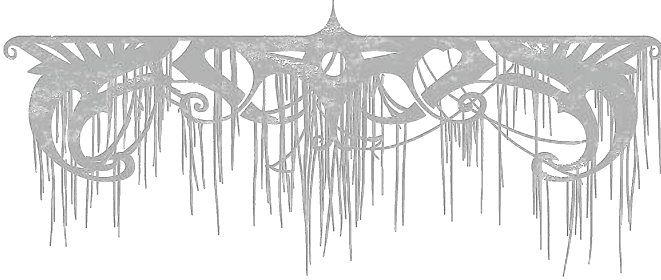


MOON 514

BLAZE AND THE WHITE GRIFFON

DREW BRINEY

THE ORDER



DESPERATE, BLAZE DOVE, ROLLED, AND FELL into a defensive posture to await his attacker. But the beast was already upon him. Without a moment to spare, he slashed at his opponent's neck while diving sideways a second time. From the unnerving sound of shrieking behind him, Blaze guessed he'd successfully slashed a tender spot on its neck but had no time to carefully assess the damage.

He'd resorted to dive rolls precisely because his legs had been injured so badly. It was the only way he could quickly gain significant ground. And bulbous swelling on his throbbing right arm suggested a significant fracture. He tried hard to ignore the almost debilitating pain and realized he was running low on options. He stood up and spun around in one fluid movement, preparing to make a desperate last thrust with the bladed end of his staff, but the beast was already too close for him to avoid its attack. Checkmate. With no time

to look at his opponent, aim, or otherwise methodically prepare for his attack, Blaze fell into instinct and thrust the blade parallel to the angle where the alien had attacked before - while simultaneously bending his torso to avoid a possible bite to his own head. As the beast crushed into him and pinned Blaze against a rock wall, the young warrior lost consciousness.

“Simulation ended,” announced the emcee.

Nearly instantaneously, the simulated, painful throbbing mellowed down to nothing and Blaze’s alertness flashed back to normal. He was always grateful when the simulator functioned well. It’s a tricky thing to manipulate the psyche. Sometimes the pain lagged on for several minutes. This time, the pain had been so intense Blaze couldn’t help but to rub his legs out of instinct. Moments before, they’d been a mangled mess, whole pieces of tendon and muscle torn from the bone. It had been difficult to suppress the body’s natural drive to panic in situations like that but now, his legs were perfectly whole. Still, a disquieting self preservation instinct lingered. Adrenaline coursed through his veins. He was ready for round two.

Blaze noticed the spear ominously peering out of the beast’s backside and then watched as his simulated opponent dissipated into nothingness. Simulated terrain followed suit and disappeared. Blaze took a deep breath. He won. He had been knocked unconscious but the beast had been slain. *It looked like a modified velociraptor with spikes, bulky muscles, and long forearms,* he mused. Jim usually

came up with innovative simulations. This one seemed old school and lacked creativity. It just didn't seem to fit Jim's personality. *He must be busy with another project*, Blaze considered as he anxiously watched a few of his friends approaching.

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“UNINTIMIDATING,” HE GRUMBLED IN FRUSTRATION. “That was the word she used – un-intimidating. Is that even a word?”

Evelia couldn't have deliberately chosen a more damaging thing to say to bruise a young warrior's ego had she thought about it carefully and preplanned the entire exchange. His voice growing louder and clearly betraying his mood, Blaze continued, “I mean, can you even create the negative of intimidating like that?”

“Oh, come on Blaze,” Jazz responded energetically, “she also said you were the best fighter on earth – how 'bout that?”

“No contractions,” Blaze reminded the young boy, “We are not supposed to use contractions.”

“Sure – but that was a nice compliment don't you think?”

“You did it again,” Blaze grumbled.

“Oh, come on Blaze,” Jazz encouraged. “You can't be depressed when someone gives you a compliment like that!”

“No contractions!” Blaze reminded his young protégé with more gruffness than he used the first two times. “Context is everything.” He looked down into Jazz’s admiring eyes. “If you did not notice, she said that although I was ‘the best fighter on earth,’ I also held the element of surprise over anyone that I would meet outside of the Order because I was unintimidating. At best, she was warning me not to ask her father’s permission to date her. At worst, she was slamming me.”

“I think she likes you,” the young one contradicted. “She’s just trying to make sure she isn’t too obvious.”

“NO contractions!” Blaze emphasized in frustration. “You know, I will have to report you to the head mistress if you continue to employ sloppy language like that – our whole society will become corrupted.”

“You are just trying to avoid the subject,” the young lad retorted wryly. “You do not have a good response so you have to resort to a conversation about grammar – you will become quite the bore if you don’t ... uh... do not stop that!” he jested.

Blaze hated to admit it but the young boy was probably right – there were very few girls to choose from and he really only held an interest for one young lady and she rarely showed the slightest interest in any of the other men – let alone him.

“You may be right my young friend,” Blaze responded in melancholy tones, “... about the

changing the subject thing – but you still need to be careful. We have less than five hundred people left in the Order and only a very small handful of us are under fifty years of age. How we speak could change our language forever and the whole purpose behind the Order would be in danger of being lost. Do not assume that just because you are so special – being the only child in the entire Order – that you do not have the same responsibility as the rest of us. If anything ... you have the greatest responsibility of us all.”

“Best fighter on earth,” Jazz repeated dreamily. “I would not be discouraged if someone said that about me.” His eyes gleamed as he pondered the thought.

With roughly five hundred known people left on the planet, the compliment could have been sloughed off as a jest. However, Blaze always fought the simulator – and he always fought the most difficult opponents that could be simulated in the database – everyone knew that. And many of them would come to watch him take on particularly tough opponents – and being designed as dynamic characters, simulated opponents could improve every time they fought a real person so they were far from challenge free.

To give himself the ability to fight heavyweight opponents, Blaze regularly made adjustments to the simulator, preferring the disadvantage of fighting larger, heavier, and faster opponents. This time, his ears were still ringing. *There must be something wrong with the fight enhancer*, he

considered. The enhancer was supposed to deal true-to-life blows but they were precisely calculated to avoid any significant damage. *The punch should have come slightly softer to avoid hurting my ear like that.* Or, Blaze considered more thoughtfully, *perhaps I surprised it by being more unprepared than usual* – the result of being distracted by the young lady.

“I am going to ask permission to leave the Order.”

“WHAT?” the boy shouted in astonishment. “Leave the Order? Why?”

“There have to be others who survived,” Blaze began. “I recently checked the database again. There is some chance that a small percentage of the population would have been resistant to the mutated diseases and radiation. There is some chance that some of those people are not sterile and therefore, there is a chance that there are people out there who could help us to continue our heritage. The Order is small now.” Blaze’s demeanor retrograded to gloominess again. “Even if we were able to continue reproducing at our current rate, we would be back to the proverbial Adam and Eve state within a few generations if the sterility problem does not subside – and despite all of Doctor Boyd’s advancements, I see little hope that he can reverse our situation.”

Blaze turned to Jazz and tapped his shoulder encouragingly. “Maybe you will be assigned to a pretty girl for a while! That would be a worthwhile change would it not?”

“Well,” the boy began, “I don’t think anyone could be as great of a teacher as you are,” he confided with a barely concealed blush.

NO CONTRACTIONS, Blaze silently shouted – he wouldn’t dare correct the lad after a confession like that. “Thank you,” Blaze answered. “I will put in a good word for whomever you would like to take my place – think about it and I will see if I can arrange it.”

“Evelia,” the boy quickly blurted. Evelia was the young woman that he and Blaze had just finished discussing. “Maybe I could put in a good word for you,” he finished with a beaming smile that was, without a doubt, both enthusiastic and sincere.

It never hurts to have someone like him on your side, Blaze mused, even if he is less than a dozen years of age.

“Do you suppose you could tell me why your hair is like that if you are really going to leave,” the boy asked. “You promised that you would tell me when you were not going to be my teacher anymore.”

“Right,” Blaze conceded. “Perhaps we should wait to see if my proposal is approved though – *don’t* you think?” he playfully jested.

“Do you really think they would say no, Blaze? After all – if things are really like you say they are, maybe there is no other choice.”

They would also risk losing one of their few young males, Blaze silently contradicted. In fact, it may not be worth asking permission at all – it may be better just

to take my copy of the database and leave a letter of explanation. Or maybe ... no, Evelia would not concede to go with him and if she said no, all of the elders would know faster than lightning.

The boy was still waiting for a response.
“Blaze?”

“Sorry,” he answered. “Okay. I was born with a birthmark on my head.”

“A what?”

“A birthmark. I am not entirely sure how to explain that – anyway, there is a thing called a birthmark and if you get it on your head, sometimes it will change the color of your hair. That is why I have a blaze of white hair instead of it all being dark.”

“Nuh uh!” the boy answered. “Tell me – really.”

Blaze grinned at his young friend and ruffled his hair. “Really – I tell you the truth,” Blaze assured him. “I had it from the moment I was born and it was so obvious that everyone started calling me ‘Blaze’ right away. It was only supposed to be a nickname but it stuck. Plus, many people in the Order saw it as some sort of sign. One would think that with all of the education we receive that silly things like that would be abandoned by our people – but I guess they were feeling desperate and needed something to hope for.” He took a deep breath and sighed. “Like it or not, that is the truth – sorry there is no more glamorous explanation than that.”

“Glamorous?” the boy asked.

“That just means that it is exciting or especially interesting.”

“Oh,” he considered. “Well, I think it is really interesting if it is true – how could a birthmark do that?” he finished.

“You know, with all of the information that was preserved in our database, one would think that we would know the answer to that question, huh?” Blaze paused. He wondered if he should really engage in such sloppy speech even if it was for the purpose of cheering up the young lad. “But,” he continued, “none of us have ever read a thing on the subject in the database – and with all of the reading that goes on around here, I suspect that this means that we will never know.

“Mmmm,” Jazz mumbled almost inaudibly. *What would life be like without Blaze*, he wondered. *It doesn't sound very fun*, he concluded. The young lad had unabashedly admired Blaze since he was a toddler and although years would pass, that admiration would never diminish. He had requested Blaze as his teacher for a number of years before the elders dared to approach the young warrior about taking on the only child in the Order. Although Blaze was known to be ready to serve others and to have a gentle temperament, he was also known for being neurotically devoted to his studies and to excessive athleticism.

Unintimidating or not, Blaze was athletic and strong – he just didn't have a hulky build to prove it – nor did he have impressive height to give him the appearance of someone who was to be feared.

I really am unintimidating, Blaze thought as he looked over his shoulder and into the mirror. He wiped his brow and reached for the toothbrush in the bottom corner of the left cabinet as he considered another factor – *I have a baby face*, he thought. *I look seventeen when I count nearly two dozen years since my birthmark gave me my name.*

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ECHOING THE DAY BEFORE, HE SILENTLY GROUSED, *Unintimidating*. His bruised ego was obstinately sore and it was showing in his disposition this morning. With furrowed brow, he tensely rehearsed a staff kata of his own invention, flexing his muscles as tightly as possible while slowly moving through the form. *Liquid misdirection*, he silently drummed into his subconscious mind. Although very young, Blaze had been trained by Master Kitana – a nickname that was so engrained in everyone’s mind that few remembered his birth name – Xun. Training with Xun was an advantage for anyone but few were able to be trained from their youth like Blaze had.

Xun had studied the entire UWC (The Ultimate Weapons Contest) database and several forms of martial arts before he died at 116 years of age. The natural extension of all hand to hand combat forums, the UWC took fighting to its inevitable climax: what style of martial art and

what weapon would come out on top in battle with real weapons? Initially begun with smart armor and inert weapons designed to prevent permanent damage, the sport was woefully unpopular because it lacked realism. Decades later, as technology increased, the sport was revived with a simulator that allowed each opponent not only to feel simulated pain from blows received, it also simulated injuries so that a deeply cut muscle would fail to perform as it would in real combat and so that simulated blood loss would result in faster fatigue and lessened strength. Other advances eventually allowed the athletes to fight until one of the parties would have been killed in real life – but at the end of the simulation, each athlete would essentially leave the simulator physically unharmed – apart from occasional and unpredictable imperfections – or “glitches” in the programming.

Criticized for being too similar to the barbaric practices of the Roman gladiator games, UWC was a popular sport for centuries and eventually replaced nearly every form of martial arts practiced during the Classic Ages.

But Xun did more than watch the UWC database, he dissected it, digested it, reviewed its most significant contests, and developed his own form of martial arts. Founded upon empty handed techniques, Xun’s style was largely based upon modified, redirected circle theories and only focused on practical weapons that survived the millennia. Although Blaze learned several

weapons under Xun, he was essentially addicted to bo staff and short sticks. Every other weapon, it seemed to Blaze, was just a modification of these two weapons; in private, he would admit that this was not really true but in public, he regularly jested that the only reason to learn other weapons was because it was important to know what to do with your opponent's weapon once you disarmed him.

Strike, arc, trip, strike, he rehearsed without really thinking of each step separately – each action was simply a moment in time from a larger fluid motion. Trying to retain fluidity, he flexed his legs even as he jumped, performing a spinning hook kick and then spinning again as he landed, striking an invisible, fallen opponent with his staff. Moving back to starting position slowly and methodically, flexing specific muscles all the while, and doggedly focusing on every detail of his kata, Blaze ended the form and instinctively bowed before relaxing.

Unintimidating. Blaze rounded the corner of the gym and approached the simulator.

“Alien,” he gruffly instructed Jim, the programmer. “Six feet, five inches tall, four arms, and weighing in at 275 pounds,” he concluded.

“Come on Blaze,” Jim retorted. “Seriously? Are you forgetting how sore you were last time you tried that? I almost got suspended from my job!”

“Yeah, I remember,” Blaze grumbled, “but we both know that was just a big political façade – no

one else can really do your job well and no one wants the thankless task anyway. You and you alone are the master of this arena. Make it 300 pounds.”

“No way Blaze,” he answered. “Until you master the four arm thing, I cannot risk taking you over 250 pounds – who knows what programming glitch that may create?”

“Who cares? It is only a simulation,” Blaze countered. “260.”

“Wow, you must really be in a bad mood,” Jim offered, changing his tone.

“Everyone is still at breakfast,” Blaze began, ignoring the comment, “no one will know.”

“Unless you get hurt again.”

“No chance,” the ambitious young warrior responded.

“All right,” Jim concluded. “250 pounds with 5% speed increase but that is it.”

“Thanks,” Blaze conceded, visibly disappointed but grateful for the concession given the circumstances. “Will you make it extra strong though?” he pushed, hoping for a little more intense experience. “I will confess to the bad mood thing if you just make it a little tougher. I need to let off some steam.”

Glancing over each shoulder and doubting his own wisdom, Jim raised one eyebrow, squinted the other, and offered a half grin towards Blaze. “265.”

No other words exchanged, Blaze went to his own terminal, silently reduced his weight down to

175 while Jim was looking at his own controls, quickly took off the mandatory safety monitor, and jumped into the cage. Nearly thirty feet in diameter, the cage was essentially a gigantic, circular chicken-wired fence with bars stretching across the top to allow unusual swinging moves that may occur in real life terrains. Blaze watched, muscles relaxed but ready to respond as the simulator morphed before his eyes. Rough terrain appeared to allow for natural landscape variations, small bushes appeared, and various rock formations grew in size until the terrain was complete. Blaze quickly surveyed this new simulation, gauged which areas would pose the greatest challenges and which areas might provide the greatest advantages, and controlled his breathing to keep his attention firm.

When Blaze saw the four armed alien, he immediately knew what Jim had been doing the last several days. Noticeably absent from a few community meals, Jim had been heavily involved in perfecting a new concept alien that boasted a noticeably unfair intimidation factor – this one was horrifyingly scary even for a warrior of Blaze’s caliber. Instinctively, his body slightly recoiled and regretted the request for an extra strong opponent – the extra weaponry on its tail and its triple row of fangs would have been enough. Consciously however, Blaze was excited and looked over towards where Jim would be standing – although unseen through the simulator – and beamed with approval.

Unintimidating? Perhaps. But then, he wasn't easily intimidated either.

The creature appeared somewhat bulky and unrealistically large for the weight class Blaze requested. He silently wondered whether or not Jim accidentally typed in 365 pounds and tightened his grip on the bo staff. Slightly shorter in length than his height, the staff was mostly made of a titanium alloy that allowed for greater strength and flexibility while simultaneously allowing him to send electric shocks to his opponents. The staff was coated in the middle section to allow for a stronger grip and protection from any electric pulse. One end of the staff was punctuated with a double point that resembled an artistic dual-edged javelin. In reality, the staff had several lethal properties but he almost never used them in the simulator – these were for reality, not playtime.

The creature advanced using its two lower arms to more easily bend itself over the rough terrain, each hand gripping jagged blades measuring slightly more than a foot apiece. The length of its back and the backside of each appendage was coated with a plate-like armor that was punctuated with occasional spikes and otherwise rough textures. Eyes undeviating from its prey, the beast quickly and lithely moved towards Blaze with surprising speed. *Plus 5% increase?* Blaze silently queried. He wondered whether or not Jim had enhanced the beast by 15% after all. All of a sudden, Blaze felt more

stress than he had felt in many moons.

But he was game.

He would have been willing to request stats like that if he thought Jim would have agreed to them. It was after all, only a simulation. The pain felt real, the loss of blood felt real, the fatigue felt real, and he supposed, the few deaths he had experienced felt real as well. Of course, no one knew for sure what death felt like but programmers simulated a painful knockout as their accumulative best guess as to what a lethal blow might feel like. But in the end, it was all simulation – and nothing more – apart from the glitches.

Blaze wondered whether or not the beast was programmed to know his habits and weaknesses and decided to test its knowledge right away by feigning a blow towards the beast's lower right arm while circling the staff to strike at its lower left arm. Blocked once. Blocked twice. That probably answered the question: it held dynamic programming or else its responsive speed was enhanced to match its increased muscle speed. But Blaze had anticipated the second block and prepared the blow to be redirected, using the beast's own block to deliver a powerful blow to its upper left arm.

Nearly breaking its wrist, the beast dropped its multi-bladed weapon to the ground, growling in disapproval. Encouraged, Blaze delivered two more feints before offering a reinforced, twisting downward strike to the lower left arm – but this

time met disappointment as the alien creature dodged the blow and threw a knife at Blaze's right thigh. Although an imperfect throw, the blade sliced the leg badly before ricocheting onto the ground. Two weapons down, Blaze forgot to rejoice as he winced at the pain. *Partially cut tendon*, he quickly assessed before throwing several more strikes at the beast and half jumping, half rolling over a medium sized boulder that was threatening to corner the young warrior.

In contrast, the beast was relatively uninjured, held one more weapon than his opponent, and boasted three perfectly functioning appendages – not to mention a semi-bladed tail. Rather than try a blow barely within its reach, the creature swung that tail at Blaze, hoping to catch him by surprise – but it too met with disappointment as Blaze was already wary of this extra advantage – and dodged it.

And so the contest continued for over ten minutes. Towards the end, Blaze felt as exhausted from the simulator as he had ever felt before and silently recited feelings of gratitude that the contest would soon be over one way or the other. Now bleeding steadily from his leg, Blaze had two new significant scratches on his right arm and a series of abrasive carvings decorating his abdominal area and lats – they looked as if someone had taken a power sander with coarse texture to his body. If it continued to bleed like it was bleeding now, Blaze was going to lose consciousness soon so he decided to make his

moves more daring and unorthodox. *Do or die*, he instructed himself.

Blaze dove into a modified shoulder role to accommodate his injuries and his staff, grabbed one of the alien's abandoned blades, and threw it at the beast as he stood up. Calculatedly overthrown, the beast stepped to the side to avoid the blade – regardless of whether or not the reckless throw would have landed blade or handle first – and then turned its gaze back towards its wounded combatant – but not in time to see the javelin like tip of the staff enter its eye socket and not in time to stop it from exiting the other side of its skull.

Contest over, Blaze silently groaned in relief before nearly passing out.

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“WOW,” EVELIA REMARKED, watching Blaze's eyes slowly focus back into full consciousness as the effects of the simulator dissipated. “I apologize for watching uninvited but at the same time,” she paused, chewing a little on her lower lip, “and even though that was the nastiest, scariest opponent I have ever seen, I am very glad I happened to be strolling by to see your performance. Impressive,” she finished, “Very impressive.”

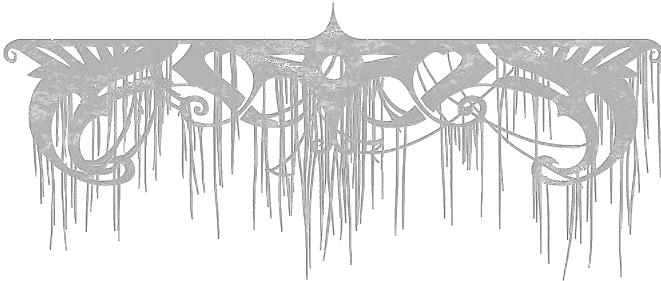
Pain dissipating, fatigue remaining, energy

gone, and frustrations evaporating very quickly, Blaze grinned but said nothing audible in response. A slight nod was all he had to offer but it didn't matter. Evelia was already walking away towards her intended destination and Blaze couldn't have intelligently responded anyway. Even though it was barely past breakfast, he was already exhausted and ready for a good rest. Besides, now it seemed like there was nothing left to accomplish. *Impressive*, he inwardly gloated. *That was the word she used – very impressive.*

As he let the words echo repeatedly in his mind, Jim walked by, patted him on the shoulder and apologized: “Sorry for the typo buddy. 365 pounds. Wwwwhhhhew. I almost stopped the simulator to reprogram your opponent until I saw your big smile. No one is game as you man!”

Blaze just smiled. *Impressive* was all he could hear – and for days, those words would remain at the surface of his thoughts.

THE MAGIC WOMAN



MOON 4 | DAY 7

I DIDN'T BELIEVE IT. But there were a lot of things that I didn't believe until I saw them with my own eyes. Other people may have faith in things but I'm a scientist – or rather, I was a scientist. I'm not sure what label should be placed upon me now. Explorer perhaps. Philosopher. Vagabond? I didn't believe in flying snakes either. They have them you know – they survived the Third Holocaust. They spring from one tree to the next, slithering and flailing like a snake that swims, spreading their ribs and creating an indentation on the underside of their bodies that creates air pockets they manipulate. Scientists technically refer to these as “gliding” snakes and I suppose that is accurate if flying means that you flap wings.

But they didn't see what I saw – the greenish-blue one.

The one whose second set of ribs separated away from its body like a whole train of wings. They didn't see it glide over one hundred yards on a nearly even keel, undulating through the air on its spread appendages like some flying centipede until it landed on one of our junior scouts. They didn't see it coil up around his neck until his eyes bulged and his tongue hung out. I did. They didn't see the fierce fight it gave before releasing the hapless fellow and slithering away in its newly crippled condition – riddled with knife cuts from

the natives. They didn't see its separated joints like I did either. They didn't see its insides. I did. I dissected it. The world's only flying, constricting, poisonous viper. One of the other natives got bit while trying to rescue his friend. He was dead within twenty seconds – really: twenty. What is the point of constricting your prey when you have poison like that? I don't know and I don't suppose I'll ever find out – or at least, I hope I never do. I don't want to see one ever again – did I mention it was over six feet long?

But flying snakes weren't what awakened me from my scientific disbelief. I analyzed the creature for days. I measured it, I analyzed the innards before discarding them, I made holographic sketches, I took samples, I even tried to tan the hide to preserve it. It was an embarrassingly poor attempt but at least I preserved the skin – it is surprisingly beautiful – striking.

Draco volans – the flying lizards didn't make a believer out of me either – dragons some call them. I thought that was quaint – of course, they would get that label. That makes them sound exotic and inspiring and that generates better tourist revenues. But they were really sort of boring in comparison with what I saw – they just glide from one tree to the next feeding on ants and termites and such. The natives reported more ominous activities from these little creatures but they seemed more intent on providing folklore than legitimate information – more intent on

capitalizing off of the flying snake incident than protecting our crew. With virtually no tourism, I suppose that I cannot blame them for capitalizing on freak incidents like the one we had with the flying snake. They are just struggling to survive like everyone else on the outside. Of course, as opportunists, they were bound to exaggerate.

At least, that was what I guesstimated until I met her.

Not much taller than five feet, she was incredible in every way. I found her when I went out on a hike on my own one evening. I thought our chief scout was going to suffer from an anxiety attack when he saw me leaving on my own. Our crew leader castigated me for wanting to venture out on my own but I reminded him that this was supposed to be a very safe area and that everything we had seen wreaked of funding issues – the scout just wanted a bonus for standing by my side – and the junior scouts’ comments about letting me die were surely similarly motivated. So he let me go without further protest. I hadn’t ventured more than a couple hundred yards when I spotted her.

She looked nothing like the natives. In fact, some of her features were so different from any person I had ever seen that I would have described her as a new species at first glance had I not been too far away to make a judgment call like that. Long, feathery eyelashes swathed around her eyes; an extra long waist gave her the false appearance of being a tall woman, and her skin glowed. It was surreal but its glow was so subtle that I initially

assumed that she had oiled herself with one of Malaysia's bazillion unique plant species. Only later did I learn that her natural skin glowed like that. Initially, I thought she was laced with subtle tattoos as well but those were natural markings – impossibly intricate and beautiful. Like many of the natives, she wore little clothing. What she did wear was comprised mostly of a decorative, feathered belt-skirt type thing and then lacey wristbands, armbands, anklets, and a necklace type thing that functioned as some sort of a half tank-top. All of that lacey material is made of a twine she makes herself out of a local “ngofe” plant as she calls it. The material is stretchy but extremely strong, one bracelet holding at least a few hundred pounds before it loses its elasticity; she showed me how to make them but I don't think I knotted it quite right as hers seem much stronger.

If you would have asked me right then, I would have guessed that she was only fourteen or so – but I would have been very wrong. Maybe it was just her slender build or maybe it was her small size but when you look past that and see right into her eyes, you can somehow tell that she is older – much older – than fourteen.

She caught me by surprise when I first saw her. I happened to be walking upon a rare stone outcropping in those moccasin-type shoes the natives insisted that we wear so I was essentially silent in movement, having left my backpack and gear behind as this was simply a pleasure stroll.

When I turned a bend, there she was, crouching down near the edge of one of those crystal clear ponds that you don't expect to find in the middle of a deep forest like we were in, looking carefully into the water before cupping her hands for a refreshing drink. If I ever saw a woman look more vulnerable than her at that moment, I have no recollection of it – and I'm sure I haven't read about anyone in the database either.

That is when it came: the griffon-dragon-thing. I know that sounds strange, but it is true. Its feathered wings flapped, its unusual saber toothed canine teeth protruded out of the front of its jaws, and its feline-like claws extruded when its digits were bent. Despite its feathered wings, it appeared mammalian ... well, besides its short haired tail that punctuated with a sharp, quill-like tip that looked as reptilian as anything I've ever seen – except it too was white. It wasn't overly large in size – perhaps only eight feet long without considering its tail but it made my heart pump hard nonetheless. That is, until I saw that it wasn't looking at me. It was looking at this small woman. I froze. I didn't know what to do. Calling out to her might have directed its attention towards me and I'm sorry to say that I acted the coward and did nothing. But that was probably best.

She saw its reflection in the pool. I quickly guessed that this is why she had been looking into the pool in the first place – she had been observing the skyline, not the water itself. I hadn't noticed it until that very instant but there was

what appeared to be a delicately carved stone ball next to her – one of those kinds where someone carved something on the inside so that there was a carving inside of a carving. I didn't see right then what the inside carving was but I later learned that it was a sacred symbol for her: the griffon-dragon-thing. Casually, as if she were waiting for her husband to bring her some game to be cooked, she stood up, faced the dragon, held the ball in her hands, and began enchanting something in her native tongue. As she did so, the griffon-dragon exhaled some nasty fire of bluish hue that changed my life's paradigm instantaneously, I know not how to describe it. It was utterly fabulous and terrifying at the same time. But she barely noticed.

The ball glowed so intensely as the flame engulfed it that I had to look away. I expected that when I looked back, the little woman would be barbecued and banished to my memories. But there she was, calmly staring down this griffon-dragon – the real thing – and speaking words to it that sounded like a mother scolding her child for coming to dinner too slowly. The dragon-thing bowed its head and tried hard to avert its eyes to escape her censure and that was when it happened. It stared *me* down.

By this point, I thought I was pretty much out of the picture. I was the fly on the wall observing this magnificent interchange and had carefully backed myself behind a leafy bush – foliage that I still don't know how to classify. But it saw me nonetheless – and it glowered. It glowered without

opening its jaws much like you would expect from a mountain lion or perhaps some other large feline. When the woman's eyes discovered my presence, she waved her hand at the dragon as if ordering it to fly away – and it did.

Now, I wouldn't readily admit this to anyone who asked but since I'm just writing in my journal for posterity's sake, I will say that this is the first time in my life that I was genuinely afraid of a woman. I had a mind to turn and run away but something kept me glued to the stony ground – but it wasn't fear. Her walk was almost tender, mesmerizing. I don't know how to describe it. She came towards me like a woman might approach a small, frightened child hiding underneath a table – but without the slightest air of condescension. I later found out that she was as curious as I was. Over six feet tall with pale skin, amber eyes, and ruddy hair splotched with white around the temples, she had never seen anyone like me and wanted a closer look. It seemed like an eternity as I waited for her to climb up to where I was. And she seemed entirely oblivious to the possibility that I might run away while her attention was distracted climbing up the rock wall – or that I might perhaps attack her or otherwise bring her harm. She has always seemed so innocent – which is very strange considering what she really knows and who she really is.

When she climbed up over the ledge to where I was, she remained on all fours, her knees slightly bent still above the ground and her eyes gazing up

at me with those enchanting looks she gives sometimes. When I saw her up close, I was strangely attracted to her despite her odd skin color and her idiosyncratic features. And yet, part of me wondered whether or not I should have run away – whether or not I should be intensely scared of her; but then, the other part of me was still a scientist. I still had that worldview where discovering a new species was something exciting – something worth taking risks. Foolish. I know.

If I then had only a tenth of my understanding about species on other planets, I would have long before abandoned this barren wasteland we once called earth. There are much more wondrous places to explore – places where the inhabitants haven't been so abusive to their environment or to each other – places where we can easily take up residence and enjoy a much easier lifestyle than what we endure here. Places where scientists haven't made their final refuge in the forests of Borneo so that they can gene splice their hearts away, creating ever new and more monstrous creatures – even griffon-dragons. What fool was behind that project?

But there she was, some sort of new species walking – or somewhat crawling – right there in front of me. I hadn't noticed until then – as she was working her way towards me – that she had a tail as well. It too appeared to be tattooed and it too had that glowing quality to it and there was only a subtle puff of hair punctuating its tip – hair that matched her head: a thick black color with an

iridescent shine to it – bluish. By now I could see her eyes: also sort of a blue but they reflected a greenish tint when the light caught them right – sort of like when lights shine on a cat in the dark – but the effect was different and it happened in the daylight – never at night. Her pupils were oval instead of round but not pointed like a feline. Her ears had small, pointy tufts of hair that made them look almost elvish in appearance except for the extra concave curve on the sides.

Oh – and I didn't notice it then – it was dusk after all – but the nape of her neck has gills. You almost can't see them at all when they are closed. I didn't notice them until the third or fourth time that I met her by the pond at midday. Perhaps the strangest thing about her though was her nails – although not hollow, tube-like feline claws, they are retractable and unusually sharp – though far from lethal. I noticed them retract as she turned her hands over and she reached towards me. Her movements have always been so gentle and soothing – graceful. Watching her is sort of like watching a swan or an egret – every movement is somehow soothing and relaxing and makes you feel like leaning back in a chair to soak up the nature around you. She is organic like that.

She smiled at me but I didn't see her teeth until later. This was a soft smile – and perhaps she was aware that if I had seen her canine teeth, I might have been startled – or maybe she was too naive to think such things. Maybe she was just a little cautious herself. But her smile was so

captivating and her eyes were so riveting and flashy that I didn't even notice that I was no longer afraid of her; I was no longer wary of what she might do or what she might be like. I was like one of those prey fish staring at the glowing appendage of a vicious angler fish – only she was no predator – though her hand *was* glowing a little more than the rest of her body. As I reached out my hand to touch hers, I noticed for the first time that her skin was shimmering – not just ... glowing – oh, what is the right word?

Computer Contextual Suggestion

***Glistening, shiny, glimmering,
sparkling.***

End Contextual Suggestion

Because she wore little clothing, I could easily discern that some portions of her skin were more shiny and glowing than others. Her backside was quite shiny compared to her face and her front side but there were patches even there (mostly around her darker skin designs) that shined more effusively. She was stunning to behold.

The scientist in me wanted to study her, to run tests, perhaps even to dissect her – so much so that at first, I pretty much failed to even notice her breathtaking beauty. I guess that wasn't the first time. I have seen rare birds and beautiful creatures before and hardly noticed their aesthetics – too entranced in learning about their anatomy and their ecological significance to see form and

beauty.

But I digress.

She learned English in a matter of days. She could speak at a toddler level in less than a few hours and after I had spent a few solid hours with her the second visit, she could speak as well as any eight year old I ever met. I still cannot say her name – only half of it – and I still haven't begun communicating in her language. She devoured information from our database much more quickly than anyone I have met before and she cried when I told her that she had learned almost everything we had to offer – and the database is almost finished. This woman knows nearly everything that I do – if not lots more.

Computer Contextual Suggestion

Five completed database copies are housed in Unit 5, Compound B, and are held in receiving under code name “magic woman.”

End Contextual Suggestion

Give us a few more months and I believe our efforts will be complete. I have unit seven reworking everything that has already been done to make sure that we miss nothing important but they remain thoroughly convinced that we are years away from completion.

When the database is done, I will take her with me to another planetary system. This one is being overrun by natives controlled by the gene splicing team – ever intent on gaining control over this

ever shrinking piece of real estate we still call Borneo.

She believes she can find her way back to her home moon with a little help and that she was inadvertently left here by herself after an attack by local villagers. And because she gets quite lonely sometimes, she has always been anxious to trade promises of my resources for her knowledge of magic – the real thing. It’s all based on some primeval system of animism – only, rather than simply believing that everything around her has a soul, she actually communicates with them. She can communicate with soils, plants, animals, and anything with the slightest amount of life in it – she even changes the air. I’m a slow learner but I expect to learn enough to satiate my interests by the time I find her home moon. She says I could learn faster – she can use telepathy to teach me everything she knows quite quickly – I guess like we do with the database – but I suspect telepathy would lead to a mutual exchange of information so I have not accepted her offer – I cannot let her learn my true intentions.

She describes her home moon as paradisiacal – a blissful patchwork of islands. Perhaps I will settle there – or perhaps I will continue to explore as I have for years. Either way, I’ve chosen to take a few more recruits with me this time. Each Order continues to grow infertile – some have so far devolved that they may be entirely unfit to continue our race even with our modern medicines. I will only take the best specimens

(scientifically speaking); the rest will go extinct or fall prey to the natives I guess. But that is no concern of mine – the database is finished and nature will run its inevitable course.

New Voice Transmission

“Good morning Doctor; how are you?”

“Oh, *hello*. I’m fine thanks.”

Inaudible

Unexpected Transmission Error

End Transcription

*** ** ***

“IT SOUNDS LIKE HE WAS DICTATING it for editing.”

“Exactly,” Evelia answered excitedly, “but because of an interruption, he inadvertently sent the transcription into database archives instead of into his personal files. The recording was made over a month ago ... can you believe the database is really almost finished?” she ended with sincere disbelief.

“And Dr. Boyd has been planning on leaving most of us here to die,” Blaze grumbled, not even trying to conceal his growing unhappiness. *Not to mention he used several contractions*, he quietly castigated in his own mind.

“But it sounds like he is going to take you with him,” Evelia soothed, “and it sounds like

there are other people in other units ... right ... here,” she added with a touch of disbelief mingled with curiosity. “... only a couple of months from completion ...”

A quick but not overbearing knock on the door interrupted their conversation. Evelia swashed away the screen of Dr. Boyd’s memo, tucked her hologram pad underneath a small blanket on the shelf, and motioned Blaze to silence with her finger. As she opened the door, she nearly gasped in surprise: Dr. Boyd was standing opposite her, offering a genuine smile.

“Evelia – I am glad I happened to catch you home. I hope I am not intruding but I have a small item of business I would like to run past you ... oh Blaze! Good to see you,” he blurted to his own surprise. Then, turning back to Evelia, he continued, “actually, this works out quite well.” Pointing to Blaze, he added, “I just spoke to Blaze yesterday about the possibility of joining a new team. Top secret, highest security clearances, and utmost confidential,” he said in his characteristic manner – by avoiding contractions, Dr. Boyd was known to speak in incomplete sentences, a nuance that few really noticed but a nuance that deeply bothered Blaze: if the Order was going to insist on linguistic purity, its chief leader ought to be the exemplar, not the exception – regardless of his advancing age.

“Space exploration,” he began again. “I know we’ve all been taught that space exploration ended with the Third Holocaust but it is a living,

breathing, viable technology that we possess ... we've just been waiting for the right time to tell more of our Order members.”

Evelia all but fell backwards with surprise. Subconsciously, she'd successfully dismissed that detail in Dr. Boyd's memo as wishful thinking. Hearing the doctor speak of it in person dispelled all doubt that he was serious. Connecting the dots, she remembered that had Blaze mentioned that his visit with Dr. Boyd was top secret and that he was excited about being invited onto an elite team but he had failed to mention this exotic detail – *proof that he can keep a good secret*, she mentally noted.

Dr. Boyd barely noticed her surprise and didn't skip a beat. “I have been on a few trips myself and our special team in charge of exploration has performed a number of other trips besides that. In roughly two months, we will be making an extremely significant trip and will be in need of a larger crew. I am hoping that you will join us.”

Blaze's temper, still smoldering after listening to the misfiled memo, was now brimming over – though by looking at him, you would never have guessed it. All of a sudden, the “special team” and the “extremely significant trip” meant a whole lot more to him than it had the day before and he felt indignant that anyone would be so brazen as to invite someone else on a mission to colonize a new planet without being informed that they would never return and that everyone you left

behind would likely be exterminated by forces they didn't even know existed and were therefore completely unprepared to defend against. Still, keeping a poker face was crucial in this situation and Blaze was bright enough to recognize that fact so he said nothing and revealed nothing. He simply looked at Evelia as if he was excited to have her invited on the trip with him. Truth be known – but for the memo – he would have been thrilled to have her with him on the trip – or maybe he *was* thrilled to have her with him on the trip despite the memo. But then, he realized he didn't know if he really would be going – and if he was going to go, he didn't know what the terms or circumstances might be.

“Yes, sir,” Evelia all but exploded with enthusiasm – whether well faked or sincere, Blaze couldn't tell – but he guessed the former. “Well,” she began amending her first statement, “at least, I expect that the answer is yes – if I was to be responsible, I suppose I would have to say that I would like to think about it but based on my first impulse, I would have to say that my answer will be yes.”

“That sounds great,” Dr. Boyd replied, giving her an eye less full of caution than Blaze would have expected. “I will expect a definitive reply in a few days. Until then ... no word of this to anyone ... agreed?” Although his voice betrayed no tone of ominous pretensions, Evelia heard the veiled threat loud and clear – intended or not.

“Yes, sir,” she heartily agreed. “I presume

Blaze is excepted from that requirement ... is he not?" she pressed.

"Of course," Dr. Boyd answered, "He is under the same injunction as you though. You are the first two new recruits that I have spoken with at this point in time. As I speak to others, I will let you know but even then ..." he seemed to hesitate a little, "even then," he repeated, "keep the conversations to an absolute bare minimum. Word of this cannot get out without causing a great deal of unwanted consequences," he warned. Again, Evelia received the veiled threat with an enlarged understanding – she now interpreted Dr. Boyd's statements with a great deal more context than he would have ever dreamed that she would hear.

As Dr. Boyd turned around and left the room, Evelia closed the door behind him in as casual a fashion as she could muster under the circumstances, nearly shaking from stress. She turned her eyes over to Blaze. He couldn't tell from her look whether she was ecstatic, horrified, or whimsical.

"Looks like we will be spending more time together," she observed without any clear emotional expression.

But that didn't matter. Blaze accepted from her comment that at least something was going well in his life – even if everything else seemed to be falling apart all at once. At least he would be spending more time with Evelia. "What are we going to do?" he asked, hoping Evelia would have some insight better than his own stupor of

thought.

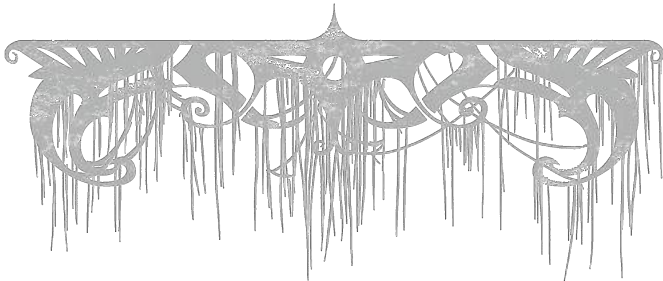
But he was disappointed.

“I have no idea,” she answered, twirling her hair with her right finger and looking down at her foot as she tapped the tip of her toes to the ground. Then, as she looked up, Blaze could see for the first time a clear look of fear and uncertainty that mirrored his own heart. Fighting aliens was one thing; fighting false paradigms and incorrect beliefs is something entirely different.

But he was game.

That is, so long as Evelia came along.

COMPANIONS IN CONUNDRUM



“BUT IF SHE DOES NOT BELIEVE US, she will tell Dr. Boyd will she not?” The question was obvious but the answer wasn’t so clear. Neither of them had been able to sleep the night before; both of them had thought about it; neither of them had any answers.

“That depends on what she is really like,”

Evelia answered, “and given what we know about her, it seems like she would be pretty trusting.”

“But would she be trusting of us ... or him?” Blaze retorted with unveiled skepticism. “I do not pretend to understand politics,” he confided. “You are a better judge of character than I am so I suppose you should make that call – what is your best guess as to what she will do?”

“Hmmm,” Evelia nearly sighed. “The database entry says that she can give information telepathically. I suppose ...” her voice trailed off. “I guess we really cannot know for absolute positive but I suppose that if she can speak telepathically, she can hear telepathically – and if she can hear telepathically, that means she can read minds does it not? Dr. Boyd seems to think so and he knows her better than either of us.”

“Maybe – but maybe she can only hear whatever you speak in your mind. Dr. Boyd did not seem so sure but either way. What does it matter?”

“Well,” Evelia responded, feeling encouraged despite the slightly pessimistic response of her companion in conundrum, “if she can read our minds, she will know that we were not lying and that she needs to be careful of Dr. Boyd.”

“Okay – that is a good thought – but will that change anything? That will also tell her that there is nothing we can do to help her – we know nothing about space exploration – and that if we do anything to challenge Dr. Boyd’s plan, her chances of getting home are not so good.”

“Oh,” Evelia groaned, now more discouraged by Blaze’s pessimism than before. She paused for an uncomfortably long time before offering another thought. “But what if she just has a good heart? What if she just wants to do the right thing?”

“What if the right thing is getting back to her family – if she has a family – or her people and letting our violent race go extinct?” Blaze questioned in return. “What if we just talk to Dr. Boyd about taking everyone with us? Do you ...”

“Really?” Evelia interjected. “Did you hear him threaten me yesterday? Did you not understand his warning about telling the others? He has no intent to help them. He is letting nature take its inevitable course remember? No, we either fight Dr. Boyd on our own, with the help of the Order, or with the help of this magic woman we have never met.”

Inside, Blaze knew Evelia was right. And he wanted to agree with her – whatever the subject matter might be. But he also did not want Evelia to be right in this thing. He wanted yesterday’s paradigm back. He wanted hope. He wanted to venture outside the Order for survivors, for good people. But that hope was gone now. The survivors were planning on exterminating the Order – and the Order was larger than Blaze had ever dreamed – and Dr. Boyd was only going to take the few dozen healthy people alive to another planet to start anew. In theory, the idea seemed innocuous – it almost seemed exciting. But

somehow, the tone of Dr. Boyd's voice and the tone of his journal entry somehow precluded the rosy interpretation Blaze wanted to impute upon this situation. Deep inside, his instincts were screaming for him to listen to Evelia's counsel – despite his mental misgivings and despite the unpleasant realities that her counsel entailed. A fight was brewing and the only help they had was a bunch of people who would have a very hard time accepting the truth or a total stranger from another planet, another solar system, perhaps even another galaxy. No expert of astronomy, Blaze had no rock solid understanding of where the alien may have originated.

“Some people in the Order will believe us; some may be wise enough to offer some good ideas,” Blaze began with a very pondersome and somber voice, “but this magic woman – whatever her real name is – this woman will know about the natives; she will know about space exploration and she will probably know details about Dr. Boyd's plans that we will have to know if we have any hope to stop him from condemning all of our friends and family to an inevitable death.” He paused for a long time, deep in thought – so deep that Evelia didn't dare interrupt him. Then, lifting his head out of his hands, pushing his elbows away from his knees, and looking at Evelia very intently, he asked the only question that really mattered: “Are you willing to entrust an alien woman we have never met with information that will irrevocably place all of our lives in danger?”

“Do we have any other real choice?” she queried, crossing her legs, placing her head in her hands, and looking up at Blaze with blank eyes. Blaze pushed aside his feelings for Evelia, pushed aside his crush, pushed aside his every desire to just spend time with her and hang out – to forget his troubles. Hundreds of lives depended on him now – he couldn’t let them down by being distracted by personal interests.

Meeting her gaze for a very long time before answering, he finally acknowledged the inevitable: “I guess not.” Then, as he watched Evelia bite her lower lip and raise her eyebrows with a look of anticipation, he added, “It sounds like Dr. Boyd has visited her at all times of the day – but who knows how often he visits her – and it sounds like the trip there might be very dangerous. Can you look up our exact location in relation to various ponds and lakes around here so that we can get our bearings before setting out? It might take a few days but I will look up medicinal plants around Borneo, update my database, and get some supplies if you ...”

“I can do better than that,” Evelia interrupted. “I traced the source of the transmission last night. It looks like Dr. Boyd has some affinity for that outcropping he mentioned in his journal entry ... at least, I hope it is the same one. I looked at satellite imagery predating the Third Holocaust and the source of the transmission was located at an outcropping overlooking a small lake or pond – just like the transmission described. If this is a

special – or sacred – place to the magic woman, it seems likely that she will visit it often. It sounds like she was performing some sort of ritual there when Dr. Boyd first met her so I am guessing she goes there often – and the transmission said that Dr. Boyd met her there on at least a few occasions so all we have to do is ...”

“Make sure Dr. Boyd does not know that we are missing and make sure that he does not find us there,” Blaze finished.

“Right. I’ve been thinking about that too...”

“No contractions,” Blaze impulsively interrupted, suddenly, but only briefly regretting that he had taken apprentice. “Sorry, I guess that is not so important right now. I ...”

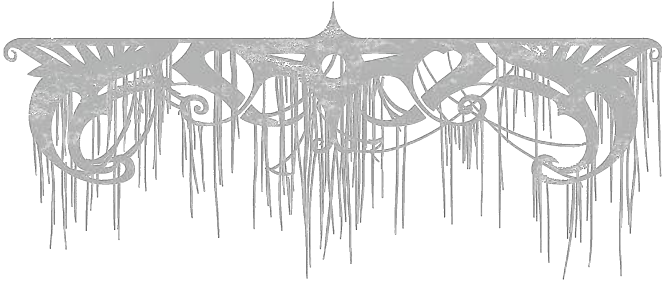
“Right,” she started again unperturbed, “Fifteen years ago, there was an illness that swept through the Order – I barely remember it – but I looked up the symptoms, looked at some combinations of herbs that mimic the rash, and got some information that will get us quarantined for at least a couple weeks. That should give us time enough to meet the magic woman.”

“There is a good reason you are so highly regarded,” Blaze blurted before he could stop himself. “You are brilliant.”

Evelia smiled. *This is going to work.*

“Oh,” she added, “I also found where they keep the complete database.”

DANGEROUS WETLANDS



THE MAGIC WOMAN LAY AWAKE, eyes closed but ears acutely attuned to the soft patter of rain, the plodding of flying insects grounded by the moisture, the occasional splashing from mammals shaking water off their soaked fur, the croaking of various species of frogs, and the musical sounds of exotic birds calling to one another. Her large waterlogged eyelashes threatened not to open because of the extra water weight but she soon had her eyes carefully slit to observe her environment without moving. *Nothing unusual*, she observed. Frogs, lizards, snakes, monkeys, and several other critters moved around in apparent silence, their sound covered by the white noise sloshing all around them. This was her new home.

She grabbed some berries next to where she lay and passed them to her mouth with her tail, greedily absorbing the succulent flavors of the local delicacies. Her environment safe, her consciousness surfacing more clearly each moment, and her rested muscles ready for

movement, she sat up and considered her plans for the day as she continued to ingest berries by the dozens. For other species in this jungle, it was a dangerous thing to lay next to a berry bush to sleep but for those on the top of the pecking order, it was less foolhardy.

But neither was it risk free.

Although local creatures recognized her as the top predator in the area, she still had to be wary as sleeping predators can also be considered prey by those with the disposition to think so. And with so many new species created by the rogue gene splicing team, there really was no security based on status here in the deep jungles of Borneo. She constantly monitored the movement of life and energy around her; it kept her safe.

Not yet ready to stand up, she began her daily routine of meditating while stretching. Legs split, face resting on the ground, and arms pointed behind her and towards the sky, she held her tail while carefully and methodically breathing in a regular, rhythmic fashion. After several moments, she shifted position until she was stretched into a similarly odd pose and continued focusing on her breathing. The air was habitually moist but today, especially dense fog left her feeling like she was breathing in whole swallows of water – and the heat was nearly unbearable. Her glowing, shining skin glistened more than normal under these conditions but she was too focused to notice that – all she noticed was that it took extra focus to run through her routine under these uncomfortable

conditions.

But then, food was plentiful here and the environment was beautiful – though dangerously and deceptively so – so she did her best to enjoy her surroundings.

Today was the day she expected this new world to communicate to her. She had spent moons here – many moons – learning everything she could about this new environment and all of its inhabitants, its patterns, its pulse, its energy. Now, it was time to learn its thoughts.

As she sat upright, she pushed her arms behind her back once again, twisting around one another more than looked natural. Her waist also twisted awkwardly, angling over her left hip. As she held that position, the magic woman felt a disturbance in the energy around her and looked up – only to see a large crocodile methodically edging towards her. She wouldn't have named it so and she wouldn't have named an alligator either but she recognized the difference – and she could recognize that this particular creature was especially large and boasted features that suggested genetic manipulations: spikes decorated its backside in two rows much like one would expect from certain species of extinct dinosaurs. Its tail boasted spikes and an edged tip as well. Apart from these modifications, the woman could not quickly detect anything unusual about this beast – but other modifications were there.

She sang to it.

A short little tune, she hummed and sang a

simple melody and countermelody in harmony with herself, using both of her vocal chords and the secondary flap in her throat to make soothing, fluttery sounds.

But it didn't work.

The beast continued creeping towards her as if it had no ears whatsoever.

Hard hearted, she observed. *Typical of these mutated abominations*, she groaned to herself.

LEAVE! she telepathically ordered the beast.

But still, it continued moving towards her.

She swathed her eyelashes a few extra times, unwanted water dripping into her eyes and then washing away. She glanced into the canopy of moss covered trees and then around the grounds far away from her, observing several creatures watching from above. Some monkeys were raising a warning call and a few species of birds were making similarly frantic noises – some of them flying away. *Bear witness*, she thought, satisfied that half of the visible jungle was watching.

Still sitting cross-legged, she bent her torso towards the ground, raised her arms to her side until they were above her back, bent her fingers into a claw-like position, extended her nails, raised her head towards the mutant croc, exposed her canine teeth, glowered with her eyes, and hissed at the creature, using both sets of vocal chords to create an ominous, scratchy, breathy sound.

But that was not all. That was just for show. Her mind was the key here. She sent psionic blasts

of great pain towards the beast with relentless efforts. The croc offered a horrific groan – or perhaps a growl – and slashed its tail wildly towards its unseen attacker. *Run!* she instructed the beast with visual imagery of itself turning and moving away from her.

And it did: it ran – or at least, it scuttled back and forth very quickly like giant crocs are prone to do.

She patiently waited for the creature to be far enough away from her to be assured that it no longer represented any danger before shifting her body out of the threatening pose she had fashioned a few moments before. Then, she found an especially relaxing position, closed her eyes, and absorbed the energy of nature all around her. She closed her ears with flaps unique to her alien body, relaxed all of her muscles, and attuned herself to the earth. She allowed herself to feel the sludgy earth beneath her legs as she gently slid them into a more perfectly comfortable position, noting the tiny scratches from pebbles and dissolving bits of organic materials that were still hard. She allowed herself to feel droplets of rain trail from her collar bones down to her navel and then to the ground; she felt other droplets trail from her shoulders to her elbows to the ground. She allowed herself to feel the slight breeze moving among the underbrush and she allowed herself to lose awareness of the many creatures that were crawling around in the canopy above – all she would listen to was the earth itself.

Two hours she sat motionless.

Then three.

Perhaps four.

She did not count the time however. One cannot rush nature; one can only invite it.

And when it was ready, it spoke to her. She watched as a young native, not especially far distant, gave birth to a child. Although under stress, the mother remained relaxed, breathing methodically and moaning that deep moan that helps the baby peacefully move down the birthing canal. She watched the young native breathing carefully and with great patience as the baby arrived. She observed great peace – and great joy.

This race of people has achieved phenomenal things, she considered, images of dancers, sculptors, gymnasts, entertainers, statesmen, and scientific achievers flooding through her mind. And yet they are globally uncivilized in many ways – while these natives, considered the least civilized by their world at large, are more in tune with nature than those who claim to have risen above it.

She now observed the mother holding the child, cradling it in her arms, admiring its new little body, caressing her fingers through the little tufts of hair, and gently nuzzling its cheek before kissing the child. She observed a triumphant smile.

This child, she heard the earth speak in great simplicity – and then silence in shadows ruled. Nothing more came. But those words meant more to the magic woman than the sounds themselves.

She understood much more. This child holds the key to the advancement of this race; this child could be thoroughly trained by the mother earth; this child alone was conceived and born in peace; this child alone was one with nature; she was fully organic; she was Elayuh.

*** ** ***

“THE BOY INFORMS ME that Blaze left last week, Dr. Boyd,” the young recruit reported.

“That cannot be correct Greydon. Last week Blaze was seriously ill. He probably suffers from extreme nausea this very moment,” Dr. Boyd responded.

“Possibly,” the young man answered, “but he left nonetheless – and he asked the boy to keep an eye on you for him.”

“No. Really? He left the Order?” Dr. Boyd asked, entirely dumbfounded by this news. “What is he thinking? And why would he ask Jazz to keep an eye on *me*?” he finished, staring well beyond the confines of the office wall where they were talking, trying to remotely comprehend this new puzzle, and reeling in confusion over these few short details.

“Well ... why did you ask Jazz to keep an eye on Blaze?” Greydon queried back, entirely unsure about whatever was going on. “Did you not invite him to be a part of our team only a couple weeks

ago?”

“A week and a day to be precise,” Dr. Boyd responded with an aloof, far away look. “But to answer your question, I just had a hunch ...”

“The young boy ...”

“His name is Jazz.”

“Yes, sir. Jazz reports that Blaze is convinced that there must be people who survived the Third Holocaust and if there are, we need to find them before our infertility problem becomes...”

“No – blast it!” Dr. Boyd almost yelled. “That foolish ...” Pausing and reconsidering what he was saying in front of this young recruit, he began again, “but probably well intended ...” Still tripping over his own words and frustrations, Dr. Boyd began to pace, rubbing his fingers along his moustache and down his beard like some men do when they’re pensive.

Unsure whether or not to interrupt, Greydon waited in silence for quite a while before continuing his report. “The boy ... ummm, Jazz ... he reports that Blaze took Evelia with him.”

“No,” Dr. Boyd responded again in disbelief. “Why would he do that?” A brief, silent moment passed before he continued. “Even considering that he is unaware of this crazy gene splicing team and even considering that he is unaware of the hostility of the natives, why would he take a docile young woman like Evelia with him to look for survivors? She studies art and music – she could be of no use to him out there – at best, she would be a constant liability.” Dr. Boyd was clearly

surprised by the news and was clearly perplexed by these developments.

“Jazz reports Blaze is crushing on Evelia.”

“Yes, that much was apparent to me long ago,” Dr. Boyd interrupted. “Blaze is a weapons master and is fully educated in the dangers this planet can bring. I wouldn’t think that he would risk her safety so recklessly because of a crush ... but then ... he is quite young,” Dr. Boyd continued, still disjointed in his thinking and unsure what to make of this new development.

“Jazz seemed unwilling to tell me anymore about the situation Dr. Boyd but I did learn something else.”

“Say on,” Dr. Boyd encouraged.

“Jazz felt a little betrayed because Blaze informed him that he would ask around to see if Evelia could be Jazz’s new mentor – but then, Blaze took Evelia with him and would not tell him where they were going or how long they would be gone ...”

“Good,” Dr. Boyd interrupted again. “Tell Jazz that I am very sorry to hear about what has happened to him but that I will make sure that he gets the very best mentor we have available and that I have something very important to talk to him about soon. I need him to keep monitoring Blaze for us if he shows up again – that is, *when* he shows up again,” he corrected himself with a tone that clearly indicated he was hoping for a best case scenario.

“Then the boy will be coming with us?” the

young man asked.

“Yes, of course,” Dr. Boyd responded. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need to try to make sense of all of this so please don’t allow anyone to interrupt me for at least a couple hours.” As his voice trailed off, Greydon failed to hear the following question: “I don’t suppose you got that tracking device on Blaze’s staff yet? Of course not – he would have been gone by the time I gave you that order...”

“Sir,” the young man ventured, feeling very nervous over how this conversation was unfolding.”

“Yes.” Dr. Boyd looked up, pulled out of his nearly subconscious meanderings.

“As you requested, I made a few more copies of the completed database, including the newest changes that you requested, and modified the older versions.” Despite himself, the young recruit inadvertently paused, internally unwilling to make this final report when Dr. Boyd was already visibly disturbed. The older man waited patiently, half distracted, half curious as to what the younger man might say – he clearly wasn’t finished with his report. Then, in a flurry, Greydon gathered his courage and confessed: “One of the completed databases – an older one without the new modifications – is missing. And whoever took the copy failed to properly check it out as you have instructed. The librarian on duty – the one in charge of the databases right now – she reports no visits from authorized personnel – or anyone else – to check out a completed database for well over a

month. She believes that it was probably ... stolen.”

“No,” Dr. Boyd repeated for the third time, his cognitive dissonance intensifying, his disappointment growing, and his frustration furiously mounting.

Unhappy at his misfortune of having to deliver all of this bad news at once, Greydon held back several questions: Will this delay our mission? Will the natives attack before we go? Do you think Blaze and Evelia will survive? How will we find them? The latter question reminded him that he had forgotten to report on his failure to find Blaze’s staff – though the implication of Blaze’s disappearance clearly suggested this result. However, one interminably burning question could not be suppressed: “Sir, do you think Blaze could have taken the missing database?”

“No,” Dr. Boyd instinctively responded without the slightest hesitation or thought. “He knows nothing about this version of the database – and for that matter, he knows nothing about Unit 5. If he left the Order, he undoubtedly took the southernmost exit – it’s the only exit he knows about – and that exit doesn’t even allow a view of Unit 5 without travelling all around the exterior of his Order. No, this is unrelated – and the timing is very unfortunate.” His voice trailed off again. Dr. Boyd was not normally so distracted and disjunct with his thinking so his response showed that he had not anticipated any of these new developments and that he was personally and

emotionally distraught over the news. Still half drowned in his own concerns, he almost whispered his last question: “It tends to suggest a traitor does it not?”

The young man shifted nervously. Dr. Boyd’s last sentence unnerved him. Not only did it state the obvious – something he didn’t want to admit outwardly – it came with the more formal grammar that everyone else was required to use – the grammar that Dr. Boyd occasionally slipped out of because of his old age and old habits. Intended or not, the formality of the inquiry left the young recruit feeling that he was being accused – accused of something that he did not do.

“I am afraid so, sir. However, there appears to be little motivation for anyone to take a copy of the completed databases when everyone who knows about them has been promised a complete and clean copy in just a few weeks when we begin our mission ...”

“Right!” Dr. Boyd responded with some degree of enthusiasm. “You’ve marked the problem well. Go. Do a search of any correspondence discussing the database in the last couple of months. Sweep the discussions for anything that would give us a clue as to who might have taken that earlier version and what their motive may have been.”

“So you think we can find it?” Greydon asked hopefully.

“We can only hope so,” Dr. Boyd finished,

looking distant once again. “But I’m more concerned about finding out *who* has it,” he added. Then, as an afterthought, he suggested, “Don’t forget to search encrypted messages, misspellings, code words, and the like ... and I suppose you had better go back a few months just to be safe.”

“Yes, sir,” the young man responded, quickly turning on his heels.

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SHE WAS A SENSUAL BEING. In tune to everything that was happening around her, she made herself an extension of nature itself. It had taken time to attune herself to this new planet but she was becoming one with it and with that endeavor, she was finding a peace she had not known on her home moon – peace she had always intuitively wanted, unconsciously needed, and keenly anticipated.

Sad, she grimaced inwardly, *to have been so lost in my own world only to become one with another one so far away*. Here, she sensed the energy of every living creature around her. Here, she more keenly noticed when moisture passed into the pores of her skin. Here, she felt more subtle changes in the movement of air around her. Here, she felt how strongly the world buzzed with life. Its people might refer to her moon as a long string of islands

encapsulated by vast swaths of desert-like, sandy beaches. Before, her home had seemed full of energy and life: 70% of its surfaced covered with water, its continents were primarily beaches; its mountainous areas boasted tons of foliage and greenery of every sort but most of her people lived along the sandy beaches where plants and trees and flowers were less abundant. Even with all of those factors considered, her home held no amount of life and energy that compared to the area she lived in now. In retrospect, her previous home almost seemed dead – that is, compared to the energy she keenly felt here. It invigorated her; it enlivened her senses; it left her buzzing with excitement.

But she was very lonely.

Visits with Dr. Boyd, the old man who looked decades younger than he was, had been enjoyable. At least, they provided her with some companionship. But lately, even those visits were becoming less fulfilling. Full of questions, the scientist was void of meaningful answers; full of aspirations, he seemed to lack direction; and full of ideas, he seemed to lack purpose. It was clear to the magic woman that Dr. Boyd felt he was doing the right things; however, even without the benefit of reading his mind, he had told her enough of his activities to guarantee banishment from her people were he to live among them. This, she was keenly aware of; this, she knew quite deeply. After all, she had her secrets too.

She sensed energy shifting.

Humans. Two. One injured – badly. Neither

was a local native; neither was Dr. Boyd. One was carrying the other; both were deliberately making their way towards the magic woman. Torn between her interminable curiosity, her desire to help anyone in need, and her desire to keep this spot holy and untainted by outside influences, she hesitated. She compromised to allow Dr. Boyd to meet her here – and it was no small compromise – but he had something she desperately needed – something she could get from no one else – something she could not live without. Ultimately, nature itself must decide whether or not to bring people here – it was not her spot after all – she had just found it and recognized it for what it was: a holy place, a place where nature’s energy was magnified far beyond what it was in other places, a place where she could listen to what the earth itself had to say.

And now, it seemed to say that it was allowing these two humans to come here.

She crouched behind some bushes to get a good look at them and to size them up before making a decision as to what she might do next.

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“WE ARE NOT FAR EVELIA ... hold on ... be strong. Those plants should be close by. I cannot remember their name but I will recognize them. They grow by these little ponds of water and I can

see the water now. They have jagged red tips and purplish stems – they look so different from anything you have seen before that you cannot miss them. Do not worry. I will get you some.”

Her head flopped helplessly to the side.

“No!” the boy instructed. “Hold on! Just a few more minutes. Do not leave me Evelia. There is too much at stake. We need you. Do you hear me? Stay with me Evelia!”

The boy was frantic.

But he was right.

Those plants were found on each side of the pond and he was only a dozen yards from a small patch if he would quit looking at the petit brunette in his arms and look around for the desired foliage a little harder.

But it might be too late, the magic woman considered.

Despite her loneliness, the magic woman was slow to approach people or to talk to them; she was even loathe to bother spending time analyzing their energies; she was unabashedly antisocial in many ways. After all, this race was, all things considered, intolerably violent.

But she was also a very curious individual.

The large human girl – at least, she was large by the alien woman’s standards – looked delicate and had a pleasant countenance – despite the effects of the poison. Somehow, Evelia (as the boy called her), seemed too pristine, too innocent, and too delicate to be sacrificed to the savageness of these dangerous wetlands. Somehow, it seemed an

offense to nature to let her life slip away while numerous beasts and abominations of nature were allowed to freely run around these jungles. It seemed a contradiction to spare the life of these beasts while not sparing this harmless creature's life.

That is why she did it.

She didn't even take the time to carefully consider the energy circulating among these two strangers. She intuitively knew that Evelia carried good energy, that she was worthy of help, and that she could receive energy harmonious with the nature around her – even if she had never been here before. Intuitively, the magic woman knew that nature itself yearned to right the wrong of its mutant inhabitants. So, she quickly – but gracefully – leaped out of the foliage and gazed towards the young couple. She expected that her sudden appearance might surprise the young boy and leave him feeling overly anxious given his companion's vulnerable condition; she expected that he might even feel frightened.

But she was very wrong.

He almost seemed to smile with relief to see her.

Very strange, she mentally noted, not taking the time to consider the situation more carefully. She had more important things to do. She had reached her destination. Gracefully acknowledging the young boy with a nod and a timid smile, she reached her hands towards Evelia's face. And he didn't resist.

Tired, stressed, and trusting without a reasonable choice, Blaze quickly lowered Evelia to the ground where the magic woman could see her better. But the magic woman did not need to see the wound or her patient; she needed to feel her. Placing her hands around the young woman's face much like a mother grabs the face of a small child to get its attention and to make somber eye contact, the magic woman closed her eyes, placed her cheek next to Evelia's cheek and whispered in her ears something Blaze was unable to make out. He wasn't sure if this alien creature was speaking too softly for him to hear well or if she was speaking in a foreign tongue but whatever she was saying soothed his nerves – and he found himself relaxing under the influence of her voice.

“Evelia,” he heard in harmonious tones, as if two people were speaking together in unison. Then, Blaze heard nothing else he could repeat. He immediately understood that she was speaking in her native language and he immediately recognized that her speech resembled the gentle, relaxing purring of a satisfied feline. He noticed that her tail was wrapped around Evelia's closest wrist and that the magic woman was holding that carved sphere Dr. Boyd described in his journal entry.

It glowed.

The magic woman's skin glowed ever so slightly – and it glistened as well. Blaze might have tried to resist noticing these interesting details about the alien's body and focused on the needs of

Evelia but he intuitively sensed there was no need for him here and nothing he could do that would help. Beyond intuition, he consciously felt calm and peaceful as the magic woman spoke. He nearly felt entranced by her voice and that glowing sphere.

Evelia was glowing too. Mostly, it seemed her skin was glowing but soon, Blaze could tell that the glow was moving internally. He guessed that the glow might be draining – or pushing – the poison out of Evelia’s leg where she had been bitten by some puny, harmless looking lizard. Had it been a snake, Blaze would have pushed it aside with his staff or shot something at it to make it change its course – but a lizard? It hardly seemed a threat at the time. Like Dr. Boyd, he wouldn’t have believed the tales of the natives. But now, he knew better.

Soon, there was a mass of coagulated liquid slodgily stagnating on the ground underneath the bite, collecting itself together like some sludgy black algae at the edge of a dormant pond. Task complete, Evelia’s skin still seemed to glow a little and Blaze quietly – and quickly – determined that he liked it. Somehow, it made Evelia even more beautiful in his eyes and somehow, it made her seem more innocent and pure as well.

But she still wasn’t moving – and he couldn’t tell if she was breathing either.