

2394

‘Mirrors of the Past’

(Don't shoot the Messenger)

By P. Roscoe

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In other words this Story is purely Science Fiction, I hope.

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Prologue

Often, a constant breeze blows in the flat deserts of their world, creating small sandstorms that virtually mask the presence of all who travel there. It's now the year 159 a.t.d. (after the disaster). It would have been 2394 A.D./C.E had the calendar not been reset the year after their planet was almost destroyed.

Resha's mother gave birth to a beautiful auburn haired baby girl in one of their world's largest megatropolises on the stroke of midnight Mayday's eve 2222. Resha was raised for eight years with the bustle of the city surrounding her so she never knew anything but noise and overcrowding. A month, five days and ten hours after her eight birthday, a scientific miscalculation triggered a chain reaction that lead to the disaster and brought an end to her world as she had known it.

In the year 2394, Resha has just turned 172 years old. Her new found friend and now regular companion Swallow, has is 96. Born after the effects of the disaster had subsided, Swallow has grown up on a barren evolving world devoid of all living things except for the few remaining survivors of her species. Over the centuries as the human population grew, one by one whole species of animals disappeared. By the beginning of the 22nd century almost all animal life on their planet had been eradicated. The final assault to life on their planet came during the turmoil during the decades leading up to the disaster, the radical environmental of the disaster itself and in the great thaw that followed. Drugged since she was a baby Swallow had never learned to think on her own. In fact till her mom had perished during her clans travels on their month long trek to their new home a small, makeshift village on the edge of a vast ruddy desert, Swallow had never even spoken to anyone besides her.

Now in the year 2394 over their artificially elongated lifetimes, Resha and Swallow have become accustomed to walking and sitting on their naked earth. To meet for Resha's tale these two picked an isolated spot a few miles from their village under an ancient solitary tree where their ruddy desert collides with the coffee colored foothills. On their hike to their meeting place, the blowing sand has covered them both from head to toe with a fine coat of rosy dust, so before sitting in the shade of their tree they pause to beat some of the dust off. Swallow and Resha, then sit face to face under the tree's spreading branches on the warm sand of the desert's floor.

Gazing at Resha; Swallow notices that the dust of their world's deserts has filled the subtle lines of the ageless older woman's face, leaving observers with an image of an eerie lime-green mask covered with faint rosy lines etched by fate and time. While she stares, Swallow shifts her focus to soften her gaze and for a brief moment, Resha's face blurs into a verdant green landscape traversed by bloodied rivers and creeks. In passing, Swallow mentions to Resha how striking she looks with that rose-colored dust accentuating the indistinct lines that now trace her features. The faint blush that rises to Resha's skin is barely noticeable as she ardently tries to ignore Swallow's compliment and readies herself for her tale.

Although Swallow appears to be in her mid-twenties, almost three quarters of a century has passed since she has left that decade behind. She wears her flaxen hair pulled back in one long French braid which runs down the center of her back ending at her waist. Its pale color is a striking contrast against the smooth pale lime-green hue of her skin. Resha's hair is a similar length, but she wears her dark amethyst-colored locks in two narrow face-framing braids pulled back and stylishly woven together with the rest of her hair into a single long plait. It's her usual custom to wear her mane draped over her right shoulder. Swallow is willowy about eleven hands high, with a taut, well-muscled frame, as the bodies of most of the young are. There are still

traces of timeless beauty in the mature woman's face. Like most of the older ones, she's lean, slight of frame and nearly a half of a hand shorter than her companion.

Over the younger woman's shoulders, their world's three cerulean suns form a trine that shines brightly in the midday sky. In their new world these three, artificial suns' combined heat leaves little available moisture in the air during daylight hours. In the decade that preceded the disaster, these new suns appeared one by one in their sky like a miracle sent from the heavens. After all three were brightly shining in place, the faint, ghostly white silhouette of their nightly crimson moon appeared to be imprisoned in the center of this solar trine. During the day, the moon is paled by her blazing azure guards which encircle her and never allow her to set. Then, each night after the suns go down, the moon rises alone from the west and transforms the nearly pitch-black night's sky into a crimson and dark cobalt blue spectacle. After dark the blushing moon's only visible companions are her numerous neighboring suitors—a field of brightly glistening emerald-green stars. After the three suns set, these stars attend to their spectacular red mistress, and it appears as if each is trying to gain her favor against the velvet cobalt blue night sky. The maiden moon is at home in darkness. There her brilliant blood red splendor surpasses all three suns in their combined daily glory.

In the century following the disaster as what was left of their natural world struggled to recover, the remains of man's improvements on their planet slowly crumbled into decay. Since the beginning of human civilization, their world's natural, ancient features had been slowly eroded away and replaced by humans' so-called improvements. This progress reached its pinnacle around the year 2150 but even then, the humans couldn't seem to stop and control themselves. Their world's suppressed fears and the exploding numbers of its population drove the peoples' use and expansion of their 'improvements' well beyond the limits of what the

surrounding living planet could tolerate. By the time Resha was born, things had been critically out of balance in the natural world for a very long time. As an infant, her eyes first opened to sprawling cities and she walked her first steps with her feet imprisoned in things called shoes, on the rigid, unforgiving rapidly deteriorating pavement of her infertile world. In her planet's past, as the human population had multiplied, man had done away with most of their planet's natural features to make room for new dwellings needed to shelter its people. This had left Resha and Swallow's world mostly flat. Resha smiles as she recalls fondly, that this planet she's now grown old on is vastly different from the world she was born into. Over this last century, her now naked feet have now grown accustomed to the powdery soils of their new world. Yet till this day Resha's childhood memories of her old world still haunt her distant dreams.

Visible to the north of where Resha and Swallow are meeting is one of the recently rebuilt semi-natural landforms on their current world's mostly flat terrain. The vista is striking and consists mainly of two new land features. One is a collection of dark coffee-colored hills that the wicked winds began to create after the disaster. In the half century following the disaster after the thaw, severe blasts from a series of ruthless storms that had been triggered by the rapid cycling of the climate changes had begun the construction of these hills. In the wake of the disaster during the several decades that had followed, fierce uncontrolled winds blew eroding away most of the human progress that civilization had painstakingly made in the preceding centuries. Now during this last century, what the wicked winds had started, the new controllers tasked with making sure the human race survived, valiantly tried to complete. Adding crushed stone to pulverized, rusty steel which was all that remained of most of the cities, the Androids had supplemented what unbridled nature had begun. Now these newly finished groups of hills

undulate and surged up from their world's flat desert floor haphazardly creating breaks in their ruddy deserts' terrain.

Since most of the human population had perished in the fighting that led up to the disaster or in the disaster itself, those cities left standing were abandoned and soon fell into decay. After the people disappeared with the cities now empty, their physical planet fought back to regain a natural balance as best as it could and their world slowly changed. Since then, time, wind, and weather aided by the Androids have completely dismantled all but a few of the cities that survived the initial catastrophe, blowing them away and leaving few familiar remnants aside from these new hills.

Adjacent to this particular set of hills, stands another semi-naturally constructed addition to their landscape. Rising up from the desert floor is a forest of steep, translucent, crystal rock towers that miraculously started to grow at the beginning of this past century. Each of the mature crystal towers is a different brilliant, striking color. This particular group of stones forms a dramatic transition between one of their rosy deserts and its adjacent coffee-colored hills. As Resha and Swallow sit beneath the tree chosen for their story site these two features dominate their northern horizon. Besides the areas occupied by the newly grown towers and coffee hills the majority of the remainder of their planet is now covered only by a vast ruddy desert.

Almost a century ago, one by one these multicolored crystal towers suddenly began rising from the desert floor like they had been planted. They grew like the monolithic forests of the colossal trees of their world's past. These kaleidoscopic forests of crystals now extend up into the heavens and invade their world's newest creations, the recently formed nocturnal clouds of their skies. In this brutal new world, as their three man-made suns set and the air cools, clouds form and gather around the tops of the crystal towers like guardians of the night. There is no rain in

their world, but in the cooling darkness, the moisture from these clouds condenses on the higher faces of the crystal obelisks and, drop by drop the water makes its way to the ground just before dawn heats the morning air. These colored crystal spires also somewhat filter the harsh daylight cutting the intense, scorching rays of their world's artificial trio of suns. Shortly after these mammoth towers had reached their pinnacle, smaller flower-like clusters of clear crystals began to sprout up randomly on a number of the multicolored massive towers. Now, when the suns rise, their rays hit these tiny clear gem flowers and randomly cast prisms out in all directions. It's not unusual to see pockets of rainbows in the sky and on the ground surrounding the towers, where the clear crystal flowers have now set seed and blossomed.

These immense, vibrant crystal towers are somewhat opaque at their bases, so they cast shadows, which result in shaded areas surrounding the base of each tower. In these dappled shadowed areas, most of the struggling plants of their hostile, newly evolving world have begun to grow. These plants first appeared about a hundred years ago and began slowly sprouting up about ten years after the skies were newly seeded with clouds. Recently in this last decade, a moss like vegetation has begun to grow in patches on the branches of the surrounding shrubbery. In fact, in the more deeply shaded areas, a few patches of moss have even spread to the ground.

Since as of late the newly formed clouds have been producing more and more water, over the past few years these plants have been widening out from the base of each crystal tower and a small number of them have recently started to invade the harsh sunlit regions. These plants evolving in full sunlight are vastly different from those found in the shaded areas for they have evolved in the fierce light and heat while growing under the unforgiving rays of their world's three brutal suns. This makes these plant's stature scrubbier and they are mainly a dense, thorny,

woody thicket. To aide in their conservation of water these plants also have fewer, smaller, brittle, waxy, green leaves.

Because of all the radical changes their world has witnessed since the disaster, only a few of the largest ancient solitary trees have survived from the Before Time. It is under one of these that Resha and Swallow have decided to meet for Resha's tale. Most of the remaining primordial giant trees are scattered alone throughout their world. Centuries before the disaster, these towering elders had already been endangered. Toward the end of the Before Time, there just wasn't enough space to support these colossal giants in the humans' rapidly overpopulating world. So one by one, they had been killed and/or transformed into more useful items. In the ancient past, areas that had been once covered by vast forests of trees rising into the skies slowly gave way to high-rises used to shelter the mushrooming human population. This had left most of the few trees that had survived located in remote areas where the elite had built their compounds to escape and take refuge from the masses. In the time leading up to the disaster, these giants had served a dual purpose in the elite's walled off, well defended compounds. Since the trees had towered above many of the surrounding natural features, the elite had used them as part of their surveillance systems. At the same time, they had provided greatly needed shade for the outdoor recreation areas of the elite's strongholds. In the decade before the disaster many of the elite had sequestered themselves away and attempted to hide out in some of the more remote sanctuaries.

At the end of the Before Time and during this last century and a half many of the trees protecting the compounds of the elite's had perished in the harsh, unyielding climate fluctuations. In the year or two after the final demise of the planet's old climate, most of these lumbering giants had died when the sun waned and the frigid cold invaded. The few ancient, towering trees that had managed to survive since the disaster are now the sole survivors of their

kind. Although a few of these ancient relics still provide and set new seed each season, few seedlings have managed to endure and grow in the unforgiving climate changes of this last century—at least not until now. With the seas dried up there's been little water to nourish their seedlings and even if their seeds sprouted the tender seedlings had little protection from the suns so they couldn't survive. Little does their new world know that part of these two women's destinies may be tied to the survival and possible resurgence of these massive trees.

During the last century of the Before Time, prior to the disaster their world had been viciously overcrowded. Overpopulated cities had covered nearly every available space on their planet. Then when the land masses became overcrowded, as a last ditched effort the people overflowed and moved out onto great 'home' ships anchored on their vast oceans, eventually occupying these vessels as permanent dwellings. Then after the disaster with the lighting of the artificial suns which over time caused the seas to evaporate. This along with all the destruction of life and the near death of their world, the landscape and tenor of their world had severely transformed.

What led up to the disaster was intriguing for it was a strange combination of hubris and suppressed un-dealt with fear. Shortly before the disaster, the Scientist of their world had theorized that their world's solitary sun was beginning to wane. Even though their sun's final demise was still centuries away the scientists at that time were so accustomed to fighting nature and fixing the problems that human overpopulation had caused, that they rose to the challenge of correcting this future speculated problem. So, in a top-secret lab they built a miniature model of their waning sun and began experimenting on it, trying to spark it back to life. First, they tried using nuclear fission which shortly after they started they recognized was too dangerous. In addition, the nuclear experiment required so much room on an already overcrowded world; it

soon turned into a miserable failure. After failing with a Helium Regeneration Experiment, the scientist began experimenting with cold fusion which had given them a few favorable results. This gave them a new focus as they began to pursue that avenue for a solution of providing a self sustaining energy source.

After a few years of testing cold fusion with some favorable results, the Scientist believed this was the best option and that they could control the results. With that they then launched a rocket armed with a cold fusion probe hoping to spark their sun back to life. Unfortunately, there must have been unknown factors that they couldn't account for in their experimental model because shortly after the probe hit their sun and they activated it, their sun started cooling at an accelerated pace leaving it in a worse state than if they had done nothing. Every degree their sun cooled caused the temperatures on their planet to drop. Realizing they had made a grave error they searched desperately for a new solution to correct their mistake but were unsuccessful. Besides even if they had discovered something to help at that point in time their sun was so unstable they were too frightened that they might damage its critical balance even more and all would be lost.

Only the elite and their Scientist knew of the danger. Helpless to fix the problem they panicked while the elite took up permanent residence in their fortresses and underground shelters to save themselves. They abandon all the other life-forms and left them alone on a planet struggling to survive. As the temperatures fell and because the scientist were unprepared in the year leading up to the disaster all living things had to endure and survive eleven months of unrelenting cold. In that time, many of the inhabitants who were not able to relocate to warmer climates or find suitable shelter perished. As a massive extinction event happened right before their eyes the top minds frantically struggled to find a solution. Few living things could

completely escape the radical climate change, and many species were unable to survive. The scientists finally devised a man-made sun and desperately began construction. By the time the first was completed they realized one sun would not be enough to create a livable climate. They placed the first tied to the orbit of the moon while under abysmal pressure they constructed two more and place them in orbit. Unfortunately when they were ignited, there was an unaccounted synergistic effect between the three new suns and the temperature at first began to rise out of control. This was what was eventually named as the disaster. This unrelenting heat continued until the suns were stabilized over the next several decades. During this time their world slowly desiccated as their vast seas began to evaporate. This created a chain reaction that eventually caused severe flooding as the polar ice caps melted and disappear. The climate became so hot that over time the cloud cover had burned off before the heat finally subsided.

When the seas were gone the home ships lay abandoned on the dried up and cracked sea floor. Eventually over time as their planet was re-sculpted by the merciless winds these ships were buried in mass graves as the terrain of their planet flattened. Over this last century, the last remnants of their world's ancient home ships and magnificent, immense cities have been rendered unrecognizable and eroded away by time and their new merciless climate.

Almost a century before the disaster happened, in order to attempt to control the exponentially escalating population of the world, the elite ruling class, prescribed drugs to the people, especially those of childbearing age. Along with limiting the rapidly growing population, the drugs were administered to manage or reduce certain undesirable behaviors. The first objective of these drugs, of course, was to control the number of births by acting as birth control and dampening the common person's sex drive. The drugs also contained a blend of sedative-like medications used to suppress aggressive behavior to 'help the elite maintain some semblance of

order'. These 'therapies' were designed to take away the people's will, with the objective of leaving them easier to manipulate and controlled by the ruling class.

This medication had been modified many times over the past three centuries but the drug regiment stayed intact until 2393 even after the last elite controllers had died off. After the last of the elite perished he then passed the role of controller onto his loyal companions, protectors and caretakers, his android caretakers. Of course, part of the androids newly assumed tasks as the new controllers was the routine administration of the 'medications'. In some fashion the drug regime had been maintained up until very recently. However, after the massive population die offs following the disaster, the updated prescription's focus had shifted to encouraging birth instead of inhibiting it. Yet, for over two centuries the goal of breaking and controlling the peoples' will had never wavered.

In the year 2391, about three years ago, the number of times the androids visited the people began to taper off and so the drugs were not administered as consistently. During this past year, for the first time since before Resha was born, her people were without their medications.

In the years directly following the disaster, their world's few survivors wandered aimlessly in shock. Most had been severely psychologically altered by the covert long term drug use they had been secretly fed and the loss of all they knew. All of the animal life and over 99% of the human population on their planet had been brutally eradicated within a decade by the fighting for resources, erratic environmental changes and famine. The medications, along with the shock of all the deaths, and the many drastic changes their bodies and their world had experienced, left the survivors stunned, with no direction. To help the survivors cope and prevent mass suicides the drug regiment was again manipulated to help the people better evolve to adapt to the changes happening to them and their planet. After the heat of suns began to stabilize and

the final catastrophic drop in the population had stabilized, those left alive became nomads (normads in New Speak). Their planet had changed so drastically that they had difficulty adjusting to the emptiness of their new world and had felt vulnerable staying rooted in one place for too long.

At the end of the last century the Androids tasked by the elite to rebuild their world and save the human race felt the survivors needed a new path. With the human survivors still in shock and having no home base, a silence had descended. To begin with the rebuilding of their planet and aid the people's survival the Androids genetically and biologically re-engineered the human genome to allow for survival in their planet's harsh new environment.

They constructed villages made of small huts for the people to inhabit and collected the tribes from the surrounding area to settle them in their new homes. As the people fell into a new daily routine and recovered from all the changes to their bodies and their world, their lives became routine. Since the elite controllers around the world had taken refuge underground they turned the task of the recovery and rebuilding of their planet over to their Androids protectors. Methodically around the world these Androids did the best to achieve that task. In the past religion had been an important guide many people followed so the Androids around the world decided to create a new world wide religion. After spending years resettling the lost souls of their world the androids in charge had felt that the surviving people needed a task and a new structured path to fill their aimless lives. 'The Book of Ways' as it was titled by the Androids, had been compiled based on the jumbled pieces of all their old world's ancient religions in order to avoid conflict and promote world unity.

This book had been considered a goddess send, for it provided a direction for the people to follow and a strict new path for those who had survived the disaster. The new controllers gave

this guiding manuscript to the survivors of their ruined planet by instituting a cult like gathering and instructing the people through short fables as to the proper ways to proceed in their new lives. It was a feeble attempt to bring a new direction and meaning to their lives but the people had clung to it for in the beginning, it was the only stabilizing force in their lives.

Years passed, and as the population grew, more and more of the younger ones were indoctrinated in the teachings of the Book of Ways. Since the integration of this text into the normads' lives and the start of the silence more than a century ago, individual thinking and discussion had been held in check by the drugs that were routinely given to the surviving population. Creative thought was also discouraged to the point of being almost forbidden.

After the Book of Ways was firmly established as the 'one correct path', the people followed its rules blindly. Their allegiance to this path was enhanced since the people had little individual will of their own because of the drugs. After the path was set to encourage order and cooperation, the controllers, who by that time were solely the androids, eventually started building small villages for the survivors to occupy and populate. These villages began cropping up in random places across their barren, sparse, new world. After the androids had completed the needed modifications to their recovering world they rounded up all the surviving humans herding them into the newly constructed settlements, encouraging them to make their homes there. These rural communities were strategically placed far enough apart to prohibit easy contact between the inhabitants. No one truly knows why, but some speculate that the controllers did so to prevent the spread of diseases among the fragile remaining population. In the beginning, one clan occupied each new village. These new villagers were loosely related by 'blood ties', which encouraged a feeling of family among those occupying the settlements. The idea was to engender new bonds

of trust in each clan and promote a spirit of cooperation with the aim of starting a new population.

Since the seasons were eradicated after the disaster, the people are moved from village to village on a preset schedule determined exclusively by the Book of Ways. It is said that things were structured this way also to promote and secure the ties within each family. The people vacate their old villages and then march and colonize new ones approximately every ten years. Still, compared to the Before Time, their world is now barren, almost void of human inhabitation.

About a year ago, shortly after the androids stopped coming around, Resha met Katina. Her stories made Resha remember that she was one of the few old ones left who learned how to speak and think as a child, so she began her journey back to what she remembered as normalcy. She started this symbolic voyage by teaching herself to talk again and then began to speak to the others of her clan. Resha's new conversations inspired those around her who knew of the Before Time to also start to speak, and a new language started to emerge and develop. She soon discovered that the younger ones who had never learned to talk were eager to learn, and their desire for knowledge soon surpassed most of the older ones who had survived. After the dialogue began, a few of the younger ones actively sought out teachers to instruct them. New words soon took the place of the words that her people had forgotten in their old forms. This budding innovative language is now called 'New Speak'.

After the Book of Ways was introduced, the people spent so much time following its directives that they almost lost their creative capabilities. The prescribed drugs had depressed their spirits and prevented most from realizing, developing, or voicing their feelings and thoughts during this last century.

Resha was one of the first to start speaking again. Even today, more than a year later, she's still unaccustomed to thinking and talking after so many decades of silence. Fortunately, Resha does not give up easily, and she has been progressively recovering her mind and voice since her discussions with Katina a year ago.

A short while back, Swallow came to Resha, asking about how the people became who they are. Above all Swallow wants Resha's perspective because Resha is the oldest woman in her clan. In an attempt to minimize unwanted attention, Resha and Swallow have decided to meet outside of their village to talk in privacy. For their first scheduled meeting, the two women have arranged a get-together about three miles (or two kilanss in New Speak) outside the borders of their village.

*And so the old world ends and a new one.
rises, trying not to re-create its own past*

1

The Reunion

As Resha clears her throat to begin her story, Swallow stretches out and leans back on her elbows and nestles in to get more comfortable. It's mid-morning, and a rare gentle breeze of arid air is blowing across Swallow's face, dancing with a loose strand of her flaxen hair. Mesmerized by the movement of Resha's mouth while she carefully pronounces her words, Swallow secretly smiles, fascinated by the sounds echoing in her ears.

In all of Swallow's ninety-two years, she has not heard anyone speak more than a few words at a time. She can barely contain her excitement as she eagerly anticipates Resha's coming story. Before Resha begins her tale, she tilts her head and gazes into Swallow eyes inquiring. "I look at you, and you remind me of myself when I was your age. Are we closely related? You know, are any of your genes direct descendants of mine?"

The light flickering through the stirring leaves of the ancient tree harboring their meeting place illuminates the confusion dancing on the younger woman's face. "Yes, my genes are from your great, great, great, second cousin on my mother's side but I thought you knew that."

"Ah yes, you're right. I remember now. I believe you told me this when we first met and I mentioned to you that we might be related somehow. Forgive me, for I'm still a bit fuzzy because of the effect of the drugs. After all I've been on them much longer than you have. Now back to my story.

“Let me start with my awakening at the beginning of this last year, the year of our Lady 161 a.t.d. meaning ‘after disaster,’ or the year of our Lord 2393 A.D., as it was known in my youth. At the end of this past year, it had seemed to me like a good time to die. I had spent a bit over one hundred and sixty-seven years as a member of this family, and I was one of the few survivors born in the Before Time.

“I decided last year that it was a good year to die because I was tired, and the week before, I had lost my last baby tooth. This seemed like an omen of some sort, although I hadn’t used that tooth for a very long time, as all my teeth had been lost during the disaster and had to be synthetically re-grown last century. At that time, I was given a new lease on life. These new teeth, which I called my baby teeth, were designed to replace themselves as they wore out. My other teeth had been successfully replaced long ago, yet this last survivor refused to give way till last year.

“It’s a shame to say that despite the vast changes to our world, I haven’t seen many radical changes in human behavior during my time on this planet, but during the last one hundred years things seem to have grown increasingly more stagnant. That fact only left me increasingly more tired of all this nonsense. Yet it did reinforce my belief in the words of the prophets from the year 2070, who foretold of the end and the great losses to come.

“That is, of course, if I remember and believe in the validity of teachings that had passed on their tales. Unfortunately, I can’t be certain of this, since slightly more than a century and a half after their words were spoken, the silence descended on our world. During the reign of computers all but a sparse few of the written records were ferreted out and systematically eradicate and destroyed. As a result, since most of human knowledge before computers was

never accurately transferred to digital storage much of our earlier data was lost. To complicate matters the methods of storing data kept changing and it became an impossible task to transfer all the data each time the mode of storage was updated. This only left all the digital data passed on at best incomplete. I believe the profits' teachings were especially vulnerable because their words were considered frivolous and shortly after they surfaced spreading their word, they had been killed for heresy. As there were many rapid changes during that time especially after our technology failed and there was no written record of their teachings, they were soon forgotten by most. This fact alone leaves me questioning my own memories because I have no written proof of this foretelling and from 2263 on, our people have blindly followed the Book of Ways which adamantly denies their teachings.

“About two centuries before I was born, the incidents that led up to the disaster and all the rapid changes of the Before Time, seemed good and new. There was much excitement about the new equality and freedom because of the new elite's budding and rapidly growing technology. This brought a mix of anticipation and fear in some, as change always did. Yet most of our ancestors adapted very quickly. It seemed almost too quickly.

“By that time, the throwaway society had spread into every corner of the world and quickly became the new fashion. In the two centuries preceding the disaster, the money and power this new technology bestowed on many, became the solitary focus of the elite in their world. Early on, and because of this singular focus on money, greed had set in. Back when the new technology was first developed, only a few abused the power it bestowed on them and as it became the norm, many enjoyed its conveniences. However, few fully recognized the responsibilities the use of this new technology conveyed on us all. Most profited from it, but as always, some used its tools to exploit others and amass great wealth.”

Quietly, Resha looks down into the dirt for a few moments, as if to gather her thoughts and then raising her gaze to meet Swallow's, she continues. A look of amused confusion skirts across Swallow's face as Resha resumes her story.

“That's when the elite first came to power, and this is why I must tell you, my story. I want to pass on my knowledge to you so that someone knows about our past, just in case something happens to me. I feel better sharing my experiences for I feel that may be our only chance of avoiding some of the same mistaken paths our ancestors traveled down. Maybe if enough people know an alternate perspective, we can do things a bit differently.”

Suddenly saddened by the thought that Resha might die, Swallow severs her locked gaze with Resha and looks down at her hands tightly laced together in her lap. As her feelings almost overwhelm her, she sits up and grasps a stick lying on the ground next to her to distract herself. As she crosses her legs in front of her, she begins drawing lines in the soil between her and Resha, absentmindedly practicing some of the letters she has already learned to scribe.

“Ma'ama, what do you want of me?” Swallow says.

“Swallow, all I ask of you, is that you listen and remember as best as you can.” Resha momentarily places her hand on top of Swallow's holding the stick, and then, as if Swallow's hand's aflame, she quickly removes it.

Swallow hesitates, before looking up to return Resha's gaze smiling. The connection she feels with this woman is uncanny and almost takes her breath away. She raises her left eyebrow while watching Resha briefly lies down to stretch in the warm rosy dust letting it caress her

supple body. This tranquil movement distracts Swallow from her writing, and out of the corner of her eye, she watches every gesture of Resha's well-muscled frame, sighing to herself.

After stretching in the dirt, Resha sits up again and makes a feeble attempt to dust herself off as Swallow returns the stick to its resting place on the ground beside her.

“Last year, I felt as if I had done all I was supposed to do in my life, at least thrice over, and I had no desire to face it all a fourth time through. That year, a new cycle had begun. The androids again herded our clan together—and others from villages like ours, who were once city dwellers—to return us to what was left of the old ghettos where we had been born. In the half century directly after the disaster, this migration was considered critical so that the ancestors of the city dwellers would conceive the new members of their families in their rightful birthplaces.

“The Book of Ways tells us we must always travel back to the place of our family's birth, at least once every cycle. Since the androids settled us in villages this had usually happened at the beginning of a birthing time. However, since most of the cities had all but disappeared over a century ago, and now their remnants are almost gone; this tradition has lost its favor in many of the young one's eyes. And so, I chose like many others do now, not to make that journey.

“I have not returned to the city since the end of the cycle before last, over thirty-six years ago. During that last time, those in our clan who chose not to visit the cities were relocated early to our new village. The birthing time and changing villages usually don't coincide so it was just happenstance that it all occurred this way.”

Resha pauses again to formulate her thoughts wondering about things she's not yet prepared to share with Swallow. She's not trying to be withholding, but Resha's not sure if Swallow is ready to hear all of her inner thoughts, quite yet. If she reveals too much too soon, the

truth might be extremely harsh for Swallow to know. Therefore, until she's relayed what she has witnessed these past centuries, she will need to be cautious about speaking of her speculations and suspicions. After all, they are only her beliefs; she has no tangible proof to confirm her thoughts and therefore doesn't want to burden Swallow.

Besides, at my age, I've begun to wonder if this traveling to the cities even has a purpose or if it's just another needless task for us all to survive. If we make it through the journey, it means we are worthy, and if not, too bad. It seems the Book of Ways may have been written by taskmasters just to keep us busy and provide a purpose. After all, when we are busy following the Book of Ways, it does make it easier for us to be controlled.

“Maybe I was just feeling this way last year—about dying, I mean—because in preparation for our trek to our new village, the shots had started once again. At the last two physicals before the birthing time, the hormone supplements were also given. Before that time, I hadn't been heavily medicated for the past few years. This might have left me being extra sensitive to the drugs' effects.”

I still wonder why they are not more secretive about giving us these supplements. After all, since what we eat and drink is so tightly controlled, they could easily slip them into our food without our even knowing it. I also wonder why there is such a big fuss around the giving of these shots and all the preparations for the new births, since this happens every cycle.

Then I remember my age and that I have been through this many times before. I realize there are those for whom this is their first time. These young ones are still learning the process of the Book of Ways. Upon remembering this, I chuckle to myself as I recognize how trivial most of us have become and how convinced we are, that the Book of Ways is the only way.

After pausing to smile at Swallow, Resha once more begins relaying her tale. “The Book of Ways tells us that we are now given shots called hormones to enable the maximum number of births for our clan, but I question why they are then wasting these shots on me and others like me.

“Having to get these shots only makes me ill-tempered and cranky, and I wonder if they affect others this way also. Maybe it’s something in the shots, or maybe it is just because my body has long since been used up for birthing. Besides I have always found mating with men barbaric, and nowadays I deliberately avoid the mating day when it comes. The day preceding and two days after this ceremonial day, those not wishing to take part in the mating festival with the men leave the village with the young. During this last cycle, it seemed that many, many more young women chose to accompany my group on our trek, than in times before.

“Since now the males can be impregnated and carry the young of other males, this does not seem to seriously affect the number of births. Maybe it’s just time for the men to share in the wonders of birth. I know you don’t remember the birthing practice of the Before Time, but their old mating ritual is very unlike our present practices.”

Resha pauses for a few moments, contemplating.

Anyway, at my age, I now suspect that our population is being controlled and that each clan is only allowed to give rise to a certain number of offspring each cycle. So let the men take their turn at being the ones who bear the responsibility of suckling this next generation.

“At the biyearly exams, our people are given other shots besides the hormones. I have recently begun to question if the controllers put something in all of our shots that’s supposed to make us forget ever having received these inoculations before. If they are using drugs to make us

all forget and remain compliant, it seems as if they may be losing their grip on me, or maybe the controllers finally feel that I'm no longer a threat at my age and have lessened my dosage. Who knows?

“For many years now, my memories of what has been done to us have stayed with me, and now with the drugs finally wearing off, I have begun to recall quite a bit of my past. As the frequency of shots has dwindled over the past few years, all sorts of memories have started to come back to me.”

Swallow touches Resha's arm to get her attention before she speaks. “Resha, are you alright? This part seems to be disturbing to you.”

“I'm all right, my dear. It's just been so long, and I'm impatient to get it all out. Since my mind is still somewhat clouded by the drugs, it's sometimes difficult for me to remember. Also, since I'm one of only a few people left who have even known anything of the Before Time and most have known only the Book of Ways, you must understand that these are solely my thoughts and not give them too much credence. I know there is no one in our clan of one hundred and eighty-nine who is even near my age, and it seemed until now, with your queries, none of the younger ones perceived that they may have a choice, never mind questioning ‘the Ways’.

“Since we have little contact with the other clans except through chance meetings when we exchange villages or occasionally during our birthing gathering, my chances of encountering other old ones who might validate my memories of the Before Time have been limited, so I'm anxious that I might forget important information that I feel I must tell you. After all, in the past, the only chances I have had to encounter and talk to any my age about these things has been

when we migrate to a new village, which is roughly every ten ials—or years, as they used to be called. All this is as it's decried in the Book of Ways.”

Stirring Swallow interrupts. “Ma’ama, would you mind if we walk a bit while we talk? I promised myself I’d hike into the low hills to the north today to explore.”

“That would be fine, Swallow.” Getting on her feet first, Resha offers a hand to Swallow.

When Swallow is up, the young woman puts her arm around Resha’s shoulders as a guide for her to set a comfortable pace for them both. They walk in silence together for a few steps before Resha speaks again.

“I have had but one other opening for such a conversation in this last cycle of thirty-five years. This has limited my talks with anyone around my age who remembers the Before Time. Over the past century and a half, it has been especially difficult since talking has been frowned upon, and sharing ideas has been almost nonexistent. That’s why I was so surprised for you, such a youngster, to ask of such things.”

Swallow smiles as if to encourage Resha to continue, but having been trained to hold her tongue, she utters nothing.

“You know, talking like this does aid me in recalling my past. The only other I have discussed some of this with, is Rada. Well, her given name was Rada. Her friends just called her Katina. Do you know that since the end of the Before Time, to change your name like that is considered just short of sacrilege? After all, to deny your given name, the one assigned to you at your orientation into the Ways, was unheard of in my younger days.”

Resha clears her throat and then continues. “My chance meeting with Katina was only a year ago, and in all my years, I’ve never met anyone else, who so openly defied the Ways.”

Thinking about Katina, Resha briefly stops, turning to look back at the spreading branches of their shade tree standing behind them in the distance. Both women stand for a moment and look at that one lone tree. Swallow, sensing Resha’s isolation, puts her arm around Resha’s shoulders hugging her and then joins her gazing intently at their old friend in the distance.

Resha looks up admiring Swallow’s profile. *She looks very striking, but she’s strong like me. I think I have made a good choice in passing on my story to her. This arrangement may just work out yet.* “You know, there are so few of those old trees left in our world.” Resha says as her voice dies away and falters in the parched air. Almost in a whisper, she continues “I remember reading during my childhood studies that in the early Before Time, there used to be thousands of great protected groves of similar trees called forests.” Resha sighs. “Even though I never knew them in my lifetime, somehow, there is a sadness in my heart for them all.”

The tree’s massive, leafy branches mask two of their world’s three blue suns so only a solitary sun is now visible. Although it is not the color of the sun Resha knew in her youth, it carries with it a flash of old memories she’d nearly forgotten until now. *Just more things for me to pass on.*

“So where should I really start my story?” Resha looks down then raises her eyes to meet Swallow’s, searching them for understanding. She senses the clear warm aqua-blue of Swallow’s eyes reaching inside her. *Maybe my best place to start here would be with Katina and my first lucid recollections and remembrances of the Before Time.*

Swallow, trapped by Resha's isolation, is unsure how to respond but finally asks, "Would you mind if we continue our walk as you relay to me your time with Katina?"

Turning toward the direction of the hills, Resha looks away from their tree. She hesitates, nodding as she takes her first step, leaving their tree behind, which physically signifies the beginning of their long figurative journey together into the past. Swallow follows the older woman's lead as they head toward the coffee-colored hills to the north, and Resha begins this part of her tale.

*'The telling of false tales can rattle the
brain as well as swell the tongue.'*

Lifting the Fog

At the start listening to Katina, at best, was confusing to me. She simply noted my confusion and responded by saying that she remembered all, even the Before Time. Back then, I recoiled slightly from that quiet statement, for to expose others to such sacrilege was, to me considered abusive. Yet my curiosity prevented me from withdrawing completely. Like a wildcat, fearful yet tamed by hunger, I knew I had to discover more.

“My talks with Katina then began to stir the pot of my own memories. Our talks brought to mind images that shed light into the closed-up old attic in my head. These images aided my memories crippled keeper in cleaning away the cobwebs that had held my thoughts captive for the past century and a half. In the beginning, clearly remembering seemed an impossible task to accomplish. At first, only mixed bits and pieces would stay in my drug-soaked mind that was eroding away all my crisp recollections.

“Before my encounter with Katina, when I did remember, I only tried to recall the good things from my past. Like what it felt like to be young and beautiful—many had said I was, you know—and the exceptional moments of my earlier life.

“In my youth, there was much overcrowding and little time to one’s self. Because of the overpopulation, peace and silence were unknown in my world. Too many people and too much conflict left no room for tranquility. I can distinctly recall the first time I ever heard silence. It was when I was thirty-eight, after the second great die-off had taken its toll.”

Stopping for a moment, Resha looks at Swallow, who is staring down at their vanishing footprints in the sand. Moments later, Swallow drops her arm from Resha's shoulders and lifts her head gazing directly into Resha's eyes. The look on Swallow's face is that of a trusted companion, not a youngster or apprentice. Standing there this is Resha's first glimpses the real Swallow and she seems wise beyond her years. Unconsciously responding to this perception Resha subtly raises her left eyebrow in silent admiration. "Well, I suppose you don't really hear silence, but just the same—you know what I mean. Of course, my not knowing silence must be difficult for you to imagine, since you grew up with silence all around you and it's all you have ever known."

Swallow's only response is a wisp of a smile.

"Well anyway, back to Rada—I mean Katina, of course."

As the two women turn and slowly continue their walk, Swallow shifts her arm to around Resha's waist. This time, the two women are in sync stepping forward together.

"As I listened to Katina a year ago, it seemed to me that she appeared to have full recollection of the past, and since my clan wasn't due to report to our new home for five days, I used my influence to stay and camp with Katina's group for three of those days.

"I was drawn to Katina like a mistreated pup that, over time and repeated abuse, grows to be completely loyal to its abusive owner. Although Katina was by no means really abusive to me, at that time, I felt as if she might be causing me great harm. However, despite these disturbing warning feelings, I continued to come to her gatherings for those three nights, eventually sharing my stories and eagerly listening to hers....

“Each night, as we all sat around the dwindling fire, Katina talked quietly, repeating the same things over and over to those of us compelled by our own curiosity or boredom to listen. Looking at the sea of faces surrounding me, I slowly realized only a few showed even the slightest signs of understanding Katina’s tale, and none seemed to comprehend to the extent that I did. Most in the group were young and just thought of Katina’s stories as an entertaining way to pass time. The older ones present seemed to be drowning in a collective sea, dulled by their own confusion, pain, and the silence of their pasts. Sitting there, it seemed that the abuse and trauma of the last century had dulled even the sharpest of their senses. My awareness and the memories of my past allowed me to be able to understand, and my own recollections of the past were what drove me to finally respond to Katina’s words.

“By the middle of the second night I could no longer keep quiet so I looked at Katina and whispered, ‘Yes, I do remember the Before Time.’ At first, Katina seemed to pay no heed to me and continued on. Clearly, she hadn’t heard me or possibly, she hadn’t grasped the meaning of my words, so I repeated myself, louder this time, saying, ‘Yes, I do remember the Before Time.’

“Suddenly Katina stopped talking and stared back at me as if a haunted phantom had mysteriously appeared. I could’ve sworn a look of fear mixed with confusion fleetingly danced across her face which was followed by a cog in her mind slowly slipping into place as she hesitantly met my gaze and smiled. For a few minutes, the deafening silence between us seemed almost smothering as I stared back into her clear blue eyes in silence. I was confused but I swore that I might be witnessing a flame of pure pain and recognition before her delight stamped out that feeling and the blaze of suppressed pain hiding behind it. In response, I simply returned her smile. ..

.. “It wondered how long, if ever, it had been since she had experience pure joy or if I had

been mistaken about her earlier expression. A tear welled up in her right eye as Katina reached out for me to take her hand. I, spellbound, got up and moved to sit closer to her. At first, I attempted to sit next to her, until she put up her hand to stop me. ‘No, you must sit across from me so that I may read your eyes, your face,’ she said. ‘I must know if I’m losing you or my place so that I may alter my story so that you may understand.’”

Resha stops talking turning towards Swallow pondering what she’s about to say next. All the while she’s peering directly into Swallow’s clear aqua-blue eyes trying to discern what’s making her hesitate. With one foot in the past, it suddenly comes to her. *Her eyes remind me somewhat of Katina’s, only Swallow’s have a suggestion of green, are a touch more expressive, and are less clouded over by these past two centuries of pain and horror.*

Innocence can be a positive thing; it can allow the soul soar unhindered allowing hope to fly free and grow. It feels to those surrounding the innocent as if they are blessed and bathed in a saintly glow. Oh, to regain my innocence once more and to be blind again to all the pain of the past centuries. Yet Resha’s fully aware that this is all an escape and once innocence is lost it is gone forever. For me the only path to Joy is to deal with my past painful memories fully.

“You see, I had realized by then that although Katina considered herself their teacher, none of her students, up until our meeting, could fully empathize with her or understand what had happened, which prevented them from grasping the full depth of her stories. It had taken a reflection of herself, which she saw in me to truly reach her. If the others had thought anything of her at all, she was but an impetuous old woman who entertained them and helped to pass the time. So exasperated, Katina had just kept repeating the same words each night with the

slimmest hope that she would eventually touch at least one of them or by rare chance find someone like me who could remember and exchange stories.”

For a moment, Swallow and Resha stare at each other in silence. Then Swallow breaks the mood by grinning and the sparkle in her eyes captivates Resha, nearly taking her breath away. “Please continue,” Swallow says.

Clearing her throat Resha begins once more. “That third night, Katina and I got little sleep. After the others bedded down around the red-hot coals of the fire, we talked on into the night until dawn. We spoke of forbidden things, like herbs, how rare they had become toward the end of the Before Time. And how they had almost disappeared after the disaster happened. We both agreed that they were probably still around, but with the scarcity of the controllers the extinction of the elite, and the immense changes to the planet, where they had been hidden along with the well kept secrets of their origins and uses, most likely would not be discovered soon, if ever.” Suddenly, Resha shakes her head and grows silent for a few moments.

At this point in the story Swallow’s staring towards the hill in the distance.

Looking at her Resha recalls a touching image of Katina and to redirect the potent feelings this image has evoked she looks down and shakes her head, quickly adding, “And after all, if they were forgotten by all others and will not be discovered by us, those who remember, who will even question and seek them out? Who else will even be interested in where these herbs are hidden and their uses, if not us?”

“Katina and I also briefly talked of observing the many unnatural changes since the end of the Before Time and recalled the promises unfulfilled by those who were in political power back then... and as our crimson moon crept across the deep cobalt night sky toward home, we

continued on about the elite's broken promises of the beginnings of a new world. There were promises of new freedoms back then, just before it fell apart, but the elite were unable to relax and were still trying to maximize their profits by controlling everything. Shortly prior to the end of the Before Time, when the guarantees made by the elite failed to materialize, the super- rich had retreated into hiding in order to protect themselves from the devastation that their greed eventually had caused. As a last-ditch effort to right their wrongs in the decades leading up to the disaster, they built and sent out androids to take control of, and manage the common people. Over time, the common people had nicknamed the elite along with their androids, the controllers.

“Katina and I both recalled the uprising of those androids and the gradual extinction of the elite because of, or maybe in spite of, those same androids. I think by that time, maybe even the androids realized that the system that had been created over the centuries by the elite was unbalanced and would not sustain itself.

“Shortly after that discussion with Katina, our talk dropped off into silence, and in that calm, one of the fellows sleeping around the fire stirred and uttered the words *purple potatoes* in his sleep. Mildly startled by this strange statement, Katina and I looked at each other in astonishment and began giggling like children. Once our laughter started to escape, we couldn't seem to contain it, so we stretched out our glee to enjoy it to the fullest. Our half-hushed merriment softly echoed so eerily in the sleeping camp that the hair on the back of my neck stood up. But to hear and share in laughter again after it being absent for so long had felt so good, that Katina and I shared as much mirth as possible on into that early morning. After our outburst of laughter, we intertwined comical stories from our own past memories into our serious discussions of what we had witnessed, which made the painful memories easier to bear.

“Immediately following the waning of our first attack of glee, we next discussed, in sadness, the repetitiveness of our artificially prolonged lives for the past one hundred years in the care of these same androids. Death wasn’t an option for us; we weren’t allowed to die, for in the end, the elite’s guilt had prompted them right before their deaths to instruct their androids to preserve at all costs, any humans who survived.

“These unimaginative androids, who lacked emotion and feeling, could only do as they were told. We couldn’t blame them for their insensitivity, for they were only reflections of those who had created them, and over and over again they had proved this by continually repeating the thoughtlessness and lack of caring for the rest of humanity that they had seen in their creators.

“Just then, as if to break this depressing spell, Katina and I shook our heads and laughed again. It was a bitter laugh this time, because in looking back, we were both fully aware of the foolhardiness of the elite and their creations, the androids, especially since we now knew from our own experience the damage that had come from the elite’s folly and greedy quest focused solely on gaining additional wealth and power.

“Katina and I then paused in silence, tightly bound together by our shared thoughts and emotions. It was no wonder there was no new laughter. In that instant, we both wordlessly realized that in order to laugh, one had to be taught to play and view things with irony. But who could teach laughter to the humans now surrounding us, when everything was so sterile and tightly controlled by these humorless nonhuman controllers? In the end, we couldn’t blame the androids, for they were created by humans who bordered on being nonhuman themselves. The truest expression of this was the androids’ inability to connect and empathize with those they directed and cared for. They were so much like the elite in all aspects that the common person

who they had been programmed to be concerned about wasn't even aware when the last of the elite died quietly of an unknown illness under the care of those they had created.

“Anyhow, I wander from my story. My dear girl, you look a bit bothered. Is there something you would like to ask me?”

“No, not quite yet, Ma'ama. Maybe later.” A flicker of what Swallow perceives as anger fleetingly crosses Resha's face, causing Swallow to hesitate. “I hope you do not mind me calling you that. It seems fitting to me, and I enjoy the sweet taste it brings to my mouth.”

“Swallow please just call me Resha, and my dear I don't mind too much but it's hard for me to hear, because I have had no blood family of my own. Most of my life, I have been drugged, and I have wandered alone in the dark for so long that it feels as if I've almost lost track of all time. You see, I still feel young, as if you are not only my surrogate offspring but also my partner and friend. Okay. On then.”

In response, Swallow half smiles. Not knowing quite what to say she's clearly touched by Resha's statement, so she keeps silent and links arms with her as they continue on their trek.

“As I was saying, Katina and I slept very little that night, and when the others arose the next morning under the violet light of the rising sun, we smiled to greet them at the ashen coals of our dwindling campfire. Soon after they woke, one young woman with closely cropped mauve colored hair rose and stirred the dying coals to new flames, so she could cook breakfast and Katina and I were offered a meager share. Not having much of an appetite that morning, Katina pulled me aside to tell me how much she had enjoyed meeting someone who could remember the Before Time. One of the others who, as Katina would say, ‘at least possessed half a brain’ called Katina's name, trying to gain her favor and get her to rejoin the group. She, in turn, pulled me

farther away. At that point, I shook my head and thanked her for her time, the kind comments, and the stories we had shared. I then asked if our paths might cross in the future. The light in her eyes slowly ebbed and dwindled as she looked down and shook her head in doubt.

“I would like to say yes or that at least there is a chance, but to my recollection, in all my years of storytelling, besides the familiar eyes of my own clan members, I have not ever seen eyes in a familiar face reflecting my campfire more than once.”

“Sadness sat heavy on my heart as I half-smiled in return and said, ‘Well, I guess there’s always hope.’ At that time, I didn’t want to fully unshackle and release the small glimmer of promise of a future reunion that attempted to set seed in my heart and mind.

“‘Yes, there is always hope,’ she echoed flatly as the radiance departed from her face. ‘Anyway, we still have our memories. I will take mine to my grave before I forget you, and I promise I will always keep hope alive of a future reunion.’

“I gently took her hand before I told her, ‘And I will vow to do the same,’ although silently, I had to admit to myself that I wasn’t overly optimistic about keeping this vow, for by this time in my life, I knew the chances were against me seeing Katina again. We then clasped hands as we briefly and awkwardly hugged to finish our good-byes. I walked away without turning back so that Katina would not see her pain reflected in my eyes.

“After rejoining my clan that morning, we began preparations for leaving camp and heading to our new home. We set out as the last of the three suns had barely cleared the horizon.

“After four days of uneventful travel, we entered our new village. Upon arriving there, I was struck by something vaguely familiar about this new place. When we consulted the village’s

record of families and I discovered it was Katina's old village, I was only mildly surprised by this finding. It was almost as if, for me, the scent of Katina still lingered in the air to refresh my newly seeded memories of our talks. This made me wonder if there might be a chance that Katina might've left something behind that I might find and keep as a tangible reminder of what we had shared, so I paid close attention as we cleaned the huts and common areas.

“I was disappointed when we found nothing, although I just knew if I was diligent and waited, I would eventually discover something to hold as a keepsake to use to rekindle my time with Katina. Finding a memento that could also help solidify and reinforce my new memories of the Before Time and the stories Katina and I had shared was important to me.”

By that time, Resha and Swallow were approaching the edge of the foothills so Resha slows her pace to pause. “May I have a little water, my dear?”

Silently, Swallow removes the water skin from her pack handing it to Resha.

After drinking, Resha hands the skin back and says, “I think I'll head back to our village to allow you your leisure to explore the hills on your own. We can meet again next week, and I will continue my story, if that is alright with you.”

Swallow nods her approval while she re-straps the skin to her pack. She then stands there watching Resha swiftly retrace their footsteps till she's almost out of site. While watching Resha leave, Swallow ponders her fondness for this woman, wondering where it will lead. Then she turns slowly and starts her ascent into the low-lying hills, thinking of nothing but her footsteps in the soft, chocolaty dirt, caressing her feet with its warmth and discoloring her skin.

'My true trodden path is chosen and not marked by faint footsteps from my past.'

Alone Again

After leaving Swallow, Resha travels at a comfortable pace and soon her village is in sight. Arriving on its outskirts about an hour before her evening meal she notices the skies are starting to gray and darken. Looking to the west, she sees an indigo blush where the first of their world's three suns have already set. Minutes later with the second sun already dipping below the horizon, she relaxes for a moment to gazes at the last sun hanging in the sky and waits till it too, surrenders to the night. Standing there she catches a glimpse of a burgundy flash in the silent evening as the last sun barely kisses the rosy ground in the pursuit of its comrades.

Soon it will be dark.

During this time of early evening most of their pale ghostly moon falls just below the horizon, where it takes on a crimson hue as it begins to rise again into the deep cobalt-blue night sky. Resha knows that soon the apparitions of the moon's neighboring emerald-green stars will become visible against the dark backdrop to haunt the surrounding night sky. The top crest of the rising moon is barely peeking above the horizon as she sets foot in her village.

Resha heads directly for her hut immediately aware that she dearly misses Swallow's shielding presence. This newfound feeling surprises her. As she crosses the threshold of her hut, she becomes a bit more secure, but for some reason, she still feels uneasy, restless, and not her

usual tranquil self. Pacing the open floor plan of her living room she's suddenly driven to stop to study its unchanged appearance.

Although her home is not large, it normally feels roomy. This night, it does not. She looks around again, as if to ferret out the cause of her mood. Nothing in particular catches her eye.

I don't understand why I'm so uneasy. Nothing has changed.

The only furnishings in her front room are a bench next to the fire pit and a small chair in the corner. Furniture is sparse in her world, and her hut's arrangement is typical of most dwellings in her village.

Lately the gray synthetic wood-like material that is used to build their furnishings has been particularly scarce and hard to get so she has come to appreciate it a bit more. In the past, their furniture had always been made and left behind by the controllers. Now with the androids coming around less frequently new furnishings were harder to come by, and her clan has learned to make do with what they already have.

Pausing to look up at the night sky through the large open skylight in her ceiling, Resha finds that no matter how hard she tries she's unable to sit still. Shaking her head she walks into her bedroom and even though this room is small, in the past year, she has never felt cramped by her sleeping quarters. It's meager and barely large enough to hold her bed and night table but in the past, it has always felt cozy to her. Her hut's sparse furnishings and view of the early evening sky through her open ceiling have always added to her home's illusion of spaciousness, which has made her feel at ease, but for some reason tonight is different..

Why am I so tense? Nothing has changed and there is no reason for my edginess, except that I have now aligned myself more strongly with Swallow. Maybe it's just the readjustment of my boundaries with the rest of my clan that's bothering me.

Still, for the first time since living in this village, she feels almost helpless and ensnared by her surroundings. She tries her best to compose herself, but tonight the razor-sharp edge of her nerves will not be blunted.

Coaching herself in a whisper, she says, "It's less than an hour till dinner. Just cool yourself down and wait."

In the past she has used this self-talk as a meditation when strong emotions were trying to gain unwanted control over her but tonight, her soft voice echoes into the emptiness of her living room and is nearly swallowed up by her solitude. Her voice only reverberates off the walls of this empty room and when her words return to her, the sound of her own voice seems like that of a stranger. This false perception only increases her edginess. Unfortunately, distortion has her firmly in its grip.

The voice in my head is too full of emotion to be my usual soft, serene voice.

"Well, maybe I should go for another walk just to kill time. Or even though it is not my turn to help prepare our meal, maybe I will go pitch in."

This second option seems like the best choice for her because she then will be around others in her clan, which might soften her edgy mood. Resha soon leaves her hut heading in the direction of the eating area, hoping that company and a meal will quiet her nerves. *Maybe after I fill the emptiness in my stomach, I will at least be able to sleep somewhat peacefully this night.*

*'The meeting of two minds may sometimes bind two hearts,
but the meeting of two hearts always binds two minds.'*

Swallow's Trek

After Resha departs, Swallow heads directly into the hills where the warm, chocolaty earth caresses her naked feet. The dark dirt beneath her is soft and powdery and feels different from the rosy, sand that she and Resha had been sitting on under their favorite shade tree for most of the day.

Looking up at the incline of the first hill she stops abruptly, placing her pack on the ground and bends down to pick up a handful of this dirt in order to inspect it more closely. It's deep brown, but the color is not what makes this dirt feel different. As she examines it more closely, she can see and feel that it's softer to the touch, finer, and particles cling to the skin on her hand, unlike the sandy soil beneath their tree. Swallow, curiously, flings a handful of dirt into the air. As it falls to the earth, it leaves a wisp of a chocolaty trace lingering in front of her until the gentle breeze cooling her skin carries it away. *Yes, this is very unlike the desert soil I sat in earlier today.*

Before her talks with Resha, Swallow never considered such things as dirt. If she noticed the soil at all, it was only because it felt good under her feet. Picking up a second handful she inspects it more closely. At first glance, the dirt appears to be a uniform powdery chocolate brown, but as she looks closer, she can see that it's made up of many different particles.

She remembers the word Resha had used to refer to these pieces of soil when Swallow offhandedly called attention to the dirt on Resha's face during their morning story session.

Looking more closely at soil in her hand, she can see that some of the grains in her hand are almost black, while others are white and shiny. Some reflect the light and a small number of the dirt flecks are difficult to see, almost transparent. Looking closer still, she also notices that some are similar in color to the surrounding crystal towers.

I wonder where this dirt comes from. Maybe the crystal towers are related to the dirt like I'm related to Resha.

She dumps the handful and brushes her hand against her pants to remove any remaining traces of the soil. All sorts of wonders are opening up to her in this new world as the effects of the drugs she has been on for most of her life start to abate.

Feeling the urge to move on, she picks up her pack heading up the first hill, eager to see what's on the other side. Arriving at the top, she can make out the silhouettes of many similar hills fading off into the distance. They go on for much farther than she anticipated. Swallow focuses on one hilltop a few crests away that's much higher than the surrounding hills and quickly starts toward it. Hoping that at its pinnacle, she will be able to see much more beyond these present hills.

She picks up her pace and soon reaches the base of the highest hill, noticing as she starts her trek upward that the suns are slowly descending in the sky.

After this, I will need to turn back, or I'll not eat tonight.

Her stomach groans in protest at the first fleeting thought of missing dinner. In no time, she reaches the foot of the summit and proceeds to climb to the top with ease. There is just enough light left to clearly see beyond the hills. Gazing out at the terrain beyond, she discovers

that it flattens out again into another rosy plane dotted with brilliantly colored crystal towers and little else. This scene holds little interest for her, as it seems to fade endlessly into the horizon.

Just more of what I have already seen before.

Spinning around, attempting to scan the entire landscape in one glance she spots her village in the distance in the direction opposite of where she's been facing. Beyond that barely visible to the right, stands what appears to be the ruins of a city. There are several central structures still towering above the rest of the surrounding rubble which immediately catch her interest. From where she's standing to her, it all seems like an indistinct mass of debris.

I wonder what that looks like up close. With suns swiftly sinking, she shrugs and turns away. *I guess I had better start back.*

Swallow promptly retraces her footsteps down the hillside, heading in the direction of her village.

If I hurry, I still might make it back in time to get some dinner.

*'I followed the dust in the wind only to discover
my own footsteps being covered by the sand.'*

5

New Home

Although Resha hasn't seen much of Swallow during the past week, except for their brief encounters at meals, she's comforted by knowing Swallow's dwelling in the next hut. Intentionally keeping her distance from Swallow this week to allow herself room to explore the feelings she had experienced at their parting last week, Resha is baffled by this new feeling of dependence. Being shaken by this feeling she's taking this week to regain some composure and control over herself. After all, what if Swallow's mind-set isn't the same? What if she decides to stop their meetings? Resha feels it would not be wise to become too attached too quickly, just in case.

The week following their last story session passes quickly. Now, feeling more comfortable in her own skin again, this morning Resha wakes at sunrise and gets out of bed. Despite regaining her composure, she's eagerly looking forward to today's chat with Swallow. After dressing, she sits down on her bed, waiting for Swallow to come get her.

Resha's mind is still drifting in and out of the fog caused by the mandatory series of shots her clan had received almost a year ago, right before they moved to their new village. Yet something in her village's last relocation seemed a bit off to her, so she strains to recall her clan's earlier moves. Remembering earlier moves, she recalls that her clan received at least five different series of shots spread out over a year's time.

Funny... this last year, we only received our prescribed shots once and we haven't seen the androids since then.

Wondering what is going on, she considers the past few years, and remembers that her clan has only received their mandatory drugs once or twice a year, which is also unusual.

Could I have forgotten about receiving the other shots? Or maybe the androids just neglected to administer them?

While struggling against the seemingly impenetrable black mist that's blocking her memories, she fights to understand why this last move felt so different from her past moves. Drifting images float in and out of her mind as Resha tries desperately to clearly recall the details of earlier migrations. Finally, the shadows in her head start to fade, and she can distinctly remember a scene from a previous move ten years earlier. During that move, at least two dozen androids were present, preparing the people, administering the shots, and closely directing her people's transfer. She recalls that in the past, when her people migrated, the androids acted together like a well-oiled machine, and it took little time to relocate Resha's clan and settle them in their new village. In these images, she sees the androids supervising and directing her people's resettlements from beginning to end. In fact, many times, the androids remained a bit longer after the settlement of a new village to help her people adjust. Often, the controllers actually lent a hand with the larger, more complicated tasks, such as converting a few storage huts into living quarters or organizing and collecting new supplies, if such needs arose.

Yet when her people were moved last year, only two androids directed Resha's clan. They gave her people their inoculations and shortly thereafter disappeared. Her people had much less direction and were left unsupervised for most of the actual move.

I wonder what's going on.

Resha would have realized these differences earlier had she not been drugged. With her head somewhat clearing now, she speculates about why things changed so much during the last ten years. Now recalling that she has not seen much of the androids during the past few years, she again wonders where they're not around so much.

I will need to mention this change to Swallow.

Moments later, Swallow shows up right on schedule outside Resha's hut, and her knock interrupts Resha's thoughts.

"Who is it?" Resha asks certain it's Swallow.

Opening the door Swallow peeks in. Swallow walks in briefly pausing in the front room. "It's just me. Are you ready?" She always enjoys entering Resha's hut and hates to leave once she's there. It feels like home to her. Making her realize how much she misses living with another.

"I'm in the bedroom. Just come back here." Resha shouts from the bedroom.

Heading toward the bedroom, Swallow meanders through Resha's living room, admiring the countless touches of color Resha has used to decorate. Since many of these shades reflect their world's surrounding landscape it makes her feel as if she's outdoors and more at home. This feeling of being home is one of Swallow's favorite things about entering Resha's hut. Most of the accents are rosy and green like the colors of their desert floor and the sparse plants of their world. Within weeks of their first meeting, Resha taught Swallow how to dye fabrics. Swallow

loves the effect but thinks the process is too much trouble for her to bother. Besides, not decorating her hut gives her an excuse to always come to Resha's, which she dearly loves to do.

Gazing through the bedroom doorway, Swallow notices a new addition. It's a bed covering made of a color that reminds her of the pictures of the sky during the Before Time that she recently saw in a book Resha lent her. After seeing this bed covering, she's sure this is her new favorite color even though she doesn't know its name.

She leans up against the door jam and a warm smile spreads across Swallow's face. "What is that color, Resha?" she says, pointing at the bed. "I haven't seen something that shade before."

Resha smiles, as she looks down at her bedcover. "It's called sky blue; the color is similar to your eyes."

Swallow shyly looks at the floor. "It's very pretty." She quickly changes the subject. "How would one make a dye of that color?"

Running her hands across the bedspread Resha says, "I don't know. The only thing I've seen in our world that's similar is one of the crystal towers. I suppose if someone could grind a small piece of it finely enough, one could then make a dye from its powder.

"I found this bedcover on my last trip to our food storage bunker. It was tucked away in a corner, hidden under some things I had to move to get to the bookshelves so it must've been there for several decades." Resha holds up one corner. "Look how thick it is, it appears to be stuffed with some type of feathers that gives it added warmth. It was probably forgotten and left

behind by one of the elite, as far back as a century ago.”Resha rises, and walks toward Swallow, brushing past her into the living room.

Following Resha into the front room, Swallow’s soon standing at her side. As they head outside together, Swallow slips her arm into Resha’s saying, “I’m looking forward to today’s tale. If I remember correctly, today you will tell me of what happened after your meeting with Katina.”

Resha nods, and a few moments later, the two women are heading down the path leading to the shelter of their ancient shade tree. Its dawn and the three suns appear sapphire as they rise above the horizon with their combined light reflecting off the crystalline sands of the rosy desert floor. This illusion casts an indigo shadow over the whole scene. In the early morning half-light, Resha heads toward the dim outline of their tree, the nearest distinct shape visible on the horizon. As soon as they’re out of earshot of the village, she starts her tale.

“After my discussions with Katina, my senses perceived a new world, one bright with possibilities, so even though I was still in a drugged state, I began to wonder about our lives now compared to the Before Time. So after parting with Katina and arriving at our new village, I ended up secluding myself in my hut for many days to reflect on the changes that had occurred since the Before Time’s end.

“Five days passed quickly before I emerged from my self-imposed seclusion and still I continued to question many of the habits of our current lives. My talks with Katina had awakened my curiosity and after gaining a bit of clarity, I found new questions coming to my mind about our ways and the meaning of our existence. During these early days in our new village, as I was still somewhat under the influence of the drugs, strange questions drifted in and

out of my hazy mind. For example, why did we usually find the storage huts fully stocked with food and raw materials whenever we occupied a new village? And why, over the years, we had been trained to find our new monthly supplies located in bunkers usually about six and a half miles from each new village?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Resha, but I don’t understand the terms *miles* and *years*. What do these words mean?”

“No Swallow; it’s I who should apologize for sometimes I forget. Those are old terms from my childhood. My memory is especially bad after receiving the mandatory shots, and sometimes I get confused and go back to the words from my youth. Please let me explain.

“Years is an old term for our new word *ials*. Some words were ‘improved’ after the disaster to show that certain things had changed and to help usher in the new era. After our old sun had died and the cycle of our moon was altered by the addition of our three new suns, the length of a year changed slightly, so we called this new cycle an *ial* instead of a year to mark this change.

“The second word, *mile*, is a measure of distance akin to our word *kilanss*. A *kilanss* is roughly one and a half miles. However, that term was changed years before the disaster occurred. I was very young, so I don’t remember exactly when it was changed or why, but during that period, those in power decided it was time for our world to have a single global system of measurement to minimize conflict. In the century before this one, our world worked toward a unification of cultures and economies. During my childhood, our world leaders tried to bring together our systems of measurement as a movement to define the coming new era of a unified

worldwide economy. They felt that establishing new terms to replace the old could easily demarcate the changes and in time, make the new changes easier to accept.

“The word kilanss was chosen to replace my land’s term for miles. As I said, I was very young when this happened, but I had already learned my measurements, so sometimes I slip and use the word miles instead of kilanss. I’m sorry if my misspeaking has caused you confusion. I will try to be more careful in the future.”

“No worries. I was just wondering and now that I know what these words mean, it doesn’t matter if you use them in our future discussions, for I will understand.”

“Okay. Where did I leave off then?”

“I believe we were talking about our supplies and how they got to the bunkers, ma’am..., I mean Resha.”

Trying to hide a smile at Swallow’s slip, Resha quickly continues on. “Yes, that’s right. As I said, I was just beginning to settle into our new village after our move, but my head was still in a fog because of the drugs. At that time, so many questions flowed in and out of my brain. Who replenished our supplies? Where did they come from? Then, as I reflected on how we had survived the devastation, a flood of fresh new questions rose in my mind like the tides of the oceans I had known in the Before Time.”

Swallow raises her right eyebrow in confusion, reaching toward Resha to stop her once again. “Resha, what are tides and oceans?”

Resha looks down and shakes her head. “Again, sorry. That’s right. You don’t know the oceans, for they were gone before you were born. Please let me briefly explain. A long, long

time before the disaster happened, about three quarters of our world was covered in water. At that time, the land was in the form of what we then called continents, which were surrounded by water. Vast bodies of water were located in between the continents. The largest of these bodies of water, were called oceans.”

Raising both eyebrows, Swallow says almost imperceptibly, “I can’t imagine that much water. What happened to it all?”

“Please let me explain a few things before I get into that. Anyway, back then, the tides controlled the movement of the water in the oceans. These tides were directed somehow by the moon and its cycles. This interdependence was a complex matter that I must admit I don’t fully understand myself, but just like our moon it went through different phases and during these changes, she would appear differently in each night’s sky on a monthly cycle. All I can tell you about this today is that one of the movements of water in the oceans, its level or how much land it covered, was called tides and they were affected by the moon’s phases. Swallow I’m sorry that I can’t be more specific but since the oceans disappeared when I was very young, I don’t know if I ever fully understood, how it all worked. For right now, let me continue with today’s story and we can talk more about these differences at a future date if you wish. Once I have more fully researched the changes that occurred and understand how things worked in the before time better myself we can revisit this all again.

“Also, back when water was more plentiful, it was necessary for all living things to ingest a great deal of water to live. Drinking too much water from the oceans could make a person sick, because ocean water contained a substance called salt.

“Over that century’s time, because of pollution and our increasing population, water soon became our world’s most treasured commodity. In order for us all to have enough to survive, we began to take the salt out of the oceans so that we could drink their water. This, of course, had devastating long-term effects because of the enormously increasing population of humans. The most noticeable effect was that after a number of decades of consuming the water from our oceans, we were affecting the oceans’ reserves. Over time, the oceans began to shrink in size. Then, after the disaster, the placement of the three new suns, and decades of the suns’ intensified heat, the increase in temperature took the final toll on the water supplies. Due to a miscalculation the new suns had a synergistic effect on each other. So, when they were first ignited the heat was unbearable and much more intense than the scientist had planned. These higher temperatures eventually had devastating effects on the oceans, which began drying up all together. Of course, the decrease in water in the oceans then affected many of our major food sources, which for centuries the oceans had been providing.

“Since this all happened before we could produce synthetic food, our food sources then had to shift, and we became dependent more and more on using only the foods we produced on land. With overpopulation continuing to increase, the land available to produce food was also diminishing. Ultimately, we found ways to grow food artificially, but this artificial food lacked certain nutrients that were present in naturally grown food so over time these substitutes were less healthy for us humans.

“This reduction in food sources began to affect the wellbeing of the population and had many unforeseen and uncontrollable side effects. In an effort to combat some of these problems, supplements were developed to minimize the most harmful side effects. However, supplements were expensive, and in the beginning, most of the common people couldn’t afford them. When

those in power back then realized the devastating health effects and the potential threat of future food shortages, they developed a program to provide supplements to the masses. At that point, consuming pills to maintain health became our way of life. In the end, the reduction in healthy food sources and decreasing quantity of food caused those with power and money to start hoarding. When the masses finally started to go hungry, many fights broke out, and people began to kill each other just to get enough food to survive.

“The ultimate outcome of this all was massive starvation, and at that time many died because of this hoarding and the fighting it caused. Since by that time, overpopulation had become our world’s greatest problem, those in power did little to curb or control the outbreaks of violence. They justified not taking any immediate action by saying that the fighting was just a natural population check and implied that nothing they had done had contributed to the problem and it wasn’t their fault or responsibility. However, a few of the more vocal rebels began to question what was really going on and the underlying causes for all the ills of their time. Unfortunately, it was already too late, for the few small seeds of distrust that had previously been sown and left to fester, were now growing. Eventually, the populace realized how those in power were manipulating events to keep the people off balance and gain even more influence.

“A few years later, after a sufficient number of people had starved to death or died because of the suspected intentional spurred conflicts, the elite caught wind of the grumblings of criticism from the populace that were starting to surface. These complaints accused the elite of manipulating the fighting by pitting the common people against each other and because of this at some level they were responsible for all the death. It was said they were using the unrest to their advantage to keep the people at bay. To squelch these rumors; the elite swooped in and started the development and production of synthetic foods. Regrettably, by then, the distrust had already

spread, and most people assumed this action was just an attempt by the elite to appear to be saving the day by developing a new synthetic food source and supplying it to the starving masses.

“In no time, a rumor circulated that synthetic food had been developed decades earlier but hadn’t been implemented and had been kept hidden from the starving masses to help curb the growing population. Ultimately, the elite had moved too late because a rumored seed of distrust of those with power and money had already been firmly rooted in the masses’ mind and had grown beyond repair. This distrust, in the long run created a breach in communication that led to devastating future repercussions.

“Then, some decades later, when the elite informed the people that their sun was cooling, so much distrust had been bred from past lies that the people didn’t believe what the elite and their scientists were reporting. By that time Rebel groups had amassed enough power to hinder the development and installation of a new artificial sun that those in power were insisting was necessary for their planet’s survival.

“Even though the people’s suspicions of that particular endeavor were unwarranted, it turned out there was still a valid underlying reason for the people’s distrust of those in control. Little did they know just how valid their growing distrust was?

“Years later it came out that rampant experimentation with cold and hot fusion by the elite’s scientists over the previous seventy-five years had been directly responsible for their waning sun’s deterioration. After discovering this, the rebels started sabotaging nearly every scientific effort made by those with power. This prevailing standoff between the rebels and the elite delayed the initial installation of the one new artificial sun for decades. Finally, the elite’s

scientists managed to place a single artificial sun somehow tied to the orbit of their moon to supplement their dying sun. They figured they would ignite it, if or when it was needed.

“The scientists then returned their attention back to the task of trying to revive their cooling natural sun. These new experiments had additional devastating effects on our sun, which I don’t fully understand, except that these new actions caused the natural sun to decay at an even faster rate than before.

“Now with the sun cooling faster than ever, additional testing predicted that one new artificial sun would not be enough. When they realized that all the efforts made till then would not be enough, fear in the scientific community began to grow and spread. Feeling that their world was doomed unless they took extreme action drove some of the scientists to be even more reckless than before. Meanwhile, they continued to try to correct the damage they had inflicted on the existing sun. These new series of experiments started to stabilize their crippled sun, but additional measures were needed quickly to avoid a lasting ice age.

“This near scientific frenzy and the turmoil cause by this new discovery left no time for the final testing stages of any new proposals. At that point with their sun too weak to provide enough warmth for the survival of most of life forms on the planet, the scientists installed two more suns to compensate for the decrease in temperature of their old sun. Since it took time to implement and place the additional two suns nearly a year passed before all three artificial suns were ready to ignite and there was no escaping, a hopefully, temporary ice age. When ten months of wicked ice and snow had passed, the scientists knew the people couldn’t survive another year of this. With that and pressured by the cold they decided to take the chance and to ignite the three new suns in orbit before their old sun became useless. They knew if it wasn’t done quickly the

scientific infrastructure and population of their planet would be irrevocably damaged. So in three months' time, they placed the two new suns in orbit, and just in time, they ignited all three in the shadow of their crippled old natural sun. The three new suns began to blaze in a trine as their old sun's rule slowly passed away. The earth warmed once again and the snow and ice began to melt.

“Unfortunately, an unforeseen synergistic effect was created by the ignition of the three new suns and their dying sun, which created a temporary period of devastating heat that rained down on the planet. These unbearably hot temperatures eventually took its toll on what was left of the remaining oceans, as they began to evaporate and dry up that next decade. The scorching heat and other changes caused by the new suns also destroyed the little cloud cover our ancestors' world still had. This caused a drought to ensue. If I remember correctly, this period of devastating heat ended a little over fifty years before your birth.”

Swallow takes Resha's hand. “I hadn't realized how different the Before Time was. It must have been very difficult for those who survived the changes.”

“It was, and I think that was part of the reason we were drugged—to make us forget and stop fighting. But please let me return to today's story. I will provide more facts about the disaster and the drugs another time, once I research and understand better what really happened.

“Before my talks with Katina a year ago, I had no thoughts about the whys and wherefores of our daily lives. I just accepted all things that happened to me and around me. Before then, I never pondered where our supplies came from. They were always just there, so there was no need to inquire about their origin. All that we needed had always been supplied.

“But after our talks, I began to wake up, and it seemed that the drugs were finally beginning to loosen their hold on me just a bit. My head was starting to clear, so all sorts of

things began to provoke odd, fleeting inquiries in my mind. I began to wonder where our supplies came from and who brought them to the village bunkers. For that matter, where did the bunkers come from? So many questions ebbed and flowed and drifted mistily in and out of my dazed, drug-soaked mind last year that I couldn't keep track of them all. Then, just when I needed help with remembering, I recalled that before computers, we would scribe things on a material called paper to aid our recollection.”

“Like the paper you have given me for my lessons in learning to scribe?” Swallow asks.

In her mind, it seems a strain to think of such things, but her interest and her close ties to Resha had opened a door she wasn't aware of before so her curiosity had wedge it wide open and unlikely to close anytime soon. Not knowing which direction to pursue with all these new visions churning in her head and not wanting to interrupt Resha's story again, she silently waits for Resha to continue.

“Yes, Swallow, and I also remembered I had seen things in the bunkers we used to call books, which were used before computers to relay information. In the century before I was born, these books had almost been completely replaced by electronic tablets, computers, and phones. But I had been raised on books, because when I was a girl, my mother and father had a fondness for the old ways so they collected many and even had what we used to call a library, a room full of books for their reading pleasure. They respected the old ways, so they schooled me in both old and new.

“As a young child, I can remember spending days lost in the stories held in that room. The texture of the paper in these books fascinated me, and as I grew older, my parents' love for books became infectious. At age four, when I began to read, I would often go to the library and

read the classics with one or both of my parents. They would do most of the reading but I was eager to listen and they let me take brief turns reading aloud to one another as the hours of the day quickly disappeared.

“One day, when I was about five, my mother showed me her special collection, which she kept in a smaller hidden, locked room off the main library. She explained to me that her great-great-grandmother had decided to keep a paper history of events when she was about twenty years old. Her great-grandmother and then her female descendants carried on this tradition ever since creating new paper documentation was outlawed around the year 2100. By that time, keeping a paper history was considered breaking the law and akin to treason, so her great-grandmother built this special, secret room for hiding their collections in order to protect herself and her family. Because she loved books so much and because she had started writing her history before using paper had become illegal, she couldn't seem to stop herself from continuing with this act of treason.

“Looking back now, I wonder if she might've also foreseen the way things were headed, and this was her way of trying to preserve some of our written knowledge. Who knows? In the end, it really didn't matter, though. When everything crashed during the information wars and when the production of electricity dwindled because of our waning sun, we were finally forced to leave the city and all our possessions, including our treasured books, behind. My family lost all our written history with that move. Then, when the widespread production of electrical power completely failed about ten years after the disaster, our electronic technology eventually became almost useless.

“Since we had practically forgotten before the disaster how to communicate without this technology, and now it was gone, new conflicts arose. As people with power began to hoard all things of value and take advantage of those less powerful, fighting and looting began again. Finally, people resorted to solely using physical clashes to settle all their differences. Soon larger skirmishes broke out and spread. This fighting killed many more over the next few decades, so our numbers again declined. I can’t remember when the newest drug regime to control our fighting was initiated, but it must have been shortly after resorting to solving our difference solely by fighting, had started.

“During this time, other things transpired that I can’t recall clearly because of all the confusion. Or maybe I was just too young to fully understand at the time, but I do remember that all the death and the loss of all we had known, and depended upon only increased the isolation of those who had survived. This isolation and all the preceding events over the last century caused a major disconnection between the people.

“In the last hundred years of the Before Time, we relied so heavily on electronics to convey all our information that we almost forgot how to talk, and then it was suddenly gone. Because of this loss, nearly all communication halted, and the remaining few humans who had survived the disaster became disoriented and totally detached from one another.

“In the end, the few who survived the final stages of the devastation were lost, and the shock of all the dying, along with the failure of the link we had depended upon for so long to maintain our relationships, left us uprooted. Those few of us who survived after the full effects of the disaster took its toll just wandered aimlessly for many years to follow.”

“Resha, I have another question to ask. I want to understand. You have talked of the disaster many times, and you have said it’s also spoken of many times in the Book of Ways, but still, I do not understand fully what happened. You speak of how crowded things were in the Before Time and how little space there was because of this overcrowding, but what happened to all the people? What thing caused so many deaths at the end of the Before Time, and why did all the people die so suddenly in such large numbers?”

“Well Swallow, that’s an interesting question, but in reality it wasn’t really all that sudden. Would you mind waiting a few weeks’ time for the answer? The reasons for the end of the Before Time were complicated, and I was just a child, so I didn’t understand much of what occurred. Also, since it was so long ago and we were drugged for many years, it’s difficult for me to recall. Many of the tech records were lost or are now useless, so I don’t have easy access to the information you are requesting, and it may take me awhile to find these things out.

“In order to do the telling of that story justice, I will require more time to prepare. I also need to take another trip to our bunker for research materials. I think I remember a journal there that may help fill in some of the gaps in my memory and explain some of the events I couldn’t understand when I was younger. I must go get that book and read it to prepare my story.”

Swallow raises her eyebrows and nods. “Fair enough. I can wait, but I will be looking forward to the telling of that tale. Do you need help in researching what happened? I would be happy to help with your studies.”

Resha smiles and clears her throat. “I don’t know if you can help me, Swallow. It also requires reading some of the older books, and I don’t know if you have mastered your reading skills well enough to aid my investigations or if you might just hold me up by helping. Besides,

recently, with the drugs wearing off, I have become more curious myself about reading and scribing again. This interest has driven me to try to re-teach myself how to scribe and read properly. I must know how to do that better in order to do my research, and it will also aid me in teaching you and the others who may wish to learn these new skills.

“As you know, recently, my curiosity prompted me during one of my trips to the bunker to collect some paper, pens, pencils, and a few books to bring back to my hut, so I can study and use them. I also require these tools to organize my thoughts better about the disaster and the end of the Before Time.

“These books I have chosen, along with the journal I spoke of earlier, may be of particular help for me to fill in some of the holes that are now present in my knowledge and memory. While I’m researching, I can jot some of my notes in the margins of pages of the books I use, which may aid in your understanding of reading. Since the drugs are now wearing off, I hope to be able to have the focus to complete this task soon.

“If you like, I will bring a few of these books and my notes with me for you to see during the session when I tell the story of the disaster. Some of these may aid you with your lessons in learning to scribe and read by yourself, along with providing some helpful information to me.

“Of particular use to you might be an old book that we used to call a dictionary, which I discovered in the main bunker. I’m reluctant to loan it to anyone yet, because I need it in relearning to read. It is indispensable to me because I must look up the meanings of many words that I don’t know in my research.”

“I would like that. It would be nice to have a book to look up the meanings of words new to me,” Swallow responds curiously. “Learning to read and scribe takes a lot of work because I

find it is hard to stay focused for too long. I find myself falling asleep when reading and scribing, and when I try to start over again after I have rested, I lose my place and have trouble picking it up again.”

“Don’t give up. That may be partly because of the shots we were given before the move. I still don’t know what was in them, but I have noticed over the years that I’m much less clear for a long while after they are given. Last time, it took many months before I was clear enough to even realize what I needed to do. If you continue to try, you may find it easier to focus after a little more time has passed.” Resha shifts her position on the ground to get more comfortable.

Swallow pouts, nodding. “You mean the shots may be making it hard for me to think. Oh, I always wondered what those shots were for. Okay then, for now, I will just do the best I can to understand.”

“Yes, I would encourage you to just keep trying, for that is what I have always done.” Since she and Swallow skipped the teatime meal, Resha is getting hungry and tries to wrap up this part of her tale, because she wants to finish it in time for them to get to their evening meal.

“Now, back to this part of my tale then. Almost a year ago, with all these questions about our lives churning in my mind, I began to wonder about our villages and how they had been arranged. I was curious why each of these villages had somewhere between fifty to a hundred mud huts, which typically each housed one to four people...and there were always about twenty extra huts remaining for storage.

“I began to wonder ... Who had built our villages? And how come in our villages, the huts were gathered around three larger structures: a central dorm, a meeting hall, and a kitchen and dining area where we all ate. Even back then, this design seemed a bit outdated to me. It was

peculiar that the meeting hall was rarely used, for the few times we gathered, most preferred to meet outdoors, but such a hall was still found in each village. At that time, I wondered why all the villages were so similar and why they had been constructed in such a fashion.”

Swallow gazes at their village in the distance over Resha’s shoulders, allowing Resha’s voice to lull her into an escape from all the loss and destruction she has heard about so far in today’s tale. In the distance, their village now appears to her to be only a number of small bumps on their world’s flat horizon. Even though she knows her hut is one of the closest to their story spot, she cannot make out any distinct marking that might give it away. Fearing that her ears may have missed a small part of the telling of Resha’s story, she takes a deep breath. Still, she doesn’t want Resha to know this, so she says nothing as she silently tunes back in to Resha’s tale..... her lapse of attention might’ve betrayed her, she again focuses and realizing she has lost a Shortly after this, Resha, sensing Swallow’s distraction, breaks from her story. “Swallow, I’m parched, and I think this may be a good stopping point for today’s story. We can pick up from here next week,” Resha says, stirring while preparing to get up. ...

.. In response, Swallow rises, picking up her pack. “Yes, Resha, that’s fine with me. Also, this might give me time to try to scribe part of this tale to aid in remembering it while it is still fresh in my mind. If I finish it, I can bring it next week for you to see, if you like.”

Raising her left eyebrow in silence, Resha notes that for most of today, Swallow has remembered to call her Resha instead of calling her ma’ama. “That sounds like a good idea to me.”

*‘As time loops upon itself, it finds itself desperately
trying not to get caught in its own well-worn path.’*

Reflections

Since most of the people are still fighting the effects of the drugs, they are oblivious to how repetitious their lives have become. In truth, much of the villagers' present lives consist of doing the same things over and over again. Most are so busy fighting the mind-numbing and body-deadening effects of their prescribed drugs that they don't notice anything else. Everything's done for them, and all their needs are provided for, which only compounds their problems, because there is nothing driving them to try to go further.

Sometimes an individual may decide to attempt a project, but because they are so dazed and unclear, they find it difficult to focus and complete any tasks they set out to do, and inevitably, a mild frustration sets in before they can finish. Over time, this frustration breeds complacency and an acceptance of the limitations of their daily lives. This reality has left many of Resha's village's inhabitants doing things in an inefficient manner, so none can seem to make headway in breaking free of the aftermath of their prescribed drugs.

As a few months went by the effects of the drugs begin to wear off and Resha starts to remember what she was like without them. Since, for some reason unbeknownst to her, she escaped being drugged as a child, she still has clear memories of that time. These lucid childhood memories give her a distinct advantage in recovering from the numbing effects of their recent treatments because she has an old frame of reference the others in her village don't. This makes it easier for her to see past the actions of the drugs and attempt to break free. To help her

accomplish this task, she now spends much of her time alone, poring over a few books she sequestered from the bunker on her last trip for supplies.

At some point on that trip, she found a dictionary, which is of particular interest to her. The intense, focused research on the subject of the disaster she had recently started, soon makes her realize she has forgotten the meanings of many of the words she knew as a child. The complicated task of reconstructing the language of their world is challenging because of the drug-imposed silence that began in the late twenty-first century and lasted till this past year. She immediately realizes that because of the silence, there will not be many like her with coherent memories of before the disaster to guide their people's journey back to civilization. Given this, she knows she needs outside help to teach the others, and the dictionary has been like a gift sent from the goddess to guide her own self-instructed lessons. Since bringing the book back from the bunker, she has set aside time each day to relearn her old language and traditions. Each morning after rising Resha starts every day by randomly picking and memorizing a handful of words from her newly found treasure, the dictionary.

On this day, like previous mornings, she closes her eyes and runs her hands across its immense pages arbitrarily stopping to discover new words. Today her fingers first land on the word *squabble*. When she was a child, the word meant to argue, to dispute something. She smiles to herself, realizing that in the world they have been living in this past century, there is no need for this word. It is no wonder she forgot it, there hasn't even been a discussion let alone an argument since the silence started. Her people have been living in a blind, drugged state that has lasted for nearly two centuries that has left them with no free will to even consider such things.

Realizing how limited her vocabulary has become a deep sense of loss for the richness of her childhood, invades. She decides to try to recapture that richness by resurrecting it. Hoping to rebuild some of the culture she remembers from her earlier days so she can share it with others. She has begun this task with an old Webster's dictionary, the 111th edition, recognizing that this book must have been an exclusive special-order printing, since by this time, it wouldn't have been published in book form. Noting the printing date, she realizes that paper books had been banned decades earlier. Since this dictionary is printed on paper, it's tied to an earlier time, one she remembers with joy. The strong memories of the treasured reading sessions with her parents provide the strength for her to explore further. This causes her to reflect on and long to share with others parts of her early world.

Although these memories bring her joy, she understands the past cannot provide all the answers her people will need to move forward. She knows instinctively it would be a grave mistake to sculpt their future by attempting to re-create the past she knew when she was young. Bits of what went before will be useful in their new world, but this alone cannot help them move forward and create a new world of wonder and beauty for their future lives.

She vows not to lose sight of their past, their present, or the new potential future they will be creating. Holding the massive book fondly in her lap, she instinctively comprehends that this dictionary can't contain all of the current world's truths and lies. They also will need to create new words in her lifetime.

In fact, some of the new speak words developed recently are already more commonly used than the older terms in this dictionary. So now whenever Resha discovers one of these newly created words, she writes the new speak version of a word in the margin next to the

original word. By doing this she's crafting, as best as she's able, a more comprehensive record of their newly evolving language.

Today, as she runs her fingers down a chance page, they trip over the new word *cosa*, handwritten in the margin next to *amethyst*. Flipping through until she encounters another word jotted in the margin, she randomly bumps into the new word, *finan*, penciled in next to *flaxen*. Thinking back, she figures there might be fifty or so new words that she has already placed in the margins, and she knows that these efforts are just the beginning.

She also understands that to teach others, she herself needs to recognize what happened so that she may answer the questions that others might ask. Realizing that her knowledge is limited, she's aware that there will be no way she can answer all the questions that are ahead and teaching this new language to others will be easier if she has a written book for all to refer to. After she's finished adding the modifications to this old dictionary it might become one of her peoples' new reference books.

In fact, things have changed so radically from the past she remembers that she knows in reality, they will all be teaching, relearning, and creating their new world together. This proves to be humbling thought for someone of her years and experience.

Much of the old language might not even apply to their new world so she understands that after all her efforts and teachings, their language will always be evolving. Therefore, after she's finished what their new language eventually becomes might be radically different from what this dictionary presently holds as truth.

Still, she must start somewhere, and though it's anybody's guess where all this will lead, this well-worn dictionary seems like as good a place as any to start. Besides, because a large sum

of their past knowledge was lost when their technology failed, this book is, at least to her, an integral part of what she knows of her people's past

She decides that she will start from here and do the best she can to study to broaden her knowledge so she's able to teach those who wish to learn to read and scribe. In fact, she has already discovered something new herself. She has remembered that when she was a child, they used to refer to scribing as writing.

Finding that her conversations with Swallow are aiding her in reconstructing their language only enriches her meetings with Swallow and makes their talks even more precious.

*'The trick of learning from the past
can be tricky, but it's not impossible.'*

A Dreamscape

Most of Resha's clan members don't venture out of their village often. They seem to be content with doing their daily chores and filling their days with mindless tasks. After all, it's what they have grown accustomed to doing. Eat, sleep, rest and work has been the only things most have known their entire life.

Up until the time Resha started to remember the innocent days of her youth and how to think, she had been much the same as the others but after she had met Katina, things started to change.

Beginning her discussion with Swallow this past month had been the first major deviation from her old tedious pattern. Since then her new world had blossomed. She became increasingly aware of the little things in her life and more importantly, Resha started to remember and to expand her logical thinking. She steadily grew tired of her old approach to life and was no longer happy solely with 'The Ways'. As her intensity and frustrations increase, she desperately searches for something more meaningful to do in her life.

That next morning Resha wakes before sunrise, rolls over in her bed and being too restless to immediately go back to sleep she lies there staring at the ceiling,

Before, my talks with Swallow my chores were enough to occupy my entire day. Like the others I had been mindlessly content with just filling my time but now, after my talks with Swallow I've been given a new hope for a more useful life. These days I finish my chores in a

short space of time. I give them enough attention to do them justice but not enough time to get lost in them. I spend most of my free time discovering new things to make me feel more useful.'

It's early and Resha rolls over so she can gaze out the window where in a few hours her world's suns will rise. She knows she's still tired and if she gets up now she will feel the effect later this day so Resha closes her eyes again and drifts off into sleep soon reentering her dream of The Before Time.

I was four years old and holding hands with my mother in our old city. We had gotten off the rail at 34th Ave. and were instantly immersed in a sea of people so she took my hand as we walked the two blocks to the music store, her errand for that day. She was saying how she needed sheet music to learn how to play the new piccolo that her brother Ted had given her for her birthday.

In a half-awake state, I realized at that moment that our present world has completely forgotten about music. It was important to many people in my youth, including my mother, but now it was gone.

Still in trapped in this semi-awake dream state, my adult mind keeps distracting my child's mind from enjoying and fully experiencing her dream. The adult in me recalls that recently, I read about how music had developed before I was born. 'During the centuries before me, many people had spent their entire lives being musicians—that was the word. In fact, upon looking back, I think that may have been my uncle's calling, for he loved music with a passion. What had happened to that world? Along with the loss of everything else, what had become of music and playing instruments?'

In this dream, I was just a child, and at that tender age, I didn't have any answers to

these questions that were now rumbling around in my adult head. They seemed to only spark more questions for me in my innocent youth so I strained to remember that trip to the music store, and the result was that I semiconsciously slipped back into sleep and reentered the same dream, but this time, it was crisper, almost overpowering.

Music was so important that in the two blocks we had to walk to the music store, we passed three people on the street who were just playing for pleasure and spare change.

The part of my adult mind still lingering outside the dream focused and paid closer attention to every detail.

These street musicians seemed different from my uncle somehow. They seemed to wear their poverty like medallions of joy. Most were lean from lack of food, but their hunger for their music seemed to provide a kind of sustenance for their bodies like no morsels of food could. The power of playing music lent them energy from a nebulous, untouchable, and invisible source.

Again my adult mind took control interrupting my child's dream. 'This naive child in my dream clearly didn't fully understand the power of music that possessed the musicians as she blindly passed along her way. In fact, the musician's driving force may have completely eluded the younger me. It lay hidden till now somewhere in my subconscious before it burst forth in this dream. Now, being grown and older, I can finally grasp these concepts, and since I seem to be reliving some of my memories through my dreams, my mind can pay extra close witness through those innocent childhood eyes of mine.'

Switching back to the child in the dream once more, I began to experience it through

my child's eyes again.

My mother stopped on a corner to listen to a young girl dressed in rags playing a fiddle. She had her eyes closed as she swayed in time to the sweet lullaby she happened to be playing when we passed. Her long blonde hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail that she wore over her left shoulder. Although her clothes were ragged and soiled, her face and hands were scrubbed spotless.

She had placed an open violin case at her feet, in which those passing by rewarded her talent with some spare coinage. There wasn't a lot of money in the case, but many who lived on the streets or in the abandoned ruins of the poorer quarters of the city had to make do with what they could get.

I looked around at the gathering crowd surrounding her. Most seemed lost in the melody she was playing. Even at that age, I could tell that others were haunted by her music. They had their eyes closed and were swaying in time to her song. Others seemed to momentarily be cast into states of near ecstasy as they listened, wide-eyed and staring. As we all watched her, the harsh world around us faded into the distance and took second place to our new reality: the captivating delight of this young girl's music.

The violinist was only nine or ten years old, so her mother stood guard a few feet behind her. I remember briefly wondering if she was guarding the money or if it was the girl she was watching over. I know my mother was very cautious with me whenever the two of us traveled without my father in the city together, so

even at that age, I was aware of some nebulous threat and their perceived need for protection.

We stopped and took our place among a handful of admirers. Her fiddle looked very old, but it had been well kept. My mother bent down and whispered something to me expressing her feelings about how beautifully this young woman played, but the sound of the violinist's music had deafened my ears to all else, so I cannot recall if I even listened to my mother's exact words. She said something akin to how she too still liked to play the old instruments, unlike many of the privileged, who had long ago succumbed to the ease of preprogrammed and artificially composed music or, worse, those who only listened passively and didn't feel the music or play anything themselves.

Again the adult in me interjected. 'Even back then, it seemed that the old instruments were falling out of favor.'

I looked up and asked my mother why others didn't play and why we were not being taught to play instruments in school.

"Good, quality instruments are no longer being made in any quantity, so they are very expensive. If one wants to own an instrument, he or she needs to have it commissioned or make it him- or herself. Since most don't have the skills to craft such a thing or the money to pay for it, we all do the best we can. Besides, it 's very difficult to get any quality natural materials required to make such an instrument, so it seems the art of crafting instruments is also dying...Besides, nowadays most are content with just listening to machine-composed music," she

said. "In my opinion, it seems inactive listening is becoming the norm because learning to play takes time and patience. These are two luxuries that most, except the wealthy, in our world no longer have.

I thought that composing music might be dying with my generation, but this young girl gives us all hope." She paused for a moment to look at the young girl sweetly playing and momentarily closed her eyes to get lost in the music once again. A few moments passed and she sighed opening her eyes once more to gaze down at me. "Also, the funds for the schools must be used for more important things, like computers and such. Moreover, there is much negative judgment in our world, and people are not encouraged to try things they are not good at, so most don't even attempt to learn unfamiliar things."

As her words touched my little my ears, a wave of sadness invaded and began to slowly engulf me while I stood there, still enraptured in the music. My mind drifted away as I listened to this young girl's song, playing in the background and it seemed to me her music echoed back the same sadness that I felt intently clawing at my heart.

My mother then said, "The violin this young woman is playing has probably been passed down to her from the elders in her family. I'd venture to say that it looks more than hundreds of years old."

Now fully captured by my four year old mind and body an omnipotent voice boomed over head 'At that age, I had been too young to fully understand, so I nodded and smiled to

hide my confusion. Back then I had been too innocent to know where to begin with asking questions about such things.’

Shortly thereafter, the young girl finished her tune, and my mother placed a few coins in the case at the girl’s feet. Her mother nodded appreciation as my mother’s thankful eyes, met hers. My mother then took my hand, and we left, passing other musicians along the way. We walked in silence for the remaining block to the music store and didn’t stop in between.

I awoke from this dream suddenly and sat up in my bed. *Today I feel much the same as I did back then as if I’m finally waking up after more than a century and a half of being drugged and remembering how I was in my youth. It seems that I’m as out of place in this time as I was in my childhood.*

This dream made me wonder if there might be any musical instruments remaining in our world.

If there are, and were not lost or destroyed, maybe I might be able to search them out. Most likely, if they are still around, they are in the cities, somewhere in storage. Or maybe I might find one or two simple instruments secreted away somewhere in our village’s supply bunkers. If I’m lucky it might be possible to uncover them and maybe even teach myself how to play.

This idea delighted me.

Sometime in the near future, I need to make a trip to the ruins of the nearest city so I can look for an instrument or two. If they are still around, most will likely be found in the

larger bunkers under the cities. That's if the elite consider them worthy of saving or if they weren't destroyed in the chaos at the end of the Before Time.

Resha uncovered herself and swung her legs over the side of the bed to sit up. Resting there she remembered that as a child, she had heard faint rumors that the elite had excavated large bunkers off some of the vacant underground transportation tunnels that, at that time, still ran under most cities. These tunnels had all been abandoned and closed a century before the disaster occurred. They had been discarded because it had been decreed that there was no longer a need for them since there were no jobs to commute to any longer. Also, by that point in time, there was no public money available to keep the municipal transportation running, so the elite took over the tunnels and eventually closed off all access to these underground areas.

Resha recalled that toward the end of the Before Time, the elite's fears of an uprising had overtaken their sanity, and some of them ultimately took shelter underground. Over the last few decades of the Before Time, rumors circulated that a small group of the elite had collected anything of value that they had had and stored it all in secret underground bunkers.

Maybe their fears had been justified, but no one will ever truly know for sure, because no one is left now to tell their side of the story.

Resha finally gets out of bed to a glorious sunrise speculating.

It's possible I might even find an instrument stored in one of the smaller bunkers outside some of the villages, but in all my past explorations of these bunkers, I've never seen one.

This newly proposed quest gives my next planned trek to our village's bunker an added objective, but it also drives my restlessness even deeper inside me. I feel as if I will burst as my old memories churn in my clearing mind and our new complex world this all jumbled together with my past experiences.

*'Sweet memories circling down a drain may
next lead to a new brightly colored future.'*