip Kala took was preceded by a difficult conversation, on phone or in person. It was his duty to remind her that the open highway was an exceptionally dangerous place. Sandor always had some tale to share about some unfortunate young woman who did everything right—drove only by day, spoke to the fewest possible strangers, and slept in secure hotels that catered to their kind. Yet without exception, each of those smart ladies had vanished somewhere on the road, usually without explanation.

"But look at the actual numbers," Kala liked to counter. "The chance of me being abducted twice in my life—"

"Is tiny. I know."

"Dying in a traffic accident is ten times more likely," she would add.

But eventually Sandor analyzed the same statistics, ambushing her with a much bleaker picture. "Dying in a wreck is three times as likely," he informed Kala. "But that's for all women. Old and young. Those in your subset—women in their twenties, with good looks and driving alone—are five times as likely to disappear as they are to die in a simple, run-of-the-mill accident."

"But I have to travel," she countered. Her doctorate involved studying the native communities scattered across a dozen far flung mountaintops. Driving was mandatory, and since there was barely enough funding as it was, she had no extra money to hire reliable security guards. "I know you don't appreciate my work—"

"I never said that, Kala."

"Because you're such a painfully polite fellow." Then laughing at her own joke, she reminded him, "I always carry a registered weapon."

"Good."

"And a gun that isn't registered."

"As you damn well should," Sandor insisted.

"Plus there's a thousand little things I do, or two million things I avoid." She always had one or two new tricks to offer, just to prove that she was outracing her unseen enemies. "And if you have any other suggestions, please ... share them with your helpless little sister..."

"Don't tease," he warned. "You don't understand what men want from women. If you did, you'd never leave home."

Kala had a tidy little apartment on a women's floor, set ten stories above the street—far too high to be stolen away with even the biggest ripper. On this occasion, Sandor happened to be passing through, supposedly chasing a mechanic's job but not acting in any great hurry to leave. His main mission, as far as she could tell, was to terrify his little sister. As always, he came armed with news clippings and Web sites. He wanted her to appreciate the fact that her mountains were full of horny males, each one more dangerous than the others, and all the bastards fighting for their chance to start some new world. As it happened, last week a large shipment of class-C rippers had just been hijacked from an armed convoy, and now the Children of Forever were proclaiming a time of plenty. And just yesterday, outside New Eternal, some idiot drove a big freight truck through two sets of iron gates before pulling up beside the classroom wing of a ladies' academy. Moments later, a large class-B ripper fired off, leaving behind a hemispherical hole and a

mangled building, as well as a thousand scared teenage girls, saved only because they had been called into the auditorium for a hygiene lecture from the school's doctor.

Kala shrugged at the bad news. "Crap is a universal constant. Nothing has changed, and I'm going to be fine."

But really, she never felt good about driving long distances, and the recent news wasn't comforting. Nearly a hundred stolen rippers were somewhere on the continent, which had to shift the odds that trouble would find her. Kala let herself feel the fear, and then with a burst of nervous creativity, she blurted out a possible solution.

"Come with me," she said.

Sandor was momentarily stunned.

"If you're that especially worried about me, ride along and help me with my work. Unless you really do have some plush mechanic's job waiting."

"All right then," he answered. "I'd like that."

"A long family vacation," she said with a grin.

And he completed her thought, adding, "Just like we used to do."

* * * *

More than ten years had passed since they last spent time together, and the summer-long journey gave them endless chances to catch up. But for all the days spent on the road, not to mention the weeks hiking and working on alpine trails, they shared remarkably little. Kala heard nothing about life in prison and very little about how Sandor had made his living since his release. And by the same token, she never felt the need to mention past boys and future men—romantic details that she always shared with her closest friends. For a time, the silences bothered her. But then she decided siblings always had difficulty with intimacy. Sharing genetics and a family was such a deep, profound business that no one felt obliged to prove their closeness by ordinary routes. Sandor revealed himself only in glimpses—a few words or a simple gesture—while in her own fashion, Kala must have seemed just as close-mouthed. But of course these secrets of theirs didn't matter. This man would always be her brother, and that was far larger than any other relationship they might cobble together while driving across the spine of a continent.

Sandor relished his job as protector. At every stop, he was alert and a little aggressive, every stranger's face deserving a quick study, and some of them requiring a hard warning stare. She appreciated the sense of menace that seemed to rise out of him at will. In ways she hadn't anticipated, Kala enjoyed watching Sandor step up to a counter, making innocent clerks flinch. His tattoos flexed and his face grew hard as stone, and she liked the rough snarl in his voice when he said, "Thank you." Or when he snapped at some unknown fellow, "Out of our way. Please. Sir."

If anything, empty wilderness was worse than the open road. It made him more suspicious, if not out-and-out paranoid.

Kala's work involved an obscure genus of pseudoinsects. She was trying to find and catalog unknown species before they vanished, collecting data about their habitat and specimens that she froze and dried and stuck into long test tubes. One July evening, on the flank of a giant southern volcano, she heard a peculiar sound from behind a grove of spruce trees. A rough hooting, it sounded like. "I wonder what that was," she mentioned. Sandor instantly slipped away from the fire, walking the perimeter at least twice before returning again, one hand holding a long flashlight and the other carrying an even longer pistol equipped with a nightscope. "So what was it?" she asked.

"Boys," he reported. "They were thinking of camping near us."

"They were?"

"Yeah," he said, sitting next to the fire again. "But I guess for some reason they decided to pull up their tent and move off. Who knows why?"

Moments like that truly pleased Kala.

But following her pleasure was a squeamish distaste. What kind of person was she? She thought of herself as being independent and self-reliant, but on the other hand, she seemed to relish being watched over by a powerful and necessarily dangerous man.

Two days later, driving north, Sandor mentioned that he had never gotten his chance to visit the Grand Canyon. "Our vacation never made it," he reminded her. "And I haven't found the time since."

Kala let them invest one full day of sightseeing.

The canyon's precise location and appearance varied on each world. But there was always a river draining that portion of the continent, and the land had always risen up in response to the predictable tectonics. Since their earth was wetter than most, the river was big and angry, cutting through a billion years of history on its way to the canyon floor. Kala paid for a cable-car ride to the bottom. They ate hard-boiled blue-hen eggs and mulberries for lunch, and afterwards, walking on the rocky shoreline, she pointed to the rotting carcass of a Helen-trout. The First Father didn't bring living fish with him, but later Fathers realized that fish farming meant cheap protein. The Helen-trout came from the fifth new world—indiscriminate feeders that could thrive in open ocean or fresh water, and that adored every temperature from freezing to bathwater. No major drainage in the world lacked the vermin. "They die when they're pregnant," she explained. "Their larvae use the mother as food, eating her as she rots, getting a jump on things before they swim away."

Sandor seemed to be listening. But then again, he always seemed to pay attention to his surroundings. In this case, he gave a little nod, and after a long pause said, "I'm curious, Kala. What do you want to accomplish? With your work, I mean."

He asked that question every few days, as if for the first time.

At first Kala thought that he simply wasn't hearing her answers. Later, she wondered if he was trying to break her down, hoping to make her admit that she didn't have any good reason for her life's investment. But after weeks of enduring this verbal dance, she began to appreciate what was happening. To keep from boring herself, she was forced to change her response. Inside the canyon, staring at the dead fish, she didn't bother with old words about the duty and honor that came from saving a few nameless bugs. And she avoided the subject of great medicines that probably would never emerge from her work. Instead, staring down at the rich bulging body, she offered a new response.

"This world of ours is dying, Sandor."

The statement earned a hard look and an impossible-to-read grin. "Why's that?" he asked over the roar of the water.

"A healthy earth has ten or twenty or fifty million species. Depending on how you count them." She shook her head, reminding him, "The Last Father brought as many species as possible. Nearly a thousand multicellular species have survived here. And that's too few to make an enduring, robust ecosystem."

Sandor shrugged and gestured at the distant sky. "Things look good enough," he said. "What do you mean that it's dying?"

"Computer models point to the possibility," she explained. "Low diversity means fragile ecosystems. And it's more than just having too few species. It's the nature of these species. Wherever we go, we bring weed species. Biological thugs, essentially. And not just from the original earth but from seventeen distinct evolutionary histories. Seventeen lines that are nearly alien to one another. That reduces meaningful interactions. It's another factor why there will eventually come a crunch."

"Okay. So when?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Next year?"

"Not for thousands of years," she allowed. "But there is a collapse point, and after that, the basic foundations of this biosphere will decline rapidly. Phytoplankton, for one. The native species are having troubles enduring the new food chains, and if they end up vanishing, then nobody will be making free oxygen."

"Trees don't make oxygen?"

"They do," she admitted. "But their wood burns or rots. And rotting is the same reaction as burning, chemically speaking."

Sandor stared at the gray mother fish.

"You know how it is when you turn on a ripper?" Kala asked. "You know how the machine has to search hard for a world with a livable atmosphere?"

Her brother nodded, a look of anticipation building in the pale brown eyes.

"Do you ever wonder why so many earths don't have decent air for us? Do you?" Kala gave him a rough pat on the shoulder, asking, "What if a lot of pioneers have been moving across the multiverse? Humans and things that aren't human too. And what if most of these intrepid pioneers eventually kick their worlds out of equilibrium, killing them as a consequence?"

"Yeah," he said.

Then after a long thoughtful moment: "Huh."

And that was the last time Sandor ever bothered to doubt the importance of Kala's work.

10

The heart of every ripper was a cap-shaped receptacle woven from diamond whiskers, each whisker doctored with certain rare-earth elements and infused with enough power to pierce the local brane. But as difficult as the receptacle was to build, it was a simple chore next to engineering the machines to support and control its work. Hard drives and the capacitors had to function on the brink of theoretical limits. Heat and quantum fluctuations needed to be kept at a minimum. The best rippers utilized a cocktail of unusual isotopes, doubling their reliability as well tripling the costs, while security costs added another forty percent to the final price.

Twice that summer, Kala and her brother saw convoys of finished rippers being shipped across country. Armored trucks were painted a lush emerald green, each one accompanied by two or three faster vehicles bristling with weapons held by tough young men. Routes and schedules were supposed to be kept secret. Since even a small ripper was worth a fortune, the corporations did whatever they could to protect their investments. Which made Kala wonder: How the Children of Forever learn where one convoy would be passing, and what kind of firepower would it take to make the rippers their own?

Sandor was driving when they ran into one of the convoys. A swift little blister of armor and angry faces suddenly passed them on the wrong side. "Over," screamed every face. "Pull over."

They were beside the Mormon Sea, on a highway famous for scenery and its narrow, almost nonexistent shoulders. But Sandor complied, fitting them onto a slip of asphalt and turning off the

engine, then setting the parking brake and turning to look back around the bend, eyes huge and his lower lip tucked into his chewing mouth.

For a moment or two, Kala watched the bright water of the inland sea, enjoying the glitter stretching to the horizon. Then came the rumble of big engines, and a pair of heavy freight trucks rolled past, followed by more deadly cars, and then another pair of trucks.

"Class-Cs," Sandor decided. "About a hundred of them, built down in Highborn."

The trucks had no obvious markings. "How can you tell?"

"The lack of security," he said. "Cs don't get as much. It's the As and Bs that bandits can sell for a fortune. And I know the company because each truck's got a code on its side, if you know how to read it."

The convoy had passed out of sight, but they remained parked beside the narrow road. "When are we moving again?" she asked.

"Wait," he cautioned.

She shifted in her seat and took a couple meaningful breaths.

Reading the signs, Sandor turned to her. "You don't want to trail them too closely. Someone might get the wrong idea. Know what I mean?"

And with that, her brave, almost fearless brother continued to sit beside the road, hands squeezing the wheel.

"You gave somebody the wrong idea," she said.

"Pardon?"

"Sandor," she said. "In your life, how many convoys have you followed?"

Nothing changed about his face. Then suddenly, a little smile turned up the corner of his mouth, and with a quiet, conspiratorial voice, he admitted, "Fifty, maybe sixty."

She wasn't surprised, except that she didn't expect to feel so upset. "Is that how badly you want it? To be a Father ... you're willing to steal a ripper just to get your chance...?"

He started to nod. Then again, he looked at his sister, reminding her, "I'm still here. So I guess I'm not really that eager."

"What went wrong? The work was too dangerous for you?"

His expression looked injured now. Straightening his back, he started the car and pulled out, accelerating for a long minute, letting the silence work on Kala until he finally told her, "You know, there were thirty-two security men on that other convoy. The one hit by the Children of Forever. Plus a dozen drivers and three corporate representatives. And all were killed during the robbery."

"I know that—"

"Most of those poor shits were laid down in a ditch by the road and shot through the head. Just so motorists wouldn't notice the bodies when they drove past." He squeezed the steering wheel until it squeaked, and very carefully, he told Kala, "That's when I gave up wanting it. Being a Father to the very best world isn't enough reason to murder even one poor boy who's trying to make some money and keep his family fed."

* * * *

A pair of mountain ranges stood as islands far out in the Mormon Sea, and they spent on few days walking the tallest peaks. Then they drove north again, up to the Geysers, enjoying a long hike through the mountains north of that volcanic country. Then it was late August, and they started back toward Kala's home. One stop remained, kept until now for sentimental reasons.

"Our best vacation," she muttered.

Sandor agreed with his silence and a little wink.

They stayed in a reserve campground meant for employees, and Kala introduced her brother to the few rangers that remained from her days here. The mood was upbeat, on the whole. Old colleagues expressed interest in her studies, asking knowledgeable questions, and some cases, offering advice.

One older gentleman—a fellow who had never warmed much to her before—nodded as he listened to her description of her work. Then he said, "Kala," with a sweet, almost fatherly voice. "I know a place with just that kind of bug. I can't tell you the species, by I don't think it's quite what you've found before."

"Really? Where?"

He brought out a map and pointed at a long valley on the other side of the continental divide. "It looks too low in altitude, I suppose. And a lot of junipers are moving in. But if you get up by this looping road here—"

Sandor pushed in close to watch.

"There's a little glen. I've seen that blue bug there, I'm sure."

"Thank you," Kala told him.

"Whatever I can do to help," the old ranger said. Then he made a show of rolling up the map, asking, "I can take you up myself. If your brother wants to stay here and rest for a bit."

Sandor said, "No thanks."

But he said it in an especially nice way. For the time being, neither one of them could see what was happening.

11

As promised, juniper trees were standing among the natives. Rilly birds and starlings must have eaten juniper berries outside the reserve. Since their corrosive stomach acids were essential for the germination process, wherever they relieved themselves, a new forest of ugly gray-green trees sprouted, prickly and relentless. Most biologists claimed that it was an innate, mutualistic relationship between species. But Kala had a different interpretation: The birds knew precisely what they were doing. Whenever a starling took a dump, it sang to the world, "I'm planting a forest here. And I'm going to be the death of you, you silly old trees."

Sandor squatted and stuck his thick fingers into the needle litter, churning up a long pink worm. After a summer spent watching Kala, he was now one of the great experts when it came to a single genus of pseudoinsects. "Not all that promising," he announced.

Earthworms were another key invader from their home world. And no, nightcrawlers didn't usually coexist with her particular creepy-crawlies.

"Maybe higher up," he offered.

But the old ranger told her this was the place, which implied that her subjects were enduring despite worms and trees: A heroic image that Kala wanted to cling to for a little while longer.

"You wander," she said. "If I don't find anything, I'll follow."

Sandor winked and stepped back into the black shadows.

Twenty minutes later, Kala gave up the hunt. Stepped into a little clearing, she sat on a rock bench, pulling a sandwich from her knapsack and managing a bite before a stranger stepped off the trail behind her.

"Excuse me?"

Startled, Kala wheeled fast, her free hand reaching for the pistol on her belt. But the voice was a girl's, and she was a very tiny creature—big-eyed and fragile, maybe ten years younger than Kala. The girl looked tired and worried. Her shirt was torn, and her left arm wore a long scrape that looked miserably sore.

"Can you help me, ma'am? Please?"

Carefully, Kala rose to her feet while pushing the sandwich back inside her bag, using that same motion to make certain that her second pistol was where she expected it to be. Then with a careful voice, she asked, "Are you lost, sweetie?"

"That too," the girl said, glancing over her shoulder before stepping away from the forest's edge. "It's been days since I've been outside. At least."

Kala absorbed the news. Then she quietly asked, "Where have you been?"

"In the back end."

"The end of what?"

"The bus," the girl snapped, as if Kala should already know that much. "He put me with the others, in the dark—"

"Other girls?"

"Yes, yes." The little creature drifted forward, tucking both hands into her armpits. "He's a mean one—"

"What sect?"

"Huh?"

"Does he belong to a sect?"

"The Children of Forever," the strange girl confessed. "Do you know about them?"

With her right hand, Kala pulled the pistol from her belt while keeping the bag on her left shoulder. Nothing moved in the trees. Except for the girl and her, there might be no one else in this world.

"He's collecting wives," the girl related. "He told me he wants ten of us before he leaves."

"Come closer," Kala told her. Then she asked, "How many girls does he have so far?"

The girl swallowed. "Three."

"And there's just him?"

"Yeah. He's alone." The girl's eyes were growing larger, unblinking and bright. "Three other girls, and me. And him."

"Where?"

"Down that way," said the girl. "Past the parking lot, hiding up in some big old grease trees."

Kala's car lay in the same direction. But Sandor had gone the opposite direction.

Whispering, she told the stranger, "Okay. I can help you."

"Thank you, ma'am!"

"Quiet."

"Sorry," the girl muttered.

"Now," Kala told her. "This way."

The girl fell in beside her, rubbing her bloodied arm as she walked. She breathed hard and fast. Several more times, she said, "Thank you." But she didn't seem to look back half as often as Kala did, and maybe that was what seemed wrong.

After a few minutes of hard walking, Kala asked, "So how did you get free?"

The girl looked back then. And with a nod, she said, "I crawled up through the vent."

A tiny creature like that: Kala could believe it.

"I cut my arm on a metal edge."

The wound was red, but the blood had clotted some time ago. Even as Kala nodded, accepting that story, a little part of her was feeling skeptical.

"If he finds me, he'll hurt me."

"I won't let him hurt you," Kala promised.

"There's three other girls in the bus," she repeated. Then she put her hands back into her armpits, hugging herself hard, saying, "We should save them, if we can. Sneak up to the bus while he's hunting for me and get them free, maybe."

But Kala wanted to find Sandor. She came close to mentioning him to the girl, but then she thought better of it. Her brother's presence was a secret that made her feel better. It gave her the confidence to tell the girl, "Later. First I have to make sure that you're safe."

The girl stared up at her protector, saying nothing.

"Come on," Kala urged.

"I want to be safe," the girl said.

"That's what I'm doing—"

"No," she said. Then her hands came out from under her arms, one of them empty while the other held a little box with two metal forks sticking from one end, and the forks jumped out and dove into her skin, and suddenly a hot blue bolt of lightning was rolling through her body.

* * * *

The girl disarmed Kala and stole her bag and tied her up with plastic straps pulled from her back pocket. Then she vanished down the path. The pain subsided enough to where Kala could sit up, watching uphill, imagining her brother's arrival. But this wasn't the path he had taken, and he still hadn't shown by the time the girl and New Father appeared. A stubby automatic weapon hung on his shoulder. He was forty or forty-five years old, a big strong and homely creature with rough hands and foul breath. "She is awfully pretty," was his first assessment, smiling at his latest acquisition. Then he offered a wink, adding, "He promised I'd like you. And he was right."

The old ranger had set this up.

"I didn't see any brother," said the tiny girl.

"That would be too easy," the man cautioned. Then he handed his weapon to the girl and grabbed Kala, flinging her over a shoulder while saying, "I don't think he'll be any problem. But come on anyway, sweet. Fast as we can walk."

They entered the open glade, crossing the parking lot and passing Kala's tiny car before they climbed again, entering a mature stand of native trees. Hiding in the gloom was a long bus flanked by a pair of fat freight trucks, each vehicle equipped with wide tires and extra suspension. And there were many more brides than three, Kala saw. Twelve was her first count, fourteen when she tried again. Each girl was in her teens. They looked like schoolgirls on a field trip, giggling and teasing the newest wife by saying, "Too old to walk for herself," and, "Fresh blood in the gene pool, looks like."

Three young men silently watched Kala's arrival. Sons, by the looks of them. In their early twenties, at most.

"Beautiful," said one of the boys.

The other two nodded and grinned.

With the care shown to treasured luggage, the older man set Kala beneath a tree, her back propped against the black trunk, arms and legs needing to be retied, just to make sure. Kala quickly looked from face to face, hoping for any sign of empathy. There was none. And the girl who had been sent out as bait stood over Kala for several minutes, wearing the hardest expression of all.

"He will come for me," Kala said.

"Your brother probably will," said the New Father. "But I've been watching you two. He's carrying nothing bigger than that long pistol, and we've got artillery here he wouldn't dare face."

As if to prove their murderous natures, the sons retrieved their own automatic weapons from the bus.

"What next?" one son asked.

"Stay here with me," their father advised.

But the oldest son didn't like that tactic. "We could circle around, pick him off when he shows himself."

"No," he was told.

"But—"

"What did I say?"

The young man dropped his face.

"God led us to this place," the wiser man continued. "And God has seen to give us a sticky hot day. Pray for storms. That's my advice. Then we can punch a hole in the clouds and get power enough to finally leave..."

Lightning, he was talking about. Kala had heard about this technique: With a proper rocket and enough wire following like a tail, it was possible to create lightning during a thunderstorm. A channel of air supplied the connection to the charged earth below. The bolt would strike a preset lightning rod ... up in the tree on the other side of camp, she realized. She noticed the tall black spike and the heavy wires leading down into the ripper that was probably set in the center of the bus, a class-C that was hungry and waiting for its first and only meal.

Kala could guess why these people had come into the mountains. They liked solitude and cheap energy, and besides, the police were hunting everywhere else for those who had murdered the security guards.

Sandor was somewhere close, Kala told herself.

Watching her.

She almost relaxed, imagining her brother hunkered low in the shadow of some great old tree, waiting for a critical mistake to be made. Hunting for an opening, a weakness. Any opportunity. She went as far as picturing his arrival: Sandor would wait for afternoon and the gathering storms, and maybe the rain would start to fall, fat drops turning into a deluge, and while the devout boys and girls watched for the Lord in that angry sky, her brother would sneak up behind her and neatly cut her free.

Obviously, that's what would happen.

Kala thought so highly of the plan that she was as surprised as anyone when a figure emerged from the shadows—a man smaller than most were, running on bare feet to keep his noise to a minimum. He was quick, but something in his stride seemed unhurried. Untroubled. He looked something like a hiker who had lost his way but now had found help. Perhaps that was what Sandor intended. But his face was grim and focused, and no motion was wasted. Everybody—grooms and brides and even their captive—stared for a moment, examining the stranger in their midst. Then the newcomer reached beneath his shirt and lifted a long pistol, and the first hollow point removed the top of the father's head and the second one knocked the small girl flat. Then Sandor was running again, slipping between brides, and one of the sons finally lifted his weapon, spraying automatic gunfire until three girls had dropped and another brother had pushed the barrel into the forest floor, screaming, “Stop, would you ... just stop...!”

Sandor had the third brother by the neck, slamming him against the broad black trunk of a tree. Then he stared out at the cowering survivors, pressing the barrel of the pistol into the man's ass, and with a voice eerily composed, he said, “Put your guns down. Do it now. Or I'm going to do some painting over here ... with a goddamn pubic hair brush...”

12

The matronly gray robes of middle age had vanished, replaced by an old woman's love for gaudy colors. She was wearing a rich slick and very purple dress with a purple hat with a wide gold belt and matching shoes. Diet and exercise had removed enough weight to give her a stocky, solid figure. She nicely filled the station of her life—that of the fit, well-rested widow. Seeing her children standing at her doorway, Mom smiled—a thoroughly genuine expression, happy but brief. Then she found something alarming in their faces. “What's happened?” With concern, she said, “Darlings. What's wrong?”

Kala glanced at her brother and then over her shoulder.

In the street sat a plain commercial van. Nothing about the vehicle was remarkable, except that its back end was being pressed down by the terrific, relentless weight of a class-C ripper and a powerful little winch.

The van was their fourth vehicle in three days, and Sandor would replace it tomorrow, if he thought it would help.

"I was just leaving," their mother offered. And when no one else spoke, she added, "I don't normally dress like this—"

"Don't go," said her son.

"Are you meeting friends?" Kala asked. "If you don't show, will somebody miss you?"

Mom shook her head. "I just go the tea parlor on Fridays. I know people, but no, I doubt if anybody expects me."

It was the Sabbath today, wasn't it?

"Can I park the van inside your garage?" Sandor asked.

Mom nodded. "You'll have to pull my car out—"

"Keys," he said.

She fished them from a purse covered with mock jewelry, and Sandor started down the front stairs.

Kala gratefully stepped inside. All these years, and the same furnishings and carpet populated the living room, although every surface was a little more worn now. Immersed in what was astonishingly familiar, she suddenly relaxed. She couldn't help herself. All at once it was impossible to stand under her own power, and as soon as she sat, a deep need for sleep began to engulf her.

"What's happened?" Mom repeated. "What's wrong?"

"We're going to explain everything, Mom."

"You look awful, sweetness. Both of you do." The old woman sat beside Kala on the lumpy couch, one hand patting her on the knee. "But I'm glad to see you two, together."

Sometime in these last few moments, Kala had begun to cry.

"Tell me, dear."

In what felt like a single breath, the story emerged. For the second time in her life, Kala had been kidnapped, but this time Sandor killed two people while freeing her. A second bride died in random gunfire, and two more were severely injured. "But we had to leave them," Kala confessed. "After we disarmed the brothers and brides, we left them with first aid kits and two working trucks ... except Sandor shot out the tires before we drove off in their bus, just to make sure we would have a head start..."

Her mother held herself motionless, mouth open and no sound worth the effort.

"It was a big long bus with a ripper onboard. Sandor drove us through the mountains. Fast. I don't know why we didn't crash, but we didn't. We stopped at a fix-it shop and he made calls, and a hundred miles after that, we met a couple friends of his ... men that he met inside prison, I think..."

"When was this?"

"Wednesday," she answered. "Those friends helped Sandor pull the ripper from the bus. They gave us a new truck and kept the capacitors and the other expensive gear for themselves. Then he and I drove maybe two miles, and that's when Sandor stole a second truck. Because he didn't quite trust his friends, and what if they decided to come take the ripper too?" She wiped at her eyes, her cheeks. "After that, we drove more than a thousand miles, but never in a straight line. By then, we'd finally decided what we were going to do, and he stole the van before we came here."

Mom was alert, focused. She was sitting forward with her hand clenched to her daughter's knee. Very quietly, she asked, "Is it one of the stolen rippers? From that convoy?"

Kala nodded. "The ID marks match."

"Have you thought about giving it back to its rightful owners?"

"We talked about that. Yes."

But then Mom saw what had eventually become obvious to Kala. "Regardless what you tell the owners, they'll think your brother had something to do with the robbery and murders. And what good would that do?"

"Nothing."

Then her mother gathered up Kala's hands, and without hesitation, she said, "God has given you a gift, darling."

She didn't think about it in religious terms. But the words sounded nice.

"A great rare and wonderful gift," her mother continued. "And you know, if there is one person who truly deserves to inherit a new world, it has to be—"

"My brother?"

"No," Mom exclaimed, genuinely surprised. Then as the front door swung open and Sandor stepped inside, she said brightly, "It's you, sweetness. You deserve the best world. Of course, of course, of course...!"

* * * *

Their frantic days had only just begun. The Children of Forever would have learned their names from the old ranger, or maybe from the Kala's abandoned car. And people who had murdered dozens to steal the ripper would undoubtedly do anything to recover what was theirs and avenge their losses. Obviously, it was best to vanish again, this time taking their mother with them. Old lives and treasured patterns had to be avoided, yet even on the run, they still had to find time and energy to make plans for what was to come next.

Sandor knew the best places to find machinery and foodstuffs and the other essential supplies. But Kala knew where to find people—the right people—who would make this business worthwhile. And it was their mother who acted as peacemaker, calming the water when her two strong-willed children began fighting over the details that always looked trivial the next day.

Suddenly it was winter—the worst season to migrate to another world. But that gave them the gift of several months where they could make everything perfect, or nearly so.

Years ago, the old fix-it man who once worked on their family car had retired, and the next owner had driven his shop out of business. The property was purchased from the bank for nothing and reconnected to the power grid, and with Kala's friends supplying labor and enough money, Sandor managed to refit the building according to their specific needs. Medical stocks were locked in the lady's room. The garage was jammed with canned and dried food and giant water tanks, plus the rest of their essential goods, including a fully charged class-C ripper that would carry away the little building.

On a cold bleak day in late March—several weeks before their scheduled departure—a stranger came looking for gasoline. He parked beside one of the useless pumps and pulled on his horn several times. Then he climbed out of the small, nondescript car, and ignoring the CLOSED signs painted on the shuttered windows, he walked across the cracked pavement in order to knock hard on both garage doors and the front door.

"Hey! Anybody there?" he shouted before finally giving up.

As he returned to his car, Kala asked her brother, "What is he? Children of Forever, or some kind of undercover cop?"

"Really," Sandor replied, "does it matter?"

Kala set her splattergun back in its cradle.

"I think it's time," their mother offered.

It was too early in the season to be ideal. But what choice did they have? Kala lifted the phone and made one coded call to the nearest town. And within the hour, everybody had arrived. Those who weren't going with them offered quick tearful good-byes to those who were, showering those blessed pioneers with kisses and love. But then the pioneers had enough, and with quick embarrassed voices, they said, "Enough, Mommy. Daddy. That's enough. Good-bye!"

* * * *

Kala had come too far and paid too much of a price not to watch what was about to happen. She opened all of the shutters in the public room, letting the murky gray flow inside, and then she sat between two six-year-olds, one of whom asked, "How much longer now?"

"Soon," she promised. "A minute or two, at most."

Sandor and several other mechanically minded souls were in the garage, watching the ripper power up. Sharing the public room with Kala were a handful of grown men and a dozen women, plus nearly forty children sitting on tiny folding chairs, the oldest child being a stubborn twelve year-old boy—the only son of colleagues who were staying behind.

Kala's mother was one of the women, and she wasn't even the oldest.

"We're not making everybody else's mistakes," Kala had explained to her, sitting in the old living room some months ago. "We're taking grandparents and little kids, but very few young adults. I don't want virility and stupidity. I want wisdom and youth."

"What seeds are you taking?" her mother had asked.

"None."

"Did I hear you say—?"

"No seeds, and no animals. Not even one viable tortoise shell. And before we leave, I want to make sure every mouse in the building is dead, and every fly and flea, and if there's one earthworm living under us, I'll kill it myself when it pops in the new world."

Nobody was leaving this world but humans.

And even then, they were traveling as close to empty-handed as they dared. They had tools and a few books about science and mechanics. But everyone had taken an oath not to bring any Bibles or odd Testaments, and as far as possible, everything else that smacked of preconceptions and fussy religion had to be left behind on their doomed world.

The children came from families who believed as Kala believed.

It was amazing, and heartening, how many people held opinions not too much unlike hers. And sometimes in her most doubting moments, she found herself wondering if maybe her home world had a real chance of surviving the next ten thousand years.

But there were many parents who saw doom coming—ecological or political or religious catastrophes—and that's why they were so eager to give up a young son or daughter.

They were there now, standing out near the highway, surely hearing the ripper as it began to hammer hard at reality.

From inside the cold garage, Sandor shouted, "A target's acquired!"

Will this madness work? Kala asked herself one last time. Could one species arrive on an alien world, with children and old people in tow, and find food enough to survive? And then could they pass through the next ten thousand years without destroying everything that that world was and could have become ... ?

And then it was too late to ask the question.

The clouds of one day had vanished into a suddenly blue glare of empty skies, a green-blue lawn of grassy something stretching off into infinity ... and suddenly a room full of bright young voices shouted, "Neat! Sweet! Pretty!"

Then the boy on her right tugged at her arm, adding, "That's fun, Miss Kala. Let's do it again!"