

Go-on-all-fours-sometimes-upright tracked the three-horn spoor alone. He moved along the ridge in the red of the day when the Greater Light swallowed the sky and heat danced over stone.

Below, the big waters licked at the land. In the days when he was young, Go-on-all-fours remembered eating swimmers the People used to pierce in the shallows while the children played on the shaped rocks that the Oldest People had left behind. But the swimmers were rarer now than even the three-horns and the big waters drank those rocks long ago. Rememberer-of-forgotten-days said someday the big waters would drink all of the land and the People as well. But Rememberer-of-forgotten-days also said that the People had walked across the big waters before they were so big, in the days before the sky burned red. And Rememberer-of-forgotten-days had difficulty remembering where (and sometimes when) to make water.

Go-on-all-fours picked up a pebble and put it in his mouth. Hunger chewed at him; there'd been no meat for twenty days. He clutched his piercer, its sharpened tip burned hard in fire, and went on threes with his nose to the ground. His hackles rose. He crested the ridge and stopped. The scent of blood made his tight stomach rumble.

Now he went upright, stretching his neck, working his nose, darting his eyes over the place where the broken rock became gray scrub and spider trees. Blood. The three-horn lay in the shadows, sides heaving, a small piercer protruding from its neck. Go-on-all-fours-sometimes-upright growled a warning in the speech of the People, raising an octave into inquiry. No response.

He shuffled forward cautiously, piercer ready. Laying beside the dying three-horn was a bowed stick, the ends tied together with a strand of dried gut, and a pile of small piercers. He sniffed them, inhaling a strange, sweet smell like nothing he'd known before.

Turn.

The compulsion spun him around, a panic boiling in his chest. He lost his footing and fell.

Compassion. No fear.

A female upright walker stood a throw away. Her hairless skin radiated in the copper light and she stood straight and very tall. She held a similar bowed stick in her hands and her mouth curved like the stick, her teeth shining white.

Go-on-all-fours scrambled backwards, dropping his piercer. Her smell - strange, sweet - overpowered the three-horn's blood-smell.

Watch. Learn.

She pulled the string, holding a small piercer point facing out. The small piercer blurred across the ground, sinking into the three-horn's throat beside the other piercer. The three-horn bleated and died. She lay the thrower down, then turned and walked away.

Frozen and whimpering, he watched her go and tried to remember what she looked like.

Go-on-all-fours-sometimes-upright pounded the dirt and howled to be heard. Rememberer-of-forgotten-days handed him the horn and he spoke. "Scared. Not harm. Golden-upright-walker People."

"Harm," said Best-maker-of-fire, gesturing at the two throwers and the bundle of piercers. "Not People. We People. Upright walker eater of People."

They had argued long after the last of the three-horn had been devoured, the women and children banished to their caves. As night drew on, the mountains cooled and the Lesser Lights throbbed and sparkled overhead. Rememberer-of-forgotten days taught the People they were dead hunters guarding them while the Greater Light slept. He also taught that the Greater Lesser Light, fat and white in the night, was a mother who chased her young to bed. Perhaps the upright walker gave the gift because she was a mother, too, taking care of her young. Go-on-all-fours wondered about this and poked a stick into the fire, despite Best-maker's growl of protest.

Rememberer coughed. He was the oldest of the People, and blind now though he once had been their best hunter. "Upright-walkers make gift." He smiled toothlessly at Best-maker-of-fire. "Not eat Go-on-all-fours-sometimes-upright. Could."

No-child-in-stick laughed and made a spitting sound. "Go-on-all-fours-sometimes-upright too skinny."

Everyone else laughed, except for Best-maker. He scowled, picked up one of the throwers and tossed it into the fire. Go-on-all-fours leaped to his feet and burned himself pulling it out. "Not people," Best-maker said. "Eaters of people."

When the angry growls died down, they all went to bed. He had not told them about the voice in his head: they would never believe him.

Come.

He came awake, instantly alert, and untangled himself from his woman, Best-maker's sister. She mewled a question in her sleep and rolled away.

Outside. Come.

He picked up his piercer and left the cave silently, careful not to wake his young. The upright walker waited at the edge of the clearing and the sight of her hurt his eyes. Easily half-again his height at his tallest, she stood with her hands hanging loosely at her sides. Long golden hair spilled down her shoulders and over her heavy breasts. Her eyes shone bright green.

Compassion. No fear. Follow.

He followed her, going upright until his back and legs ached from the effort. They hadn't gone far when a chittering sound stopped him.

No fear. This voice was heavier. He knew it came from the monster that separated from the shadows, but he raised his piercer anyway. No fear.

Fear, he said back. The eight-legged monster – almost a spider but even larger than the six-horns Rememberer told stories of – scuttled closer.

No fear, the woman said. She put a hand on his arm. Cool. Soft.

He pushed the piercer into her belly as far as it would go and screamed as the monster leapt.

His first awareness was the fullness of his brain. His second awareness was

the coolness of the grass beneath his bare skin.

He opened his eyes on golden light playing in the boughs of upward-sweeping trees. He sat up and looked around. He had never seen so much green in one place.

Pleasure. "You like my garden?" The naked upright walker strode into the clearing, a piece of fruit held loosely in each hand.

Confusion. Anxiety. "I've never seen anything like it." The memory of attacking her jarred him. Fear. Surprise. The golden skin of her flat stomach showed no mark from his piercer. "You're...well?"

She laughed. "Of course I am. The Seeker would not have allowed me Outside had the risk been real."

"The Seeker?"

"Ra-sha-kor, the Firsthome Seeker. I am the Seeker's Lady, Jadylla-kor. We have traveled vast distances to find you, cousin." Dark. Alone. Searching.

"I do not understand."

She offered him a piece of fruit. Trust. "Of course not. You're not fully recessed, cousin. When you are, everything will become clearer."

He took the purple globe and studied it, rolling it around his fingers. He looked up at her and their eyes locked. Raising her own piece, she bit into it and its golden juice ran down her mouth, dripping onto her breasts. Trust. Eat.

He took a bite and his mind expanded. As if she stood in his mind speaking, words formed without sound as they stared at one another. She answered questions before he could ask.

I name you cousin because you and I are of the People.

Long ago, before the Seventeen Recorded Ages of Humanity, our cousins flung themselves out from the Firsthome like scattered seed. Outward and outward they spread away and away to find new homes among the stars. Long travelers into dark, they warred and loved one another in those distant days and fled so far from home to have lost their way back to it. This was the Darkest Age, marked by the absence of history and the presence of myth. Then, in the Fifth Age, came Yorgen Sunwounder, the first Firsthome Finder, who searched and found the cradle of the People, of Humanity.

But the Firsthome did not know him for time and technology had changed him, and in his rage he smote their sun and thus began the Cousin Wars that brought about the Second Darkest Age. Humanity rose and fell again and again and once more the Firsthome was lost....

He stopped her with a blink. "What is happening to me?"

She placed her hands on his shoulders and drew her face nearer, her stare unbroken. Recession. A return backwards to what you once were, cousin. A human. One of the People. Truth: all life changes over time. Truth: the clock-spring can be unwound carefully, carefully, we have learned. Infinitely small workers live in the nectar of this fruit, each unwinding you, recessing you to what you would have been millions of years ago had time not taken you on a different journey. Infinitely small teachers in this fruit fill your mind

with language and comprehension.

Another voice now in his head, deeper and stronger: Enough, Lady. His recession is as far as you may take it. Bring him to me.

She released him and he realized that the closeness of her mind and body had aroused him. He blushed and moved to cover himself. The Lady smiled sympathetically.

Peace, she said with her mind. "It is time for you to meet the Seeker and to taste the root." Turning, she strode out of the clearing and Go-on-all-fours hurried to keep up with her, surprised at how easily he now went upright.

They entered another clearing after darting in and out of wet, hanging foliage. Twice, he thought he saw the monstrous spider-thing that had captured him. Once, they brushed against a wall of blue crystal, warm to his touch, and stretching up, up, up, lost far above in light.

In the center of the clearing stood a massive tree, its branches bent low with heavy purple fruit.

"I'll leave you now," the Lady said, squeezing his arm. "I will return when the Seeker calls for me."

This time, she did not walk away. Instead, her shape began to shimmer and then melted into the ground too fast for him to respond.

He heard a chuckle in his head. She is fine, cousin. Bending light rather than moving feet. Welcome. I am Ra-sha-kor.

"You are the Firsthome Seeker. The Lady said - "

I am the Firsthome Finder. I have sought you, cousin, through deeps of space and time that you cannot begin to comprehend. It is my great Joy to have finally found you.

"I am - "

You were Go-on-all-fours-sometimes-upright. Again, the chuckle. You now need a new name. May I have the honor of naming you in my own tongue?

The People gave names when a child was old enough to hunt - now he understood that it was an important coming-of-age ritual. "Yes. I would be honored, Lord."

You shall be called the Firstfound Cousin, the Healer of the Broken Distance, Sha-Re-Tal. Tal.

He did not know why exactly, but he knelt. After a respectable silence, he looked up. Other than the tree, the clearing stood empty.

I am here, Tal. The tree. Tal stood and took a step towards it.

"You - "

The People, over time, have learned to make themselves into what they will. My roots run the length of this craft, nourishing it, powering it, carrying the wisdom and knowledge of the People in its sap. Even as the Lady chooses her form, I have chosen mine. As has Aver-ka-na, our Builder Warrior. The branches behind him rustled and the huge spider sidled tentatively out.

Compassion, it said. No fear.

The Finder's mind joined in. You have nothing to fear, Tal.

With everything in him, Tal fought the panic as the creature came closer, its mandibles clicking. It raised a hairless arm and lowered it onto his shoulder.

Peace, cousin.

Then, it turned and scuttled away. Tal released held breath.

Sit with me, the Finder thought. Tal sat, his head suddenly hurting. "We will make words in this way now," the Finder said, its deep voice drifting down from somewhere lost above. "You are young in understanding yet and I would not wound carelessly after so long in the finding of you."

"I am grateful," Tal said. And he was. He felt himself expanding, stretching, his awareness filling like the hollow of a rock as the tide gentled in.

He sat in the shade of the tree until the Finder spoke again. "You express gratitude for our shame."

Confusion. Uncertainty. "Your shame?"

"It is not our way to force," the Finder said. "The Rul-ta-Shan – the First Gift Given – was choice. The Lady gave of the fruit while you slept."

Tal nodded slowly. "I would have chosen so."

"We hope so. Still, the ages had robbed you of choice and so we made our own on your behalf, trusting our cousinhood to cover a multitude of transgressions. Thus we brought you to this place, your choice restored."

Love welled in Tal's heart and brimmed his eyes. The power in it made his life with the People, his life as Go-on-all-fours, seem small and far away. Breeding. Hunting. Foraging. Starving. Led by appetite and instinct to survive. "I was an animal," he whispered. "I was not of the People. Now I am of the People. You have made me – " he struggled to find the word – "whole."

The mighty tree shook. "No. You were always of the People, Cousin. You were as whole as you could be." Freedom. "And now you possess the First Gift Given. What will you choose, I wonder?"

The grass at the base of the tree rustled, exposing thick roots that pulsed with life and possibility. Tal crawled forward. "I wish to know," he said.

"Then taste the root and know what you will."

He put his tongue to the root; it was bitter and sweet, the tang of earth and grass, and it swept through him, over him, into him. Tal collapsed inside himself, his eyes slamming shut as his brain pried open.

Understanding. He saw. Loss. He knew. Endings. He wept. Beginnings. He slept.

He awoke to the Lady cradling him against her warm body.

"Lady," he said. "How long?" But he knew that too.

She offered a sad smile. "Years. But not many. The sun swells from its wound.

Slowly, it swallows the Firsthome."

"And the People will end," he said in a quiet voice.

"No," she said and he remembered. Beginnings. "You have a choice now if you will make it."

Her fingers lightly stroked his skin. The smoothness of her pressed against him and he was smooth now, too. The smell of her filled his nose, overpowering the scent of flowers and grass around them. He swallowed, sensations overwhelming him. "I choose."

"It is a great gift," Jadylla said.

He stretched out a nervous hand to touch her. "I am grateful."

She brought her face close to his. "No." Her breath was warm. "You give the great gift, Cousin, and the giving of it heals the broken distance between the Peoples." Her mouth touched his. Heat. Unity. "The life we make together will satisfy our deepest longing for Home."

He'd never mated face-to-face. He was nervous and awkward as his hands sought her out. Her own hands moved lower on his body and, learning from her, he imitated her caresses. Slowly, they touched one another with hands and mouths and when he could no longer wait, he gently crawled onto her and let her guide him into her. He pushed into her warmth and wetness and her eyes went wide for just a moment. Then she smiled and pushed back against him, moving her hips in time with his own.

When they finished, he lay back in her arms. Her sweat and her scent mingled with his own. They were silent for a long time before he spoke.

"Why me?" he asked.

"What did they call you? Before the Finder found you?"

"Go-on-all-fours-sometimes-upright," he said.

"Sometimes the past returns in small ways. Of your People, who else ever went upright?"

He shook his head.

"We watched for a year. We watched you hunt. We watched you mate. We watched you all and you were chosen."

He thought of the others. With no sky overhead, he'd lost all sense of time. He wondered if his mate slept or if she foraged to feed their young. He wondered if they wondered where he was, if perhaps they even searched for him.

Thinking of them prompted a question. "Could they also be...recessed?"

She shrugged. "We do not know. And we could not find out without further shame."

"But I am grateful. Wouldn't they be grateful as well?"

She rolled away from him. "It is not a matter for discussion."

Something sparked in Tal's memory. "I have young. When they choose to crawl

into the fire, I do not allow their choice. Does that shame the First Gift Given?"

"It is not the same," Jadylla said.

"How is it not the same?"

"It is not the same," she said again. She disentangled herself from his arms. "You have honored me, Cousin, but I must leave you now." She stood and touched her stomach. "This life must be nurtured at the root and my husband calls."

Tal lay back and watched her leave. He thought about his mate and his young at home. "When my young crawl into the fire, I do not allow their choice," he said to himself. Because, he thought, the parent chooses for the child until the child can do so for themselves.

An unhealthy line of thought. Aver-ka-na scuttled towards him, its naked belly dragging the ground, its eight legs moving slowly.

"Not unhealthy," Tal said, his brain spun to bring down exactly the right word. "Love."

Not love, it said, mandibles clacking. Love respects the First Gift Given.

"Love," Tal said slowly, "pulls young from the fire."

The Builder Warrior chittered, its eyes rolling.

Tal stood, stretching himself fully upright and raising his fist. "I will return with fruit for my People." No answer dropped into his mind or drifted into his ears. He started walking and kept walking until he saw the tree, heavy with its purple fruit.

Anger. Sadness. The Finder stirred. I can not permit it.

The ground at the foot of the tree peeled back, exposing Jadylla where she lay wrapped in roots. Her eyes opened. She was different towards him now, her voice cold and far away. "We came for you. Not them."

Tal swallowed. He felt anger building. Falseness. "You did not come for me. You came to take life from me."

Neither answered.

"I will take life, too. Life for my people." He paused. "It is my choice."

The Firsthome Finder's Lady looked at the Firsthome Finder. Her tongue slipped from her mouth, touching the root, moving over its surface. Finally, she nodded. The tree shuddered and fruit fell like rain.

Jadylla's eyes were narrow. "You may take what you can carry. We will not wait long for you."

Tal picked up a piece of fruit. "And you will take us all with you."

Only those who choose, the Finder said into his mind.

Tal picked up more fruit, cradling it in his arms. "Only those who choose," he repeated.

Light swallowed him and sent him spinning away.

Tal stood on the rise overlooking the fires and the caves. He watched Best-maker-of-fire argue with No-child-in-stick. Young played around the fire, moving quickly on all fours in a game that imitated hunting and mating behavior. He saw his own young among them. His mate, Soft-voice-sharp-bite, sat with the other females, grooming one another.

Compassion, he sent. No fear.

They looked up quickly as if struck, all wide-eyed.

He lifted a piece of fruit. Watch. Learn. He bit into it, letting the juice spill onto his naked skin. He took a step forward, extending the fruit though he was still two throws away.

They moved, scrambling back toward the caves. "Don't go," he said. "It's me - Go-on-all-fours-sometimes-upright. I've come back for you."

"Not People," No-child-in-stick growled. "Upright walker eater of People." His eyes rolled wide and wild.

Peace. "No," Tal said.

Abandoning their fire, they fled into the caves.

He spent the night trying to coax them out. He fed the fire for them, hoping somehow it would show he meant no harm. He placed a piece of fruit outside each cave entrance. He called to them. He waited.

As the sky reddened and the swollen sun crawled out, he heard his young whimpering in the dark.

Come. Eat.

Deep in the back of the caves, they growled and moaned.

Finally, he took a piece of fruit and went into the cave that used to be his own. His mate yelped and hissed as he moved quickly toward her. She clawed and kicked at him as he grabbed her, biting at his hands as he tried to force the fruit into her mouth. She shrieked, her nails and teeth drawing blood, her eyes wide in terror. He shoved her away from him, turning toward his children.

She fell on him before he could take a step and he went down beneath her, the air knocked from him as her thrashing feet connected with his testicles and her gnashing mouth found his ear.

"Not People," she screamed. "Eater of People."

Tal wanted to fight back but couldn't. Suddenly he knew that it didn't matter anymore. He yelled again and again. His young were fleeing now and other forms were moving into the cave waving piercers and hefting rocks.

He heard his own bones breaking and smelled his own blood on the air, the tang of iron mingled with the sweetness of nectar.

He closed his eyes and waited for the end.

Not love, the Lady's voice in his mind said, heavy with sorrow.



Tal's eyes opened. He lay wrapped in the ground, tangled in the Finder's roots. "No, not love."

"You are well now."

He nodded. "I am grateful."

She touched his arm. He still felt the distance but no longer cold. He saw now that her belly curved slightly outward, his child growing there quickly, nourished by the Finder's sap.

Come to Newhome with us, Ra-sha-kor the Firsthome Finder said. Come, cousin, and meet your Other People.

Tal twisted himself free from the roots, goosebumps forming on his skin as he remembered the stones and fists and fire-sharpened sticks. "What would I do at the Newhome?"

Jadylla smiled and rubbed her stomach. "You would care for your daughter. With me and with the Firsthome Finder."

He saw that the Builder Warrior hung from his legs in the tree branches, weaving three silk hammocks. His mind told him that these were to let them sleep for the long voyage.

"My daughter will not need me." Tal bent, placed his lips to the root, letting knowledge and emotion wash through him. "She will be cared for."

Understanding. Acceptance.

Love, he thought.

Tal stood on the edge of the big waters in the cool of the night. Far above, a fleck of light moved away, crisp and clear among the pulsing stars. He waved though he knew they could not see him.

He picked up the thrower and the pouch of little piercers they had left with him. He tested the string and calculated in his mind exactly what he would need to make more of them. He also thought about ways to go out onto the big waters to find the swimmers and ways to capture the three-horns and breed them for food. Ways to plant the good berries and tubers and to dig them at his leisure. He even thought about ways to take his People to a new place – far to the north or south – where life could be better for them until there could be no life and the sun finally swallowed the world.

Perhaps someday they would let him do these things for them...with them. Certainly not now, but maybe with time.

For now, he would hunt. For now, he would keep what little he needed to survive and leave the rest where his People could find it. He would do this every day for as long as it took because he knew that if choice was the First Gift Given, love must indeed be the second.

Sha-Re-Tal, the Firstfound Cousin and Healer of the Broken Distance, found the three-horn spoor and broke into an easy run. He ran upright, his feet steady and sure beneath him, his eyes and nose and ears remembering their work very well.

A silver moon rose over the big waters.

He howled at it and dared it to chase him.