

The Giant War:  
“Immovable Objects”  
By  
Robert Hernandez

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For Joey... Because I couldn't figure out a character worthy of you.

# Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Map:

Chapter 1: First Huntress

Chapter 2: First Huntress

Chapter 3: First Mender

Chapter 4: Tali

Chapter 5: First Huntress

Chapter 6: Waroo

Chapter 7: Waroo's Daughter

Chapter 8: Great Grandfather's Story:

Chapter 9: Tali

Chapter 10: The Elders

Chapter 12: Tali

Chapter 13: First Huntress and Teresa the Mender

Chapter 14. The Elders

Chapter 15: Tali and Chris

Chapter 16: First Huntress

Chapter 17: Four Smiths

Chapter 18: Tali, First Huntress and Chris

Chapter 19: Elders

Chapter 20: The Second Sea Battle

Chapter 21: Lull

Chapter 22: Land Battle

Chapter 23: Final Retreat

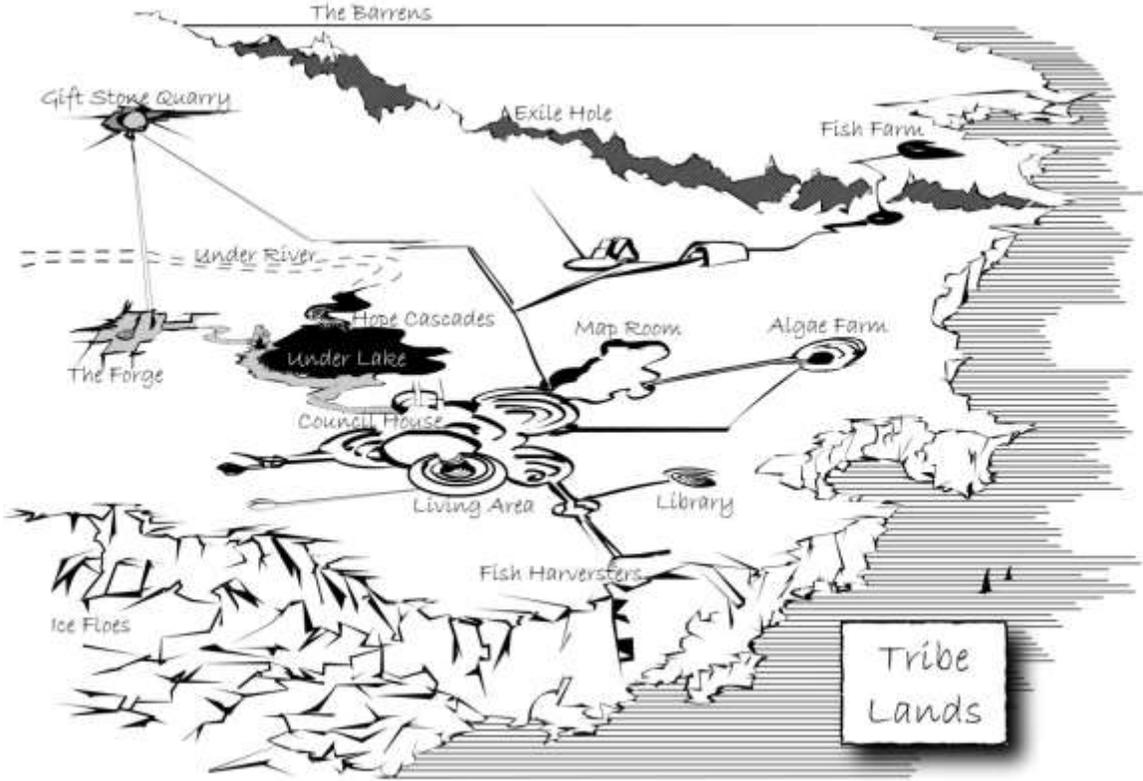
Chapter 24. The Tale of Larso's Cavern

Chapter 25: The First Sea Battle

Chapter 26: The Quiet Elder

Chapter 27: Chris and First Huntress

**Map:**



## Chapter 1: First Huntress

The pod was hungry ...

.. Uncomfortably hungry.

First Huntress had been sensing a steady escalation of their frustration. Testing the pass more boldly, dorsals darted in short bursts towards the bay, shattering the clear forming shore ice in every direction. Complaints directed at her, in the orca vocabulary of squeaks, and agitated sloshings filled the air. The adolescent bulls especially hated their predicament, unleashing their displeasure with violent fluke slaps, and powerful leaps, clearing the water by more than two body lengths. While at the apex of these acts of bravado, suspended above the sea and ice, hovering nearly motionless as the sunlight scattered off the water cascading over their perfect black and white skin, for an instant, they could believe they were masters of all around them. For an instant, they allowed the surge of instinct to overpower the reality of survival and they'd tighten, priming for a spasm of attack once the water took them back...

.. And then they see her.

Perched high on the cliff; sentinel of the channel which fed the ocean to a food-teeming bay. The unwavering strength and determination in her stance begged them to succumb to their stupidity.

Against this formidable predator they knew there was no defense, and the young, foolish males slackened. Gravity would reclaim them. They'd smack the ocean sloppily, and drift downward slowly, no closer to resolving their impasse-- aware again that while they indeed were masters of the deep waters; their kingdom had borders where beyond they did not rule. Near the shore, First Huntress reigned unchallenged.

“Soon” thought First Huntress, “Soon the pang in their bellies would overcome their fear of me. Soon, they would brave the gauntlet separating them from their prey.”

“Soon, I will hunt.”

But not very soon. The Alpha knew her intimately. He had been a young bull, barely weaned, when they first met. The missing chunk of his dorsal, ever erect, proclaimed his successful encounter, and her early failure. That was so long ago, and unique. Even then, she did not fail often. He sensed that she hunted, and had corralled his wards away from the cliffs ... away from the spear. He sustained them with the occasional errant school, but in the dark season, they were as rare as the warmth. Usually

they avoided the cold foods altogether, preferring the warmer, fatty shore animals. When the pod ached with hunger however they were less discriminating.

Usually, this cliff was barren.

First Huntress tracked the Alpha with her eyes as her hands inspected her rope for the hundredth time. She followed his location mostly by the behavior of the others. Were he alone, he would have been quite difficult to find from atop a cliff. Unlike his kin, he was mostly black. What little white adorned his hide was hidden well below the water line. His movements were efficient, purposeful, and almost imperceptible, as if the dorsal were an ebon blade skinning the hide that was ocean. He was larger than she remembered him. The hunting must have been good during the light season. But he had not softened. His skin was taut and sinewy.

And he did not fear her. The Alpha was a creature of impeccable instinct. He had no place for fear.

First Huntress' lips cracked into a mirthless smile on her stern, wind etched face. She on the other hand, had quite a few places to store that fear. She too had grown during the light season. They had that in common. But her growth had not been so flattering.

Her hair, still long, flaxen, and reddish gold, combed straight and draped over her right shoulder in the classic manner of a hunter, glinting with prominent streaks of white. Her limbs still pulsed with her renowned strength. But the deep crevices segregating her muscles had been stuffed with a softness that she knew would never disappear. Her once highly muscled, creased, attractive shape had been hammered round, her sharp peaks pounded in, the cavernous creases pounded out. Only her eyes, deep and azure, snatched an occasional second look. And they merely triggered curiosity for what the bearer of such a penetrating gaze once looked like, acknowledging, not her worn, weathered frame, but the young ghost who once dwelled there, and now merely haunts it.

Where once, any man, or boy with the capacity to do so would stumble clumsily over himself to gain her attention as she passed, there were now only cordial head bows, and a polite salute to the First Huntress... Reverent and lustless. Gone, apparently forever, were the bloated chests, comically inflated to the point of bursting; the booming bravado boasting of deeds (real and conjured) as they desperately postured to appear fit enough for one of her strength. In truth, she did not miss the attention. Her one love had been tragically brief, but sufficient. She harbored no desire for a replacement. She merely missed the body of the person who garnered it.

First Huntress' deterioration had been continuous and gradual, but only broke the surface this past season. Her lifetime of injuries had mounted, and contributed to a broken

leg suffered during a friendly blunt spear joust with her neighbor Sanol. The profoundest insult was that Sanol himself had not inflicted the hurt. She fell as a small child scurried between her legs. Sanol had not realized she was harmed until after she had won the battle. Had she not already favored one leg because of stiffness in the other from long ago hunts; had she been faster, she could have—SHOULD HAVE scooped the brat aside and delivered the winning blow in one sweep.

Her injury forced her to many days of convalescence, which, in turn, softened her even more. It was while lying helplessly in her bed, bored to insanity-- an orphaned seal pup, suckling on Tribe resources she had not helped to acquire-- that she realized her physical injuries were not her setback. She has borne them all this time without incident or complaint. It was her mind that fatigued. She no longer carried the edge that made her spear seem dull by comparison. She did not instinctively move. She calculated. When the mind was engaged as a tool, rather than relied on as an animal would, then the body became a tool as well. And tools broke down.

Fortunately, tools could be temporarily mended to complete a task. She healed, and was still able to keep the spear this hunt when the challenges came, but there was no heart in the attempts to wrest the spear. Her daughter Kavra did not even respond to the call. This last hunt had been a gift from the Tribe, and from Kavra.

First Huntress had become so lost in her thoughts that the Alpha startled her when he lurched suddenly, and whisked the pod off a ways. One at a time the dorsals submerged. The waters frothed with activity, and when the breeze changed, the acrid, wet stench of cold food death reached her. They had found yet another hapless school. The pod fed ravenously. First Huntress noted more than an occasional whistle of pain as an errant snap caught something besides fish. The half-starved whales were feeding in a blind frenzy, no better than sharks. But like sharks, they were surviving.

Her hunt must wait even longer now.

Uncharacteristically, First Huntress fidgeted. She was surprised to be tired and cold. Not so fragile as to need the full coat, it currently rested in a loose nest on the ground by her side. She had brought it, as always, more to protect the rope from ice crystals than her own insulation, but she could not deny that the snow seeping inside chilled unpleasantly. It had been three days since her last kill. Three days ago she brought an orca to the cooks, presenting the food to the Tribe on behalf of her clan, and basked in the hearth's warmth as they chanted their appreciation. She remembered being cold then, and the giggling of her sister's children. The youngest had never seen a hunter's gift before, and found her aunt's trembling and bluish skin humorous.

She had cried out gleefully, "First Huntress, you are made of old ice!"

The Tribe laughed heartily with her. First Huntress did too.

But not really.

Cold had never been a factor, especially after only the second kill. And NEVER, not even in blizzards, had it ever penetrated this deeply inside her. Her days as First Huntress were undeniably drawing to a close. She realized suddenly, that it did not bother her as much as she felt it should.

First Huntress shook her head to dislodge the accumulating ice crystals from her hair. Changing her position slightly, but remaining in her crouch, she rubbed her joints. Her spear stood erect, tip down, the rope looped neatly beside her. Her eyes scanned the magnificent weapon tip to heel noting every fray, every chip, and every crack on its gleaming yellow surface. She precisely remembered those scars she inflicted herself, and which were the work of the previous First Huntress—her mother. The remaining marks were mysteries, lost testimonials of previous hunts the mighty spear held secret. She recalled the many futile arguments she had exchanged with the Smiths when turning the spear over for repair in the Deep Forge. First Huntress longed to make invisible those marks she did not recognize. The bent men and women who chose to work the fatally warm hearths patiently, but consistently denied her demands. They revered the spear's damage as evidence of a tool well utilized. First Huntress had argued that the marks would shorten the life of that "well utilized" tool, but she lost her resolve when her own mother chose to join the Smiths soon after she reached the stage of Elder. She echoed the Smiths' sentiment, but as a compromise, offered to remove those nicks that she herself had made when hunting. First Huntress had indignantly snatched the spear away, lest her mother erase those treasured markings, and she never brought the matter up again. She also made certain her mother was not working the Deep Forge whenever she submitted the spear for repairs.

Inevitably, the spear's bruises would add up, and the noble tool which had served the Tribe through her clan for so many seasons would need replacing. First Huntress was confident that it would last through Kavra, and perhaps the First Hunter who would someday snatch it from her. More than that was hard to accept. She mourned for the descendant who would be forced to melt it down to forge a new one. But such is the inevitability of time.

All tools wore down ...

All tools would someday need replacing ...

She, First Huntress, longest reign of First Hunters since the Tribe had colonized the land and the histories began, was not ... could not ... should not be so proud to think herself the exception.

With the same unfaltering certainty she employed on everything else in her life, First Huntress realized she had just decided, that after this kill, she would accept Kavra's challenge, and inevitably lose. Kavra was worthy, her merit was unquestioned. Many in the Tribe softly suggested she should have been First Huntress last season, though none mentioned it beyond shadowed whispers. She still commanded enough fear to quell outright belligerence.

With her choice made, a peace settled within her, and she wondered why had she had been so unwilling to accept this inevitable passage. Better that, than losing the old spear to the sea.

Why indeed.

That was the question no one asked aloud because the answer was so stark.

It was because of the "little ones" of course.

For so long, they had been absent, but recently, their vile presence returned to the land. They were few in number, and hardly ventured ashore, but they were as vicious as the legends and stories warned, and each time they arrived, their numbers grew. They did not respect their prey, extinguishing it clumsily, leaving the meat alive for much too long, and forcing the spirit to suffer a profound anguish that would haunt the seas many seasons before it dissipated.

How could such sacrilegious monsters be so successful?

How could they, with no spirit or manner, dare to hunt a hunter?

Was this new appearance an anomaly, or was this a trend? Were these the days leading to the unthinkable? Would she be the First Hunter leading the Tribe to the Final Retreat? Question upon unanswerable question ricocheted in her mind until, as always, merely thinking of the little ones ignited her rage. Hot waves of anger surged to her fingers and toes stoking the embers within her. Knuckles, already painfully white, brightened. Her face flushed red. Her spear rattled against her thigh. The anger was understandable, but quite uncomfortable. First Huntress allowed it to ebb. And she realized that she was now no longer cold.

"I must remember to tell Kavra this method. The little ones can at least anger us to warmth." She mused.

What is this? The pod is moving? Now?

Apparently the school was insufficient to satisfy them. The Alpha must be hungrier than First Huntress had imagined. She was disappointed. Her quarry would be weakened, not a worthy contest.

But the meat would taste the same.

The pod's destination was mindlessly obvious. A fattened herd of seals, lulled into stupidity because of her vigil, expected her protection once again. They were carelessly frolicking between the ice floes, hardly eating, enjoying the pleasures of swimming with full bellies.

Stupid. Such pleasures were reserved for true hunters, not the middle food. They would pay dearly. And their ransom was their pups.

First Huntress rose. When fully erect, she towered over the modest mogul that had been deflecting the winds. Quick chills sprang up the bare skin of her back as the howling invisible air that carved cliffs took on her body as a new project. Her body withstood the onslaught unaffected. Even now beyond her peak, she was still a First Hunter, and there was no wind the land, sea or sky could ever whip into existence with sufficient force to harm her. She was wearing the only hunting outfit she had ever used, and the single piece garment, sewn from middle food hide in a pattern to honor her most formidable hunt was showing its age. Her wide, white bare back was framed by violently flapping, and increasingly fraying edges. Her leggings rustled as well, while still tight to her skin, wind found enough slack to vibrate, and even wriggled through the few gashes where white flesh poked through the black portions. For a moment she thought (hoped) the outfit would be decimated. But alas, Tribe tailors were most competent. The outfit held. A regret she must endure when she passed the spear to Kavra was that her mission to annihilate her outfit would remain unfulfilled. Although her vanity admitted that she liked the way the shimmery black and white garment folded around her form, First Huntress had always loved the cold, and found the warmth of the water trapped in her outfit a nuisance. She had hunted nude for many seasons until, as First Huntress, she was forced to set an example. Not all of The Tribe thrived in the starkness. Her compromise was to allow the hunts to strip her. A new curved bone anchoring the front with a choke hold to her neck was the entirety of the repair she had ever bothered with.

A few adjustments released the crimping that had migrated the seal skin fabric into crevices where it did not belong. A quick kick sent her coat floating down the cliff, landing on the shore where she would hopefully emerge. She tested the knots. Both the spear and her ankle were tightly bound. She stepped as close to the edge as the soft snow permitted. Using her foot, she nudged the cross bar so it was perfectly centered through

one of the shaft's seven eye holes, setting it fixed in a perpendicular position, and rested her bound foot on it.

All was ready for the pounce... All but her prey.

Atop the cliff, framed by a dim grey sky, the mostly black outfit complemented by her painfully white bare shoulders eerily matched the dark grey water and colors of her quarry. Mirror images set to converge in a deadly, eternal, necessary dance.

And the music began.

The Alpha took his point position very seriously. Never wandering far from his wards, nor allowing laxness in their formation. First Huntress had difficulty selecting a target. She was pleased in her difficulty. She realized why the Alpha drove on now. He was not willing to wait for his pod to weaken with hunger before shooting the gauntlet she had set. Instead, he wagered his chances were better with his wards healthy, than not. Their hunger, temporarily quelled with the cold food in their bellies, would keep them focused.

He was good.

She must be better.

First Huntress scanned the length of the pod repeatedly seeking a gap, an opening, a bulge, anything to distinguish a weak spot. Finally, nearly at a point where it would be too late to act, she detected a pocket of excessive foaming. Pumping her flukes frantically in a failing effort to keep pace, First Huntress recognized the cow who had just weaned the energetic calf who always pestered the adults. She was very large, and had probably sired several calves for the Alpha. She was old however, and her time had passed.

She was the one.

The pod was incidental now. First Huntress focused on the cow. She did not remember harvesting such a large whale before, and was not sure she could pull her in. She could not rely on overpowering her prey. Even slowed, the cow would have been too strong for her in her prime. And she had felt cold this day.

This last hunt must be won on tactics.

Timing was critical. The higher the whale was upon penetration, the less it sank. First Huntress watched for the blow hole exhausts. They were rapid, nearly equal to the submerged interval. The cow was tired indeed. She leaned down and with a quick flip of her wrist, she relocked the cross bar several notches higher. The cow was a thick animal,

and if her spine was not severed completely on impact, First Huntress would be slaughtered amidst the thrashing. And both their deaths would be senseless.

The Alpha was underneath her now, in a moment, it would be her time. She rechecked the knots, the crossbar, the ledge stability, the wind, the waters, the sky, and her grip on the spear. Then casually, she stepped off a mountain.

Rock and ice rushed past her as her second foot planted on the crossbar, mirroring the first. Her knees bent slightly, the spear handle pressed tightly on the left shoulder with two strong hands. She could see her prey rapidly expanding between her feet.

Wait ...

Wait ...

Wait ... NOW!

The cold wet slap on her soles unleashed the full strength of her thighs with a mighty spring. First Huntress barely heard the death screech as the spear penetrated to the cross bar just between the dorsal and skull before her momentum submerged them. Foam, then cold darkness instantly snuffed all air sounds. The tethered pair drifted downward. With the sea cushioning, and the blackness masking their descent, First Huntress lost her awareness for which direction was up. No matter. That will soon resolve itself. She glanced at the entry wound, straining her eyes through the dim increasing opacity. She had been perfect. The cow was clearly dead, the deathblow's force pushing the meat into a slow roll towards the bottom. A slight shimmer to one side, insignificant, unless it were compared to the utter blackness from below, clearly revealed where the surface awaited. Oriented, satisfied her spear would hold, she pushed off the meat.

The contest was on.

Thick, steady strokes brought her to the surface, and a welcomed lungful of precious air. She took it in gladly, but did not linger. Her Place-Sense told her where the shore was. Her arms thunderously whipped through the water to transport her there. The cow was sinking quickly. If First Huntress was not firmly anchored on solid footing when the rope went taut, she too would die. There was simply not enough air to navigate the ankle knot's release. Some hunters exhilarated from the terror in these moments, tapping its intensity to boost speed. First Huntress had never known that particular terror. She had always been convincingly stronger than her prey. Fear was impotent on the fearless.

But that was before. Now, there was cold inside her, aggravating a collection of bruises and scars gathered throughout a lifetime of hunting. She was uncertain. So just this once, this final uncertain hunt, First Huntress tapped all her reserves. She allowed

herself to feel terror. It was an unpleasant emotion, but effective. Her pace quickened, and in short measure, her hand slapped rock. She had reached shore. Quickly scampering to knee deep water, First Huntress gauged the tautness of the rope. She was well ahead of the meat.

Terror worked.

Grasping the rope tightly with one hand, she undid the strap on the sheath holding her knife flush with her lower leg. Gripping the hilt tightly, she unleashed the impossibly ever sharp blade. Swift flicks carved footholds into the rocky terrain, which were then deepened by the shuffling of her thick, leathery feet. First Huntress applied a second knot with the slack to her waist. Watching the rope carefully, she resheathed the knife, undid the choke of her outfit to free the reservoir of uncomfortable warm water, dressed, and firmly entrenched, began to reel in her prey.

The slack was gone with two sweeps. First Huntress braced for the weight of her quarry. When it hit, she nearly succumbed. Her thighs moaned heavily as the foot holds dug deeper. Her arms shuddered from exertion, hands spraying blood vaporized by the rope's slide.

But she held.

And she pulled. Ignoring the pain, she pulled. Ignoring the blood, the complaints from her bones and arms. Ignoring the angry challenges of the pod, First Huntress pulled. In an eternity, a dead whale's carcass was hauled ashore. First Huntress had meat.

Throughout her toils, the Alpha exploited the time wisely, and had maneuvered the pod past her. They had already forgotten their loss and were gorging themselves with the stupid and now panicked middle food. Only the Alpha remained behind. He was in the shallows watching.

First Huntress untied the rope from her waist, ankle and the spear. She rolled it up neatly, and despite the complaints from her joints, she rose.

"My Third Kill..." she told the Alpha, as she tossed him the rope.

".. My Last Kill. You have nothing more to fear from me."

The Alpha watched her for a bit, and then joined the pod in their meal. For him and his wards, the danger had passed, and was forgotten. All was as it should be again.

But First Huntress felt no such peace.

Again, it was the little ones who poisoned her thoughts.

Today there was meat, but how long would the Tribe's hunters be free to procure it? How long will the blissful isolation last?

They were coming in increasing numbers. A few had even ventured to the shore with their meager supplies and their snarling beasts. They were woefully unprepared and quickly annihilated by the cold. But always they returned, and they were learning. Each landing was better equipped. They were as tenacious as they were illogical. They trekked into the empty lands for no apparent reason. Did they really think there was food there? A few times even, they had come close enough to one of the Tribe's gateways and had to be eliminated. It was becoming a challenge to remain invisible to them. It may come to a point where interaction would be necessary, and she was certain the unmentionable would be reality. Just as the legends foretold...

There would be war.

Hunters do not negotiate.

That however would be a matter for Kavra and her council. Still breathless in the shallow waters, aches of this and every hunt before throbbing for attention, she realized her mind no longer had the clarity to consider the problems of the entire Tribe. She would pass the spear on when she returned. It would be a swift transition. Even if both were at their prime, Kavra was still her superior. Kavra was powerful and had been resting during her hunts. Kavra would not hesitate in her attack. She did not bear memories of holding her opponent crying in her arms as a child. When the blood was swept away, Kavra will lose her family name and become First Huntress. And she would again be addressed as Tali.

First Huntress retrieved her coat and folded it into a pad over her shoulder. She leaned down, and with a lurch, hoisted the meat on the pad. Trembling from the weight, she bent down for her spear, and using it as her walking stick, she trudged back to the Tribe for her final presentation and her confrontation with her daughter.

Curiously, she found herself walking at a brisker pace than she expected. Her mind was slow to realize it, but First Huntress' body was anticipating the removal of many burdens when she reached home.

## Chapter 2: First Huntress

First Huntress awoke sore but refreshed. She retrieved a slab of dried middle food from her pouch, moistened it on the snow, and chewed on the salted tough meat as she gathered her thoughts. Unless her slumber had stolen more time than she sensed, she measured that she had been traveling now for three days. Her destination should then be just beyond the next drift. While using her elbows to rub the tightness from her thighs, she rocked back and forth stretching the stiffness from her joints. Her long, wild, red-blond hair which she had forever refused to confine with the traditional hunter's braid, or corral with a brush, slapped wet and sticky on her pale bare shoulders, keeping tempo with the rhythm of her rocking. She wore the garb of an ordinary traveler, a simple unit, sewn of deep brown middle food hide which covered the areas modesty amongst strangers demanded but freed her thighs and shoulders so she could run unhindered. Her pouch was equally modest and neat. The bindings were set to attach her supplies tightly to her mid back. But for the exception of the First Huntress amulet pinned to garment's shoulder, just above her heart, she was unadorned. And she was barefooted. No material had yet been shown to provide more reliable support than her thick soles. As she basked in the ever present light season sun, gathering her strength for the day's ordeal, she marveled enviously at Tali's discipline. Her mother, keenly attuned to the potential of her own body, planned long runs such as this perfectly. Once calculated, she set off unhesitantly. She never faltered, never wavered, and she never, *EVER* fell short,

Unlike her mother, *this* First Huntress did not ration her energy. Confident in her stamina, she merely ran until she could not breathe, then she would slow to a walk until she regained her wind, and again she would run. If she stumbled, and could get up, she would, and she would run some more. If she could not, she would rest until the fatigue waned... Then she would rise. And she would run again. It was a most chaotic, random, but successful strategy.

A fall when her ankle buckled on a soft pocket of snow had been her most recent limit. Despite her exhaustion, she had at least been alert enough to make certain no damage other than on her dignity was inflicted. She had ensured the twisted ankle was not serious, packed it tightly with snow anyway to be safe, and then buried herself in the snow before succumbing to her recovery. Her clean white flesh could not withstand the relentless pounding of the peak light season sunlight. She would have awoken to a torment of blistering redness.

Running on the ice exhilarated her. Bounding through the thigh deep drifts, building up speed to leap mightily forward, then skidding on her heels until the snow

sucked up her momentum, brought back fond recollections of racing (and soundly beating) her cousins. Even now, on an ominous journey as the powerful and responsible First Huntress, she couldn't resist the occasional flourish on her landings, transforming her linear skids to swirls. This run had been particularly sweet. She was savoring the same defiant excitement a child enjoyed when stealing meals from the Elders while they gave thanks, or when she and her cousins snuck into Tali's chambers to hold the spear.

The little ones were everywhere lately, poking the ice with their magnificent but insane devices. They still struggled, but their successes were many, and their improvement vast. In her own brief tenure as First Huntress, she had noted significant advances in their tactics. Their beasts were mostly gone, replaced by noisy, smoking carriages. Their dwellings were sturdier, so they stayed longer. In some sites the little one's presence had existed permanently enough to be carved on the Tribe map. Those sites are gone now from the land and (because the mapmakers are notoriously thorough) from the map as well but they left for reasons as mysterious as their arrivals, so there was no assurance they would not return. They no longer hunted, electing instead to continue the stupid approach of importing all their materials rather than harvesting any resources from the very land they colonized. Why they did this made no sense to her. That these sloppy, voracious hunters had ceased their senseless slaughters brought an enormous peace to all the region's denizens, so she dared not question the motive for fear of its dissolution. As best as First Huntress could determine, their newfound resilience was mostly because of their sleek, whiny flying devices. They infested the air, defying all explanation, scurrying through the skies carrying their kind around, constantly replenishing the stores of their few meager settlements. With enormous, rapidly spinning swords at their head and tail, it was obvious the flying machines were built for battle. The positioning of the blade edges-- well above a little one's head, but about even with the chest of a Tribe adult -- left no question on many minds as to whom the battle was to be waged on. If the interpretation of the little ones' adversary proved true, then it would follow that it was the Tribe they sought with their magnificent devices.

There was no shortage of thoughts on why they were looking. Too many songs about the little ones' persecution and their lust for blood and metal carried their motivations. She had heard and sung them all. There was also a general agreement that although they hunted here, they did not know of the Tribe location. They merely fished blindly for something to destroy. The Elders had concluded — with resounding consent — that it was in the Tribe's best interests to declare the surface unacceptably dangerous. The Tribe was to confine itself to the tunnels for travel, and was to venture into the open only when ceremony and necessity were deemed vital.

“Soon enough,” the Elders decreed wishfully, “They will tire and move on to different waters. Such irrationality is their nature.”

That blunt inflexible edict was precisely what attracted First Huntress to the surface. Until she was told not to, the surface held no allure for her. The hunt was magnificent, and she did enjoy that, but there were so many tunnels she had yet to explore, and many many Tribe folk she had yet to visit as First Huntress. The surface would always be there, but she had learned from her mother that her reign as Supreme Advocate of the People was limited, and it was her duties as the Advocate she loved. Her strength in the hunt was merely the tool she wielded to secure that honor. First Huntress enjoyed speaking for the Tribe to the Elders. She took a great satisfaction in the knowledge that what she said was truly their voice and not her own thoughts, because at every opportunity, she took counsel from anyone who was courteous enough to offer it. In this she also differed from her mother. Tali had been matchless in the hunt. As Advocate, she was fair and competent, but she was a looming quiet figure that intimidated the Tribe. Her advocacy was confined to hearing from only those few who braved her formidable persona to state their concerns. Even Tali (should anyone be brave or foolish enough to ask her) would agree that the timid were not well represented by the previous First Huntress.

Elders' memories were long, their experiences with the little ones numerous. They remembered that although the immediate observations suggested otherwise, the interests of the little ones came in waves. Their attention was like a child's — obsessive, but undisciplined and easily distracted. They feverishly attacked one task or another, merely to abandon the supplies and people they invested at the first failure, or when something else caught their attention. Their resources were seemingly infinite, as was their waste. Crumbling settlements, unused caches of supplies, corpses of their kind, and the snarling beasts they once brought along, littered the land. Was the place where they originated so plentiful that this disregard was acceptable? Or were they—as many in the Tribe suspected— merely stupid? First Huntress did not think so. They flew like birds; they constructed shelters of exotic materials unknown to the Tribe; they clothed themselves in colorful, strong, and light fabrics that could not possibly have been hide. Theirs was a world of fantastic inventions, and she would have been impressed at their remarkable accomplishments, had they decided to build someplace that wasn't ludicrous. How could beings with such innovation be so thick they could not recognize that the surface was where all the risk of the land was concentrated? It was the one place to avoid, yet it was the only place on which they focused.

First Huntress caught herself. Best to be thankful for the little ones' ignorance. More often than not, their bizarre excursions had taken them directly over portions of the Tribe's tunnels. Only their stupidity had spared contact.

In the first private conversation she had engaged with Tali after she won the spear, the most pressing matter on the retired First Huntress' mind had been the eminent

danger of contact with the little ones. Tali had spoken so passionately and with such conviction, she had reopened the wound she suffered on her jaw during their bout for the spear. First Huntress remembered how the blood oozed from the right side of Tali's face, accentuating her already fearsome presence, even in defeat. She had insisted vehemently that contact would lead to the unmentionable, with the likely outcome of the Tribe's annihilation.

The legends they sang were to be heeded.

It was Tali's contention that despite their physical advantages, the Tribe was no match. The little ones' inventiveness was exotic enough in the mundane, she was terrified at what such destructive and unpredictable people would produce as their tools of battle. The Tribe also suffered the burden of limited resources and the responsibility of the land, whereas the little ones bore neither of these.

"There will come a day," Tali spoke solemnly, "when the little ones will impose such a danger, the Tribe will be forced to choose whether to fight or retreat. Both are failures First Huntress. To fight is death, and soon you will learn that although we have long ago laid the framework for a Final Retreat, that too is a type of death."

Tali had gone on the same topic for a short time, then noticing the blood dripping on her arm, she stopped in mid phrase. First Huntress remembered that her mother touched it with her fingers and after a long silence, she smiled. It was ever so slight, nearly unnoticeable by any but those who knew her face well. Nevertheless it was a smile. She placed her hands on her daughter's shoulders and concluded, "But that is a matter for the First Huntress to decide my daughter. I am merely stating my concern to the Advocate of the People."

They held the embrace for a time, daughter accepting the quiet blessing of her new position from the mother, along with the tremendous burden. When the menders were motioned back to tend the jaw yet again, Tali was softer somehow. She appeared more like a person than the mighty chiseled hunter who brought meat for so many seasons. First Huntress almost immediately recognized the distinction. While her mother had borne the burden of Advocate, she had never wavered in her admiration, but of necessity, for the good of the Tribe, she realized her love for the woman who raised her had been set aside, and she was apparently reacquiring it.

Tali was mother again.

First Huntress willed herself not to shed tears. It was not appropriate for her new position. She cordially expressed her appreciation to her mother for the warning, keeping her emotions distant as the menders noisily repaired her. They jokingly complained that

they would not be coming again. Mother even returned a light hearted comment or two, jokingly hurrying the menders' work, claiming that this orca she had just hunted would only taste well if she assisted the cooks. First Huntress watched from the room's doorway, the weight of her position, and her hold on her emotions rendered her unable to partake in the pleasures of casual chatter.

*Perhaps this was how mother's sternness began.*

Perhaps indeed.

First Huntress was truly grateful for Tali's counsel, but did not honestly dedicate much attention to it. She was soon overwhelmed with the affairs of her new role, and the little ones' problem seemed a matter more appropriate for the future. Even when she sat with the Elders for their first private council, and the secrets only Elders and First Hunters bore were revealed to her, she did not take the matter seriously. A Final Retreat was almost as insane a thought as the strategy devised to achieve it. Yet time had proven Tali unmistakably right about their resourcefulness. First Huntress' instinct was warning her that mother may have been prophetic elsewhere too.

That the danger was increasing lately was apparent. There was notably more intense activity from the little ones these past few seasons. Her mother's warning, and common sense forced her to admit that the Elders' decree held wisdom. She attended the councils and reviewed the contingency plans dealing with little one incursions with a more attentive and somber tone. Should they ever be enacted, the Final Retreat, along with the elaborate Final Push, were etched indelibly in her mind. If called upon, she would fulfill her role flawlessly.

Despite this, she had never been one to comply blindly with the Elders' usually overcautious prattlings, but as the wielder of the first spear, she did not think it appropriate to openly defy them. She went out on hunts as she was allowed, and no more. As a passive rebellion, she extended her forays by purposefully selecting more challenging prey, but she only did this because the Tribe was well stocked. She enjoyed the luxury of abundance. The remainder of her time was spent skulking through the tunnels trudging through her duties, yearning for a surface she did not previously ever care for. Until the news reached her that the exiles failed to make their rendezvous.

Exiles did not miss their rare opportunity to speak with, or rather spew at, the Tribe designate, and obtain meat from the hunt. It had been the triplets' father Waroo who returned with the meat still in his satchel and a worrisome gaze in his eyes. He was the only member of the Tribe whose heart felt anything for the exiles. First Huntress recalled the triplets' crimes well because unlike the others, these had been committed in her living memory. The remaining exiles and their crimes were vague monstrosities

recanted by the older children to the young in a mischievous attempt to ruin sleep. She, as most of the Tribe, had been both recipient and inflictor of the tales, so she was unsure if any held merit. Waroo's daughters were worse. Their crimes were undeniably true.

They had dug an unauthorized tunnel for their exclusive pleasure, and had snuck out countless times late in the early times of the day to kill barbarously. Second Hunter had discovered them when he returned delayed from a particularly harrowing kill. They were gorging themselves on a small striped whale while it still lived. It was trapped in the ice floes, with only the small crack between two monolithic sheets providing enough space for it to take an occasional shallow breath. It could not escape, and weakened from hunger would not survive the dark season even if the air pocket was not sealed. Apparently, they had been coming out for several days and carefully hacking off chunks to eat raw. From the accusations of Second Hunter, based on the positioning of the triplets' hacking, they would have continued this for at least several more days. Beaten to submission and in great pain, he had brought them in forcibly, but alive. It was miraculous he was able to restrain himself. She remembered the rage trembling in his blood soaked and pulpy hands as he left to free the spirit of the wretched animal. This was to be meat preserved for times of need. The torture it had endured was too disturbing for consumption in any but the most extreme of circumstances. The Elders' barely convened before passing their judgment. Their crimes were sufficiently dire to warrant banishment. Besides the sacrilege of allowing suffering, the bleating cries of the whale had been distraught enough for other animals to circumvent the Tribe's hunting arena altogether. All hunters faced an ordeal that dark season finding meat as a result. Even middle and cold food was scarce. As the triplets' belongings were gathered for destruction, and the menders prepared for the grotesque but necessary duties of rendering them harmless, rumors of other atrocities began to circulate. The triplets were nearly mother's age. Season after season of suspicious occurrences were remembered and re-explained with their possible macabre involvement. Many mysteries -- some even involving the little ones -- were attributed to their secret tunnel. The triplets admitted to all of it, whether it was truly their doing or not. They were, above all else, unrepentant. They claimed the Tribe had stifled the true nature of the people, and that cringing under the ice whenever little ones came around was the behavior of middle food. They shrieked that the Tribe had to discard the trappings of comfort, shed their cooking pits, their cozy homes, and the clothing that separated them from the land. They were hunters, and hunters cared nothing for the trappings of the civilized. The Elders above all were the focus of their most severe contempt. Hunters did not tend those who have passed their ability to contribute to the Tribe, and it was blasphemous to them that the weakest of the Tribe were in positions to pass judgment on they who claimed to be the strongest.

The triples' ramblings went on until they were replaced by screams of pain when the menders severed the mandated one hand, one foot, one eye and ear. They were

carried, bound and hooded, to their prison, a vast, hollow chamber within a mountain. Its only entryway was a narrow hole at the apex. All exiles were discarded into that hole. After their undignified and painful drop, the triplets joined the twenty to twenty five others who had in previous seasons been deemed too repulsive to remain with the Tribe. They were abandoned there with no food, clothing, or comforts. Their one remaining hand was too meager to scale up the sheer walls to the entrance. Even if stubborn strength proved enough to escape, the one foot was inadequate to carry them back and their single eye and ear insufficient to gain a sense of place in the white landscape. There was a cave with no access other than for dropping the doomed. Composed of abhorrent, inflexible rock, it was a hole for depositing and forgetting the Tribe's waste. They would live and eventually die feeding on the crusted molds lining the stones, and the charity of the people they harmed most.

Every full moon, a satchel was laid out in the dining hall. Someone would pick it up ... Or not. If the satchel remained untouched, then no one was willing to make the trek for the banished, so a collection for them would be wasted. If however, someone made the spiritual decision to travel the journey to bring scraps to the ungrateful, they took up the satchel and walked the dining hall. The Tribe gave what they felt. The collection was always robust, even in lean times, as an honor to the collector more than from pity for the exiles. The collector immediately embarked on the five day walk to the single tight exile opening atop a mountain. A sturdy rock jutted nearby, ideal for latching a rope. Collectors anchored themselves to the rock, and descended, swinging to a platform well above the reach of the exiles and called them out. They passed the satchel to those who responded, and spoke to any who wished to hear news. They were to listen to those few who wished to speak and leave.

From the first opportunity after the exile of his only children, Waroo had been collector. He had been consistently stoic in his duties. Other than when he carried the satchel around, he never acknowledged his daughters, or what he encountered in his treks. In confidence, Waroo's sister had confided to First Huntress that each visit they cried and pleaded for their father to free them. They yanked at his guilt and sorrow, screaming of their torment at the hands of the other exiles until burdened beyond his ability to endure, Waroo would start to leave. Then the sobs transformed to their true nature, and the profanities and curses echoed inside him long after the sound died away.

This last visit was different. No one had met Waroo at the platform. No one who Waroo could see. His uncertainty was because the cavern was obscured with a fog of fine, acrid dust which was densest near the ground. That too was different, as was the hum. Waroo described a directionless discomfiting hum so faint and unfamiliar, he was not sure whether it truly existed or if it was a product of his fear. He called many times, with no response. The emptiness was complete, even with his keen eyes and ears. Waroo

was desperate to climb down and look for his daughters, but feared they were merely hiding as a means of trapping him. First Huntress shuddered, remembering the profound sadness in Waroo's voice as he spoke so plainly of his daughters' treacherous nature, and wondered whether she would even have bothered to investigate had he not been so bent with anguish.

First Huntress pitied him and had agreed to take this journey for answers.

The wind picked up, jarring First Huntress back to the present task. Her hair had dried in the breeze. Her ankle did not appear to remember the fall, and the meat filled her limbs with strength. Reattaching her pack, a quick spring resumed her journey and she was soon ascending the last hill. At this summit, was the resolution to Waroo's mystery. She hoped silently as she climbed that there had been some sort of rock collapse which wiped them all out as they slept. Although the banished deserved a long, miserable life, Waroo did not. His self-imposed punishment should end.

She reached the hill top, and found disappointment. There was nothing.

The rock was there, as was the hole. She could even make out faint imprints of Waroo's tracks not quite smoothed over by the drifts. Curious, what did she expect? And why did the absence of anything of interest trouble her? First Huntress approached the hole cautiously. Her spear balanced comfortably in her tensed hand. Scanning the ground proved fruitless. Only she and Waroo had been here. This location had been selected precisely because all around, the land was dead. No meat ventured this deeply inland, or this high. The ice thinned here to a tattered shallow blanket strewn sloppily over the brittle, dark, stiff, useless rock. Barely knee deep and gradually disappearing altogether as the rock jutted upward to a steep precipice in the distance, a reliable home was impossible to mold. Beyond the rock was better ice, but the waters were treacherous, and the hunt too difficult. She had been here several times before for various reasons, and always she shuddered as the barrenness seeped in through her keen senses. Here, this portion of the land was ever a dead place, befitting dead souls. But was there more now? Was it merely the mystery that keened her reflexes to expect danger? Had she forgotten how bleak this place was? Or was her body screaming a message that her mind did not yet understand?

There were no answers to her troubled wariness on the surface. If she wanted to know the truth of what had occurred, she would have to descend into the chamber. The exiles' opening was a circular, black foul smelling pore cut into gray, foul smelling rock. She could make out nothing within from the outside.

She unrolled thick, sturdy rope from her pack, fit it snugly around the jutting stone, and without hesitation, spear hoisted at the ready, she lowered herself and her

troubled thoughts with one hand and her feet. At first her descent was purposefully slow, allowing for her eyes to acclimate to the dimness. Strangely enough, she felt less disturbed the moment she began her drop. The dread did not return until her feet touched the platform. Then she knew. The faint unmistakable vibrations of machinery coursed through her soles. Once attuned to them, her ears picked up the resonations bouncing off the cavern walls. Her body had sensed them outside, on the surface, pulsating through her feet, but they were pallid and too muffled for her mind to give them heed. In here they were clear, strong and unnerving...

Little ones.

The sound was immersive, directionless, and penetrating. It was more vexing because the fine floating silt Waroo mentioned saturated the air all throughout the cave, confounding any effort on her part to give the vibrations direction. From this vantage, through the silt, she had an unobstructed view of the chamber. It was as empty as Waroo had stated.

Where were the exiles?

First Huntress scanned the chamber walls. Numerous passages led off this main room. Most of them were either too narrow or shallow to be more than indents. Some were just too precarious for an exile to reach. She identified four which seemed satisfactory for usage. Discoloration of the ground leading to the four hinted of the worn appearance of heavy foot traffic, validating her guess.

First Huntress removed her second rope from her pouch and lowered herself from the relative safety of the platform to the dwelling surface of the banished. The ground repulsed her. The idea that exiles had trod on the very floor she stood on filled her with revulsion. What's more, it was rock. Rock was permanent. It did not replenish itself as ice did. All filth and vileness that touched a spot had no means of dissolving away other than on the foot of anyone unfortunate enough to make contact with it. She would have to spend an entire day submerged within a fresh snow bank to regain her cleanliness. But that would wait. The vibration was stronger here.

First Huntress took a moment to gauge her surroundings. She was at the center of an average sized cavern. From here she could see that the platform she had descended from was a toppled column roughly three hunters high and just to the side of the room's center. That it lined up so directly below the only opening, ten hunters up suggested that the column had once stretched to plug the entrance itself. Enough fragments remained strewn about to support her conclusion. Its collapse had served the dual purpose of allowing the Tribe access and a safe vantage for exchanges with the exiles. In addition to the definitively stronger vibrations, the ground was slightly sticky. Seasons of messily

devouring the Tribe's generosity littered the rock her bare feet stood on. Off to a corner, she also noticed the skeletal remains of some of the less tenacious exiles piled messily. They were long dead and desecrated. She winced at the jagged tooth marks riddling them. More hurt for an already burdened land.

"Three days," First Huntress cursed aloud with gritted teeth, "I will sleep in the freshest drift I can find for three days. Little ones be damned!"

She moved using the vibrations as her beacon. They intensified in the direction of the highest accessible corridor. At the entrance, First Huntress was pummeled by a new set of signals. Their strength was impressive considering that none of the stimuli entered her eyes. Barely any of the light dripping from the high ceiling gap reached here. What little did, merely lit the dust, which was quite dense, and apparently oozing out from this opening. It tasted acrid, stuck to her wet skin, and irritated her eyes, causing them to water and itch. She shut them tightly. Her vision was useless here anyway, and for the moment, she did not need sight. She had her place-sense, and she had noted the cave layout during her descent. The vibrations were also loud enough here to allow her ears to hone in on them. She need not rely exclusively on her feet. The scents too pointed her way. They were increasingly overpowering. Pungent living flavors, reeking of bodily deposits, mingled with the moldy pulverized rock. This tunnel was unquestionably where the exiles agreed to eliminate their wastes. The ground was slushy. First Huntress nearly voided her middle food from the realization that she was standing on and breathing the bodily rejections of every exile the Tribe had ever discarded.

"*Four* days! And the Elders will grant me an extra hunt!" she declared. Her repugnance was so severe; it took a moment for her to recognize the other odor. There was death here too. This was unexpected. No life other than what was cast down by the Tribe existed in this wretched place. That was why it had been selected as the bin for depositing the exiles. Had they finally killed one another?

She sniffed purposefully, taking in the smells. Ignoring the abhorrent, but expected, she refined her understanding of the mystery. The scents wafted up her nostrils, interacting with her memories, transforming into a frightening image in her mind;

Wet, pungent - the death was fairly recent.

Intense, concentrated - a large death. Several big animals, or many, many smaller ones.

Diverse, sour, foul, and meaty - marrow and intestine blended with muscle and flesh. A sloppy death, screaming of violence.

Blind and now revolted, First Huntress' every instinct warned her to avoid this path. Had she been merely one of the Tribe, she would have honored her instincts and done as Waroo. But she was First Huntress - the strongest of the Tribe, the Advocate of the People and Bringer of Meat. She alone had won and now wielded the First Spear. She, and only she, was allotted three kills. She was the one chosen to enter such paths so the remainder of the Tribe would never have to.

Without any more reluctance than to take a last breath of the not-quite-so fetid air, First Huntress crossed the threshold into the passage. Within a turn or two, the silt ate up what little remnants of the dim cavern light that still lingered. She was submerged in dense, utter and complete blackness. Moving cautiously, using her spear tip as a probe, her progress was frustratingly slow. The main path divided into many side tunnels, which she unceremoniously discovered, was *precisely* where the exiles did their relieving. She inspected a few before deciding her course was not within them. The waste tunnels were vile but did not reek of the death or pulse with the vibrations so strongly. She was able to further distinguish the main path because, with the exception of an incidental light run-off, it was thankfully waste free. The path proceeded at a slightly declined arc for a substantial distance. The curve was annoying since it did not allow her to sense much of what lay in front of her until she was nearly upon it. By her estimates, she had turned and was meandering parallel and quite close to the precipice edge. Occasionally she would venture to open her eyes to test their effectiveness. After an indefinite time, she began to make out some shapes, and tried to reason that it was because her vision was finally acclimating, but knew better. Even the sharpest eyes needed some light to work with. She still tasted the silt that enveloped her. It had easily swallowed the light at this corridor's mouth. Sunlight must be seeping in from elsewhere.

She was coming to another opening.

Had the exiles, despite their maiming, managed to tunnel through raw rock to free themselves? Or had there been a collapse within the cavern to create an opportunity for the Tribe's waste to spill out on the land once more? The very idea turned her belly. She hoisted her spear at the shoulder and tensed her stance. Her upper body arched back bowlike. She quivered with the tightness on every step, a taut coil ready to spring her fury at the first sign of a quarry. Yet as she shuffled forward, the sensations steadily amplifying, none appeared. How long or how far she proceeded like this was difficult to determine in the featureless tunnel. It had to have been a significant distance because her muscles were in the first stages of knotting up. At last, after countless twists, First Huntress reached both the cause of the vibrations, the source of the silt, and the light. She also found the answer to Waroo's mystery. And there was death, so much mindless, horrific, senseless death. The sheer immensity of the desecration alone was enough to lock her soul into a nightmare. So much life snuffed without any possibility of the

resources passing on to the living. So much waste! And the torment! How long had the torment endured?

At this point, her revulsion overpowered her control, and she finally lost her meal. Middle food chunks poured from her mouth, forming ugly splats on the ground. Each surge from her gut mingling with frozen blood pools and rock. A howl of anguish arose, as the impact of the atrocities her bare feet were forced to touch percolated within her. The food eventually ebbed, being finite, but her anguish continued for much longer. She lost any recollection of time as she moaned. Death stench saturated, as was the deep unmuffled whirl of the little ones' rock crumbling device. She swayed slightly, narrowly balanced between the urge to collapse, and the horrid repercussions she would suffer if more of her skin touched the defiled ground. Her despair eventually won, and she fell to her knees. Dropping her attack posture, her spear clanged loudly on the stone. It was useless here. In this reviled place, nothing physical could harm her.

Time passed. It must have, her throat was hoarse, yet she did not recollect making noise. She was dazed, her spirit torn to bits, but she had regained control. In a limp attempt to find some solace in the atrocity she had been immersed in, First Huntress began a search to alleviate suffering. The corridor had ended at another cavern nearly as wide as where she had entered, but nowhere near as tall. Just short of the ceiling, a little one device whirred noisily, hanging perilously from the lip of a tunnel it had apparently created. It was both the vibration and the light source. Three strong white brilliant beams lit the floating dust, which in turn bathed the entire terrible scene in a bluish tinge.

First Huntress maneuvered cautiously between the corpses. Exiles riddled with the holes from the little one weaponry were strewn everywhere. Some of the exiles gripped little one, or rather little one portions -- limbs, heads, torso segments of various sizes-- in their dead and bloodied fists. As if this land could tolerate more vileness, it was apparent they had been feasting when they died. She found a small pit area where the exiles had corralled their quarry for holding. A severely mangled, still smoldering exile corpse clutching the remains of a little one in its chest laid across the entry. In the corral were three dead but fairly intact little one bodies. They too were riddled with the holes. Following a loose spiral, First Huntress moved along the rocky ledges. She found exile body parts, and more little one corpses. These were different however. They were undesecrated and appeared sturdier and better supplied than their sad counterparts on the cavern floor. Coming to the little one machine, she found the last exile draped over a rock, burn lines carving black bubbly slices on her back, a relatively pristine little one body with its weapon in hand crushed underneath her. Upon turning the exile over, a gaping hole where her jaw should have been marked the end of a powerful conflict. With some difficulty, First Huntress recognized her as one of Waroo's triplets.

The dead little one must have discharged his weapon just as the triplet crushed him. First Huntress could not help but acknowledge the bravery that must have required. No doubt killing this triplet saved many of his tribe. No doubt, this little one knew he would be dead in moments, yet he had maintained sufficient composure to fell a savage exile. Granted the weaponry was formidable, but no weapon ever worked in the hands of someone too frightened to wield it.

*So some of the little ones possessed hunters' hearts.* This was a new, unnerving revelation to her.

First Huntress knew as she rummaged she would have to return quickly with many strong backs to disguise the true horror of what had occurred here from the little ones. The task would be arduous, but simple. Other similar hidings speckled the Tribe's lore, none to mask anything near as heinous, but the essentials of concealment were well understood by the Tribe. The little ones never suspected a culprit more sinister than the harsh luck of the land. They would arrive eventually, gather their dead and depart, ignorant of those who slew them. All the Tribe needed to accomplish was removing any conflict with their predetermined conclusions. Given the harm inflicted, First Huntress imagined nothing short of a rockslide would provide a sufficiently convincing direction for their blissfully ignorant minds. And even that was doubtful. Little ones were many things. They exhibited quite stupid behavior on numerous occasions. They were not feeble minded.

Beyond the whirring machinery, nearly obscured by the hulking mass and its blinding artificial lights, was a second machine, then a third and a fourth. Beyond them, a softer illumination, natural and familiar, promised of another access to this cavern of atrocity. Finding no life, longing for untainted air, she made her way to the light source. Pushing past the vibrating machine that obviously had created the new entrance was difficult work, but the traumatized vehicle yielded eventually to the prying of her spear, plummeting to the cavern floor. She moved through a tunnel too disturbingly smooth to be natural, all the while gaping, "They can penetrate rock!"

Despite the circumstances, she was undeniably impressed.

The remaining machines impeded her progress. She could not push them aside. There were too many, and the tunnel too narrow for her to gain any leverage. Inspired by the promise carried by crisp outside breezes occasionally brushing in from the end of the tunnel, and the repugnance of retracing her walk through the torrent of desecrations, First Huntress suffered to touch the horrid rock and squeeze by them. Pressing hard against the wall, she slid her large frame past the little one wreckage. A clean smear formed on the newly carved wall marking her progress. Her fair hair, white bare back, and the brown buttock portion of her travel suit blackened as she scooped up the recently deposited

smoke and gore. When the final vehicle was cleared, the wall she rubbed was decorated with a traced smooth, unbroken line, and her entire backside from hair to thighs was caked in bloody soot. But she was outside.

Her progress through the obstacle ridden tunnel allowed her eyes time to again adjust to the extreme change. First Huntress found herself at the base of the cliff she had walked through. Her upward glance met the sheer unclimbable rock wall stretching to the sea and forever into the empty barrens that was the remainder of the continent. She could barely make out the stone outcrop where her first rope tethered. First Huntress was apprehensive that her return journey to the Tribe had to commence at the summit of this blighted pile of rock, and that meant going through the tunnel again, traversing the atrocities, but it was unavoidable.

She needed to regain her composure. The crisp air helped. It was clean here and she gulped it deeply. Each new breath rolled into the recesses of her lungs, displacing the foul stagnant gas she was subjected to inside, strong bellows of her chest muscles expelling the desecration with great pleasure. Her mind cleared somewhat, reminding her that there was the need for haste. The Tribe must be told. Action to conceal this event must be taken immediately. She had already concluded that she would collapse the little one tunnel when she reentered. This would not stop a tribe that could carve rock, but it would hopefully slow them enough to give her the time she needed to arrange the deception.

Lungs cleared in a few breaths, but her body was still filthy. First Huntress looked for a small bank to rub some of the insult off before braving the rock again. She rejoiced at the splendid view that met her. Across the horizon, as far as she could see, a mere short run and a jump away from where she stood, was her precious ice. Thick, bluish, covered with a hunter's height of powdery snow, it was nearly the quality of their home. She had been too distracted to notice it, but now, clearer in thought, she welcomed the white landscape as a tired traveler welcomed a comfortable bed. She remembered now that this ice was familiar to her. Tali had shown her the field when she was young. Long ago, in the early days, the Tribe had considered it a good site for building, but too many islands dotted the sea, making the bottom too shallow for hunting.

Caution seemed a nuisance given where she was, and how desperately she needed cleansing, so with long determined bounding steps, First Huntress sprinted to her destination and leapt.

The fall was short, rapid and cold, the impact muffled. She rose from it instantly, spear still clutched in a throwing stance, waist deep in the blissfully white snow drifts. Her feet mercifully free of the rocks were planted on ice. Here in her element, free from

the infestation of the cavern, she spun herself clean, leaving red and black smudges in her wake. The cold cleansing felt wondrous.

When finally satisfied no trace of the exiles remained, suspended comfortably in the soft snow, she attempted to assemble Waroo's mystery. Little ones had drilled into the mountain's heart. Again First Huntress could not help but marvel at this. They had the tools to slice through rock as the Tribe did through ice. To their misfortune, they had for some reason reached the decision to carve through this particular rock wall, and pierced the cavern of the exiles with horrific consequences for them. The exiles must have easily overpowered their smaller, witless intruders, trapping those they did not immediately dispose of in the pit for their sick pleasure. Then they commenced with the very desecration the legends warned had nearly annihilated the Tribe long ago. Saturated with so much blood to feast on, the exiles' chants, primordial shrieking, and orgies of carnal satisfaction would have resounded throughout the cavern.

Yet Waroo heard nothing.

How could that be?

Waroo did not lie, nor could he have missed the noise. This must therefore have been the scene he would have encountered had he braved the cavern floor. Everyone—exile, little one, triplet-- was already long dead.

Waroo was strong for his age, but weighted with it as well. His return journey to the Tribe must have been five days, faster perhaps if his worry pushed him but never less than four days. She had left immediately, not spending more than the briefest of moments preparing, and traveled for three. This would mark at least seven to eight days since the butchering took place. It could not be much more. The dust would have settled, and surely their machinery could not whirl indefinitely. But precisely who was butchered? The exile's desecration, heinous though it appeared, was not as thorough as their reputations would warrant. The exiles' corpses were as long frozen as the little ones. But if the exiles killed the little ones, where were the survivors? If the little ones persevered, where were they? Had this been a perfect annihilation? Had each group merely wiped the other out?

Not likely.

If she could trust her memory, she counted eighteen dead exiles. All marred with little one weapons. Yet she only remembered a few intact little one corpses. Nowhere near enough to account for felling so many of the banished. Did the exiles rebel against one another? Did they pick up and use little one weaponry?

Or were the exiles defeated?

First Huntress pulled herself out of the snow to search her surroundings. Her answer appeared in the horizon. Far off, nearly beyond her sight's ability to distinguish, she saw signs of a little one camp. As she stood, intending to make her way to investigate, she heard a sound, or rather the end of a sound behind her. The little one machine finally ceased its whirring. That change drew her attention to the tunnel again. It appeared no different than when she last saw it, except in two spots, rather than the blackness, there was a faint, almost invisible shimmer. More shimmers appeared at various perches along the cliff wall, or perhaps they were there all along, and she had simply been too revolted to have noticed them until now. As she considered the significance of this observation, she heard a sharp pop in the distance and a felt painful prick on her arm soon after. She had just enough time to notice blood dripping from the prick before several more pops resonated, and her body reeled in pain. Instinctively, she twisted her frame downward and disappeared in the soft snow leaving a trail of red from various pricks. Searing sounds whizzed all around her as tiny projectiles zipped through the ice, melting the white in their wake.

That she was under a little one attack was obvious.

That she would more than likely die of the attack was obvious too.

## Chapter 3: First Mender

First Huntress again awoke in pain. This time however it was not the dull soreness born of exertion. She actually welcomed that sensation because it confirmed that she had not held back in her efforts. There was no such validation here. Sharp, tight unfamiliar pangs searing from many many places along her entire body screamed acutely for her attention. Individually, each was sufficiently harsh to bring her close to convulsions. Blazing in unison, they were overwhelming. The pain was a fire. It raged unbridled through her consciousness, incinerating her every thought to a dusty white ash until it alone reigned. Her mind demanded that she immediately extinguish the sources, but there were so many, her body writhed violently, futilely, and without relief. Her strength quickly drained away, degrading the writhing to a soft convulsion.

First Huntress moaned. She attempted to roll into a ball. That was when she noticed the restraints. The realization of capture overrode her torment, and her mind returned to her, but barely. She was bound at the wrists and ankles, seated propped against a smooth wall of obvious little one construction. Her arms were outspread, elevated slightly above the shoulder and supported by a series of sloppily arranged slings draped from the ceiling. Her legs extended uncomfortably apart in front of her, ankles gripped in thick metal cuffs leading to chains anchored to opposite walls. Most of her wounds were tended. Her belongings were gone. Her clothing had been replaced with a thin loose fitting sheet. She could not see her spear.

Her head hurt as much as the remainder of her other pains combined.

All around her she heard the high pitched, excited, shrill chatter of little ones. There was a scurrying sound - a gurgle - and her pain began to perceptibly ebb. A relentless, thick dull fog rolled in over her mind, extinguishing the shards of torment. Her convulsion ceased. At first, the glorious relief was so pleasurable; she welcomed the fog. She even smiled. But the fog's effect was unremitting. Exhibiting the same selfish thoroughness of its vanquished foe, it continued its invasion into her mind, suppressing her thoughts.

She was groggy. Her spirit wanted desperately to fight the shackles that restrained her, but she could not muster the will to give the effort her attention. A shrill squawking agitating her left ear cut through her haze, and she moved instinctively to swat it away. To her surprise, her hand did not respond to her commands. It was a tremendous exertion merely to open her eyes and turn her head to see the source of the rude sound.

Little ones were working around her left arm. The noise had come from a device in the possession of a very nervous little one male. Thin, rectangular, the color of old ice, about the size of the hand which was furiously working to quiet it, the flat box emitted little one voices which from the fearful looks of the owner, was as unexpected an occurrence for him as it was for her. She watched his efforts. They were quite comical. Curiously, he succeeded in quelling the noise when one of his companions gathered what appeared like small shiny stones, and touched them to his ears. The stones lit, emitting the same soft hue as the box. The noise was gone, as was her interest in that section of the room.

Glancing forward, she found three little ones wielding the weaponry that she assumed brought her down, positioned tensely in front of her. They kept their distance, but underestimated her speed. One sweep of her spear would have easily pulverized them all. But she could muster no energy to move against them. And she did not have her spear. Even in her thick state, that revelation was agony. She, the mighty First Huntress, Advocate of the Tribe, had lost the First Spear.

A jarring pain ripped through her left arm. She cried out, whipping her head around to address the cause. The rapid head spin made her unbelievably nauseous, and she could not help but scowl at the whimper she heard come out of her own mouth. What had these creatures done to her? Fighting the sickness, she strained to twist her position so she could see what they were doing, scattering the little ones and agitating the weapon wielders. Her strength quickly drained, but she succeeded in gaining some vantage. A small metallic device with handles suited for little one fingers was inserted rather deeply in her arm, as were various tubes winding up to clear, liquid filled satchels. Several of the satchels appeared to contain blood. She could not determine whether they were filling or draining. The others were filled with water, and they were definitely flushing it through the tubes into her arm.

Satisfied that her tirade was for the moment ended, the weapon wielders stood down somewhat, and the little ones returned to her arm. One of them, a female, by the curve of her form, appeared to be a leader. She, like all the rest in the room, even the weapon wielders, was garbed head to toe in an impossibly white garment, or rather it would have been, had it not been spattered with copious amounts of (presumably First Huntress') blood. They further concealed their features with masks, eye protection, and gloves. First Huntress supposed this particular little one was in command because the others revolved around her. Taking up the handle of the metal device, the little one leader moved it. First Huntress' pain increased dramatically there, and she moaned her complaint. The little one leader immediately stopped and squeaked what sounded like instructions to some of her kind behind First Huntress. Shuffling sounds signified the prompt performance of those instructions. The little one female reclasped the device, and

the pain returned although it was not as severe as the last time. Perhaps she was prepared for it. First Huntress did not have much time to contemplate because in a moment the device withdrew, and she saw that an elongated pellet resembling an arrowhead was extracted from her at the end of the device. Other little ones cleaned the hole in her skin with colored fluids and sealed it in a white sticky cloth.

“You are menders.” First Huntress slurred, frightening all the little ones into a withdrawal. All except the leader. She did not flinch. First Huntress noted that she must be their First Mender. Instead she squeaked more commands. In response, the satchels were inspected, some knobs were adjusted.

First Huntress lost consciousness.

## Chapter 4: Tali

Tali was nearly finished with the last of the excuses she could think of that kept her near Waroo's home. After scrubbing the trails until they shimmered and volunteering to help cook the meal for this clan of the Tribe under the pretense that her cooking was unfairly judged as inadequate by her neighbors, she was now assisting Miallo and his sons with the repair of their home's entryway. From her vantage on the porch, while hoisting the ice blocks up, she could nearly touch Waroo's main room wall, and if she concentrated, her ears were keen enough to overhear through the ice- what? The sobs of a broken man? A confession? A conspiracy? What exactly did she expect to uncover? What bothered her mind so? Kav- *First Huntress*- was delayed less than a day. And while disturbing because her unaccounted absence was unprecedented, she was a magnificent First Huntress and she wielded the spear. A danger was difficult to imagine which could threaten her. Where she traveled was barren, an uneventful bland journey to an unpleasant but not precarious destination. Even if acting in unison before the menders maimed them, the entire exile population was no match for her daughter's prowess.

Has First Huntress perhaps been duped by the treacherous rejects? Or has she suffered a misstep in her travel and was hobbled in some way? Or had the descending rope snapped? Tali again went through the myriad of horrors explaining her daughter's absence. None rang true save one, and she was not prepared to think that yet. So she shadowed the man who last visited her daughter's destination hoping to gather a scrap of knowledge that would alleviate her angst. She was so focused on her trio of tasks, grinding possibility after possibility through the mill of her mind, while her body lifted the blocks to Miallo's grateful but confused hands, all the while holding Waroo's movements in her periphery, that the sudden appearance of Waroo's sister startled her.

"Tali, why do you hunt Waroo?" she asked plainly, no hint of accusation in her tone. The woman's name was Moro, but since the triplets' banishment, she had been addressed mostly as Sister, not from animosity for the stains her nieces' acts had inflicted on the land, but from admiration for the affection she showed her brother despite their crisis. She was a large, plain, generous woman good and strong, one of the few who did not wither from Tali's unintentional but unmaskable intimidation. She never hesitated to approach her as Advocate. In keeping with her kind heart, her petitions had always been for others. To Tali's recollection she had never requested a matter for herself. Her calm soul was a stark contrast to the wild turmoil surrounding Waroo's life. That his daughters had attained their savagery from their deceased mother was common knowledge. The woman was never exiled, having perished in an ice slide when the triplets were adolescents, but the Tribe consensus was that the ice had spared the menders the trouble

of performing the maiming. From their birth, Moro had attempted to divert the spew of her brother's mate. She toiled relentlessly to retrieve her nieces from the torrent the mother's blood brewed. Not long after the foul woman perished, she tried to step in and mother the girls, offering a path of kindness to curdle the venom coursing through their souls, but for them it was too late. The infection had festered, and she had lost them. So she cared for Waroo, taking on his burdens while he trudged to deliver the offerings to his brats, and providing a shoulder when he returned. She knew her brother was a gentle and very weak man. She had quietly accepted the role as his protectorate. Her own family- husband and three children- clearly did not understand, nor did they very much approve of her devotion, but they loved her enough to stay clear of her while she did this. Tali admired her.

“Tali, I have spoken to you directly. Will you not answer?” Moro pressed.

“I do not hunt him Moro: I hunt his thoughts” Tali replied. She was never any good at deception, and Moro was someone who deserved plain answers.

“He has no knowledge of First Huntress' whereabouts, unless you are suggesting he was part of a plot by the exiles to-”

“No, no Moro, your brother is a clean soul. While I do not eliminate the possibility that he has been duped, that thought does not resonate.” With a slightly bowed head, she added, “I confess that I am keenly frightened of what does.”

Moro was taken aback at the impact of this revelation. Tali feared only one thing. Moro had not ranked First Huntress' delay as much more than a curiosity. Having accompanied Waroo before, she knew how far the walk was, and how shoddy the tunnels were along the fringe. She also understood, perhaps better than anyone else but Waroo, how complicated an encounter with exiles could become. A Tribe so in tune with their land held a natural inclination to mending. It was difficult to gaze upon a site beyond their ability to heal. The exiles' impression triggered powerful emotions. Their squalor and pathetic condition amplified their pleadings for mercy, freedom, or whatever it was they desired at the moment. To uncalloused ears, this sounded so sincere, they concealed the memory of the crimes that warranted their banishment. Surrendering to the urge for compassion had cost several lives over the seasons. Only by the strongest restraint did any from the Tribe stay safe. Waroo mastered the control because he had been immersed in deception and hatred so long. To those whose lives were blessed with the warmth of affection, this proved daunting. Moro did not doubt First Huntress could hold herself back, but she would not be surprised if the effort explained her delay. Moro related all this to Tali who listened patiently, nodding in agreement, but not with her heart.

“My apologies Moro,” Tali said once Moro concluded her explanation. “Your words ring true in my mind, but not in my soul. I had considered some of what you said. I understand that it is the likely truth-”

“But you are certain she has been harmed by little ones.” Moro interrupted with a fixed but not unsympathetic gaze. Tali’s mouth gaped in mid word at the stark exposure of her worries. She fought the embarrassment at how ludicrous it sounded when uttered aloud. Her daughter could outfight, outrun, and outwit the entire Tribe if she had to. Her fears of the little ones were merely unfounded lingering shudders of childhood memories, stoked by fatigue and age.

“No, I-” she started, then stopped. “I just-” she continued, and stopped again. “It is just that I think-” she attempted a third and final sad time before surrendering. “I fear my daughter is lost to them Moro. I do not know why I do, and I am angered that I cannot purge my mind clear of this thought. Perhaps if I spoke with Waroo for a moment, he could carve an opening of clarity from the worry which envelops me, and I can escape from this stupid elderly cowardice.” At this, Tali’s shoulders slumped. She leaned weakly against the building, fists reflexively tightening and loosening. Her head tilted upwards, eyes squeezed shut, jaw clenched white. Tremors of her frustration vibrated up the walls. Had someone just noticed her, they would have concluded she had been defeated in a battle, which was partially true. Tali had at this moment, lost her struggle to resist aging. Her mind was now subject to her body, where until an instant ago, the reverse was true. Every pore, every muscle, bone, and drop of blood within her *knew* First H- *Kavra* was in danger. Her daughter, her only child, her stunning and graceful creation, the solitary focus of her pride and love, was hunted, exposed and vulnerable while she sat impotent in the Tribe doing chores. Tali’s mind knew this was the proper approach. *Kavra* would be better positioned for finding her return without the meddling of a silly mother to worry about, but her heart did not care.

“I need to speak with Waroo,” was all she could utter.

Miallo and his sons had been following the conversation below from their perch over the nearly completed entryway. There was nothing else to do. Interrupting would have been ruder than listening. Tali’s block feed had halted, and she was by the ladder. Miallo “accidentally” dropped the shaving tool he was using to chip the ice blocks to their final form. Both women immediately looked up.

Miallo was standing on the edge, a son at either side. The threesome’s thick, unruly, black hair, laugh-crinkled eyes, and broad shoulders, left no question as to their relation. Their similarity was all the keener because Miallo was clean faced, a rarity among the Tribe men. He had mentioned once to Tali that his mate preferred his face exposed thus and he preferred to please his mate. Long after her death, Miallo continued

to shave in homage to her memory. The three wore dark hide work tunics and boots. Their skin was therefore covered to the shoulders with tool laden pockets. Miallo's barrel chest and thick arms held the weights effortlessly. The garments comically sagged and yanked the two boys, the oldest barely commencing adolescence. They bore the tools and the accompanying discomfort proudly because it made them resemble their father even more.

"Our apologies ladies. We did not mean to overhear, but your choice of location for this intimate talk left us no alternative." Miallo said with a pleasant smile. "Tali, because of your involvement, we are nearly done with the repairs. There is a debt of gratitude from my family to you. I would like to offer payment. Speak with Waroo. I hope he will ease your distress, but if he does not, my sons and I will accompany you to the exiles' hole. We will find First Huntress and deflect some of the anger she will undoubtedly let loose in response for meddling. I have always intended for my sons to see where we deposit the banished before they move on to their independence. My father took me when I was the age of my eldest, and I remember it as a profound lesson. This seems as apt a time as any, and I would enjoy the journey all the more with your company. What is your answer lady?"

Moro failed to restrain the smile washing over her face. Miallo had been stalking Tali for some time. They were both widowed, of the same age, and obviously enjoyed each other's company quite a bit. Tali's sternness had repeatedly stifled Miallo's advances. He was an undeniably patient man, a natural hunter who relentlessly stalked his prey, ever watchful for an opening, which he pounced on immediately and without delay. Tali was too weakened from her worry to resist the offer, but as a credit to her stubbornness tried anyway.

"Thank you Miallo, but I am sure I can run the journey alone."

"Then I will take my sons there without you, and it will be merely coincidence that we begin at the same time. After all, who in the Tribe has the right to say when a journey can commence?"

At this, even Tali grinned. He was indeed a very good hunter. His offer was both noble and generous. Perhaps after she settled her worries, she may even allow herself to be caught.

"Very well Miallo, I thank you for the company of your family," she said to the man her position had trapped on the roof. She and Moro moved away from the ladder, just beyond ear range of the three men. They enjoyed a few moments of the good natured teasing Miallo endured from his sons, then turned to one another.

“I do not wish to burden Waroo more than necessary. He is barely able to suppress his anguish. Should it emerge, he may not have the strength to draw it back in,” Moro spoke with resignation. Tali knew from the inflection of her voice she would speak with Waroo. This was a formality Moro was going through to diminish the damage the talk may inflict on her fragile brother.

“I have no quarrel with him Moro. Accompany me, and counsel your brother when we speak. I seek clarity, not vengeance. And I will not press what you do not wish pressed. Is this acceptable my friend?”

“Yes Tali. Thank you.”

Together, the two women set off to Waroo’s home seeking answers to questions sane people should never have to ask.

## Chapter 5: First Huntress

Again and again First Huntress would ebb and flow from her slumber. Each waking interval was dominated by little ones prodding at her with their bright noisy machines in a number of bizarre, sometimes painful, often times intrusive manners. Always their intent was unknown. Always they were careful in their administrations, chastising one another many times over at even her slightest complaint. At one point, her tormentors' outfits changed. Gone were white garments, the head coverings, and the masks. They dressed in loose colorful clothing revealing their features. First Huntress was surprised to note that while there was a tapestry of sizes, shapes and colors to the little ones, many actually resembled the Tribe's colors and hues quite closely. Physically, but for their diminutive size, they could easily be kin.

They worked around her, mostly ignoring First Huntress, but a few wrapped soothing cold wet cloths over her head. Some even attempted to smile at her.

What manner of creature was this?

What were they doing to her?

Why could she not remain awake long enough to gauge her predicament?

When First Huntress was a child, she and her cousins had tried the dream stones—small white forbidden rocks found in the remote flats, which if placed under the tongue, conjured visions. She felt a similar sensation now. Perhaps dream stones had been crushed into the water pouring into her from the array of satchels? She slipped off into troubled sleep again remembering the price the dream stones levied when they wore off.

She was down for what felt like a disturbingly long time. Clearly the longest since she was felled near the exiles' cavern. At first, First Huntress could not congeal her observations with what her place-sense told her. She felt stationary, but her surroundings had changed. She understood the conflict when she recognized her original location at the far wall. The slings and satchels which once supported and flushed through her, now hung limp and unconnected. Piles of the spent white patches saturated with her blood lay there in disturbingly large heaps where she was once propped. Her place-sense was sound. She was stationary. Only her vantage was different. They must have moved her when she was unconscious.

Remembering her experience with the dream stones, she allowed herself a tiny fragment of solace that her head did not ache resoundingly like it did when she and her cousins awoke after their mischief. Her fog lifted as well. She could again think and retain her thoughts, although she was not quite ready to be gratified by that. From the moment her body was stung as she tried to lose herself in the snow, First Huntress was resolved that she had become prey and would not live to see her beloved Tribe again. She was certain that the sum of the tiny injuries she had suffered was lethal. Like gulls on a beached carcass, from a distance with no danger to themselves, the little ones could have picked her clean to the marrow, but her assailants had refrained from doing so. They had retrieved her, alive. They mended her injuries and aside from the initial assault, and her grogginess, they had not returned the torment the exiles so heinously inflicted on them. Then there was the matter of the precision of her wounds. Her head and neck were pain free. Had she their weaponry to wage on a similarly superior adversary, First Huntress would have targeted the head and neck primarily. The neck was crowded with thick unprotected blood vessels, and the skull, while hard to penetrate, bore openings which could blind, deafen, and enrage. There was little doubt they wanted her alive. Perhaps matters may not be as dire as she had concluded. Propped by this ever so narrow sliver of hope, she surveyed her situation.

Rectangular, smooth, flat and grey, the room bore all the characteristics indicative of little one construction. It was small to her, but must have been enormous from their perspective. One double door and one large impossibly transparent window broke the monotony. Evidence of the injuries and the indignities of the mending she must have endured sullied the far end. Her current position in the room was barren except for a small device with a tiny red light on it attached to the wall, and an opening sealed by another smooth flat grey structure. She was bound differently now. She still sat on the floor, leaning against a corner. She felt the unyielding coldness of metal cuffs on her wrists which were secured behind her back. A quick tug verified that they were also attached to the wall. Her ankles were similarly cuffed, tied separately to each adjacent wall, pulling her legs, straight and straddled far apart. A sling under her breasts propped her up, seated against the corner. The purpose of this confinement apparently was not just to immobilize, but to deny her leverage. She was unable to wriggle to a position where she could garner any push, let alone attempt to stand. Noting that the ceiling nearly touched her head as she sat, such an attempt would have been foolish anyhow. A few satchels were still attached to her, as were a collection of new things. Several round flat disks with slender black ropes that came together braided and disappeared from her through an opening in the wall. Three disks were over her left breast, a few on her abdomen, but the majority attached to her head around her eyes and ears. She could feel the ropes as she swung around. The garment that had covered her was lying in a pile between her thighs, having apparently sloughed off as she jostled in sleep, exposing the many injuries she had sustained on her chest and abdomen. Clean versions of the white

sticky rectangles that covered her wounds blanketed the majority of her body. She estimated at least fifty on the portions she could see. Stings from her back and shoulders clearly suggested that the number was significantly higher. The patchwork was so extensive, she may as well have been garbed in them. It covered her modesty more than her missing traveling outfit.

They had mended the injuries they themselves inflicted. Why? They had no hesitation for killing. The exile corpses were an unquestionable testimonial to that. She had seen for herself that they were justified in their desire for vengeance and restoring balance. Were they perhaps so angry at the defilement their kind suffered that they wished to inflict it on her when she was fully mended? First Huntress shivered as an idea wriggled in her mind. Were they going to allow her to heal merely to reinjure her? Did they intend to mend her again afterwards? Was she destined to live out her life suffering wound after wound to pay the blood debt of the exiles? She did not have a chance to contemplate that fate because the opening in front of her unsealed.

The weapon wielders returned, forming a half-circle in front of her. One in particular—the apparent leader by his demeanor—paced behind his wards. He hardly spoke, relying on a look or a hand gesture to get his points across. First Huntress saw that he was an elder. He too wielded a weapon, but it was sheathed in a pouch at his side. First Huntress could not be certain because this was all so novel, but she remembered some of the legends of the little ones. Just as the Tribe has specialists who learned, honed and performed a craft to perfection—fish harvesters, artists, bricklayers, Smiths, cooks, hunters and the like—little ones too were supposed to employ a guild where their members' only job was to fight. They were hunters who killed, but not for food. The word that described them was “Soldier.”

She was guarded by soldiers.

When this quiet little one elder appeared satisfied his soldiers had their prisoner compromised, he motioned outside the doorway, and one more little one joined them.

The purposefulness of her walk was instantly recognizable. First Huntress knew the cadence of her boots before she saw her come in. It was their First Mender. Moving slowly but decisively, she approached First Huntress with her hands wide apart, and her fingers spread, clearly trying to communicate that she had nothing in her possession. She no longer wore the mask and gloves. Instead their First Mender was garbed in a less bulky version of the soldiers' apparel. She was tiny, even by little one measure, but proportionally quite muscular. The dark blue, form fitting single piece outfit that covered her from neck to wrists to calves bulged and creased fluidly as she walked. She drew unquestioned deference from those around her, including the quiet elder. It was she who commanded here. It was she who controlled First Huntress' fate. Her dense black hair

was pulled back into a tight efficient tail. Her skin was quite dark, not as much as some others she had seen, but it contrasted quite starkly with her own glacial hue. She had pleasant eyes, and a face First Huntress was certain laughed a lot, although there was nothing remotely resembling a smile in her fearful gaze now. Cautiously, but with painstakingly purposeful motions, the tiny mender unfastened the attachments adorning First Huntress. First she removed the disks, placing them neatly on a tray. She pointed clearly at each object before detaching it and showed it to First Huntress after each removal. She undid the satchels last and sealed the tiny wounds with yet more sticky white rectangles. First Mender adjusted some of the looser rectangles and nodded to the quiet elder. He returned the nod. She faced First Huntress and extended one arm towards her, fingers and thumb together, pointing up directly at her face. It was an obvious attempt at communication. What did she want? Again, the hand jutted. Not comprehending, First Huntress could do nothing more than stupidly look down at her mender. Her mind must still be sloshing with some residual of the fog because she could not fathom what this creature was implying. No, that was untrue, even sluggish, she should understand something. This was an obviously sentient creature whose Tribe had the mind to conjure frightening devices, powerful enough to fly through the air, decimate a cavern of Tribal refuse, and fell a First Huntress. The little ones' only experience with the Tribe was senselessly violent and savage. There was no reason for them to think of her as any different, so this message must be very simple. The very attempt at communication demonstrated a tremendous civility First Huntress hadn't expected. Despite her predicament and ominous fate, she silently wished there would be a time where she could return the gesture.

Again the hand jutted in her face. Why did she not comprehend? Was it a threat? If the arm movement was swift, it could mean she was symbolically striking First Huntress with the heel of her hand. Perhaps, but the mender's face did not suggest threat. Was it some sort of greeting? With her hands bound, she obviously could not return the gesture. Was she reaching for something? Did she want something from her? They had taken all her belongings, and she was in no position to resist any assault, so that too seemed unlikely.

First Huntress shifted her attention back from the gesture to the little First Mender herself for clues. The physical contrast between the two Tribes could not have been greater in these two representatives. The tiny, dark skinned female, charcoal hair pulled tightly back and held out of her face with a piece of fabric, gazing at her was but for her hands and head covered in neatly arranged garments. What was going through *her* mind as she assessed her large, white skinned, wild haired Advocate of the People, clad solely in a patchwork of little one bindings, bound in front of her? One promising realization was that it wasn't hate. First Huntress did not see that in her eyes.

They held their look for a time, then First Huntress' side cramped and she stretched upwards to alleviate it. This agitated the soldiers. They snapped forward ready to pounce, but the First Mender stopped them... by jutting her hand at them.

First Huntress understood. She was receiving instructions to "be still." She could not convey her comprehension since the mender had spun around to back the soldiers down. In her current predicament, the ones with weapons could see her, but did not consider her anything more than a target; the one who could defuse the moment could not see her. First Huntress was frustrated to have reached an impasse so quickly, having not even been conscious for more than a moment. Any noise she made to get the mender to turn around would draw the wrath of the already nervous soldiers. Her only recourse was to trust in the ability of the little one female to calm her tribe folk. Then her eyes met the quiet elder's. He had apparently never turned his attention away from her. She saw wisdom in them, and again no hate. He nodded his head once. Was this acknowledgement of her attention? She returned the nod as best she could, then carefully she sat back. The process was painfully difficult given her injuries, her bindings, and that she had to accomplish it slowly enough so as not to frighten the tense weapon wielders. It was clumsy, but she managed to retreat enough to satisfy the quiet elder that she understood. Again wordlessly, he walked over, inserting himself between the soldiers and the infuriated First Mender—still heatedly debating—and with a bob of his head, drew their attention to First Huntress, defusing the argument. He retreated to his position at the back of the room. Soldiers regrouped to their original positions, albeit more wary, and the First Mender returned to First Huntress.

Even seated, First Huntress was a full head taller. The mender reached into one of the countless hidden pouches of her garment and retrieved a flat rectangular box about the size of the little one hand which began glowing pale blue on one side with her touch. Again, she juttied the "be still" gesture. Bending down to one of the bound ankles, she pointed the glowing box at a slit in the cusp that held her, and with a "click" her ankle was free. The mender inspected the ankle, applied an ointment to some of the chaffing that built up, repeated the process on the other leg, then sat on the floor facing First Huntress mimicking her position. She remained there for a bit, perhaps to ensure that her audience was aware it was being mirrored. She then put her legs together and bent forward. She did this twice and then stuck her hand out, palm up, as if handing her something, but the palm was empty. This message was much simpler to understand. The upturned palm meant "do as I do." First Huntress leaned forward in the manner she had observed. First Mender rose, added the jutting "be still" command, and maneuvered behind First Huntress. There was a fumbling sound. She felt the little one's hands working on her wrists, then the now familiar "click" and she was unbound. The mender walked back in front of First Huntress and again, sat like her. She moved to a kneeling stance, pointing at her left side below and beside the breast area to draw attention to how

gingerly she treated it as she moved. First Huntress noted the extensive white rectangle latticework on her own ribs comprehendingly. She too kneeled favoring her right side. Even so, there was significant soreness throughout her left chest and back.

The soldiers took her kneeling stance as a cue to action. They opened a panel on a wall, slid a latch over, and the wall with the transparent window disappeared into the floor. Another room, with a much larger door leading to a corridor merged with the chamber they were currently in. Half of the soldiers aggressively brandished their weapons. The other half purposefully departed. From the commotion and shuffling sounds, they had joined a much larger group just outside the room. Many more footsteps than the departing could have made ricocheted off the hall walls. Throughout the chaos, First Huntress observed that the quiet elder was in constant eye contact with the mender. He too had a light blue box similar to the one which the First Mender used. She realized now that this was the same device that had caused so much commotion earlier. Studying the remaining little ones, she realized that they all had the thin blue boxes. Now that she could see them so closely, she also noticed most were adorned with earrings of the same glow. Did perhaps their eyes also glow blue? It seemed so, but she could not be certain. From how they used the boxes, responding when it squawked, nodding acknowledgement, or vigorously shaking dissatisfaction, it appeared they were somehow speaking to each other through them, which was no more impossible than anything else which had transpired.

Eventually, the corridor's shuffling died down. The quiet elder received some sort of satisfying information from his box because he stored it decisively. He gave the mender a nearly imperceptible nod and left the room. First Mender slunk from a kneeling position to a crawl. She took a few shuffles to the door, gave the familiar "do as I do" gesture, then cupped her hand and made a pulling motion towards herself using her entire arm. This third hand gesture, "come", was the easiest to understand, or perhaps she was adjusting to the idea of receiving orders from what she had considered prey. On hands and knees, First Huntress, grimacing with every step, followed the mender out the door.

Lined up evenly on both sides of the hall, weapons ready, were more little ones than she had ever seen in her life- All soldiers. The mender stood, displayed the "come" sign and walked through the gauntlet of weaponry. First Huntress was led down a long, sleek, slightly curved corridor lined tightly with weapon wielders. They choreographed her progress through their devices, running ahead along hidden passages after she passed so she was never out of the range of at least eight of them. Her trek was arduous. She was weak from her injuries, her left side in particular aching more with every movement. She longed to stretch out her soreness, but lying down would only further agitate her wounds, and the confines of the little one hall made standing impossible. Mercifully, she was halted occasionally while the soldiers repositioned. The mender exploited that stillness to

check First Huntress' injuries. She in turn exploited the lull to study her mender who was an interesting paradox.

Unlike the casual, patient, unhurried Tribe menders, infamous for their chatter, the little one First Mender's movements were quietly intense, purposeful and unfaltering, as one would expect of a hunter. She spoke sparingly, and when she did, the words were deliberate and terse. Her hands never fumbled or hesitated as they prodded First Huntress' myriad of injuries. They tested the coverings- adjusting, changing, cleaning - adding white rectangles at a pace hurried by the soldiers, but uncompromising. She used her blue box, unlike the others (as best as First Huntress could determine). She did not communicate with it. She waved it around various portions of First Huntress' body, then studied what appeared to be drawings and writing that drew themselves on the box surface. The First Mender pulled instruction from the figures on her box, often referring to it as she sought new places to mend.

After watching a bit, First Huntress realigned her mindset. This mender's movements were not of a hunter after all. There were too many pauses in her actions. Too much time was spent stepping back to examine her work. Such hesitation was not only unproductive, it was unseemly in a hunter. The better fit was that of an artist.

Which would render First Huntress' body as her sculpture.

And an enthusiastic sculptor she was. From the moment the wielders halted her, guided by the blue box's glow, the tiny hands were in motion, relentlessly prodding the curves and crevices of her torso and limbs. They were strong too. First Huntress winced several times as they probed well beyond the injuries working their way through a surprisingly large area of First Huntress' exposed pale skin. They meandered over parts First Huntress did not think required the mender's attention. She was particularly confused with the interest the mender took in the back of her head and her eyes. At every pause, she would run the box, then her fingers along the nape of her neck, working her way through the hair to her temples. Then she would shine the blue light in each eye. This required cooperation by First Huntress since even fully extended the mender could not reach the neck when she was kneeling. Only when she lowered herself to a crawling stance, propped up by her hands and knees, could the mender hands work their way to First Huntress' head. It was awkward for First Huntress to lie still on all four limbs. Her left side protested painfully, but the mender seemed adamant that there was a need, and the weapon wielders twitched at any sign of defiance her behavior suggested. Compliance was less of a nuisance than the alternative. As the mender worked on her neck and head, First Huntress was able to thoroughly study her attendant's face. It was wise, well beyond the youthful façade her diminutive size and demeanor suggested. The eyes were fearless, resilient. And there was something else. First Huntress could not

capture it at first because it seemed so displaced, but there was clearly an annoyance in the First Mender's expression. Surprisingly, it was not directed at her. The anger was with the soldiers for some reason. She would wince as they passed, exchanging angry scowls when their actions prevented her from tending First Huntress. What manner of creature was this? Did she not know that their promise of harm was the only deterrent holding her at bay? That had they been less diligent in their coverage she would not hesitate to immediately strike her and any other blocking her path to freedom down? A hunter cornered always pursued a path to retreat. It was the reasonable choice. To fight needlessly wasted energy, risked injury, and potentially inflicted needless suffering. Only when the cornering was comprehensive and no path to freedom existed, only then, when left no recourse, did a hunter join with the soldier and kill not merely to eat. A hunter also killed to attain freedom. The weapon wielders knew this, yet this mender with no hatred in her eyes did not.

Curious.

First Huntress took a moment to study the soldiers too. Most were male; all were young looking, if physical comparisons with the Tribe held. Their faces held hatred, that was undeniable, and given their motives, understandable. She was surprised to also sense a more primordial and less noble emotion—lust.

Even more curious.

What manner of creature was this?

They were guarding someone who they had strong presumption slaughtered many of their kind in a most heinous manner. First Huntress would kill all of them instantly if the opportunity arose, and they knew it. Yet she saw the attention her bruised, pale, white rectangle speckled, but otherwise naked body drew. Their eyes unmistakably focused on her sensual components rather than the parts of her which could rip them to pieces. Their obvious physical mismatch aside, what could possibly attract someone to an injured enemy? A brutal killer of their own kind? Even more perplexing to First Huntress was trying to comprehend the mindset that might make them conceive the delusion that she could return their desire. The thought of them fumbling to fulfill the deed their leers contemplated seemed as ludicrous as competing for her attention with the viable males of the Tribe. Picturing their futile, impotent little efforts, she forced back a smile that tried very hard to crease her mouth.

The misplaced lust was apparently the source of the First Mender's irritation. Now that she had identified it, First Huntress connected the stares her little mender shot at the soldiers with their sexually driven harassment. They were triggered whenever one of them "accidentally" brushed too close to her as they repositioned. She had accepted

the pathetic gropes on her thighs, buttocks, and breasts as incidental contacts. She honestly barely felt their weak taps through her hunt-toughened skin and did not understand the mender's fuss. Was she upset her males were showing attention to someone other than herself? This did not match the impression of artisan First Huntress had conjured. More likely, the mender was upset that they would injure her further and thus ruin her craft. Or was she disappointed that her kind could not keep their desires in check?

The First Mender's feelings were an interesting response, but from First Huntress' perspective, they were irrelevant. If her observations were true, the male little ones' sexual drives were acute and perhaps uncontrollable. She was certain this illogical lust could be exploited, but she was embarrassed to admit, her own sexuality was one of the few weapons she wasn't sure how to brandish. Unlike her beloved and quite mischievous cousins who took great pleasure in riling up the boys, she had focused instead on learning the spear and growing strong like her mother. While regret was not a concept hunters embraced comfortably, she found it ironic as she admitted that she would be better suited for escaping these captors had she been more frivolous. Still, she knew she was attractive, and she had watched her cousins as they toyed with their suitors. Large white healing rectangles aside, she was essentially nude.

Although the entire notion seemed so impossible, she could not resist the temptation to test it. What could happen? Matters could not get worse.

On the next stop, under the pretense that she was studying her wounds, First Huntress ran her hands along her body. Remembering that posture was a significant component of the cousins' arsenal, she arched her back, jutting her chest forward. She had, according to her very infrequent love interests, a pleasant form. She was unsure which portions of that form were of particular interest to males, and even less certain what a little one found lustful, so she gyrated randomly. Her cousins no doubt would be howling hysterically at this clumsiness had they been here. But they were not... They could not jeer, nor counsel.

A pain shot through her shoulder, but First Huntress smothered it, allowing the sound to seep out as a soft moan like those she heard as she walked past the couples' homes back at the Tribe. She closed her eyes softly and let her hands wander from her thighs to her neck. She felt idiotic, and despite the absence of any from the Tribe who could ever proliferate the story, she was utterly embarrassed. Holding the pose was excruciating, more so because her naivety prevented her from knowing just how long a supposedly sensual position should be maintained than from the damage she was inflicting on her injuries. She yearned to slouch down and allow the mender's competent hands to tend her side, but her instincts demanded that she check to see if her ruse had

any effect. Cautiously she cracked the tiniest of slivers on lids she pretended to close in an erotic trance. It was awkward to catch details through the corners of nearly shut eyes, but her best guess was that to her amazement, her act was working. The soldiers were exchanging snickers. More significantly, they were lowering their weapons. Not fully, but enough to require a moment to realign to her. They were also unconsciously inching closer. The mender was taken aback by First Huntress' behavior and was clearly just as irritated with her now as she had been with the soldiers. The disapproving expression on the mender was piercing. First Huntress decided to avoid it.

Strange that this little one's irritation bothered her.

There was opportunity here. Her muscles had instinctively ratcheted up, in anticipation of a strike. Her body, sensing its imminent utilization well before her conscious mind had processed the information, stretched and flexed in unison with her erotic charade. She was coiled tightly, yet her tension was imperceptible to the mesmerized weapon wielders. First Huntress swayed just enough to locate each wielder's position. There were only six. The others had not maneuvered to their stations yet. The two to her rear would be the first. They were at the extreme ends of her peripheral vision, and therefore unpredictable. The cocky one with the frightening stare directly in front was next. He appeared to be the most competent. His removal would degrade the remainder of the soldiers into a disarray she would exploit for her escape. No item she could snatch as a weapon was visible. The soldiers' arsenal required the insertion of fingers into much too small a space, and the hall was otherwise barren. The mender was incidental. She was unarmed, but she would be swept as the soldiers to her left were dealt with. If she could, First Huntress promised herself to minimize the damage to the little one female who mended her. That was the most gratitude she could afford given her circumstances.

First Huntress exaggerated her back and forth swaying, lowering both her hands on the ground between her legs. She concealed the firm anchor her fingertips were groping for on the smooth exotic little one floor with her body. She continued her rocking, sliding her weight forward ever so slightly with every sway, until she was nearly suspended on her hands. One last forced opulent moan dropped her head and shoulders forward, climaxing the weight shift. Using the now firmly anchored hands as a fulcrum, she kicked back hard, hurling her extended body into the soldiers behind her.

One heel solidly crushed its mark; she felt the little one's ribcage collapse beneath her foot. The other came close enough to knock over her captor, but she needed to roll sideways for a second kick to finish him off. That took time the competent wielder used well. He managed to fire his weapon several times before she sprang forward, felling him with a clean fatal blow. Her swinging elbow, aided by her overwhelming size, obliterated

his head and shoulder. The instantaneously dead little one flew into the stunned others, bowling them over. She saw in their faces that her action had achieved precisely the effect she hoped for. They were frightened and panicked. Once untangled, they would scurry to find safety before launching a counterattack. First Huntress had carved out a space to plot an escape.

From the moment she pounced, her movements had been instinctive. When in that mode, she did not hamper her body with conscious instructions that conflicted with what she felt needed doing. Essentially turning off her mind and freeing the lifetime of training had allowed her to neutralize her adversaries, inflicting a minimum of harm. There had been quite enough damage to the land from suffering spirits these past few days. She would not—even at the cost of her freedom—needlessly inflict more. Reengaging her conscious thoughts was similar to waking up in a strange environment; something she had done quite a bit of recently. A moment was necessary to orient herself to the circumstances her instinctive attack had left her in. To her surprise, her first concern was the little one mender. Even more astonishing was her apparent relief when she eyed her unconscious, but alive and relatively unharmed in the pile of groaning soldiers.

Interesting that the death of the little one who was so naively kind would have saddened her.

Blood again trickled from her white skin, along her arm and shoulder. The competent soldier had been proficient, but the amount of bleeding was more than he could have inflicted. Remembering the conflict, she found he had punctured her skin in three relatively benign locations. Each was steadily bleeding. She found it peculiar that such tiny pricks had not begun clotting, but that was not an imminent concern. Her new injuries were minor. The existing ones were now screaming for attention. She had taken great efforts not to traumatize her left side, but her movements had been decisive and firm. The twists of her torso and the yanks from her limbs could not help but pull on the tender area. It hurt to move. It hurt to breathe. A cloud was again descending on her. Thinking was bothersome; her vision was beginning to blur somewhat on the left side, and justifying the tiny First Mender's concern with First Huntress' neck and head, a light, but steadily increasing throb, grew behind her eyes.

First Huntress determined that she was most likely irreparably damaged somewhere inside, and possibly dying. Having no better idea, and too little time or energy to conjure one, she decided to head for the Tribe. They had to be warned that the little ones knew of them, and were angered. Perhaps this time she could lose them in the deep snow. She might even get lucky and find one of the old sealed tunnels. She doubted that so weakened and without her spear she would get far. At best she would die standing in her precious snow rather than crouched inside this shiny box. That would have to

suffice. The jumbled stew of scrambled thoughts and throbbing pain in her head streamlined themselves to the simplest of thoughts.

Go “Outside.”

Which way would that be? The little ones’ labyrinth was enormously disorienting. All the corridor walls seemed to curve slightly, as if they were in an immense spiral. Even the rooms she had been in were similarly bent. Perhaps this structure was carved into a rounded cave? She mentally traced the route through which the soldiers moved her. It appeared from her memory that they were moving her in the direction away from the center of the spiral. In her thick weakened state, she could not be certain of this, but having no other alternative, she concluded that if they wanted her away from the center, then she would escape towards it. She scrounged through the battle area, grabbing the largest weapon she could find, a long, skinny hollow tube ending in a complicated knot of metallic jumbles. She knew from painful experience that the tube shot... something. How this was done likely involved the metallic jumble, but her mind and fingers were too thick to decipher how the painful, and penetrating little pricks were triggered. Gripping the thing by the tube, the little one weapon became a small club. Armed with this sad replacement for her spear, she set off on her improvised course, crawling at first, but resorting to a shuffle on her knees so her hands would be free to deal with the inevitable attack.

Her place-sense was weak, but it did reveal that she was much further away from the Tribe than the exiles’ cave. She had never traveled this region before. It was also on the wrong side of the exile cliff, doubling the difficulty she would have finding a path to safety. But that was a problem she could address in the unlikely future where she actually reached the outside.

She traveled for a short while through empty, unadorned halls with many sealed openings. A hidden light-emitting bar along the ceiling bathed the entire area in a soft immersive bluish glow denying shadows. She found this eerie, and even more disorienting. What manner of creature dislikes shadows? The corridors that intersected with the curved halls were straight, slightly wider and even more barren. At these intersections, she would turn towards the inner curve. She would eventually reach another similar arcing corridor, further reinforcing the pattern that she was in a round labyrinth.

Suddenly, the bluish glow was replaced by red lights. A howling annoying noise flooded the corridor. First Huntress’ headache immediately intensified, and her blurred vision spun uncontrollably. She stumbled, groping at a wall for support but missing, rolling as she fell to shield her left side, she landed hard on her back, her head whipped even harder on the unyielding floor.

She blacked out - maybe.

First Huntress could not concentrate on her inner senses through the throbbing to be sure. She picked herself up to continue her course, unclear at the moment precisely why she was bothering, but certain that she had a good reason before. There was something in her hand - A little one weapon? Where did she find that? Mother always warned her that little ones were dangerous. Where was mother? Maybe she is at the end of this maze she was traveling through. Maybe that was why she was pushing herself to the center. Her head really hurt, and she had difficulty maintaining her balance. Deep clangs accented the howling as shoulder and head continually bumped the smooth corridor walls. Eventually, she simply kept her head and shoulder propped on the wall and slid along using it as a crutch. The pressure of the cold surface actually alleviated some of her headache. She wished the howling would stop, the blinking red light too. She wished all the noises and lights and smells and touches of this strange place would disappear.

First Huntress arrived and turned into another intersection. This one, unlike the others was populated. Unsuspecting little ones urgently scurrying on some silly task froze in their tracks at the sight of her. The sheer panic in their eyes was comical. First Huntress laughed at it loudly. She stopped because laughing hurt her side and made her even dizzy. The end of this particular hall, unlike the others, appeared to be an opening. Light that wasn't red trickled in, a warm outdoor light that she immediately yearned for. Perhaps she could even stand up. Concluding that she most definitely wanted to be standing in whatever was out there, her body lumbered forward, initiating a stark frenzy of panic from the little ones. They dropped whatever belongings they were carrying and leapt clumsily into the nearest openings, sealing them loudly behind them. That too was funny, but First Huntress remembered that laughing hurt, so she just smiled. She had taken no more than three or four shuffles and the hall was clear.

"They are funny and fast," she mused.

Objects were coming into view from her destination. The light was indeed the clean sunlight she craved as a relief from the blaring red. Her place-sense, still muddled, was suggesting that there was wrongness in that, but she moved on. She would sort matters when out of the howling, red, confining corridor. She also noted that ahead, the low ceiling disappeared. She would thankfully be able to stand.

The corridor came to an end at a balcony.

First huntress frowned. She was not outside. She was in a little one created cavern. It was enormous, even by Tribe comparison. It was perfectly impossibly symmetrical. Her balcony extended from a ledge midway up the wall of a hollow sphere.

Identical ledges extended from the base-- which was populated by hundreds of little ones who had not noticed her yet—up to a light that resembled the sun in nearly every manner, except that it did not hurt to gaze upon it. The ledges skirted completely around the sphere cavern. Countless brightly lit corridors similar to the one she had just exited dotted the ledges meandering away from the center. Moving staircases transported little ones between ledges. Four huge staircases moved them from the base to the cavern's equator, and then to the top ledge. Side paths streaming out to various levels along the route allowed little ones to cut their journey to the peak short. It was an amazing sight to behold, and she was enjoying it fully, when a blunt blow to the small of her back sent her flying off this ledge. She twisted reflexively as she soared, crashing on her back, skidding downward, finally coming to a rest three levels down facing the false sun. Her broken body cascaded over two levels of little one balconies.

First Huntress again was certain she was dying. She had already recently gone through her thoughts of death, so she was currently less pensive. What held her final attention was the frustration that they had felled her before she was able to fully stand. It would have been nice to stand once more, but she could not muster the commands to move. And she was certain she would be pounded again, probably even harder, if she tried. Lying on her back, gazing nearly straight up, the shimmer around the light atop the little one sphere was at the center of her vision. It created innumerable tiny rainbows as it ricocheted the emanating rays. Undistracted by the howls, and no longer possessing the strength to move, let alone elude her captors, she concentrated what little energy remained on a matter she could resolve.

Where exactly was she going to die?

Focusing her place-sense took a moment, but once she was in tune with her place, she immediately realized that the shimmery material surrounding the false sun above her was quite familiar to her. She had trouble recognizing what she was gazing at because she did not expect to find it there.

It was ice.

The revelation filled her with a sense of awe at where she was. She was not in some surface structure. She was submerged deeply in her precious ice, nearly to the foundation rock!

The little ones had finally learned how to live in the land. They were exactly as powerful as mother warned. She allowed herself one tear of regret for the fate of the Tribe before succumbing to the blackness.

## Chapter 6: Waroo

“I do not know what has happened to your daughter, First Huntress. Please leave me to my burden.” Waroo shouted meekly from his home. Lacking the heart to power them, the words rapidly shriveled to a husky whisper in the crisp air and bounced unnoticed off the approaching women. Feeble utterances from the mouth of a feeble man.

“Waroo, Tali is no longer First Huntress. You remember that do you not?” Moro interjected, slightly embarrassed. It was quite rude to speak a false name to one of the Tribe, both from the insult to the person misnamed, and to the name itself. Tali pressed lightly on Moro’s shoulder to reassure her that the offense had not penetrated. She did take notice of Moro. Her unhesitant, practiced response hinted that this conduct was not a surprise to her. Waroo must have made similar errors before. He was obviously not entirely coherent of his surroundings, reinforcing the urgency Tali felt to speak with him. They entered, settled on names and found seating on cushions in the center of his great room. Waroo’s home was similar to all others in the Tribe - one large cylindrical common room assembled from ice blocks tapering to a rounded roof. All couples starting a life together built and lived exclusively within their common room, Privacy chambers with entrances into the common wall were added only after they bore children. Poetically, the couple ceded the sensual epicenter of their carefree lives to the onslaught of warmer, but undeniably less erotic memories of parenting. Such an arrangement served the Tribe’s couples quite well. Those unwilling to concede their sanctuary would have been unsuitable parents.

For the sake of modesty, privacy chambers for the adolescent children were also added occasionally.

Waroo’s common room walls poorly masked the remnants of his daughters’ presence. Three sealed openings, where each woman’s chamber had once been, broke the smooth cylindrical symmetry. Attempts had been made to blend the new ice with the existing wall, but efforts could only smooth the surface. It would be many seasons before the ice’s insides matched their older neighbors. Also sealed, and further camouflaged by a pile of home clutter, was a fourth scar—the secret tunnel they had dug to gain the freedom to perform their atrocities originated in the great room itself, audaciously conspicuous had anyone bothered to look. It was not blended. Other than pouring enough snow to clog access, no craftsman would touch the vile place the wretched exiles traveled and Waroo was too timid to insist. It remained an unhealed wound marring Waroo’s home. Tali guessed neither the home nor Waroo would ever mend.

“I seek clarification, Waroo. It is what you sensed that I question. I do not judge, I do not blame.” Tali spoke to the broken man. She reached out and lightly touched his face, running her fingers gently down his cheek. He flinched at first, surprised by the sudden unexpected tenderness, then he softened.

“Second Hunter would have slaughtered my daughters upon finding them had he not feared you. Their acts were unforgivable, but they were- are- my daughters, and I cannot snuff out my love for them. I owe you gratitude merely for their lives. I know you have passed the spear Tali. You will always be First Huntress in my eyes.” His voice dimmed as he spoke, as if the strength to say them sapped him with every word. “I am so drained, Tali,” he barely whispered.

Moro held her hand to Tali. “Wait,” she mouthed. Waroo sat motionless for a time. His breath shallow, then he sobbed. It was a wet, sloppy lament, loud and packed with anguish. His body stiffened, and then shivered violently as he poured out his pain in long mournful cries. Moro kept her hand up, holding Tali at bay from the comfort she desperately wanted to offer. This lament was something Moro had apparently experienced before, and as Waroo’s protectorate, Tali deferred to her approach on what aid to give. Her confidence in Moro’s judgment was rewarded quickly. Waroo’s wails were subsiding. When they dwindled to sniffles, she put her hand down, and scooted her cushion so they were facing Tali, and she could hold her brother’s hand. Tali acknowledged Moro’s silent strength with a nod and turned to Waroo.

“Waroo, I need to understand as much as I can of the conditions you found in the banished chamber.”

“I have already spoken at length to the Elders, Tali. There was much dust. It burned my eyes and clogged my throat. I smelled heat in the dust.”

“You saw nothing moving? Shadows flickering, a swirl in the dust cloud perhaps?”

“I searched hard, Tali. And I was there a long time. Only I moved.”

“Did any scent strike you?”

“Only the hot dust. It hurt to breathe it too deeply. I tried to shield my face with my hands, sniffing only the tiny portion I captured, but it was nothing more than finely crushed stone. I thought perhaps there was a rockslide in the cavern. I feared that my daughters- all the exiles- may be trapped in one of the chambers, damaged and in need of our assistance. I called to them until the dust choked my voice. If the confounded dust would just have parted for a moment, all the chamber entries are visible from my perch,

and I would know. I strained hard. My eyes are good Tali, but I could pierce nothing. I did occasionally imagine a whiff of new death, but it was fleeting, and I could not trace it. I do not think it a true scent. There is always a horrible stench there. Perhaps the dust and my fear cooked it into something else. I do not know.” Waroo appeared to tire with every memory Tali extracted. She fought her pity down and continued the questioning.

“What of the sounds then?”

“Wind from the opening, my footsteps. Nothing more...”

“What of the hum, Waroo? You had mentioned a hum.”

“Yes, there was a hum.”

“Was this hum continuous?”

“Yes, Tali. But it was unknown to me. I had the sensation that it was distant, like a rumble from an approaching storm, but all around me as well. Perhaps coming from the dust.”

“Remember on this, Waroo. Did the humming cease when you left the cavern?”

“Yes of course-”

“No, Waroo, you are not remembering; you are merely saying what you think. Use your long memory. Go back to the moment you surrendered your wait and took the rope up. What did you sense as you rose?”

Waroo closed his eyes and brought the events back into his consciousness. He struggled with an exercise of simple difficulty for even the young of the Tribe, just as any of the Tribe always knew exactly where in the land they were by sensing for their location; recalling moments was a memory trick taught to children so they could practice their lessons after their mentors were done with them. Waroo had lost that talent, or given how troubling his memories were, he may have purposefully misplaced it. Regardless of why the deficit existed, it was unquestionably there. Tali cursed to herself as she watched him stumble clumsily along his consciousness, fluttering in and out of his thoughts uncontrollably. In his undisciplined state she would gain nothing.

Tali leaned into the struggling broken man “Waroo, focus on my voice. Remember the hum. Waroo, remember the hum!” she insisted.

“I feel it,” Waroo replied. His eyes, tightly shut, twitched in the manner indicative of truly tapping long memory. His face was bent into a grimace, as if holding any thought pained him.

“Good, Waroo. Now remember the rope. You climbed the rope to return to us.”

“Yes, Tali. I climbed slowly in hopes that they would come out when they saw me leaving.”

“Good Waroo. Climb the rope. Did you pause your climb at all?” Tali asked.

Waroo nodded, “The dust swirled with the rocks, and the light. I paused many times seeing what I wanted, but not what was there.” This answer was important to Tali. She leaned into him, her hands on his lap, her face nearly touching his face. Clutching him in her stare, willing him to continue remembering, she asked, “Remember the hum again, Waroo. Was it still there when you clung to the rope?”

Waroo did not reply.

“Waroo, was there a hum when you clung to the rope?”

“No... yes... YES! Yes there was, I remember now, hearing the hum coming from the opening as I undid my rope.”

“Waroo, you are thinking again. Remember the rope. Was there a hum when you *clung* to the rope?”

“There must have been, Tali, I remember it when I rose and at the entrance.”

“But you do not recall it when you were on the rope do you, Waroo?” Tali asked directly.

Waroo made a face, as if thinking of this bothered him.

“I do not recall the hum on the rope, Tali,” he eventually answered, opening his eyes. He rolled forward into her arms. Tali held him until Moro’s thick arms gently nudged him off.

With a free hand, Moro whisked Tali away mouthing “Good bye.”

Waroo was asleep in his sister’s arms. Tali touched the siblings’ foreheads and left them there. The broken man had confirmed Tali’s fears. She had felt this hum many times during her hunts. She too had originally confused the soft rhythmic vibrations of little one machinery shaking the ground as sound. Only after connecting it to the devices

which produced it, was she able to correct her mistake. Waroo had no such experience. The vibrations traveled particularly well through stone. It was still possible that they may not have been near the chamber. Waroo could be correct. Rumbling little one machines from a distance may have triggered a rockslide. Perhaps First Huntress was delayed because she was busy freeing the survivors.

Or perhaps the unthinkable has occurred.

Had the little ones in their rambling explorations accidentally discovered the exiles? Waroo had served Tali well. He not only fed her starving mind enough information to stave off the madness of frustration, he had given her reason enough to justify her journey.

She made her way to Miallo's home where he and his sons were packing.

"You have taken great liberties on the expectation of my response, Miallo." Tali scolded when he noticed her arrival. She was slightly upset in seeing that he was preparing for the journey without waiting to hear how the talk with Waroo went.

"Did your father think I was foolish?" she asked the older son. "That I was set on going regardless of what Waroo revealed?"

"Nonsense," Miallo interrupted, rescuing his son from the discomfort of conjuring up a reply, "I have packed for my sons and myself. As I said, I intended to make this journey anyhow. I do not assume your company. We shall leave when we wake. I awaited your return merely to know if our party was to be three or four."

"It shall be four, if you will accept my company, and my apology."

Miallo set his pack down, approached Tali, and took one of her hands in his, "Both, without hesitation my good friend."

"First waking then, I will return." Tali pulled to depart, but Miallo did not release her.

"Stay a while. The Elders are milling about the meal kettle. Your visit to Waroo is wide spread. They may ask questions that will place you in a position to either disobey or lie. At this moment, we can take this journey as a ceremony of knowledge. I seek to broaden my children's vision of right and wrong. You agreed to accompany us as a guide. It is, at best, a precarious excuse to defend, but one quite easy to forgive."

"How will I get myself ready?" Tali complained, but she knew she was losing the argument. Miallo was gently nudging her into his home.

“We have everything you need here. I have extra packs and plenty of dried food. I even retained some of my mate’s garments. She was quite talented in crafting clothing, and I did not wish them destroyed, nor did I want the pain of seeing them adorning someone else. I would be pleased if they adorned you.” Miallo reddened, slightly embarrassed at his admission. He fought through it and pulled Tali close to him. He had guided her to his chamber. It was—as all others in the Tribe—cylindrical, and half the diameter of the great room. Layers of hide blankets covered the ice floor to the wall. Large cushions formed a semicircle along one end. Shelves holding weapons, trinkets, and stone carvings were etched into the wall. It was a neat and simple room, befitting Miallo.

“My mate’s garments are on the far shelf opposite my spear. You will sleep in my chamber tonight. I will join my sons in the common room. We will take our meal late in the day at my clan’s kettle. Our Elders retire early. We will not be questioned. There are cleaning rags and fresh snow in the urns by the door. I will leave you to your affairs until the meal then, my huntress.” Miallo squeezed Tali’s hand tightly and backed out of the room. Further away, the hearty laughter of Miallo’s younger son as his father futilely attempted to defend the selflessness of his intentions made her smile broadly.

Tali still sensed the warmth of his grip on her hand. She lost herself momentarily, enjoying the memory of his touch. Glancing at the four full travel packs laid side by side propped against the wall by the outer opening, she tried to be cross, but despite herself, she grinned. She was indeed being stalked by a master hunter.

“Perhaps,” she spoke aloud as a pledge to herself, “after the matter of First Huntress is resolved, I will allow this hunter to feast.”

Tali washed her hands and face with the powdered snow and fell into the furs.

She dozed and dreamed lightly of deep, strong chests, and clean shaven, smiling faces.

## Chapter 7: Waroo's Daughter

“Carrion! Filth! I will gut you from foot to throat!”

First Huntress' sleep was ripped away by a steady shrill stream of threatening obscenities. Reflexively she attempted to spring into a defensive posture, but again found herself in restraints, As before, she was seated on the floor, propped up against a wall, but much more elaborate and secure measures had been taken to ensure she would remain there. Her arms and legs had been stretched taut and bound with dense fibers at her wrists and ankles, eliminating any chance of wriggling her body to gain leverage. A sling wrapping around her chest tucked under her right armpit, kept her from slumping over. She was immobilized, her left side extremely sore, and her head pounded, but at least her mind was clear. She lived.

The room she now occupied was tall, shadowless, white and sparse. One doorway, much too narrow for her to fit through was the only opening. A single table where a collection of odd machines, glowed colorfully, the only furnishing, a mirror spanning the length of one wall, the only wall décor.

She was obviously not alone.

They had dressed her. She again wore her travel clothing. It had been mended; little one fabric stitched the holes their weaponry poked. They had even reattached her First Huntress amulet precisely where it should go. Her white rectangles appeared fresh, and a thick new swab of them covered the soreness coming from her left side. She could not maneuver her restraints to get a closer look, but it felt as if the swab extended from just under her left arm to the lowest ribs. Across from her, confined in much the same manner was the source of the vileness. Although she had not seen her since she had been a child, First Huntress recognized who it was immediately. From the content of the verbal barrage, she too had been recognized. One of Waroo's daughters, injured well beyond the Tribe's maiming and a life of exile could inflict, sat facing her. Large (but not as large as she remembered her), her body pocked with tiny welts and bruises plainly visible through the tatters of the garment the little ones had tried to cover her with. Her face and upper torso were enveloped in a patchwork of torn little one rectangles even more extensive than her own. The Triplet's right leg was completely missing at the knee, and long splints held together the shambles that was once her right arm. The little ones had taken her down with a vengeance.

Yet, she too was here alive.

What manner of creature was this?

Waroo's daughter thrashed violently as she cursed her captors, the restraints, First Huntress, and whatever mote of dust entered her field of vision, pausing only to catch her breath, or when a violent cough overcame her. She was unquestionably mad. The eyes exposed the chaos of her mind. The left, blinded by the menders and festered by incessant scratching, was a sickening shade of purple and oozed a clear yellow fluid. The eyelid was barely attached. Her one functioning pupil oscillated wildly between large, almost all black, to a mere prick in the azure. Her gaze darted about relentlessly. She hardly blinked. Most of what she shrieked was unintelligible. It was merely pain and madness pouring from a soul Second Hunter should have released when he held the opportunity. She fidgeted constantly, locking her attention on minutia for a moment, and then flitting unpredictably elsewhere. Presently, the exile noted First Huntress' open eyes.

“Carrion! Daughter of carrion! After I devour every last one of these miserable middle food filth that dares ensnare me, you will suffer a death so vile at my hands...”

First Huntress studied the barrage, assessing the mind that flung it. Her spews were as depraved as before, but more coherent now. Perhaps with a familiar object to focus on, the madness receded somewhat. This was important. Waroo's daughter was capable of providing what First Huntress desperately needed-- information. Retrieving it from the convoluted tangle of that mind would be a precarious effort. A poorly selected tactic would withdraw the exile deeper into her already profound madness, where there may not be sufficient time or a means to coax her back out.

First Huntress shut herself down to meditate on her problem. She closed her eyes, and with some effort, forced a muffling of her soreness and the verbal pummeling. They were the most flagrant of the distracters. Once removed, disarming the remaining input was relatively effortless. The constant clicking and buzzes of her captors receded, as did the uncomfortable heat of the air she breathed and the stiffness of the floors and walls she lay on, and the profound dryness in her mouth. All vanished. Her consciousness drifted to her undistracted place, a room in her mind where thoughts would stand out clearly. In here, alone, ideas, answers came quickly. Even now, when she was so physically shattered, so trapped, so lost, her mind's quiet room reaped a bounty. This particular solution forced her to fight an involuntary smile, that had it escaped, would have ruined the tactic completely. When she opened her eyes again, First Huntress adopted a familiar stern expression she had gazed on for most of her childhood— she wore a face the exile instantly remembered and instinctively feared.

“Silence, exile. I am not the father whose kindness you have rewarded with torment all these seasons. Nor am I the hapless little ones who blundered into your cavern. I am First Huntress. I am a daughter of a First Huntress who is herself a daughter

of a First Huntress. I will have answers.” When she spoke, there was no menace in her words or in their intonation. She calmly stated her expectation without even the slightest hint that those expectations would not be met. She was aware of her physical resemblance to her mother. Aside from the hair they were strikingly familiar. Most of her life, she had strived to accent the distinctions between herself and the legacy she had to live up to, but on this one occasion, she was grateful to exploit the blood connection. The exile -- who had not heard a First Hunter speak in many, many seasons -- was stunned momentarily into silence upon hearing a command from a familiar face.

“What transpired in your cavern?” First Huntress commanded, “What harm did you and your kind inflict on these people? Tell me, exile, and when I am free, I will release you from your torment.”

The exile attempted to stare at First Huntress- the right eye held the gaze, digesting the question, judging its merits with the skewed logic of her chaotic mind; the left, despite the blindness, jerked elsewhere. There was a long pause, and then with a twisted smile creasing what remained of her lips, Waroo’s daughter replied, “We who the Tribe judged unworthy received a gift from the land. A boon of fresh warm meat that would last many days, if tended to properly. Who were we to deny such a gift?”

“So you captured them all?”

“No daughter of carrion. First we feasted. It is difficult to survive on the meager scraps you ration us. The rocks provide little nourishment. And this weak middle food hardly struggled...” At the mention of a struggle, Waroo’s daughter rumbled with as much laughter as her injuries would allow, “They begged to be meals... We did not stalk them. They entered our lair!”

“For what purpose did they enter?”

“I DO NOT QUESTION MEALS BEFORE I DEVOUR THEM, CARRION!”

I accepted it. I will tell you that their meat was sweet, and all the sweeter was their surprise in finding us. They fight weakly, suffer greatly, and die slowly. We rejoiced in our gift.”

“Then why are you here in ropes, ungrateful daughter of a good man?”

For this the mad woman in front of First Huntress had no quick reply. Her fidgets accelerated, and when she spoke again there was an unmistakable tremor in her voice, “Because more came. So many more. They came to rescue their kind. For a time we could not see them. We had no one to fight. Our hands could not reach them. Our teeth could not bite them. We could not kick. And they hurled hurt from a distance. Invisible

spears shot from far off hit us, so many spears from so many directions. They stung, but were not mortal. ...They showered the little spears, pricking our skin to distract us while they **STOLE OUR MEAT!** They must have realized their tiny spears were futile because after a time, they replaced them with a hideous tube that shot a thin blue flame at us. It severed limbs as a hot blade through ice. We fell, but when their flames lit the cavern, we could finally see our attackers. We fought the little ones, killing many, and again more came. They burned on until every exile fell silent. Only I lived. I was not so foolish as to rush to my death. I hid behind rock, hoping to lure them near, and would have taken many of them by surprise, but they have a clever one with silver hair in their tribe. He halted the little ones' advance, robbing me of my kill. **HIM I WILL SLAUGHTER OVER AN ENTIRE SEASON!** They melted the very rock I hid behind as if it were snow, and the silver little man gutted me in a manner the menders could not dare...

Then I awoke here.”

Waroo's daughter fell into a mumble. Her attention shifted to a rope at her shoulder. She began to gnaw at it. That would be the end of the knowledge she would pass.

First Huntress bowed her head from the shame. Whatever befell her at the hands of these captors, she would endure. The abomination in front of her had with her ramblings, revealed the extent of the desecration the exiles had committed. The little ones had discovered the banished, and had now formed an opinion of her kind using its trash. How would the Tribe have responded if their number had succumbed to such abhorrent defilement? The shame was further weighed by her realization that the little ones did not have a means of distinguishing the exiles from the Tribe, and she lacked the ability to correct them. The prophetic warnings of her mother echoed loudly in her mind as she contemplated the future.

“So goes the first meeting of our tribes,” she declared softly. She appeared to be addressing the mad exile, but First Huntress spoke merely to herself. “We have been branded by our discards as murdering beasts in the eyes of a tribe capable of our annihilation. They are aware of us now, and have with good cause judged us as mindless killers. They cannot allow us to continue. We will disappear, again.” First Huntress slumped defeated; the restraints groaning to support her injured frame. The word not uttered by any of the Tribe ever, even when recanting the legends, even in the midst of the most profane obscenities. Now, the unmentionable would be fact...

War.

Sleep time stories she, like all other Tribe children, listened to under the security of their pelt covers exploded to life in her head. Parents, grandparents, anyone passing a

wakeful child would speak or sing them in the same comforting manner they remembered from their own childhood. As it was with all long ago tales, individuals embellished the parts they favored, and some inevitable twisting had occurred because of the convincing talents of some story recanters over the generations, but the essence carried on, so innocent once, now painfully prophetic. Acutely resounding amongst her memories, demanding central attention was the tale of the Tribe's epic migration as told by her grandfather. Mother had been a very poor story teller, passing the knowledge as mere information. Father was dead before her long memory was fully developed. Other than his hair, which was as wild as her own, she barely remembered him. She could not even recall an image of his face, and she had no recollection of his voice or his words. It was great grandfather who breathed the tales to life. Great grandfather recanted the experiences rather than the events. Great grandfather embedded the tale of the fantastic migration and the terrible reasons that mandated such a long journey into her Tribe mind.

He was from the clan that came into the Tribe from the sheets and bergs. Their ancestors was never comfortable with large groups and had peeled away from the migration, colonizing a remote seal laden island rather than continue on with the main body of the ships searching for a sanctuary not many were certain existed. They live hard, hungry sparse but content lives at the periphery until the first of the little one ships appeared. Meager, and barely surviving, those initial sightings were of no immediate danger but the legends were fierce and true. Fearing what they knew would follow, they fled to join the Tribe on the continent, who greeted them with the warmth akin to family.

He was merely a child when great grandfather entered the ice and his life toil eased, but the harsh early struggle had battered him, and over time, the battering had progressed. His voice was weighted with the heavy bellowing weak lungs demanded, yet he never denied her a story. Even here, she could still hear the smooth, soothing voice with deep inhaling pauses as her great grandfather foretold their doom.

## Chapter 8: Great Grandfather's Story:

Long before the Tribe formed their pact with the land, they were not the Tribe, and they merely lived in a place much different than their current home. It was a good hearty land, but it was not theirs. It belonged to no one or thing really. The bounty it yielded was so plentiful, pacts were unnecessary. The sun favored this land, hugging the surface, pouring its heat as it hopped the horizons. Seasons were not divided into light and dark—they were hot and cold. When in the hot, the ground melted down its ice. Mountain peaks sloughed off their colossal stacks of piled snow, which freed from its frozen state, plowed desperately through the landscape seeking the ocean, a liquid landslide dragging everything in front of it downward. In its wake, hills flattened and valleys filled. The rocks in that land were as dynamic as our precious ice. For the hot season, other than for hiding meat from scavengers and refuge from the occasional storm, there was no need for strong shelter. Rain torrents, aided by the moving ice thaws softened the rock and dissolved the detritus. In this fertile blanket, the sun, demonstrating its favor, blasted living essence from the very rocks. The land came alive, feeding ravenously on the light and the water, it grew a lush green pelt, smothering the rock and soil. Enormous plants, much larger than the thumbings farmed deep below, taller than several of the Tribe combined, covered portions of the ground so tightly, they blocked the sun from touching soil. Their trunks were hard and straight, as excellent a material for making things as any. The whole of the ground was a magic compost where any seed that fell on it grew thick and tall. Ancestors hunted as they did today, but different prey in a different sea, and there was other meat. The rich, generous land grew great noble exciting animals, some with jagged helmets, others sporting powerful blunt spears jutting from their faces. Back then, those who would become the Tribe lived in small families. Each honored its own First Hunter and no other. They were vaguely aware of one another, and traded at times, but families kept mostly to themselves and left the others to do the same.

A lifetime of lifetimes passed with no change, when one cold season, a family whose name will never be known came across a peculiar sight. Camped along their hunting trail was a group of tiny hunters much less than half their height. It was most peculiar. They were starved and shivering. The meager meat they were cooking was insufficient to feed one, let alone the ten or so that watched it hungrily turning on the spit. As the story went, the First Hunter advised to leave them to their fate, but he was chastised by his mother for his lack of mercy. They carried enough food for many nights, and these little ones could all eat a meal with just one of their rations. She opened her pouch and still jibing her son for his decision, walked into the firelight holding out a salted shank.

The little ones greeted her with spears flung with the strength of terrified souls. The mother was felled, only enough life remained in her to turn and mouth “flee!” to her family before succumbing to her wounds. First Hunter’s rage overtook him. He charged the little ones. They were no match for him and fell rather quickly. He gathered his mother and the family returned to their home to grieve, thinking the ordeal over.

His kills were not spiritual, so First Hunter had not bothered to insure the souls of his prey were free. One little one survived the attack and made his way back to his tribe. Unlike the ancestors, who made their homes within the tall plants, the little ones lived on the shores of the ocean that bore no cliffs. This was why they had never encountered them before. For even in that long ago time, the families who would be the Tribe knew that the ocean was a source of great bounty, but it was the home of severe winds and monstrous waves as well. Only the most foolish would linger in the shore flats, exposed to any spirit in a foul mood. The little ones apparently either did not realize, or they did not care of the dangers, and lived in dense clusters at the very fringe of land and sea. The survivor recanted the attack, obviously from his perspective, and the following morning, a large horde of their hunters left to avenge the deaths of their tribesmen. Individually, the little ones were not a danger to even a child of the ancestor families. Much weaker simply because of the size difference, their weapons were shoddy and broke more often than not. Hunting had been scarce, so they were starving too. But there were so many of them. Like the fish, they bred in overwhelming numbers, hoping enough survived to perpetuate their tribe. The mob tracked the family who made no attempts to conceal their path—and clumsily eliminated them in a most impressively ignorant manner. They simply attacked. No plan, no stalk, no tactic. They even destroyed their advantage of surprise—announcing their presence, screaming in unison, flaunting their pathetic sharp sticks. They just attacked using their sheer numbers as their principle weapon. The family resisted, striking countless little ones down, but the stream of bodies outlasted their stamina. And they were massacred. While ransacking the family’s belongings, they came across the food reserves. Enough to feed the family for many days, it would feed many many more little ones for much longer, and because of their battle with the family, there were fewer little ones to have to share the prize.

Leaving their dead to rot amidst the trapped spirits of the family, the little ones returned to their village with every scrap of salted meat from the family cache. Despite seeing so few returning, they were greeted as mighty victors of a great struggle, and they feasted. Properly rationed, the cache could have kept them alive until the hunting improved, and the family’s deaths—although heinous—would have been spiritually justified because so many more spirits benefited, but the little ones had no intention to end it there.

If there was one family and one cache, then there may be more, so a search began, and scores of unwitting ancestor kin lines disappeared under the relentless pursuit of these insatiable killers. When the resistance depleted the little one numbers, they attacked their own kind, engulfing other little one tribes. Able bodied hands who survived the invasion were forced to fight. The surviving women were forced to breed. And so their clumsy oozing living mob grew into a clumsy oozing army.

Knowledge of the little ones' persecution eventually reached families with sufficient advanced warning that they were able to avoid an attack. They moved off, staying well ahead of the slow loud army figuring that they would eventually tire... But the little ones did not tire. A season passed in this chase. Families absorbed the new lumbering peril into their daily routine, settling on a calm but steady southern drift. They hoped to eventually put enough distance between them to circle around and return to their cooler clines. Deeper in the land however they confronted denser little one settlements with more or less the same result. Not being quite as mad, these more permanent groups, some as populous as the army itself, did not join in the families' persecution, but little ones sympathized with the army, who they shared a physical similarity and some language. Perhaps they feared the onslaught of the army's insane wrath should they choose to befriend someone besides them. In either case, the results were that the army gained a reconnaissance ally. Any family that did try to flank their pursuers was inevitably bound to be exposed by the many sentinels posted to guard their many homes. Word was sent to the army. They were intercepted and destroyed. Sanctuary was nowhere to be found, and still they were hunted.

The army had grown so large and had existed so long, they eventually forgot they were hunting families for food. They retained their hate, but lost the memory of the spark that kindled it. In the void to explain why the army endured such hardships relentlessly pursuing an opponent some had never even seen, rumors and stories of great riches selfishly hoarded by the families were born. The types of riches varied by the region, for different people found different things valuable: but always the riches were bountiful, and always they were remote, requiring great sacrifice to reach. To satisfy their thin moral hesitation for taking something obviously not theirs, the families were depicted as horrible monsters, credited with heinous unspeakable acts. How the rumors spread was unknown. Perhaps the army leaders sought a means of stoking the army onward, perhaps even performing the atrocities themselves to create the illusion of validity. Perhaps they were even perpetuated by the army fighters themselves trying to justify their wretched lives. Regardless, the rumors became tales, became fact. Enough slower families or rogues fatigued with their constant persecution, fueled that hate to drive it on.

A generation passed, and at the insistence of he who eventually the Tribe referred to as the First Elder, the remaining families gathered high at a remote glacier. They had

learned that little ones could not tolerate cold, so for the moment, it was safe here. The only dangers being those the land itself laid out. Amid three hundred men, women and children of those who would be the Tribe, a great debate ensued on how to address the crisis.

One faction wanted to return the ferocity with more ferocity. Having run more than they could stomach, a family from the barren lands who lived not much differently than their prey, craved to challenge their pursuers. The family slept on the ground, wore no clothing, kept no belongings, and used no weapons other than those of opportunity. A bit taller than the other families, and most definitely stronger, they were intelligent, but chose to ignore their intellect and allow instinct to rule their movements. They viewed thinking as a defect which hindered their survival, avoiding it as much as possible. Although they were addressed as kin, most of the families knew them as the Animal Clan. Grunting more than speaking, the Animal Clan declared their intention to cease their exodus and meet the little one army in the midst of the first cold storm. They argued that together, the families could wipe them all off the land, and life could return to what it was. Balance would be restored, and they would be the hunters again forever.

Allied by frustration, the Animal Clan found a receptive audience, and the frenzy for battle escalated- until First Elder spoke. He did not raise his voice. In his wisdom, the folly of attempting to match the intensity of blood cries from the many was plain. Rather he presented his point to any within hearing range of his conversational tone, forcing those who were shouting to relinquish, lest they miss what he had to say. He reminded the families that the army was not the only collection of little ones; that most little one tribes were ignorant of their existence; that with a handful of exceptions, all little one encounters had been tragic. They could not possibly defeat them all, and attacking would merely galvanize the pockets of ignorance into a mad blanket that would smother them to oblivion. He suggested that the little one reach was limited. That they had weak bodies vulnerable to cold, and that in the world there had to be somewhere where they dared not venture but where all their families could hunt free. His conversation continued until only the Animal Clan and a handful whose personal losses had torn their souls beyond repair wished to fight. First Elder even persuaded some of the Animal Clan on the merits of his wisdom to come to their senses, but only some. The families split along a stark, insurmountable rift—fighting an unbeatable foe or seeking an impossible land. First Elder won over two hundred and sixty hearts, yet was saddened for his failure on the remainder. He declared the rift permanent, and the families' paths separated as of that moment. He and any who followed would migrate to the other shore and build vessels to find their impossible land. Then he took the Animal Clan First Huntress aside to discuss their fate.

Enraged at what she thought was a betrayal, the First Huntress nearly slaughtered him, but at the moment of attack, she did not feel the drive to strike. Her instinct told her that the person in front of her was not her enemy, and she retracted. They walked instead. First Elder suggested that their small family could live undisturbed in the caves of the high mountains, far from the little one army, venturing the lowlands for food, but returning to the safety of the cold. He remarked that this need not violate their instincts, reminding her that most hunters had lairs where they were safe to rear cubs and to nurse injuries. He suggested softly that they could better deal with the little ones as individual marauders rather than investing their numbers in a mad charge. For if they did that, they were no wiser than the foolish little beings who hunted them. He did not push his thoughts, merely presented them as observations. The First Huntress took the knowledge in, and in a rare display of wisdom from her clan, thanked the First Elder and bade him good journey.

She took in the torn souls, and the Animal Clan departed higher into the glacier to find a suitable lair. First Elder led his wards down. They never met again, and the destiny of the Animal Clan will forever be a mystery to the Tribe. Clues of their fate lay sprinkled throughout the Tale of the Long Journey, some promising-- a little one tribe in a panic recognizing their kind, indicating their kin had been here before—but mostly the only evidence was a little one hero sporting the morbid trophy of some limb hacked off their lost kin.

\* \* \*

“The Animal Clan is dead.” First Huntress had concluded even when too young to pick up, let alone carry the spear. It was foolish to think they could annihilate a swarm, and folly to romanticize the irrational behavior of a clan who could not adjust to their new circumstances. They had met the same fate awaiting all who cannot adapt—extinction.

And now these exiles, unable to understand the lessons of a child’s story had exposed all she cherished to the wrath of the very beings who the Tribe had avoided for so long. First Huntress locked her gaze with the exile. As mad and flighty as the exile’s mind was, it could not muster the will to break the stare. Waroo’s daughter ceased her mumbles, and sagged, unable to sustain her mania under the glare. Her mouth quivered in an attempt to respond, but could not.

“Wretched abomination, you and your kind have doomed the Tribe. You have knowingly unleashed a wrath our stories have warned of since long before your mother’s mother’s time. None of us will live long in this world because of you. I am filled with shame that this death was our doing. We should have killed you all, rather than shown mercy. One other truth remains today- before we are done, I will remedy that error.”

## Chapter 9: Tali

Had Tali undertaken this journey alone, she would have assumed a much more crushing pace, but Miallo and his sons were reasonably fast, and their presence dampened her worry. She would lose half a day; but in return, she enjoyed the good company of the three men, a most generous compensation for so slight a price. She and her companions dressed somewhat identically in long, sleeveless one piece white travel garb with built in boots for traction, the only distinction being Tali's bare back. Miallo admired that feature in his mate, and she had sewn all her outfits to please his eyes. Tali was reluctant to don the good woman's wardrobe, but overcame her self-consciousness when she caught Miallo's frequent approving (and occasionally inappropriate) glances. They made their way through the smooth, slick tunnels, Tali expertly steering their course at every intersection to ensure expediency. They ate dried good meat, slept on the crushed ice tunnel floor, and in less than three days, had reached the point where the tunnels ended, and their journey slowed on the more vulnerable and brilliant surface. Still, they continued their steady progress, and uneventfully arrived at the mountain base. A quick pause for a meal later they were set to commence the climb to the hole. Tali stopped them. A distant, ominous, but sadly familiar whisper, growing steadily louder, tickled her ears. Soon enough Miallo and his sons heard it too.

Growing on the horizon, easily visible against the contrasting clear blue cloudless sky, five darkened dots were rapidly approaching. As if planning to rendezvous with the travelers, the flying machines appeared to be headed directly for their destination. Tali had seen enough. She pulled back. Using her knife, she hacked at the ice, quickly and expertly carving out a hiding chamber large enough to enclose them all. Miallo and his sons had never witnessed the floating little one crafts and were mesmerized, but soon they too sank back down and assisted her in completing the camouflaged shelter. Miallo's youngest lingered enough to see the five flying machines pass nearly directly over their heads, skim up to the cliff, and plummet unhesitatingly over the edge, oblivious of the observers in the ice.

"I would see the other side of the cliffs, Miallo. Will you wait here with your sons?" she asked her troubled companion.

"I will not, Tali. We travel together," he replied, friendly but defiant. "If beyond the ridge is what you wish to see first, inland a ways I spied an indent where the cliff wears down. Ice covers the stone nearly to the summit. We may be able to stay hidden until we find a vantage point for your keen eyes to seek answers."

Without comment the four set off. Miallo was now in the lead. Their new course led away from the shore and steadily up for a good while. Luck (such as it was) favored them, and in a fair time, they had invisibly reached where, concealed behind a windblown snow heap, they could safely find answers for Tali.

Perched at this vantage just beyond the summit of this horizon spanning range, the land dropped a goodly amount, yielding a scene more panoramic than their modest climb should have rewarded. Far below them, framed by sheer, black, ice-storm polished cliffs and the distant ocean, a pristine, welcoming, but unreachable ice field, not so much different from their own, blanketed the ground. Tali remembered her mother's teachings of this land beyond the ugly exile rocks where the Tribe had considered settling. She did not recall why they had rejected it, only that they did. Perhaps there was no reason. There may have been many suitable places on this vast, empty continent for the Tribe to finally rest. If one was as inviting as any other, then there was no reason to agonize over the placing of the Tribe. Tali was certain that if there had been a reason, her daughter would know. She always remembered the lore.

Thinking of her daughter ached, so Tali forced herself to cease.

Focusing instead on the present, Tali nudged Miallo's sons back away from the edge. A fall to the ice far below would surely be fatal. She was equally certain the victim would be marooned. Even if the fallen somehow survived unscathed, they did not have enough rope between the four of them to form a tether. Not even in her prime would she have been able to scale the slick, vertical surface. Regardless, they would likely never be granted the opportunity to try because this empty land was now not empty at all.

Little ones, flocks of them.

The flying machines had landed at the cliff base directly under the exile hole. At least ten little ones had emerged from the vessels to join another five on the ground guarding a perfectly round entrance into the very cliff. Three evenly spaced, reverently guarded blue bags were resting near the obviously artificial opening's mouth. Just as obvious were the blue bags' contents- Little one bodies. They were retrieving their dead. What had felled them? Why so frighteningly close to the banished?

Garbed in bulky outfits which protected their fragile bodies from the cold the Tribe so enjoyed, no portion of their skin was exposed. The little ones were indiscernible, except for their leader. An elder, one clearly in command of all the little ones present, did not wear his hood. Nor did he don the protective eye piece. He wore his grey hair extremely close cut, and blazed hunters' eyes. Chewing on a smoldering stick, he soundlessly directed his people to gather the precious blue bags. Each was moved to a different flying machine. The elder snapped to a stiff rigidity, placing his flattened right

hand over his brow. The other little ones mimicked him, holding this reverent position. The machines closed and lifted off, transporting the dead to wherever it was that little ones memorialized their fallen. Not until the three flying machines reached the height they required to commence their forward journey back over the horizon where they originated, did the elder relent from his respectful pose, and none of his wards dared relax before him.

Tribe lore hinted that little ones submerged their dead into the very ground where they fell, marking the site with a token. Tali had never believed that any creature would be so heinous or stupid. Setting aside the arduous and unnecessary labor of indenting the rocky permanently frozen soil sufficiently to put a body within, how did they expect the spirit to escape when smothered in the unyielding? How would the land ever recover from such a hurt? Whatever else, she was relieved to at least learn that the many stories of rotting little one corpses seeping hurt into the land were false.

Two flying machines remained. They were much larger than the three that departed. More little ones emerged from the opening laden with equally obvious cargo. They pulled carts filled with exile bodies, or more precisely, exile body parts. Frozen, arms and legs sometimes severed at the torso, sometimes just hands and feet, stacked onto hideously sliced heads and torsos. The dismemberments were straight, as if administered by the sharp knives of menders, and clearly lethal. Clean triangular wedges were removed from the sides of heads. Ribcages were missing entire sides. Skulls cleaved at an angle where nothing below the nose and ear remained. All were crimson with the copious splatters of frozen blood the infliction of such macabre wounds produced.

The carts were moving towards the remaining flying machines.

We are exposed here,” Tali stated frankly.

She and her companions cautiously retreated to the shelter. Only then did they break their silence.

“Were those the exiles, father?” the younger son asked, clearly shaken by what he had witnessed.

“Yes,” Miallo answered.

“But how--” he persisted.

“Can you not see? They have pierced the cavern of the exiles!” the older son interrupted, clearly shaken as well.

Tali and Miallo allowed that statement to permeate a spell. The repercussions of what it meant were lost on the boys, but not to them.

“I would see the cavern for myself, Miallo,” Tali concluded, breaking the silence.

“You cannot, Tali. It is apparent that little ones are within it,” Miallo protested.

“True, Miallo, but it will be there, and only there where I will likely discover the fate of First Huntress,” Tali replied gravely.

“But you will be exposed,” protested the younger.

“And Waroo had been within the cavern. He found it barren,” the older son added.

“And First Huntress would not have blundered into a trap as blatant as this would be,” Miallo threw in his protest.

“Waroo has borne the burden of collector for so long, his mind sadly is unreliable,” Tali confessed reluctantly. “His senses have dulled themselves in an attempt to shield the poor broken man of the unpleasantness he would for his lifetime endure. He would not detect something hidden. Waroo may have strolled through a mire of little ones unwittingly alerting them. They may even have allowed him passage, anticipating, rightly so, he would lure more of us to them.

And First Huntress- my daughter- suffers the weakness of her ability. She has always run headlong into matters, relying on her considerable strength and speed to rescue her from any trap.”

“So you believe First Huntress entered the cavern through the hole? Do you propose we follow her?” Miallo asked.

“She did, but as I have warned, the hole is too exposed. We cannot follow her path. We lack her assets, and we have young ones with us. Our only clear advantage is the caution of our minds.”

Miallo unconsciously placed a hand on the closest son’s shoulder. He understood the wisdom of Tali’s caution and marveled at her restraint. She clearly yearned to burst from the snow, rush the mountain, and dive into the banished cavern; but for the sake of his children, and for fear of becoming useless to hers, she held back. Hers was a patience the great oceans could learn from. Miallo did not think it possible, but his love for Tali grew even more.

Miallo's eldest inquired, "We are at an impasse then. There is but one entrance to the hole of the banished."

Tali did not reply.

Miallo detected her silence, "There is but one hole to the banished is there not Tali?"

Tali took Miallo's arm and pulled him away from the inquisitive ears of his sons.

"Miallo, you know there is another opening," she whispered. "We may enter in another manner if your sons are strong enough."

Miallo stared incredulously at Tali. "The Lovers' Door? But it has been so long, Tali."

"The builder was genius, Miallo. It may be stiff, but we four from our end should be more than enough to pry it."

"What is the Lovers' Door?" Miallo's eldest asked. The shelter was quite small, and in the stillness, he and his brother had been able to hear much of what was said. Miallo shrugged a lame apology to Tali.

"A narrow doorway into the lair of the banished carved from ice and stone," Tali informed the intrusive young man.

"Why would someone want to go *into* the lair of the banished?" the younger son asked.

"Why do men do any stupid deed?" Miallo interjected gruffly, "Love of course. The builder's name was Cress. He stupidly offered his heart to a vile, horrible woman. Her crimes were not sufficient to retract his offer. The idiot longed for her, and over many seasons, masked in the role of collector, he journeyed here to carve out the entrance."

"What became of him?" asked the younger.

"What do you suppose?" Miallo scoffed. "She killed him. He finally completed his work, entered the cavern, and he was torn to shreds."

"But wouldn't the banished have been able to escape from Cress' door?"

"Cress was a genius, and a master craftsman, besides being a fool. His door was a marvel of leverage and access. From outside, the door could be pried open with some

effort, but from inside, it was high out of their reach and appeared no different than any other stone. Even if the banished should ever find it, there is barely enough surface for them to grip. They still would not possess the strength to lift it. As a final touch, the door was weighted such that it closed itself slowly. Cress had intended to open his door, rush inside, snatch his 'beloved' and whisk her off before it shut permanently. Had she only restrained herself, the beast might have escaped. But she behaved as the monster she was. Cress died, the door closed, and the exiles never became aware of it." Miallo lectured his children. Tali watched the father recite his lore, guessing he had rehearsed the words considerably. She remembered a similar speech she delivered much less eloquently to Kavra.

"He would mention the Cave of Warning now" she said to herself almost aloud.

"Cress' crimes were heinous, and quite dangerous. And as punishment, the Tribe chose not to retrieve his body. His murderer, or so the story goes, regretted her act of violence on the one man who had shown her nothing but kindness, and she erected a shrine for him- A Cave of Warning. Supposedly, the cave chronicles the lives of the banished from Cress' death onward. It is the only record of their existence they will have, so despite their savagery, long after Cress' murderer died, the Cave is tended. Every important event of their wretched lives chronicled in stone."

"Why is it a warning?" the younger asked.

"That depends on who you ask. The exiles who informed the Tribe of it claim it a warning that they are tallying the crimes that we have committed on them to be restituted the day of their threatened return. But they did not name the cave... Someone of the Tribe did. I prefer to regard it is a warning to us... Carving and maintaining a shrine requires skill and patience. Complete monsters have neither. Vile though they are now, the exiles were once part of our lives. We must be cautious to never forget that lest we risk becoming like them ourselves."

Tali smiled. She had not heard that interpretation before. Miallo smiled back uncertain of what made her happy, but content of it regardless.

"To the Lovers' Door then?" the younger declared.

And they moved on.

Tali led. They backtracked towards the ocean, passing the exile's hole, and almost upon reaching the shore, she uncovered a terribly maintained, but as yet still accessible tunnel. This path was interesting. It was level, but since the cliff it approached ascended, the stone the ice rested on was not. As their proximity to the cliff decreased, the packed

ice thinned. Bare rock protrusions invaded the tunnel walls with increasing frequency. Sometimes rock comprised so much of the ground, they were forced to step on it. Miallo held his younger son steady when necessary. His soft assurances that they were far from where an exile could have trod, and that this rock was pure helped but little to ease the disgust. By the time they reached their destination, Miallo was comforting both of his children.

Their tunnel ended at a very old, natural opening into the mountain. Snow had mercifully drifted in, covering the ground inside with long frozen ice, but if they proceeded onward, the rock would surround them. Tali waited for Miallo's family to decide what their intent was.

The youngest, gently broke free of his father's reassuring hand and approached Tali.

"We made a pledge to accompany you Tali... Let us go fulfill our promise and leave here quickly," He said. Taking Tali's hand, he was the first to enter. Tali followed his tug, then Miallo and his oldest. Inside, the cave was dimly lit by sunlight squeezing through cracks in the stone. They worked their way deeper into the mountain, avoiding bare rock when possible, but never diverting from their path if it was not. And soon enough, as they reached a point where the ice could not penetrate, they were truly, completely in rock.

They felt filthy.

Rock was disconcerting.

Rock was permanent.

All material absorbed the spirit of those living things who came in contact with it. The ocean waters swirled with the essence of the lives it nestled. The air carried the hearts of all who had breathed it before. Ice stored spirit, as did rock. Unlike ice, rock did not replenish itself. Rock did not become vapor. It could not free any venom trapped within it, nor allow the overwhelmingly abundant goodness all around wide entry. Rock was unyielding, and permanent. A hurt committed on a rock lingered within that rock for an eternity.

As an element, rock was not innately vile. Perhaps where they stepped was pure. Perhaps no ill deed had been committed on the ground they touched. Without the benefit of consecration from the Smiths, they could never be sure. Their proximity to the concentration of Tribe refuse cast the purity of this particular rock as very doubtful.

There was no mistaking the Lovers' Door when they reached it. An enormous rectangular slab of stone pivoted on a smooth boulder, forming a simple lever. Grooves where hands could easily find a grip lined the edge of the high effort arm. The other end was molded to perfectly plug a small hole in a sheer wall. The door's function was elementary; pulling down on the grip end, raised the other, revealing the door while sliding snow collapsed on the grip end to hold it in place. The sheer weight of the great stone would slowly overcome the snow's ability to hold it, and in a short time, the door would return to its shut position, sealing itself.

Ice encrusted the entire device.

Without hesitation, the four set to free Cress' Door. They worked in silence. Digging through their belongings for appropriate tools, they attacked the entombed machine. Knives and hammers worked around the slab, chipping away at the great rock so it would not adhere as stiffly. At some point Tali's patience ended, and she grasped the grips about to pull, but Miallo stopped her.

"Hold, Tali," Miallo spoke absolutely. "My children will not enter that horrid place... But neither will you enter alone."

Tali understood. She stepped aside. Miallo positioned his sons at two points on the grips to maximize their leverage. Together, the boys tugged hard. Nothing happened. Miallo chipped at the ice crust some more. And the boys tugged again. The tugging/chipping continued until a lurch knocked Miallo to the ground.

The Lovers' Door was free.

The Lovers' Door was open.

Snow trickled downward to prop the lever in its place. It was a tenuous hold. Working alone, Cress would have waited for enough snow to pour down on the effort arm to grant him sufficient travel time. Miallo had his sons, so he and Tali quickly shimmied through. The opening was narrow, but with the door fully open, they managed to slide through with only a slight grunt from Miallo.

"Open the door when you hear three taps of my knife on the stone." Miallo instructed, and he was gone.

Miallo's sons watched nervously as the descending lever steadily narrowed the gap where their beloved father and the female companion they were growing fond of had disappeared. The final clang which returned the Lovers' Door to the resting position where they found it marked the commencement of an arduous exercise in patience.

Not long afterwards (but an eternity to the worried children's minds) they heard the sweet, joyous, distinct taps of his father's knife. Taking their positions, they tugged hard on the lever which now free of its frozen vise, moved rather easily. The door was soon fully reopened.

Miallo emerged first, followed by Tali. They were unharmed, but definitely worried. The four sat in silence watching the Lovers' Door close again. In that same silence they left the cave and worked their way to the reassuring ice tunnel. Only then did Miallo speak.

"There are so many, Tali," exclaimed Miallo.

"Yes, and more will come. Their flying machines are numerous."

"What has happened father?" the younger son asked.

"Little ones young hunter. Many many little ones. The cavern teems with them," Tali replied.

"Did they kill the exiles father?" asked the older son.

"They did, but many of their own died too."

"Are all the exiles dead?" asked the younger.

"I believe so, but I cannot be certain." Miallo replied.

"The banished were difficult to tally. Their remains were ... jumbled," Tali clarified.

Silence filled the tunnel as the truth of her statement penetrated.

"Your daughter, Tali... Was she not among them?" the older son interjected, desperately seeking any sanctuary of promise in such a hopeless scenario.

"No, she was not, Miallo's Eldest. Of that I take solace. But I fear her absence from the fallen may not bode as a good sign. Her fate is unknown and may yet prove no less bleak than that of the pathetic wretches we discarded. Miallo, what did your senses show?"

Miallo did not answer Tali. He did not acknowledge her question. He had retreated from the group and stood stiffly in the tunnel darkness. His tightened fists vibrated. His brow furrowed in a grimace extending to his taut neck muscles. Veins bulging prominently from his forehead communicated his turmoil. It was palpable.

Miallo was enraged. He was abhorred, but most prominently, Miallo was frightened. He was frozen with a terror beyond any he could have imagined, and until he could wrestle it under control, he could not speak. He knew he was worrying his sons, and Tali, but should he crack open his thoughts before they were harnessed, he would frighten them more.

His companions waited. What choice did they have?

Miallo was strong- too strong to let such simple raw emotions overpower him for long. Slowly, he unclenched. Slowly, he reclaimed dominion over his mind, his trembling hands, and then his voice.

When he finally spoke to alleviate their concern, he was cautious, uncertain. His words lacked their rich mirth, but they were his again. “So much death, Tali. So much needless, bloody, tormented death, spilling on stone and ice! This is a horror I had never dreamed I would encounter in my lifetime. The exiles were felled in battle. Their positions and wounds are consistent with that... But the little ones? They bore signs of torment... Of feasting! How much had those poor creatures endured? How many had our filth devoured or cruelly destroyed? There were eighteen blue bags in the cavern. Three more we witnessed outside... How many flying machines have already taken bodies away?”

“I cannot guess, Miallo,” Tali responded truthfully.

“And this will not end here. We have merely discovered the wound from where the infection will spread. My sons are in grave danger. The Tribe is in grave danger. Had my selfishness for your company not commanded my actions, they would have been spared this knowledge for several days. Rather than cringing with their lovesick father, I could have granted them a few more moments of blissful peace. What have we done, Tali? What have I done?”

Tali understood. Miallo’s anguish arose from shame. Shame at what his kin had unleashed. Shame at the consequences his frivolous actions had inflicted on his children. Shame that neither was, nor ever would be undoable. She sympathized with his sentiments, but did not consider them meaningful. Whether his sons knew of the attack today, or three days hence, the attack still occurred. The Tribe’s danger still existed. An avalanche will fall, regardless of whether or not those who live below it dreaded. For her, she would prefer to know. Even as young, no, even younger than Miallo’s children, her daughter too would prefer to know. But her daughter was First Huntress... and she was daughter of a First Huntress.

Miallo's older son placed an arm on his father's broad shoulder. He was beginning to feel the first pangs of fear, but love for his father bolstered him enough to muster the strength to reassure him. With his free arm, the son fumbled for and, upon grasping, yanked on his fear-frozen brother's knapsack, snapping him in. The three men embraced tightly.

Tali allowed the connection to linger momentarily. Miallo was right. His children were not hunters. They need not have suffered this exposure with so few seasons of experience. The shame was hers too. Were it not for her desire for answers, and Miallo's affection for her, they need never have been exposed to this horror. She took comfort in their bond and granted them as much reprieve as she could to tighten it. But there were severe matters to attend, and she could not afford too much generosity.

"The atrocity is not the worst consequence this day," Tali said, softly disrupting their huddle, "We are known now, Miallo. We are found."

The party of four faced one another, allowing the impact of that statement to settle. Miallo had kept an arm around each son. He had beaten down his terror and was willing strength to his children. Only this held their fear at bay enough so they could manage it.

Eventually, with that same cautious voice, Miallo again spoke, "What is your counsel, Tali?"

"Return with your sons to the Tribe. Follow the tunnel to the end, then the mountain rim away from the ocean. When you reach the exiles' hole, turn away from the mountain and use your place sense to find the tunnel we took. You should be wary, but you should be safe. The little ones are concentrating on this mountain. They are not yet looking elsewhere. Call an immediate council to relay what has happened."

"Will you speak first, Tali?" the older son queried.

"I will not be returning with you, Miallo's Eldest. I came here to retrieve First Huntress. I have as yet not done so."

At this, Miallo began the movements of protest, but he quickly extinguished his attempt. She was right. The safety of his two children and the immediate needs of the Tribe overrode his chivalry and affection.

"Tali, they are so many," he protested to stone.

She sensed the hollowness of his words, understanding in them that he knew his duty, as well as acknowledging hers. His affection rang in them.

“I seek knowledge, not conquest, Miallo. I seek my daughter, not confrontation. I know the snows. They do not. I will be unseen, unheard, unsensed-- And rest assured-- unhurt.”

Tali stepped to Miallo. He was nearly her height, but clasping his sons reduced him to a slouch. The boys, reading that this moment was for the exclusive use of these two adults, peeled away, and moved down the tunnel to grant them privacy. Miallo stood straight and took Tali by the waist. She wrapped her muscular arms around his neck, and they slammed into a long, sweet, complete kiss.

An eternity later, Miallo broke the trance.

“Come back to me, Tali.”

When she did not reply, Miallo kissed her once more and released the embrace. Without turning around, he joined his sons deeper in the tunnels.

“You cannot fight them, Tali,” Miallo’s younger son cried out, his voice cracking with fear.

“There has been enough fighting young hunter,” Tali responded. “Hopefully, what I do will prevent more.”

The three men set off in the direction from which they came. Tali turned towards the horror, and with no hesitation, casually stepped into the unknown.

## Chapter 10: The Elders

Hidden from their clans by the skin-lined council house walls, Twelve Elders sank wearily in their seats. They were tired. None had slept very well for many many days. None expected to sleep very well ever again. Such was the curse of age-gathered wisdom.

One spoke, "She may yet return with tamer tidings, my friends."

One replied, "True, but the mother has gone after her. Her bond with First Huntress is tight. Her premonitions keen. We must prepare."

At this, the eleven others nodded in agreement.

One asked, "How completely do we prepare?"

One answered, "The Smiths must fully stoke the Deep Forge. When revealed, the ancient armory will be in great disrepair. It will require mending before we may proceed."

"Then the armory is to be revealed?" One uttered, the words a mere gasp.

"The armory will be revealed, my friend." One acknowledged.

The twelve nodded.

One queried, "Should the Smiths not be involved in this? They too are Elders."

"Second Elders," One corrected, "They may not decide, only advise."

One insisted, "But their advice has not been sought."

"Considering the fate our decision thrusts on them, surely we must consult." One added.

"True, but there is no other recourse my friends. They will support us." One replied.

The twelve nodded.

"We must, together, venture to the Deep Forge to tell them. That is a courtesy we must serve," One spoke, breaking the quiet.

Eleven nods.

“When will these events occur?” One asked. She was the newest Elder, replacing a most ancient member of her clan who had recently passed. Her mind stilled swirled dizzily from the flood of secrets the great dying man’s last breaths emptied into her. New, undigested, frightening, her burden rumbled restlessly. The other eleven pitied her.

“We speak with the Smiths now. The Tribe can wait until Tali returns with Miallo’s family. She will call a Council. We will listen then... Then adjourn... Then...” One stopped. He could not bring himself to finish their thought.

“.. Then we free the armory.” One finished for him.

“Agreed,” concluded the one who had stopped.

The Twelve felt a sudden lightness. They paused in the comforting cold, dark chamber, not so much to enjoy it (for to find pleasure in the process of their likely extinction was madness), but relishing the release their decision had on their minds’ burdens. What was to follow would unfold in the natural course. The Tribe would live... or it would not. They would all know soon enough which. They need never again dread the coming of their annihilation.

“Do we follow the ancient ways?” One asked eventually.

“Yes, my friend. The Elders lead. Followed by the strong... Then the children. There is no other way,” One answered. He was the most experienced Elder and had foreseen this moment for many seasons. He placed a kindly arm on the shoulder of the newest Elder.

“I for one have lived fully,” the most experienced Elder said, speaking to the least, but loudly enough for the others to hear. “My spirit fidgets in this gnarled, creaking, and ache-ridden body. It longs to soar. I will gladly release it for the life of the Tribe.”

“Will you soar as high if the Tribe is no more?” One asked.

“Yes, my friend, I will... For I will have all your spirits to keep me company.”

The Twelve nodded.

Having nothing more to say, as one, they rose. Addressing the Smiths was to be a private matter for now, so the large decorative public entrance was ignored. Instead, they made their way deeper through the council house, down a narrowing corridor to the rear chamber which opened out to offer a dozen evenly spaced, well-traveled passages, and

one other. While the congestion of entries was unique, the entries were not. Smooth, perfectly circular arched walls framing a path worn flat by countless seasons of traffic, they appeared no different than any other within the Tribe's intricate network. These paths however were for the Elders' exclusive use. Through these tunnels, they traveled to and from their clans. Through these tunnels, they visited one another as well. They were a necessity for a community with as much curiosity and intelligence as the Tribe. A gathering of Elders might mean matters of great importance would be discussed. Or it meant that some friends wished to enjoy each other's company. Elder affairs were private, so the Tribe had no means of distinguishing between the two. This led to silly conjecture, which escalated to unfounded rumor, which erupted into needless worry. Many many seasons ago, a wise Elder had ordered their construction. The Tribe had been significantly more at ease since then.

Each tunnel was decorated with a modest banner identifying the destination clan.

Conspicuously bannerless, and to one side, clearly distinct from the pattern of familiar passages, there was one more tunnel. This pristine entryway, having never been traveled, at least not by any current Elder, was not beaten flat. A tribute to the craftsmen who carved it, the tunnel retained the perfectly symmetrical circle of its original construction as it curved away, descending at a modest angle. Wordlessly, the Elders continued through this opening, finding the bowed floor not unreasonable to traverse as they descended through the ice. Their glacier was thick, so the journey took a time. They noted their depth by the steady bluing of the ice as it shouldered more and more weight. About the time the ice surrendered any hint of white, and they were enveloped in an unbroken blue cylinder, the heat met them. It glistened the walls and took the bite out of the air they breathed. The Elders did not like the heat but reached the tunnel's end before their discomfort expanded.

They were at the frontier where ice gave way to the rock which supported it. Down here at the base, ice surrendered its solid form and pooled into an immense lake domed by a tall cavern. Amazingly enough, sunlight, while noticeably dim, was still capable of seeping through. An azure glow, not so different from true sky at dusk, poured from the ceiling revealing the landscape. Aptly and unimaginatively named Under Lake was oval, rimmed by smooth black and gray pebbles and the odd ice chunk, and very deep. With but one prominent exception, the horizon where ice met rock was a mostly smooth wall corralling the great body of water. Constant precipitation widened and deepened Under Lake, but its waters never rose above their current station. Rather than flooding the cavern, a smooth powerful cascade poured over the lake's lip creating the even less imaginatively named submerged Under River. Other than a light mist marking its location, the falls themselves were not visible from the shore, but there was no

mistaking they were there. The spilling cascade waters' resistance to leaving the lake resonated prominently throughout the great cavern as they tumbled over.

Mixing with the deep water fall vibrations was the constant rapid drumming of precipitation of the receding ceiling. Heat, now more concentrated, and unbridled by the tunnels, etched relentlessly at the cavern dome forming a gentle and persistent rain. Patter sounds ricocheting off anything solid, echoed many times over by the closed, curved room were so numerous, they combined into a single symphonic "SSSSHHHH". The lake surface frothed noisily with countless little splashes.

Alone, each sound was louder than the spoken voice of someone nearby. Together, rain and waterfall made it very loud here.

Twelve pairs of very old and wise eyes and ears gathered evidence of the ever growing, ever changing nature of the cavern...And of the lake's stability. There were no secrets unrevealed to the Elders, but it was one thing to know of a place where waters never rose, only expanded, and a river disappeared over a horizon. It was quite another to see, hear, smell, and feel the wonder of that place.

Twelve found Under Lake beautiful.

At this ice/rock barrier, the Twelve paused, hesitant to exit the tunnel. As if expecting them and anticipating their apprehension of stepping off their realm, from a cave near the far side of the lake, a Smith emerged to greet them.

The Elders studied him as he approached. He was new to the Forge. Barely any of the splotches marked him. Other than a painful tilt to his neck, his bones were as yet unwarped. He still wore the typical work tunic of the Tribe, not yet succumbing to the more comfortable, but immodest loins. He was likely chosen to greet because he was still relatively quite agile and soon covered the distance separating them.

"We have been awaiting you, Elders," the Smith told them, slightly out of breath. His voice did not crackle with dryness, further evidence that he was indeed newly of this station, "The rock is pure here. You need not worry of the ground you will tread. And it is only for a tiny distance that you must tolerate it. Come." He beckoned, and set off down along the shore the way he had arrived.

Gingerly, the Elders, breath held, crossed the threshold onto the rock. Some even sighed relief when their foot's contact failed to unleash any noticeable harm. They followed the agile Smith and soon formed a loose line skirting the perimeter of the lake. The steady rain soaked them.. This was water which was once their Tribe. It was cold, and comforting. It had trickled through the glacier for seasons and was completing its

journey here. The river would return it to the sea, which would eventually cede it to the clouds, which would eventually cede it to the land... and its return as ice.

How fortunate they all felt to touch it one last time before it departed.

The agile Smith stopped them just before entering the cave. The rain had suppressed, but not eliminated the heat. But now they would be leaving it behind.

“Please drink deeply of the lake. The heat will increase now, and you will lose water. It is best you stock your bodies with a supply, lest you become lightheaded. We need our wits in these times eh?” he instructed kindly, and lowered himself to the shore to drink loudly and deeply. The Elders complied. The water was sweet and welcoming. One by one they rose quenched, and took up following the agile Smith into the cave.

They traveled for no more than a few steps when, after turning a corner, the path’s form changed dramatically. Their feet no longer touched slickness, but soft, fine, warm, and not unpleasantly dry sand. In this cave, the rock tunnels were maintained as meticulously as the Tribe’s ice. Along the entire length they travelled, a generous layer of dull bluish green sand had been dutifully sprinkled and smoothed flat, drying and sterilizing the path. A gutter to one side syphoned any errant water away. There were no foot prints, save that of their guide. Had an Elder been curious enough to linger back, they would have understood that another Smith trailed them with a broom just beyond the curving tunnel’s line of sight. It was her task to ensure no visitor, welcomed or otherwise, wandered where they should not. She did so by following the steps, and brushing the path pristine behind her, so any who came after would make their presence and their journey known. No Elder lingered however. None ever did.

Silently, reverently, the Elders followed the Smith through the stone, down a spiral matching the arc of the one they had taken through the ice. The heat steadily increased until they sensed a bizarre slickness on their bodies.

“It is ‘sweat’,” the agile Smith volunteered, a half smile creasing his mouth. “Our bodies have tiny pores that leak ocean water to cool us if we become too hot. It is a remnant from our days in the warmer climes no doubt. I, too, was surprised when I first sweated. It is harmless, but I caution you all to bathe upon returning. The sweat will produce an unpleasant odor if left to dry on the skin.”

As they continued their walk, the Elders, increasingly uncomfortable in the heat, and desperate for a diversion from thinking on the ominous meeting they were trudging to, became fascinated by their sweat. They licked the liquid to verify that it indeed was ocean water and not melting ice trickling from the walls. Inspecting various parts of their own wet, glistening bodies, and their traveling companions’ to see where the sweat oozed

and pooled was not extremely entertaining, but it was effective in creating a respite. That vaporized utterly when the Deep Forge appeared suddenly around the corner.

Every Smith awaited. They outnumbered the Elders threefold, but that majority was deceptive. Smithing meant long, extended periods near the Deep Forge's lethal orange heat. Over time, the intense energy warped muscle and bone. It caked the skin with dark round splotches that never healed. Eventually the exposure emaciated the Smiths, and their spirits abandoned their bent bodies much sooner than their time would normally allow. Their numbers were constantly replenishing. Work on the Deep Forge was essential to the Tribe, so there were always volunteers to take up the necessary, but fatal labor. Should this current crisis end favorably, and in the future, these two factions wished to meet again, their numbers may be unchanged. They may even be the same Elders. But there was no doubt a different collection of Smith eyes would witness that gathering.

Smith life was most revered and brief, to be embraced only by those who would trade the length of their life's journey for an abbreviated, but productive means of reaching the destination. There was no predictable characteristic. Smiths were the strong who were unwilling to yield to the graceful deterioration of that strength. They were the weak who yearned to be of some use. They were the tormented who welcomed the brevity the life guaranteed. They toiled in the heat until it stacked enough damage on the collection of ills they brought with them to incapacitate their bodies beyond use. A Smith reaching that saturation would declare a celebration. A feast would be requested from the Tribe, brought to the Forge, and the Smiths would revel the life's completion. The saturated Smith ended the revelry by thanking their companions and inserting a large dream stone under their tongue. They would sit at the Forge edge until slumber overruled their mind's desire to remain alert. They would fall peacefully into the heat, embraced and engulfed, becoming the rock which supported the ice, which sheltered the Tribe.

Despite all the tools, the bellows, and the great round gash exposing the molten core of the land in its center, the room was large enough to hold them all, and many more. Most of the Smiths sat hunched crookedly, unable to remain standing for long. Standing for them would be a struggle, but that was of little importance down here. They could perform their duties seated. Hot orange glow radiating from the nearly perfect circle lit the twisted bodies, stretching long, profoundly gnarled shadows up the walls and beyond to the ceiling. Unlike fire, which flitted nervously, forcing shadows to dance, the Deep Forge was static, consistent, patient. It had been here long before the Tribe unearthed it and will likely remain long after they had passed on. Any movement of the shadows was from the swaying of the feeble Smiths' bodies that projected them, not from the eternal heat.

In an unmistakable sign that this meeting was truly important, none manned the immense bellows. The imposing machinery hung idly on slings and levers from the ceiling. Wind, imperceptible when the usual clamor of this room overpowered it, whistled through the tubes which brought in surface air. All tools were constructed and mended here. All utensils, all inventions, even the great First Spears, were forged here. Three large side chambers, obviously for storage, and a few passages broke the smooth monotony of the surrounding wall. Two of the chambers were uninteresting, meant for holding equipment and the raw stuff of all their ordinary work. As everything else with the Smiths, it too was neatly stacked and meticulously sorted. The third room glimmered a familiar beautiful yellow. That chamber housed shelf upon shelf of metal mined from the Gift Stone.

None of these Elders had ever been to the Under Lake shore, let alone this deep into the Smiths' world. It was their first time gazing at once on so many fragments of the great rock which crashed from the sky so soon after they had settled the land. The Gift Stone's heat and speed had plowed it deeply into the ice not more than three days' walk from where the Tribe settled, a true sign that they should seek their home *within* the ice, not atop it. Those who were sent to inspect the enormous smoldering boulder descended through the canyon it had carved, reaching a dull yellow grey, partially molten sphere larger than the council house. Wondering if it was hollow, one scout had fought past the heat and poked the bubbling liquid with her spear. She cooled it on the snow and discovered to her astonishment, that the Gift Stone coated the tip in a shiny, hard, nearly unbreakable yellow gray metal that did not fade. They all coated their spears and rushed back to the Tribe with their knowledge and evidence. The return trip was fruitless because by then it had cooled to solid form. Over time, the stone's heat and weight sank it through the ice to the rock. Drifts, avalanches, and the occasional snowfall healed the wound it inflicted on the land. Had the Tribe been without place-sense, they may have never again found it. When the Deep Forge was discovered, they remembered the Gift Stone and returned for their delayed harvest. From that day, at the end of the light season, a party of the Tribe's strongest backs, armed with picks, hammers, and carts chipped free enough for them to return laden with the valuable metal. In this manner, the one stone had lasted so many lifetimes, and (if they survived) would last them so many more.

The Agile Smith allowed a moment for the Elders to gawk. He was quite proud of the Gift Stone room, and understood their interest, but he knew the risks of too much time spent near the heat. These Elders had never leaked so much of their fluids before. Best be done with this terrible business quickly. He guided the Elders to a gap in the circle of the bent craftsmen, directly in front of the room where the gift metal was stored.

“Speak your minds, Elders. Speak quickly, and let us be off. The Deep Forge will sap your strength... And I am afraid you will be needing it all too soon,” the Agile Smith prodded.

The most experienced Elder conveyed the conversation they had exchanged at the council house. He alerted the Smiths of the upcoming crisis, and what it entailed.

Eleven Elders nodded their agreement.

A silence of pondering where only the pop of expanding liquid rock ensued.

Smiths exchanged whispers. They formed small pockets of quiet discussion with those to their immediate side, then other pockets of discussion with others, then still more pockets. Never once did any rise to find a group. At a point, the nodding began. When a Smith nodded, they ceased their whispers. The nodding increased, with the decreasing discussion until they all nodded in agreement.

“It is decided then. We know our duty. Farewell, Elders. May this crisis end amicably,” The Agile Smith concluded.

The twelve Elders turned to depart. Without bidding, the Agile Smith and eleven others who were less incapacitated acquired long spears with slightly bent tips from the chamber where tools were stacked neatly, and they followed just behind. The remaining Smiths set to work. Some returned to the bellows. Others entered the storage chamber and uncovered a very disused section housing intricate unfamiliar molds long ago carved. They commenced with their cleaning, preparation, and mounting. Barrows of Gift Stone metal were gathered from the shelves, housed in the smelting pots, and exposed to the bellows stoked heat. Unyielding relentless, energy released the metal from the shape it held. A carved groove channeled the molten material from the Deep Forge to the new molds. Grand sizzling screams from the invaded rock announced the liquid metal’s introduction to the molds. Using bits of ice, Smiths guided the cooling. And spears were created. And shields... And axes and swords... And helmets and chest plates... And all the other monstrosities necessary for what was to follow.

They worked slowly because their bodies could no longer rush, but they worked continuously because their bodies foresaw a desperation, a need to create these and other unspeakable things- birthed out of this hallowed, and only moments before, benign cavern.

As they toiled, two thoughts preoccupied them:

Pity that weapons would likely be the last constructs of the Deep Forge.

Pity that weapons would likely be the last creation of the Smiths.

They worked on.

## Chapter 11: Miallo

Miallo ran. With his children in tow, breathlessly trying to keep up with their father, he ran hard. Stopping only at intersections so his sons would not take the wrong turn, Miallo ran nearly continuously. At those rare stops, he granted himself a few moments to catch his breath, then tempering his voice to disguise the panic which drove him at this maniacal pace, Miallo called his children onward. At times, he carried his youngest and at times, even his older son slumped over his shoulders. He pushed the children relentlessly, disregarding their temporary hardship for the greater good of creating as much distance between them and the horror he had subjected them to. Miallo would apologize and make amends for his cruelty later. For now, his children ran with him. At this frantic pace, he reached the Tribe in just three days. The boys made it to their home. Each collapsed in the great room mere steps from the entrance. Miallo made certain they were comfortable. He gently touched each boy's forehead, mouthing one final apology, and set off for the courtyard.

It was nearly supper. Smells from the various kettles that the cooks of his clan steamed with the evening's meal swirled from alleys. Miallo headed straight to the cooks and called for a council after the meal. The cooks accepted his directive, dispatched runners to the other clan cooks, and offered him a meat laden stew bowl. Miallo accepted it and sat on a bench. As was tradition, the cooks would convey the message to all who ate supper. All would therefore know of the meeting, and all would attend with full bellies, a state best suited for problem solving.

He must have fallen instantly asleep because his next memory was of holding a cold bowl of food and a concerned crowd suddenly appearing around him. Miallo assured his friends that he was merely exhausted from his hasty return, and that his children were frightened, exhausted but otherwise also as well. He did not respond to questions of Tali.

The meals had ended, and the clans were gathering at the Tribe center. The great block of ice covered with the ancient fur of a beast from their first land awaited him. He had never called a council, so he had never felt the impact of the entire Tribe's eyes on him. It was quite extraordinarily disconcerting. Reverently, he stepped up. Miallo spun slowly around, taking in the view. On the ground, he saw cooks, cleaners, menders shoulder to shoulder with hunters and craftsmen. Children jockeyed for space among the adults. They too were of the Tribe. They too wished to hear, and since they were of the Tribe, they too were entitled to hear it. His own had just arrived as well, still exhausted, but aware of the moment's importance. He was heartened to note someone had brought them bowls of food. All the way up, along the sides of the Tribe commons, men and

women, too frail or sick to descend to the supper pot, peered down to him from their chamber entrances, awaiting the news he felt important enough for the Tribe to hear immediately and in unison. Seated at their usual places, in their own fur covered chairs of ice in front of the council house, were the twelve Elders – one selected from each clan, selected carefully, selected for life. Behind the Elders, also seated, Miallo was surprised to find twelve Smiths. That was unusual, and were it not for the gravity of his current message, he would have wondered more about that. He wanted to wonder how the Smiths knew his words would affect them, but the matter pressing him was overwhelming. He had no space for any other thought.

Miallo, receiving a nod from the Elders, stepped forward. From the speaking block, he announced the crisis. He began by recanting Tali's conversation with Waroo (which she had described as they journeyed), followed by what he and his children found at their journey's end and Tali's decision to remain. He spoke with as loud a voice as his exhaustion would muster. When he finished, he jumped down and conceded the stage to whoever wished to speak. He found his sons and sat between them. Drained, he nodded in and out of sleep as the remainder of the evening played out.

A younger man leapt on the great block. He implored the Tribe to immediately pack. They would retreat deeper into the land, far into the barrens beyond the little ones' tendrils. This sparked a magnificent argument. Retreat meant starvation. There was no food in the deep inland. That was why they never sought refuge there. Besides, the little one flying devices were capable of transporting them across the turbulent ocean waters. What sanctuary was there in static land?

A woman took the block next. She too was young and frightened. She counseled another flight. Perhaps there was another inhospitable land they could find to hide for many more seasons. At the other pole maybe? Or on a nearby island? An Elder calmly explained that their maps of the world were quite accurate. There was no other place. He added that such a question had been discussed before, and they had made inquiries with the water folk for new sanctuaries. None remotely large enough to feed and house them all existed.

"Then we divide into clans!" came a cry from someone without enough courage to take the block. Having no champion, that comment withered quickly, then died unfed. Now more than ever, the Tribe dreaded isolation.

Descending deeper into the ice was a possibility, but it only delayed the inevitable.

Slowly, methodically, all means of solution were introduced, and after strong consideration, dismissed... save one. The Tribe, finally drained of ideas, fell silent.

That was the cue the Elders awaited. Decisions affecting such a great many people in such a dramatic fashion are never easily absorbed. Resistance to change exists naturally; the severity of that resistance is proportional to the magnitude the change demands. Without consensus, even a good idea is doomed to the eroding effects of a crowd's wrath. Only by understanding the process leading to a decision can the many be fully persuaded. The many will only understand by making the mental journey themselves. The Elders had known they had but one escape from the crisis at hand. Wise ancestors had in their wisdom long ago discovered and plotted the course. Wise Elders this day knew they lacked the strength of will to herd a reluctant Tribe. They could steer their wards, but not shove. At this moment, all in the Tribe feared the only course was to wage the unspeakable. They had reached that precipice themselves and stood fearful, but prepared to jump. Elders could now reveal the treacherous path that may avert a plunge to oblivion for consideration.

Twelve Elders, in unison, felt a pang of guilt at their manipulation. The pang quickly waned when they considered the Tribe heaped broken at the base of the precipice.

Nervously, the Tribe pressed forward, overwhelming the block. They congregated at the foot of the modest platform where the Elders sat awaiting their counsel. The Elders did not keep them in suspense. They stood, but uncharacteristically, they retreated behind their chairs rather than forward to address the Tribe. A Smith stepped beside each of them, armed with a thick hooked spear. Though they leaned heavily on the spears, standing still taxed their strength. They seemed consoled, however, that such was their role for the moment. Smith's attendance of a second consecutive council was unprecedented, and foretold of somber news. It was more effective in quieting the crowds than any insistence.

The newest Elder leaned a bit forward, she cleared her throat uncertainly, glanced back at the eleven for strength, and gaining it spoke, "From the moment we stepped from our old ships on this land, we have known this day would arrive. We have prolonged it so long, my Tribe. We so adamantly wish we could prolong it more, but so dreadful was the exiles' violation, we cannot. A time has come to us for a most desperate and fantastic of measures. We will embark immediately on a Final Retreat."

"There is nowhere to go!" a voice protested. "Those were your words to us at the previous council."

"We will remain in the land, just no longer at the Tribe," The Newest Elder replied cryptically.

A murmur spread in the crowd, confusion laced with fear.

Another Elder spoke, “We are a Tribe of guilds,” he said to his hushing and frightened people. “We divide our necessary labors into tasks and rely on each other to successfully perform our individual functions for the good of all. Fish harvesters, cooks, hunters, farmers, Smiths, bricklayers, all perform their tasks so we will not have to. We all strive mightily to be magnificent at what we do, because our successes benefit those we love. Elders are a guild. Our task is to think hard of the Tribe’s problems so you will not have to. Our craft is our ideas that address them. For many many seasons, so that your hearts would not sink with the burden, we have—for you-- thought mightily and long on this day. And we have a magnificent possible solution. A Final Retreat awaits. It will be a harsh and dramatic journey. And the cost is, oh so grave. But hear us when we say that we have spent seasons contemplating, and there is no alternative. Today we set the mechanisms in motion to transport you all to what we hope is safety. But we need you to recognize our status as a guild,” his voice cracked.

Another Elder continued, “Just as a complaint of a served meal will not change the quality of that meal, nor will sour words transform that meal to something more tasty by the mention of its deficit, so too will it be with what will unfurl for you. The wisdom of what we have prepared can be debated in some future discussion...”

And yet another Elder said, “If a fish harvester fails, we as the Tribe go hungry, and could starve. If a bricklayer slacks their quality, we as a Tribe could perish in a collapse... But we trust the fish harvester and the bricklayer to do all they can to prevent that. For the moment, trust us that what will happen is the best recourse for ensuring there will be a future at all.”

Finally, an Elder stepped to the forefront. The other eleven formed a loose semi-circle behind. He asked, “Our people, do you trust us?”

Silence...

Then, “Aye.”

Then another “Aye,” and a “yes,” followed by hundreds more.

Elders did not ignore the wash of support, nor did they then delay putting that support to action. Relieved and grateful tears blurred the movement of their trembling hands, but with much effort, and the occasional yank from the Smiths they managed to eventually remove the immense frozen furs of long dead animals, relics of the first lands, covering their seats from the ice they had rested on for so many seasons. Underneath the furs, hidden for as long as the Tribe had lived here, frozen within the ice were many *many* artifacts.

The Smiths took the removal of the furs as their cues. Utilizing the hooks of their spears as fulcrums, they leveraged the twelve ice chairs, rocking them back and forth until with a mighty crash they dropped from the Elder platform onto the courtyard floor, ripping free the top and front of the platform with them, releasing its hidden innards.

Swords clanked. Shields wobbled. Helmets crashed. Spears collided. Axes, bows, arrow upon quiver of arrow cascaded to a halt within the reach of the Tribe. Still lodged underneath the seats were mighty plates to protect the chest, the arms, the shins, the thighs. The ancient armory their ancestors donned to slice a path to this land, that same armor, rumored to have been destroyed when they arrived, had in actuality been hidden underneath their very feet for as long as the Tribe occupied this home. How peaceful their lives had been where knowledge of the armory's existence had been so utterly forgotten. Only the Elders held the ominous cache in their active memories, passing the secret down so never more than a few shouldered the burden... Until today.

More armor was visible beneath the ice, extending to the council house. There had been enough armor (according to stories) to outfit every one of the Tribe—Elder to child.

The Tribe understood. There was no mistaking the message this armory sent. The Elders had hinted that perhaps a sanctuary was within grasp, but to reach it, try as they would, there was no more means of avoiding the unavoidable. All knew the land. There was really nowhere left they could run to, and nowhere left they could hide. Peace was unattainable as long as the little ones occupied the same lands as they. Either the little ones disappeared, or the Tribe did.

And so, without declaration or ceremony, the tacit resolution was decided by unsaid consensus. Despite the legends, despite the likely outcome, the only chance the Tribe had for survival...

was War.

## Chapter 12: Tali

A different woman than the soft comfortable mother of the First Huntress who began this journey crouched in a stance she had not assumed for many seasons. A doorway had opened within her, unpacking the fierce predator she had relinquished. Senses dulled by the convalescent life within the cocoon of the Tribe keened to their earlier sharpness. Her breathing smoothed to match the vibrations of the light breeze lest it mask a necessary sound. Her eyes narrowed to slits, long eyelashes draped over her pupils, perfect nets trapping the blinding white glare of the sun and snow, so only the useful sights passed through. Her nose and mouth, wet and searching, sampled every breath, smelling and tasting for information. Muscles unconsciously flexed and relaxed, priming for their instant utilization.

Her hand twitched involuntarily, missing the weight of the spear.

Tali had explored this new, unmapped range for three days now. Her discoveries were wondrous and frightening. It appeared evident that the little ones had colonized the ice field perhaps even as far as the ocean on the opposite coast. Her travels were exhilaratingly perilous. She had twice narrowly avoided death, both events from little one machinery. In both instances, it had been chains of massive carts tied in tandem racing past her, or just as equally content, through her, at remarkable speeds. Had they connected, she would have been shattered, and the carts would likely have continued as oblivious to the death they caused, as they had when they sped off just after they almost caused it. She took small solace that neither close call had injured her, nor had she been exposed.

Until she discovered the secret of their buried tracks, the monstrously heavy, breathtakingly fast carts were very hard to avoid. Other than the whoosh of the air they shoved aside, their travel was eerily silent. Tali was certain that they followed the metal rails she uncovered, but the snow over them was undisturbed. As difficult as it was to accept, little one carts apparently floated over their rails. She noticed after the second near miss, that the carts' vortex sucked clean the loose snow, leaving a slightly darkened indent where the powder was cleared. As long as she remained clear of that area, the carts ceased to be a danger.

But the carts led somewhere important enough to warrant the creation of this magical path. She had tracked it to a dwelling of impossible scale. It was immense, round, and submerged under the ice as the Tribe's. She could distinctly see its shimmer even through the thick ice and in the light season's glow. Carts similar to those she had tracked alongside of flying vessels, continuously fed into and out of tunnels on the

periphery which likely fed down into the dwelling itself. The entire area over the dwelling was marked by an array of mirrors arranged into a hexagon of six enormous, perfectly symmetrical bowls around a seventh, inverted bowl, which was definitely a structure. The mirrors were synchronized to direct sunlight to a thin tower set in each bowl's center. Tali had no means of verifying, but she was reasonably certain the little ones were harvesting sunlight. Pipes of various gaudy colors from each tower apparently channeled the concentrated sunlight to the center dome.

Adding to the mystery was the rain. A light, steady continual flow of water streamed from underneath the scaffolding supporting the bowls and pipes. It poured downward, freezing almost instantly. Tali wondered why the frozen rain did not build up and smother the scaffolding itself, but could fathom no explanation. She explained it as a compaction. New ice crushed old ice below it, allowing for a long stack. She considered that occasionally a work group of little ones had to either excavate the bowls or elevate them.

Try as she could, she found no means of reaching the dwelling without being exposed. The terrain was too flat, the season too light. She detected enough little one activity around the center dome and mirrors to be certain there were many eyes watching the area. The sky at unpredictable times teemed with flying vessels. Once she saw a cart stop outside a tunnel entrance and unload some equipment which turned out to be replacement mirrors. Tali had exploited the opportunity to study the cart insides. She watched without blinking as the entire compartment was exposed, and concluded the carts were pilotless. Briefly, she considered them as a means of infiltrating the dwelling, but she determined that even if she was able to conceive of a way to catch and board one, she was too large to smuggle herself within the cart.

Tali followed a cart trail deeper into the barrens. It disappeared into a tunnel bored through the rock of a modest mountain range jutting up through the ice. She climbed the rock, jumping from snow patch to snow patch when possible. From the ridge, she could see where the carts exited the range and where their destination was. Rather, she could see many many destinations.

At least six little one dwellings were within her line of sight, and cart paths continued their dense lattice of travels beyond the horizon, hinting that she was not near the frontier of the settlements. Their architecture appeared from this vantage to be similarly distributed, therefore, similarly difficult to penetrate. She had invested most of her food, and two days of exploration, merely to conclude that to challenge these creatures at their heart was folly. Perhaps at the edge of their expanding empire there could be an opportunity. Disappointed, but undeterred, she retreated to where her explorations began.

Aware of the tracks now and how to avoid them, Tali traveled quickly and was soon scouting her adversaries from the overlook Miallo had led them to. Only one flying machine of the five they first saw remained, and she had no means of knowing whether that vessel had come and gone, or whether it was even the original one at all, so similar were their machines. The carts which carried the exile corpses were long empty. Seven little ones lingered outside the corridor they had carved through rock into the domain of the exiles. She noted their boredom influenced stances and guessed theirs must be the uneventful duty of guarding the entryway. But who were they guarding it from? And what precisely were they guarding? Were there resources within they wished to protect? Having just arrived, she could not know for certain. When she and Miallo explored the exiles' cavern, they had counted more than twenty little ones and at least four of their transport machines, but their search was hurried and tinged with the carnage they had discovered. They were not thorough at all. Many more could easily have lingered in unexplored corridors. Were the machines still there? Had they brought more? Without going back in, she had no means of knowing their true number. Nor could she even rely on it remaining static should she ever acquire it. They had carved this hole into rock. What was to prevent them from having carved another? Regardless, with their infernally fast flying machines, they could stream countless more here in moments.

An eighth who immediately garnered a particular interest to Tali emerged from the cave. This little one she recognized. He was the quiet respectful elder who held homage as his fallen were transported away. Still chewing on a small smoking stick, his introduction exploded the seven bored little ones into a state of respectful attention. The elder did not speak. Rather, he conveyed his instructions with decisive gestures and nods noiselessly and absolutely. Whenever he did, the little ones he addressed immediately ran off to carry out whatever it was he had commanded.

"I will take him," Tali concluded. Her plan, which she had roughly conjured just after she and Miallo parted at Cress' Door, was maniacally simple. Until this moment, it had evolved little as she had fruitlessly explored the apparent realm of these creatures. She was certain that if her daughter lived, she had been captured. Tali intended to acquire a little one leader of her own and barter for her daughter's release. Logistics of how she was going to accomplish such a ludicrous idea were off in the future. But then again, so also had her opportunity to acquire such a leader, until now. As always, she knew a hunter secured a prey before considering the chances of the next. One did not contemplate how the cooks would prepare meat that had not been captured.

The quiet elder was in the present. Tali prepared to hunt.

With her prey identified, all else became noise. She probed the elder's behavior for a pattern she could exploit. He was sedentary, which she expected from an elder, and

she had already noted, he was unusually quiet. His instructions were somehow cleanly understood and carried out unquestioned with mostly gestures. Tali granted him some admiration for his considerable command of his people. The elder was careful to appear calm, but after observing him with the acute undistracted interest a hunter never truly surrendered, she was certain he was intensely waiting for something from the sky. He kept touching a light blue box and peering upwards towards the ocean. She failed to discern what purpose the blue box served, but she soon heard what the little one elder awaited. From her vantage, and with hunter's eyes, Tali spied it long before any of the little ones on the ground far below could, yet curiously, even with a cliff blocking their vision, they were looking expectantly in the precise direction she was.

A new flying machine, not as large, but faster and more complicated than any she had seen before, shot to their location at an impossible speed. This one did not wield the spinning blades. Like a soaring bird, it had long outstretched wings. A large barrel spewing wind and a faint white fire attached to each wing at its center. It was from these barrels she saw that the machine drew its speed because when overhead, the barrels swiveled, and the flying machine simply stopped in midair. Slowly, it descended, coming to rest expertly parallel to the remaining vessel.

The quiet elder motioned for his wards to proceed with whatever instructions he had given. Three stayed with him as he made his way to the new flying machine. The remainder of the little ones boarded the other craft.

A lone little one stepped out from the new magical machine. He was... awkward. Unfamiliar with the way his garments fastened, he was fidgeting with his hood and eye coverings as he exited the door. Had he been properly attired, he'd have been as indiscernible as the others. His clumsy dress revealed... a child, a young man really, not much more mature than Miallo's eldest. The child however was unintimidated by the quiet elder.

"No, it is more than that," Tali thought, watching the wordless exchange. "The quiet elder defers to him."

Tali reassessed her hunt, instantly switching her quarry to this new little one. She observed long enough to watch the party move into the opening. The three lesser little ones peeled back, taking positions at the flank. They followed the quiet elder and the child inside.

Quick as an avalanche, but silent as a moonrise, Tali launched herself to the Lover's Door. Unhampered by companions, the distance was traversed in a short time. Tali rolled a rounded boulder near the gap and leaned hard on the lever to expose the entrance. Having been opened once, the initial stiffness of the door was gone. Her

strength easily overcame the weight, and it lifted quickly. She rushed to the gap and working with her hands dug out a hollow in the rushing snow. In that hollow, Tali lifted and slammed the boulder. The door's descent came to a halt on the boulder and after some creaking protests, rested. It would not budge further. Tali had been fast, but the gap had been narrowed somewhat. She was reasonably confident she could squeeze through, and uncertain she would have the time to make another attempt. She removed her pack, and not wishing to chance anything, also detached her knife and sheath from her lower leg. Tali lubricated her shoulders with snow and plunged head first into the exiles' lair. The fit was tight. One shoulder popped through, but the other took considerable wiggling. The rock's touch was abrasive. Her skin and outfit chaffed, but she eventually poked through. The boulder rocked slightly as her compressed body squeezed past, and for a disturbing moment, she thought she had dislodged it, sealing off her escape... But Cress had built well, and the slab came to a well balanced rest.

Familiar with the layout from her previous excursion with Miallo, she made her way quickly. This tunnel led to the cavern where the exiles were originally dropped. From there, a second, narrower corridor connected to the cavern where the slaughter occurred. It was there that the little ones gathered, so it was there she presumed the child would be. Tali had reacted instantly to her plan, and she had been fast, but it took time to maneuver to where she was. And, she had miscalculated. As she entered the first cavern, she had just enough time to duck down to avoid a light spun unpredictably in her direction.

It was the child.

Brandishing a torch which produced no heat, he was exploring the cavern.

He was alone.

At least he behaved as if he was alone. Tali made out the faint presence of others deeper within the opposite corridor leading to the entrance they used. Faint but definitely amplifying sounds approached the cavern with no pretense of stealth. The group was small, she guessed no more than the three who had entered with the child- their function likely to protect him. Their casualness indicated that the quiet elder was no longer in their midst. He had probably either been dismissed by the child or was off performing another duty. It was hard to discern the little one screeches, but Tali was confident she recognized distant laughter from the child's protectorates. Such ease must stem from confidence that they had searched throughout this cavern thoroughly and found no danger, and that for most of their earlier memories, it was filled exclusively with their kind. They did not expect danger.

They did not expect her.

She should act now, but not on impulse. Those who approached wielded weaponry which had slaughtered an entire lair of exiles... and possibly a First Huntress. Many more were presumably within a shout. She could not risk a battle. Tali would be useless to her daughter if felled. She further reminded herself that injuring the child would make for poor bargaining fodder as well. Keeping to the darkness, Tali moved steadfastly, incrementally cutting the separation between herself and her prey. It was a ridiculously easy stalk. The child, clearly young, but now so close, and with his hood and eyepiece off, not as young as she had first guessed. The shadows of a growing beard covered his cheeks, and a profound seriousness in his eyes impossible to hold in a child, adjusted her assessment of his age.

He was so engrossed within his thoughts, she easily closed the gap between them without the hint of detection. She was almost within an arm's lunge when he unexpectedly turned sharply towards an opening off a wall. He shined his light within, and Tali knew instantly what it was. The child had found the Cave of Warning. With his light fixed on Cress' bones, the child began talking. A blue box attached to his shoulder responded to his voice and emitted a slight glow. Noises which sounded very much like little one voices came out of the box, and it seemed to her that the child and the box were engaged in a conversation. Whatever had transpired, the exchange was brief and conclusive. The box lost its glow, and the child stepped into the cave.

The approaching little one voices took on a light echo. They were encroaching upon the cavern. Tali had run out of time. The child was deep within the Cave of Warning. There was only one entrance. He was trapped and may panic, but she no longer could wait for a better opportunity. She quickly stepped to the cave entrance, blocking his escape. He was engrossed with the etchings on the wall and had not seen her yet. Tali worried that her grip would harm her proposed captive and determined his best chance of survival was if he was braced for acquisition. She tapped on the ceiling with her knuckles. He turned. She jumped. The boy was in her hands.

So fragile. So puny. A slight squeeze of her large hands, and she would collapse him to a lifeless pulp. The mismatch was apparent, but surprisingly, this little one child-this leader, did not show fear. He did grimace with pain. Tali had trapped his arm in a very twisted and awkward position. Had she squeezed, she would have broken it. She risked setting him down, confident she could easily corral him if he ran. He must have also realized this. He did not run. Time was ebbing. She needed to carry him. He would not come voluntarily and could not possibly match her speed on his own even if he did. But he seemed so delicate, any manner she could think of for holding him would surely cause harm. Had she brought her pack, she could safely have stuffed him, but Cress' Door took away that possibility. If he maintained his composure she could hoist him in one arm, transporting him as a toiling mother would her infant. He would need to grasp

her tunic to keep from falling, and he could not struggle. She was certain she would injure him even with her utmost restraint if he did. Tali leaned low, sweeping her arm under the child's buttocks, cradling him not much differently than how she gathered her daughter so long ago.

Before lifting, she tried to reassure him in the soothing tones she once used on her baby, "I will not hurt you little one. I only want the return of my daughter."

He did not understand her, but he did recognize that she was attempting to communicate. His shoulders lost a touch of their tension. She was repeating her words when a shout followed by the loud pop of little one weaponry altered the scene. Tali did not feel its penetration, but a prick of blood appeared on her shoulder. Without hesitation, her body disengaged the thinking mind and took over. The boy was falling. Or was he leaping out of the way? Regardless, she scooped him under her arm and dove directly at her attackers. The center little one was crushed instantly under her massive frame. She felt the squish of soft tissue and the crackle of pulverized bone on her abdomen. Twisting sharply to and fro, her shoulders slammed the other two against the walls. The incident was fast and silent, but she heard an amplifying commotion in the corridor. Others must have heard the weapon. The quiet elder and at least the four she counted earlier were coming. As would the droves he could summon.

Her prisoner was unharmed. In her leap, she had instinctively secured and shielded him in roughly the manner she was attempting. He even clutched her tunic. Tali yearned to spring back to Cress' Door but stopped to ensure the little one soldier spirits had passed. The one she landed on was a certainty. He was noticeably flattened from waist to head, his helmet bore a raggedy crack where blood oozed through. The two she smashed against the wall were more difficult. They lay still, and were bent most irregularly. Surely their injuries were mortal, but so insulated were they in armor she was not certain they had already passed. What if they awoke and suffered from the wounds she inflicted? What if they survived and lived on, lame and useless? Tali could not fathom allowing such a horror. She reached down to unsheathe her knife, then cursed, remembering after touching nothing but clothing and skin that she had removed it. Using the barest of pressure from the fingertips of her free hand, she gently nudged and presented a little one's head so it was cradled in her palm, then wrapped her fingers carefully around it. Assured her grip was true, she snapped sharply, sending the body flying, while she retained a hold on the cleanly severed head. Tali set the head down and repeated the mercy with the second fallen little one. She wiped the trickle of blood that stained her palm with a few sweeps through the snow and bounded for Cress' Door.

Weaving dangerously fast through the rocky passages with the child pressed tightly against her chest, Tali dared not slow. She dared not look back. If she could garner

a sufficiently large lead, perhaps she could make it through, and close the opening, evading her pursuers. Cress had indeed built well. Her escape path would be as unrecognizable to the little ones as it had been for the countless exiles that had no doubt wasted so much of their skin scratching for a possible escape. The weapon laden little men would continue their search within the exile cavern, and Tali could retreat to the shelter of tunnels again where she may think out the next step of her insane, yet (initially at least) successfully unfolding plan.

At the final turn of the final corner, Tali abruptly halted. A lone little one, oblivious of her presence, blocked her path. He was injured in many places, but most prominently, one arm had been yanked loose at the shoulder. It hung limply by a handful of tendons. Frozen blood stained most of his shredded garments, which even discolored and tattered, Tali could recognize were markedly different from those of her pursuers. He was dazed and incoherent. From the age and violent sloppiness of his injuries, Tali guessed that this one must be an overlooked victim of the original battle with the exiles who had just regained consciousness. How long had that battle been? How thoroughly had the little ones scoured the cavern and still not found him? This poor broken wretch, all this time must have been stowed away in some obscure nook for the private feasting of an exile Tali truly hoped suffered greatly before giving up her spirit. His condition was pathetic, but surprisingly, not mortal. His arm would not survive mending, but if he received care, he could otherwise heal.

Tali sensed opportunity here. All the little ones knew of her kind was the exiles' savagery. She needed to pass, and the corridor was too narrow to do so without contacting the injured little one. If he was to fall, her pursuers would know she came this way. Despite having no role in hurting this one, she would be blamed, and they would follow her trail... But if she could manage to leave him standing, her pursuit would slow to tend their own. And they may perhaps change their direction believing she would not be the sort to show mercy to a helpless adversary. In this heightened state, a thought conjured was a thought enacted. She approached the damaged and disoriented little one. With a thumb and forefinger of her free hand, she pinched his head and guided him gently around her. He did not protest but did address her in some manner. She finished her maneuvering by nudging him toward her pursuers. A few stumbling steps later, he regained his unsteady balance and resumed his delusional meanderings.

Tali reached Cress' Door, shoved the child through, and dove in. She found even more difficulty getting out than before. The door must have sagged some more while she was in. She simply could not slide her second shoulder through. The child was clever. He saw instantly that she was trapped, and Tali saw he considered escaping, but instead he did a curious thing. He studied Cress' Door. Within moments, he rummaged the room, and finding her pack, pulled out Tali's rope. Working unhesitatingly, the child tied a loop

around the lever, threaded it around a fixed rock jutting from the ground, and walked the end over to Tali. There he paused. Holding the rope, he stared at Tali... intensely. He took a step closer to her, and from a pocket in his coat, retrieved a small blue box like the ones she had seen the soldiers holding.

The child pressed his finger a few times on the box without looking away from Tali for more than a quick glance. His eyes darted down, apparently interpreting something on the box's surface, but never lingering, always instead immediately returning to her. This happened several times and may have continued, but they both heard a commotion from within the cavern. The pursuers were near.

The child reached a decision. He set his box back in his pocket, handed the rope end to Tali, and mimicked pulling motions.

Tali wrapped the rope firmly around her one freed hand and yanked hard. The combination of her pull on the lever and her newfound leverage was effective. Each yank slid her further in and widened the door, but the price was that her body was supporting both the door and the boulder she had lodged in it. Both masses pressed her pinned shoulder tightly. The pain was increasingly approaching unbearable. She yanked relentlessly nonetheless. Suddenly, after one particularly ferocious yank, there was a hollow powdery crash sound. The mass crushing on her vanished, and the force of her effort propelled her violently through into the room. With one arm too exhausted, and the other numb from its compression, she had no means of deflecting her impact and hit face first on the rocky ground, rolling just enough to avoid breaking her nose, but severely rasping herself from cheekbone to jawline.

Cress' Door clicked shut, releasing a knot of tension which dulled the ache trickling in as her bloodied cheek trickled out. Tali listened for pursuit and heard only stillness. She was still in grave danger, but for the moment she could breathe... and think. She shook her arms to revive them while whirling to find the child, discovering him on the ledge nearby where she had lodged the boulder. He was kneeling, leaning against her knife, and was breathless. Had he been assisting her? It appeared so. The boulder lay crumbled just below where he was. The knife tip was planted precisely where the boulder had been. Parts of the blade and hilt were coated in a gray similar to the boulder's coloration. He must have wedged the knife between the wall and the boulder and pressed on the mass with his legs, adding his feeble strength to hers. Tali remembered that it was this child who had provided her with the rope, and it was the rope which freed her.

Why would he have done this?

What manner of creature were these little ones?

As if he anticipated her confusion and wished to cake on more, the child descended from his perch, and approached her fearlessly. He pointed to Tali's injured face, then his own, and with his hand, made picking motions at a specific place near his jawline. Tali touched her own face at the same place and felt the rock which had lodged in her skin. She picked it free and dabbed the bleeding wound on her tunic. That exchange gave surprising satisfaction to the child, for he sat in front of her. Slowly, so as not to give indication he intended a misdeed, the child plucked the blue box from his shoulder. It glowed at his touch, and after a few more touches, figures swirled on the surface.

The child touched his chest with both hands and identified himself with a sound.

"Creees," he said. It was screechy, indistinguishable from the ramblings of shore birds, but unlike that useless chatter, this had meaning.

Was that his name? Was that his title? Was it a declaration of surrender? Was it something else? Tali was working out which when the glowing blue box spoke to her.

## Chapter 13: First Huntress and Teresa the Mender

Waroo's daughter slept in ugly messy spurts. When in slumber, her sloppy, wet, nasal snores echoed thunderously off the smooth little one architecture. Occasionally and likely accented by some twisted dream, the collection of injuries contorted her form so much, her air passages crimped, and she spasmed into a coughing bout waking herself up. The one mad functioning eye would dart about frenetically for a moment, then sag to a close again, her resuming snores marking the continuation of the cycle. First Huntress, by contrast, was mountains still and appeared to be asleep as well, but could not. After the revelation of what had come to pass, she doubted she would ever sleep again. Her elimination of sleep did not however mark her surrender. She still yearned to be free, only not for herself anymore, but so she could race to the Tribe. The need for indulgences such as her own self-preservation was replaced by a more desperate duty. She ached to warn them of what she learned.

First Huntress, since becoming aware of the Final Retreat, had always considered it folly. She had not placed a high value on the little ones' danger, nor did she much appreciate the eventual result of the plan. Even if perfectly successful, the Tribe would lose their connection to the land and at such a massive cost she could not long think on it. Having suffered for herself the formidability of these tiny warriors, she could not deny she had severely underestimated them as adversaries. The legends were true. The warnings were real. They truly held the power to bring about the Tribe's annihilation. She was willing to concede that perhaps she was wrong elsewhere as well. Perhaps, ugly, costly and unsatisfying as it may be, the Final Retreat was the only recourse. The Elders must be warned to set the mechanisms in motion. She alone held the knowledge which would persuade them to do so. That alone consumed her thoughts shoving all else aside. She must return to the Tribe- to warn them, to help them prepare for what was to come, to lead them, to defend them...

To die with them.

After all, despite losing the spear, she was still First Huntress.

With the luxury of movement no longer hers, she did what she could to be ready should an opportunity arise. Her muscles were twitching imperceptibly, clearing the clutter in her limbs, her stagnation from injury and imprisonment had built up. She had been cautiously and quite futilely testing her bindings. They were impossibly strong for materials so thin. She could stretch them somewhat, but not snap them, and doubted she could have even if not so weakened. Her place sense, now oriented with her proximity within the ice, was strong again. It had revealed she was merely a day's run inland from

the exiles cavern. Vile as the notion was, if she backtracked through that cavern of death and atrocity, and if they had left her rope still dangling, she could quickly shimmy to the summit and return to a tunnel she knew would meander back to her Tribe. It was further than a surface run, but hidden. The flying machines could not track her. If the Tribe could only remain a secret until she reached them, she would call a Council, and they would unleash the old plan.

Her imprisonment was dire, but there was some progress. Little one menders were clearly superior to the Tribe. Her strength was returning. Using the ruse of tossing in her sleep, she had managed to wiggle to a position that would allow a mighty lunge in several directions should the little ones yield yet another unlikely opportunity. More importantly, her head no longer ached as it did. A mere itch where the First Mender must have worked her craft was all that remained of the banging throb. While she was unconscious from the last slew of injuries, they must have mended the damage in her head.

First Huntress had her mind again. Her body was responding well. She knew where she was and how to get back. If freed, she would run as never before, pausing for only one moment...

To snap the neck of the triplet.

The indignity of being so close to this abomination and powerless to eradicate it tormented her much more than all her physical injuries combined. It was all she could do to tamp down her desperation. Great, horrible, unavoidable and sadly unnecessary moments were soon to come merely because these strange beings had blundered into the most grotesque of the Tribe's refuse. Had they drilled into the Tribe's very center, matters could not be worse. Events were progressing along a line that seemed prophesized. All movements led to the same terrible point. Escape from that fate seemed less likely than escape from her current prison.

A door opened and the lights came on. Their first mender entered the room alone. It had been a while since she had seen her. First Huntress continued the ruse that she was asleep, but she was able to see enough from between the lash hidden slits of her eyes to notice that the mender had changed. Her crispness and certainty were gone. She was tired, disheveled, and profoundly worried. She also limped perceptibly. A leg of her garment had been removed, and a thick white wrap had been applied to her right knee. It was clearly causing great discomfort to her. First Huntress was certain she was the source of that injury. Guilt tried to squeeze into First Huntress' thoughts but was pummeled soundly away.

One of those mysterious blue boxes was in the first mender's hand. She held it at arm's length in front of her, pointing it at First Huntress as she approached. She walked

directly to her bound patient and tapped her firmly on the shoulder. First Huntress did not see a point in responding. The disheveled mender tapped her again and again with the same results. Finally, the mender moved away, opened a compartment, and retrieved two tiny blue dots. First Huntress had seen them often enough decorating the ears of many little ones. The mender returned and attached one to each of First Huntress' ears with what felt like a cold sticky adhesive.

The mender spoke to the blue box, and after a brief delay, streaming from the magical blue dots, in the language of the Tribe, First Huntress heard;

“First Huntress, cease pretending slumber. I need to speak with you.”

First Huntress' eyes shot open astonished. Before she could respond, the mender quickly placed her hand over her own mouth and pointed to the triplet. First Huntress nodded her understanding.

The mender unclipped one of her blue dots, showed it to First Huntress and reattached it. She pointed to First Huntress' ears. As validation of what she was communicating, the mender spoke again to her box, “I have attached a pair like I showed you in your own ears. Are they too loud? Too soft? Do you understand me First Huntress?”

First Huntress nodded.

The mender was terrifically relieved. She grew noticeably excited now. Moving out of sight for a moment, she returned to First Huntress holding a second blue box. She held it close to First Huntress' right eye until the colorful patterns flashed three times. She then moved to First Huntress' right thumb, placed it on the glowing surface, and held it there until the box again blinked three times. She set it down in front of her. Colors and figures whirred dizzily through the box's surface. They meant nothing to First Huntress, but they were of utmost importance to the mender. She stared expectantly at the box, waiting for some particular cue. Eventually, she received it. The tiny mender widened in a broad utterly triumphant smile. She spoke to First Huntress using her little one voice, and in moments, the Tribe's voice through the blue dots poured in her ears.

“My name is Teresa. I am a mender. Who are you?”

First Huntress jumped. She may even have made a sound. What manner of creatures are these? How can this be possible? Such was her surprise that the mender, this little one named “Teresa”, repeated her query,

“I am Teresa. I am a mender... Do you understand my words, First Huntress?”

“I am First Huntress. I am Advocate of Tribe,” First Huntress replied cautiously, unsure how to approach this new development. The little one language was as abbreviated as they were. What took an appropriate time for her to say blurted in an instance from the dots in Teresa’s ears, and while it appeared that the mender merely rushed a noise in response, the dots expanded them to meaning. With patience, the two were able to communicate.

“Your name is known to us. Our machines translated your conversation with the other of your kind that slumbers in this room. I am a mender. I attend to your injuries. Are you in pain?”

Pause.

“Why do you mend me?”

Pause.

“Because you were severely injured, and it was in our power to do so” Teresa the mender answered. Then, averting her gaze, she added, “..And we need information.”

Pause.

“My side is sore, mender, but I have no great pain.”

Long pause.

Teresa the mender relaxed somewhat. First Huntress assumed she was enjoying the satisfaction that, despite the damage inflicted by her most uncooperative patient, her craft had been successful, but First Huntress could only guess at this. She watched as Teresa the mender built up the resolve to broach the next question. The little mender approached her, halting only when there was no more room to move closer. She stood between the legs of the bound First Huntress, directly below her face. Even standing, the little one was miniscule in comparison to her. Perhaps if she stretched mightily, and First Huntress slouched a bit, she would be able to reach First Huntress’ chin. Alert now, and with her mender so close, First Huntress exploited the hesitation Teresa the mender was experiencing to evaluate her more completely. Her small size had planted a suggestion of youth she needed to adjust for. She was older than First Huntress first imagined. From this tight a proximity, she could see the tiny wrinkles on the brown skin around the corners of the mender’s eyes and a strand or two of gray within the mane of long black hair she pulled to a knot behind her head to clear her face. The mender’s dark, form-fitting garment revealed torso and limbs that were proportional and strong. Had she been the size of the Tribe, she may have been a worthy hunter, but scaled to such a tiny frame, she appeared so fragile. First Huntress was certain if she could wrap her hand around the

mender's waist, her fingers would touch her thumb... And she could easily crush her. Further study would have to wait, for Teresa the mender had come to a decision. She asked,

“Why did you attack us?”

Pause.

“Because I wish not to be captive.”

Pause.

“No, First Huntress. I speak of your people's attack in the cavern. We meant no harm. We were unaware of your existence. Yet you horribly butchered eighteen of us. Why?”

Pause.

First Huntress had no reply. Not even the most masterful storyteller could string together a collection of words which would explain madness to the satisfaction of the sane. Matters were exactly as she thought... As she feared. They were at a precipice about to plunge into an abyss, merely because of a horrible tragic mistake exploited by a band of monsters. All she could manage to respond was the simplified truth.

“You were not attacked by my Tribe.”

Teresa the mender had trouble with that reply. She fumbled her box a bit, awaking a wall of rectangles, displaying colorful, exotic things, most incomprehensible to First Huntress, but she did occasionally spy a picture of an exile, and of herself. The preoccupation took quite a while. First Huntress feared their dialogue was ended. And she very much did not want it to. Finally, not so much satisfied, but done, Teresa asked,

“This other giant. This one you named “exile” is not one of your tribe?”

“No.”

“Is she from another tribe then?”

“There is no other. There is only the Tribe.”

This reply too was troubling to Teresa, but she did not disappear into her machinery.

“First Huntress, was this woman once a member of your tribe?”

“She is of the banished, an exile dumped and forgotten in the ugly stone.”

“But at one time before her banishment she was of your tribe?”

First Huntress pondered her response for a long time. Should she explain the banished to this mender? How exactly are they explained to a stranger? All she could muster was to recite a poem sung to children:

*“Sleep well my child, and fear no more,  
The banished are gone, erased from lore.  
Dropped from existence, entombed in stone,  
They will rot in silence, all alone.  
Nor will they ever tread the land,  
They have been broken by our hand.  
Their place sense gone, their sight impaired,  
Their left hand and foot beyond repair.  
Carcass dropped in rock, as they have earned,  
Forever trapped, n'er to return.”*

“That is the fate of banished,” First Huntress concluded upon completion of her chant. She sat back, waiting patiently as the magical blue box translated her words into the screechy little one tongue. Of keen interest to her was observing how Teresa the mender digested the new knowledge. It was not very palatable at all. The little one mender pondered uncomfortably for a considerable time, stacking and adjusting the load with what she already knew, her brow furrowed more and more as she replayed the words. She jiggled phantom machinery with her hands, and the rectangular pictures slid and morphed on the wall in front of her. Her motions became increasingly agitated. She was not satisfied with her comprehension.

“First Huntress,” Teresa the mender finally asked, breaking her silence, but not her frustration. “We found you in the stone. Are you banished as well?”

First Huntress was initially quite upset at being misidentified as an exile, but given the circumstances, she understood the rationale and the confusion of the mender.

“No, Teresa. I am not an exile.”

“But you emerged from the cavern, and other than a long, steep rope, we found no other entrance.”

This information interested First Huntress. The context of her question clearly revealed that they did not know of the Tribe... yet. The triplet had not yielded any damning information, nor had they considered the possibility to ask. The little ones confined their search to the cavern because they were unaware there may be another place where they should look. A glimmer of hope, for the Tribe's survival if not her own, twinkled. It was the dimmest of all possible, but given the utter blackness she had expected, it shined radiantly, and she plunged feverishly on it.

”Nevertheless, Teresa. I am not an exile. I am the Tribe,” was her careful reply.

Initially satisfied, (relieved?), Teresa the mender played with her magical toys a bit, and her dissatisfaction returned. First Huntress ascertained the machines had somehow suggested that the little one mender should not trust the answer she just heard. It was becoming frustratingly evident that these little one machines revealed much more than First Huntress could guess, adding yet another layer of complexity to her already impossibly tangled predicament.

“What is it you fear, First Huntress?” the little one mender asked.

“I fear wasted deaths, Teresa. I fear the damage the exiles inflicted on your tribe have ravaged the land beyond repair. I fear that a weight has landed on a saturated cliff, unleashing a destructive unstoppable avalanche.” She chanced a glance over to the slumbering triplet and added, “I fear many things.”

That answer had come unexpected, prompting yet another new surprising response from the little one. The frustration was there, but it was overwhelmed by a more immediate emotion not dissimilar to confusion. Bound, injured, helpless, First Huntress had no recourse but to sit quietly and watch Teresa the mender ferociously fight her thoughts using her machines. But now she was alert, and regardless of the reason, she was out of the scrutiny of her mender. Sniffing the air lightly, she caught the scent of many many little ones. Their sweet, perfumed, metallic stench emanated from the doorway, as did the scuffs of their footwear on their exotic floors and the taste of their tension. She estimated there must be twenty of them, perhaps more, hidden behind the walls. The scents and sounds definitively revealed that they were armed with their powerful weapons, and they were frightened. Should she lose her caution, she would surely be cleaved like the butchered corpses she found in the cavern. And even if she did manage to escape this room, what lay beyond it? She could not be certain in this false

light, but she estimated that at least two days had transpired from the time she had been felled. How deep inside this structure had they dragged her? She passed the time considering and eliminating one suicidal scenario after another when Teresa the mender finally addressed her again,

“First Huntress, you are a captive of this room, but I no longer fear you will damage yourself or me. I wish to remove your restraints.”

First Huntress was silent.

“You must be aware that you cannot escape. No opening is large enough. The walls are solid, and hidden inside them are many weapons that will kill you instantly should you attempt to harm me. Do you understand this, First Huntress?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe me, First Huntress?”

“Yes.”

“Will you attempt to harm me or try to escape if I undo your restraints?”

“No, Teresa, while I wish to be free, I am aware that the possibility does not exist. For now, I will not attempt to escape. I will not harm you. You have the oath of First Huntress.”

Teresa studied her box, which must have told her that First Huntress was speaking the truth. Cautiously, she rolled a wheeled table to each of First Huntress’ ankles, and using her box, freed each leg. First Huntress again heard the clicks as her leg bindings fell away. Teresa the mender rubbed that same salve, alleviating the discomfort from the fraying inflicted on her limbs. She repeated the process on the wrists.

“You have suffered a tremendous injury to your head that became dangerously swollen when you attempted to escape. I have relieved the pressure from your skull, and you do not show any signs of residual harm, but my repairs have rendered your head dangerously vulnerable. Until you heal completely, any impact of even minor significance to your head will kill you. The wound over your ribs is also very fragile.” Teresa informed, “Do not lift your left arm more than you have to or you will risk the healing’s completion. Have I explained your condition adequately, First Huntress?”

“You have, Teresa. I will be cautious. Thank you for your trust,” First Huntress replied while testing her limbs’ flexibility.

“First Huntress, will you return that trust?”

First Huntress ignored Teresa. She rocked gently, massaging her calves and feet. Glancing upward, verifying that she indeed had clearance, she did something she had not done for quite some time. First Huntress cautiously, and with more clicks, pops, and complaints from her body than she would have preferred, she stood. Her wildly unruly, dry stiff hair rubbed the ceiling as she turned her head to gauge her surroundings from this more favorable perspective, producing an unpleasant scraping sound that bothered her ears. But she was too content from the elation of being erect to allow that discomfort to force a slouch. Light from the ceiling scattered and shredded through the lattice of her hair, casting dark stringy shadows on the walls and floor.

Somewhere in that blackness, darkened almost to invisibility, and miniscule by comparison, the box’s blue glow revealed the shape of Teresa the mender gawking ridiculously upward, her head tilting almost horizontally. She was slowly backing away, to reduce the strain on her craned neck, trying to garner a perspective she could address. With them both fully erect, the contrast in sizes was measurable and stark. Teresa’s head reached above First Huntress’ knee... but not very far above.

First Huntress stretched her arms, and winced. As she had been warned, her left side was noticeably stiff and tender. The warnings were not hollow. She continued the stretching, favoring the right. First Huntress shifted to allow the ceiling light access to Teresa, who transparently marveled at the stature of her patient as one would an approaching storm. She was awed and terrified. First Huntress wondered whether the little mender was regretting that she had unshackled her patient. She thought not, but in the shadowless wash of the ceiling’s illumination, very little was hidden. She was certain Teresa feared something; though she was relieved that from her stance, it was evident the fear was not for her own safety. The tiny mender had ceased her retreat, having found a reasonably comfortable angle and distance where she could address her patient. Her attention was definitely upon First Huntress, at least that was how she wished the attention to appear, but it flitted occasionally to the one doorway. Something on the other side was the source of her dread. Did she worry for the safety of the soldiers who hid behind it? Was there something, or someone else she did not wish harmed there? That did not resonate. Presumably if there was something Teresa feared First Huntress would damage beyond, then she simply would not have been released. Nor did Teresa show any trepidation when First Huntress tested her thought by moving slightly towards the exit. First Huntress felt more and more convinced that what her mender feared was something outside coming in, not the reverse.

Was there someone who would harm Teresa the mender for freeing First Huntress? Did the unwarranted kindness and trust she had just been shown come at a cost

to her mender? And if so, who was threatening to collect that debt? Aside from their quiet elder, First Huntress had not observed anyone who Teresa the mender deferred to. Even he shared authority. He did not own it. If her observation was true, it would force First Huntress to expand yet again her perception of the little ones. Without much consideration, she (and likely, the entire Tribe) had simply assumed they organized themselves as middle food hierarchies with a single Dominant and casts based on gender and age. It was a naive thought, but before now, there had never been an occasion where refining that assumption was necessary, nor was there ever any evidence to contradict it. Never had there been a sighting of a little one pup nor of any serious family or courtship behavior. The forgone conclusion had been that all the little ones they had ever encountered were foragers, sent off on a bizarre gathering expedition, which never seemed to gather anything useful. They did hunt, viciously, and copiously from their floating vessels, sometimes dragging the carcasses ashore to be butchered sloppily. But they abandoned much of the good meat to rot, desecrating that ground forever. They roamed in and over the ice, presumably hunting for the Tribe, if the childhood stories were real. (From her current predicament, First Huntress had trouble dispelling that notion.) Either task would be hampered if they lugged their families along, so they must have left them behind. At least, that was the Tribe's presumption. Now she wasn't so sure. Her failed escape was still hazy in her mind, but she did recall vividly the vastness of the dwelling she wandered through, and how the little ones had finally understood their folly and buried it. Perhaps their families were all here. Perhaps they had been here all along, nestled in the bellies of their ships, or inside the flying machines, or buried safely beneath the ice in hidden chambers beyond the wanderings of any Tribe hunter. Given their impressive machinery, particularly their prowess in burrowing, they might even have settled in the rock. Perhaps Teresa the mender's family was just outside. Perhaps her Elders awaited to judge her harshly. First Huntress' face contorted to a grimace from the burden of juggling all the important information she simply did not know.

But what did she know?

She was reasonably certain that, as did the Tribe, they divided their labor. She was familiar enough with their appearance to distinguish individuals now. Soldiers and menders, the only two true skills she had been exposed to, were discrete. Given their machinery, their homes, and their clothes, likely there were builders and weavers and smiths and other artisans as well. Teresa and the quiet elder were leaders, but they did not rule tyrannically, nor did their position seem vulnerable for acquisition from another within their tribe. Possibly, they may not even be better in position, merely proficient enough for deference. That contradicted with her recollection of the little one lore, which was rife with singularly dominant maniacs ruling through cruelty and impossibly

complex and paralyzing pecking orders. Was the lore merely foolishness, or was there a higher layer they answered to? Was this what Teresa feared?

Those notions also did not resonate. Whether true long ago or not, it seemed obvious to First Huntress that the little ones could not possibly arrange themselves in that way anymore. To align a group by rank meant each individual was answerable to all above it, and vulnerable to the wrath of its immediate superior from fear of being usurped. It also meant tremendous hemorrhaging of resources in attempts to scale up, or repel a challenge to be forced down the order. No move in either direction benefited the group, only the individual. Such a squandering of resources would suffocate any greatness their tribe could achieve. How could they have built all the marvels First Huntress had (too often so painfully) discovered, how could they have effectively performed the tasks they have accomplished without the freedom to call on instincts? That path guaranteed paralysis. An artisan's craft was garbage if it could not flow freely from the hands of the creator. Those hands were stunted to uselessness if they had to continuously pause for the permission of a superior. Hunters who hesitated for anything, including approval, were destined to be meat. Soldiers were simply hunters who did not harvest their kills. She dismissed such nonsense immediately, leaving the mystery of the Teresa's fear intact.

Theirs must be a tapestry of personalities as complicated as the Tribe.

Answers were not coming, and her silent pondering agitated Teresa even more. First Huntress shook that problem out of her mind because she realized her freedom of movement meant she now could resolve another.

"Teresa, I will return your trust now," First Huntress stated. She was about to take a step towards the triplet when her senses caught the entrance of another.

"Where is your Tribe?"

The sound, squeaky and rushed, originated from the door, but flowed as words uttered in a deep not unpleasant male voice into First Huntress through the blue dots. She did not immediately respond, but she recognized who had spoken. She remembered this one. He was the quiet elder who studied her when she had been moved. He was patient and smart. Unlike Teresa however this one was not a mender. He was most definitively a hunter. She remembered it was he who delivered the felling blow ending her escape. To him, First Huntress was nothing more than prey. First Huntress' muscles tightened reflexively preparing for use,

"Why is my Tribe a concern to you, Elder?" First Huntress replied cautiously.

“I would protect my own tribe from further atrocities,” the quiet elder answered. He crossed the room and took a position at Teresa’s side. The two faced First Huntress, shoulders nearly touching. Teresa grew more agitated, but her concern did not increase as the quiet elder approached her. First Huntress reasoned her mender feared something the quiet elder may do, but she did not fear the quiet elder. She did not particularly resent his introduction to the room, nor the close proximity. It appeared that they were familiar with one another. The age difference and comfort suggested that Teresa was a daughter, but they had no resemblance. Was she kin? A lover? Was knowing important?

First Huntress allowed the translation and the motivations behind them sink in. The quiet elder and Teresa stood motionless as she worked her response. She studied the two. Despite the obvious tension, neither fidgeted. Teresa had even ceased her worried glances outward, further proof that it was this quiet elder who wielded the power she dreaded. They were patient... intelligent too. More than intelligent, they were wise. First Huntress was certain that given enough time, and if they did not already know it, they and their magical machinery would wrestle a revelation of the Tribe’s existence from her. All she cherished would come to an end. First Huntress had no desire to risk answering them, but given the pains they had gone through to establish a communication, she expected that her severance would be viewed as hostile. Waroo’s daughter took that moment to snort loudly, and First Huntress knew how to reply. She chose to answer the quiet elder’s question through Teresa.

“I will repay your trust, Teresa,” she said, and while the translators moved the words to the little one’s ears, First Huntress bounded across the room, seized the last triplet by her head, and with a shattering twist, instantly snapped the exile’s neck. In one motion, First Huntress released her grip on the dead woman, and kneeled before Teresa, head bowed, hands forward.

“I have eliminated the danger of future atrocities from your tribe, Teresa. I have returned your trust. Your elder need never worry from my Tribe again.”

The walls exploded with hidden doors. Soldiers flooded the room, their weapons pointed and trembling with a desire to be used. The quiet elder understood enough of First Huntress’ actions to halt their imminent attack. He instead motioned to rebind First Huntress, and peering at his blue box, quickly exited the room. She surrendered to their instructions uncomplaining. When secured, a wall behind the dead exile was dismantled, and the body was taken away.

Seated again, bound as she had begun a few eventful moments ago, First Huntress was surprised to find Teresa still there, precisely in the same place she had been, nearly in the same position, frozen in the room gazing at First Huntress. She appeared to be fighting an urge to void her food. Teresa was struggling mightily to speak, but she said

nothing. First Huntress allowed her mender the silence she needed to assemble her thoughts. After a lengthy battle with her mind and food, Teresa cracked her silence just enough to leak out one quiet word. First Huntress saw Teresa's lips in motion, but what she spoke was inaudible even with her keen ears. The blue box swallowed the word and spit it out amplified sufficiently for First Huntress to hear. Scrubbed of any emotion, the statement was as confusing as it was brief,

“Why?”

Such a strange question. Why would a mender argue the removal of the last creature who had assaulted her tribe? Was there more? Was she upset that First Huntress carried out the task rather than allowing her kind to perform it? Was there some ritual of execution she had not followed? Perplexed more than ever, she answered the tight mender with what she thought obvious.

“That was the last of our... my refuse, Teresa. It was foolhardy to have allowed it to exist unattended when it was clearly so malevolent. My oversight has cost your tribe dearly, and the land has suffered a blow most heinous. I have eliminated the possibility of it happening ever again. By all my reckoning, those are good measures. Why would you question them, Teresa the mender?”

“Because she was in no position to commit harm ever again. You have your sanity and the use of all your limbs. You are considerably stronger than she was... And you could not escape us. Do you truly believe we feared her anymore? She was bound and helpless. She was impotent. And you snapped her neck.”

Teresa's response was a conflict of personas. There was no chance First Huntress would not hear this answer. Stark and calculated, the translated words flowed smoothly, retaining some of the intonations of her sentiments but still rationally delivering her message-- an act, unacceptable to her needed explanation. The words conveyed confusion and anger and a demand for satisfactory answers. Her physical appearance was another matter. Gone were the superficial feelings of awe, fear, dread and revulsion. Gone was any control she had over revealing them. All had given way to a primordial wash where no explanation, however persuasive, would ever suffice. Teresa was enraged.

Still, just as utterly oblivious of the source from where that rage swelled, First Huntress ignored it and simply addressed the words, “I am strong, fast, and unhesitant Teresa. She did not suffer. Nor do I believe she awoke from her slumber. She never knew her demise was coming. She never dreaded. No more pain has seeped into the land. Your tribe has not been desecrated.”

“Is it your tribe’s way to eliminate what threatens you so convincingly?” the quiet elder asked as he returned to his place beside the mender. To First Huntress, it seemed he was intruding on them, but Teresa’s anger had reduced her to a trembling muteness, not easily shaken. He was not interrupting, as much as assisting. The quiet elder clutched his blue box tighter than before. Whatever matter he had left to attend had not been resolved, and it clearly worried him.

“I am the Tribe, elder,” First Huntress answered, shifting her attention to her new conversant, but watching Teresa from her periphery for signs she was regaining control.

“No, First Huntress. You are one of many. Please cease the deception you are attempting. There are hundreds of you,” the quiet elder said plainly. He showed his blue box to Teresa, who studied it unbelieving for a long time. The blue box’s revelation smothered Teresa’s rage. More than that, it broke the tiny mender. She pressed back against the bare wall and slid to a seated position on the floor, wrapping her arms around her drawn in legs, chin flopped on her knees, eyes shut lazily. She had been exhausted when she first entered. Her rage had been all that was sustaining her: drained of it left her with nothing but absolute despair.

Coincidentally, both Teresa and First Huntress were in similar positions across from one another. First Huntress’ pose was forced by her bindings, Teresa’s by a burden too great. Regardless, seated slouched, their backs against the cold, smooth wall, and no pretense for posture, both were defeated. The quiet elder placed a sympathetic hand on Teresa’s shoulder, and with a head bob, motioned for two soldiers to escort Teresa out. She allowed herself to be lifted to her feet and left uncomplaining, acknowledging neither the sympathetic hand, nor the soldiers, nor her former patient.

Alone with the quiet elder, First Huntress stiffened mightily. Her position of strong disadvantage was to be tested now. She was certain the revelation he had shared with Teresa concerned the Tribe. The quiet elder was not forthcoming with it because she also knew that this one most keenly had the interests of his own tribe above all else. In a manner, the impending dialogue they would exchange was simpler than when addressing Teresa the mender. This fierce singular protectiveness she fully understood. The quiet elder continued,

“You have proven to be of a dishonorable character, First Huntress. You have spoken many deceptions to Teresa the mender. Our machines are capable of detecting them all, and we have other knowledge which casts you in an even less trustworthy light.”

“I have not been forthcoming, Elder but I do not deceive. There is a difference.”

“You assured a good, trusting advocate that we had no cause for worry from your Tribe again.”

“And you do not. I gave the word of a First Huntress,” she replied cautiously, unsure why the quiet elder was making such a brash accusation.

As if aware of First Huntress’ confusion, the quiet elder continued, “Moments ago, one of our dwellings was attacked unprovoked by a dozen of you. We have eliminated them all, but not before they inflicted immeasurable harm. Many of our tribe are dead. Children and elders died by your tribe’s hand, again unprovoked.”

First Huntress understood the words. Unless this elder was adept in deception, a trait she did not think likely in him, she was also reasonably certain they were spoken truthfully. She just could not at the moment fathom what he was referring to. Were there even more exiles hidden away in a dark recess of the banished cavern? Did they escape detection and somehow traverse the great barren lengths to find and attack again? That was ludicrous. No little one dwelling was visible from the peak of the cavern. They would have had to travel blindly across impossible spans, hobbled and blinded of their place sense. The little ones would have never allowed such a sloppy stalk to succeed. Had they not neutralized her without much effort? And was she not a First Huntress?

Uncharacteristically, the quiet elder grew impatient awaiting her reply. He interrupted her thoughts,

“Explain this assault to me, First Huntress,” he said, and placed his blue box on the table.

As Teresa had done, the quiet elder spun his hands and a painting made of light depicting the great common space of a little one dwelling appeared on the wall across from her. No, she thought, it was not a painting. Paintings are still. First Huntress saw there was movement. All through the space, little ones scurried about unhurriedly performing their daily tasks. It appeared to be great opening, a window to that dwelling. Was there no end to the marvelous machinery they were capable of? The image was bright and crisp. She could make out faces. Was this happening now? Was this an impression of events that had occurred? Was this a window she could step through? The colors and angles differed sufficiently to make her reasonably certain it was not the same dwelling she had rampaged through earlier. Was this even a real place? Her questions flashed dizzily, and she was so absorbed with them, that the next event startled her visibly.

Through the floor of their dwelling, a large and sadly familiar spike suddenly protruded. The spike twisted and grew, rising at a steep angle for quite some time before

toppling free and collapsing on a structure. The spike rolled lazily for a bit, casually crushing flat all little one materials it touched under its immense weight and came to halt against the lip of the first set of balconies, indenting them deeply. Out from the hole, moving quite slowly, the pain of their long travel evident to First Huntress, even through their massive armor, twelve Smiths emerged and formed an outward facing circle around the perimeter of the hole they had just carved. Most of them wielded broad, two handed swords. One, a female not quite as warped as her comrades, was still sufficiently agile to be armed with a bow and a hefty quiver of arrows. The largest of them, a very old Smith who would stand taller than First Huntress, even with his heavily hunched back, held a spear not unlike hers. The Smiths reached out to one another, adjusting their positions until each was touching the two at their side, closing the circle. When connected, they closed their eyes and stood in silence for a very long time. First Huntress knew what was to come. She stared blankly, watching the little one soldiers pour in from all corridors of the magical painting, frantically evacuating their wards and assembling their own circle no more than five or six good steps distance around the Smiths. She saw the Smiths' lips move, nearly imperceptibly as they prayed their Last Prayer, bidding farewell to the world and welcoming their return to the land. She knew their words, and, had she begun them when they did, she would have known precisely when the carnage would commence, but she did not. Following her duty as one of the Tribe, in her mind, she chanted along with them at a brisker tempo, hoping to time her song to end when they did:

*“My time is done, I am at the end,*

*I shall not walk this land again.*

*No further task, I've left to do,*

*My affairs resolved, my story through.*

*But I will not meekly wait my demise,*

*That selfish path I do not advise.*

*My slow erosion will not dictate,*

*I, with bold hand, guide my fate.*

*I shall not slow, nor will I relent,*

*I will push onward, until I'm spent.*

*And gladly meet the final peace,*

*When my spirit does release.*

*I will soar so mightily with the delight,*

*That my final act had been so right.*

*For no greater gift can I ever give,*

*Than to die so that the Tribe may live.*

First Huntress was mildly satisfied that she had indeed finished about when the Smiths did, but was immediately saddened remembering what the quiet elder had said of an attack. She was not gazing upon the present, rather these were memories of events already old and somehow captured on this canvas. She had not honored the Smiths by singing their Last Prayer with them. They had sung alone, and none of the Tribe lived on to resonate their sacrifice until this quiet elder, for motives all his own, revealed them to her. With more purpose than before, she looked on. She would use her long memory as never before, and she would remember what now transpires before her. Should the Tribe still exist at the end of this tale, should she still live, if possible, she would recant what she would see to the Smiths' kin. This she vowed as First Huntress.

Those were such precarious "ifs." The Smiths' intrusion meant the Tribe was aware they had been discovered. The Final Retreat had begun. First Huntress could not know the extent of the little ones' knowledge, nor did she dare ask. Knowing was irrelevant anyhow. Regardless of the depth of their knowledge, the cascade of events commencing with the Smiths would be the same. The Elders had determined their discovery to be unconcealable and had deemed to unveil the armory, unleashing the prophetic contingent she and all others before her had dreaded and suffered such extreme efforts to prolong. Those efforts were vapor now, as was any hope of retracting. Once begun, the measures taken would proceed relentlessly to their completion, an iceberg calving from the great glacier's edge. Much like an iceberg, the destination was as obvious as the futility in preventing it from getting there. To try was folly. Best to leap out of the way and allow the inevitable course its unhindered run. All that remained was the final fate of the berg, and even that was from the vantage of spectator. Whether the berg slid gently into its new existence, bobbing away as a sanctuary for middle food or shattered explosively into oblivion was predetermined the moment it started, and the berg did not care which form a spectator preferred. Nor did it care much to reveal what it would become before becoming.

First Huntress knew all this because the Elders had revealed much of the Final Retreat's agenda to her when she earned the spear. She was aware what her course should be, and she despised it. She had always wondered if she would have sufficient

determination to endure so much restraint. A part of her welcomed her confinement. The shackles insured she would not veer from her duties. This contingent was the task of Smiths. To intervene would undermine their purposes, rendering all their sacrifices useless. She could not allow that. Especially since she knew, despite the costly and irreplaceable loss, this truly was the only survivable recourse.

As complex as the contingent was, in its heart, the reasoning was simple. Categorizing little ones as monsters was for children and for the uninformed. Clear thinking from those shouldering the burden of Tribe knowledge had long ago removed the blame and insult from the circumstances leading to their conflicts. It was a simple truth that no two predators may ever hunt the same range without competing savagely for dominion of that range. In a competition with such a prodigious foe, their history repeatedly validated yet another truth: In a competition with the little ones, the Tribe could not win. Their only recourse was to find sanctuary, which they had done and enjoyed for thousands of seasons. The Elders had obviously concluded that their current location was threatened and had revealed the armory, setting the Final Retreat into motion in their last desperate gasp for survival. The first phase of that plan mandated that for the Tribe to live, the unspeakable must be done...

There must be war.

First Huntress turned her attention to the ghosts.

The Smiths released their hold on one another. They exchanged wordless goodbyes and, upon the cue of the largest, hoisted their weapons for battle. As one, they stepped forward, expanding their circle, and diminishing their distance from the little one soldiers. Immediately, the little one weapons flashed into action. Sound was mercifully not a part of the theater of events First Huntress was witnessing. The effects were macabre enough in silence. Smith armor was surprisingly resilient in withstanding the tiny, but sharp penetrations. The initial assault barely slowed the Smith advance. But as good as the Smith armor was, the little one aim was better. They quickly realized the futility in attacking the armor, and they shifted their aim to those tiny spaces between the mighty plates, and the places where armor did not cover. Blood, splattered from the face of one Smith whose helmet covered only his skull, his head recoiled, exposing his neck, which was also blasted. A red fountain gushed unfettered down the chest, pouring both in front, and behind the armor. Thick crimson streaks appeared on his thick white thighs. He would never recover from so much loss. Drained of so much, his face utterly unrecognizable, and still under assault, he somehow continued forward blindly, swinging his sword broadly and low. Those precious moments the little ones wasted on the armor cost them dearly. The blinded Smith's sword traversed the gap and struck its target, felling a wide arc of little ones. As he intended, all hit were instantly dead. He paused,

and reached to the ground, feeling for any who survived so he could end their suffering. He found none, but that time had been sufficient to allow those outside the arc to scatter beyond his sword's range. And still they fired on him. From the direction of the impacts, he could know where his attackers were, but without knowing the distance, he could not trust his sword to kill without pain, so the Smith discarded his weapon and lunged towards the densest of his bombardment. His leap was true, and he landed hard on an assembly of little one soldiers, crushing most instantly, and with his hands dispatched the few who still lived. Then he disappeared in a splash of blood as a frenzy of weaponry buried him.

The female with the bow advanced no more than a step, and immediately dropped to one knee, positioning herself squarely. She twisted her bow so that it was wide rather than tall, knocked three arrows, and fired them directly at the little ones. Each shaft impaled at least two soldiers, and would have easily gathered more, had their ranks been deeper. The arrows soared unhindered across the cavern, pinning their dead cargo to the rubble that was once the smooth far wall. There was a noticeable pause in the assault from the remaining soldiers as they turned more perplexed than frightened to the place their comrades had been mere moments before. To the spared little ones, the fallen had been carried off so quickly and so far out of their sight by the momentum of the arrows, they must have appeared to vanish. Those who turned their heads sufficiently were visibly shaken when they discovered their companions' true fate skewered through the shafts in the distance. They immediately passed the knowledge to the others, probably through their blue boxes, because soon after, they snapped back into the battle with an even fiercer resolve. The three perfectly fired arrows were the first and final blows the bowed female could manage. Little one weapons pulverized her bow hand, expunging it of any strength. She still held the bow, but not from any muscular contraction on her part. It had been fused onto the pulp that once comprised her fingers and palm. Neutralized of her offensive capability, the soldiers honed in on her joints where the armor did not cover. Her left arm came apart at the shoulder, dangling by a mere thread of muscle. The knee she supported herself on became liquid as the relentless barrage found the tiniest of slivers between her thigh and knee plates created by her crouch. She dropped to her elbow, which became their new focus for liquefaction. When that was gone, the bombardment ceased. There was simply nothing left of her to shoot at.

Most of the remaining Smiths, having barely the strength for the long arduous journey they had just completed, were too exhausted to even pretend to attack. They were scarcely standing under the burden of the armor. There was no possibility they had made the journey wearing it. First Huntress reasoned they must have donned it right before their bore pierced the floor. Likely there were children and grandchildren in their company who had carried it for them. It would have been their honor to escort their kin on their Last Prayer and their responsibility to collapse the tunnel behind them to prevent

the contamination of the Tribe's world with their enemy's. There was hope after all that kin joined them in their Last Prayer, evaporating her sadness for the Smiths' lonely deaths. They would be remembered, regardless of whether she escaped.

The spent Smiths' initial battle cry was the last of any pretense of strength. After, they managed a step or two towards their foes trying to appear menacing, but failing miserably. Even before they were attacked, their swords, too heavy to lift, dragged at their side. One even dropped his. Bits of armor slid from their bent frames. Helmets too small, one even on backwards wiggled as they moved. Their assault would have been comical, were their ensured fate not so terrible. The spent Smiths must have caught how they looked by eyeing each other and realized how quite pathetic their assault appeared. As if they had agreed, they stopped nearly in unison, made some even more lame gestures of attack, and then awaited the arrival of their prickly death, which the little ones were only too adept in accommodating.

The few stronger amongst them fared little better. They had withstood the onslaught sufficiently whole to reach and plow through the little one defenses and were scaling the balconies scoring clean kills as they climbed. None made it very far. The higher they rose, the more exposed they were to the endless barrage of damage from all sides. They eventually, inevitably succumbed, the culmination of the hemorrhaging from so many openings sapping them of their strength. Most of their still bodies clung lifelessly to the walls of the great little one common room, but a few had released their grip on this world while between perches. They had fallen, landing explosively. The impact squirting what little blood remained in long streams from their many many wounds.

In short measure, only the Large Smith stood.

Undistracted by other threats, all weapons pointed directly at the Large Smith. He too had been moving steadily towards the balconies, and was now stalled by a circle of opposition. From many perches, all just outside the reach of the enormous spear he held loosely in one hand, little one soldiers had regrouped. They seemed as numerous as they had been before the attack. Their many dead had been carted away, replaced by fresh soldiers from the corridors. There appeared to be an unending supply of them, which to First Huntress, was the very essence of why this strategy was as futile as it was inevitable. Their numbers were infinite. The Tribe's was not.

An uneasy pause in the hostilities held momentarily. The damage inflicted on the Large Smith was extensive but peripheral. His arms and legs were coated red with spilled blood, making the grip on his spear slick. She could see he was exploiting the moment to wipe his throwing hand clean on his chest plate. His face bore marks of damage, but he was still formidably intact. There was much more fight left within him. And from the

determination in his face, he was eager to release it. She regretted that she did not recognize who he was, and that she had not known, nor sadly would ever know, such a spirit.

Other than the heaving of his grotesquely bent ribcage, he did not move. The Large Smith stood glacially still. Little one soldiers could not know what was obvious to First Huntress. His had been a ferocious and rapid attack. He had ascended nearly to the equator of the great room, and from that vantage, could see the fallen bodies of the others. He knew he was the last standing, and that soon he would join their exit. His would be the last blow from this assault, and he was trying to determine the best way to inflict it... The best way to die.

Knowing all this had occurred, First Huntress silently wished he chose well. She watched as a decision he found both satisfactory and apparently quite pleasant creased the Large Smith's face. Was that a smile under the caked blood? Fluidly, he turned his spear point downward and rammed it firmly into the floor. With the soldiers watching uncomprehendingly, he placed both hands firmly on the shaft, and with horrific pain and determination, pushed downward. His spear did not yield, so his body straightened a bit. He adjusted his grip and repeated the effort. While First Huntress and the soldiers gazed incredulously, the Large Smith reversed the erosion inflicted upon him through many seasons as a Smith. He was, through sheer will and strength, straightening his back. It took six good pushes, and the damage caused by the process likely was more lethal than the collection of little one hits so far, but this Large Smith, who must have once been a hunter, perhaps even a First Hunter by his stature, faced his final moments erect.

First Huntress was dumbfounded. To do what this Large Smith had done was remarkable, but puzzling. While his back was straight, it was now useless. There would be no way he could move now. As if to answer her, the Large Smith most definitely smiled, and with a final show of strength, using his spear as a pivot, toppled directly on the little ones below him. He made no effort to protect his fall and landed squarely on a group paralyzed with fear, where he remained face down, flat. First Huntress noted that he did not attempt to roll or stand. She had been correct in her thoughts on the condition of his back. Yet the Large Smith was not helpless. Using his powerful arms and legs as pounding tools, he renewed his assault, and First Huntress understood. His excruciating adjustment was not merely a final act of vanity. A straightened back noticeably lengthened his reach. The Large Smith crushed and crushed until the avalanche of weaponry descended upon him. The painting froze as the movements of this great man slowed, then dimmed slowly to darkness, leaving First Huntress with the memories. The quiet elder intruded with his question,

“How many more are there, First Huntress?”

Silence. What could she say?

“We detect hints of you under the ice. We are aware that you are moving in groups, and with purpose. You have seen that we can dispatch you. The attack you just saw caught us unaware. Our weapons were inferior, and you hurt us more than you should have. Yet, we still persevered. We have become alert now and have upgraded our arsenal. You will not inflict such harm on us again. To continue your assaults is suicide. Is your Tribe intent on self-annihilation?”

The insight of his question impressed First Huntress. She reminded herself that there were great mechanisms in motion which she could jeopardize with a misstep in her dialogue. One counsel she gave herself was to end the communication. Let them siphon what they could from her mind with their stupid blue boxes. But if she had not been certain before, she harbored no doubt now that this quiet elder was the dominant, at least when it came to the soldiers. The longer she distracted him, the less time he would have for other matters. He was not flawless. Had he not underestimated her several times already? Perhaps his underestimations were not finished. She deemed it worth the risk to guardedly prolong their talk,

“No. We do not wish to die, Elder,” she replied, “but it seems that it is now time that we must.”

“There is never a time where someone *must* die, First Huntress.” The quiet elder responded more strongly than she had observed before. He had tempered his response to mask it, but she was a hunter. She saw all that her prey revealed, whether the prey knew it was revealing it or otherwise. Her words had deeply upset him, which First Huntress found both interesting and advantageous. Anger often compromised restraint. The quiet elder added,

“You have seen that ours is a myriad of advantages. We hold superior weaponry. We hold superior numbers. We hold mastery of the air and the sea. We hold machines which give us vision into your mind and through the ice...” The quiet elder moved close to First Huntress before completing his thought, not to intimidate or threaten, but to convey with certainty that what he was saying was true.

“And, First Huntress, I speak this plainly to you. We possess other, mighty powerfully frightful weapons we have as yet not revealed. You cannot defeat us, and if you persist with your futile attempts, we will rain our ugly machinery down upon you mercilessly. We do not wage war lightly, but when we do, we are thorough.”

Your Tribe’s only choices are to surrender or die.”

First Huntress gaped. The quiet elder uttered the terrible phrase casually as if he had no notion of the abhorrence it carried. She hoped her shock was not revealed, but suspected the confounded blue boxes would not have missed it. There was no doubt in her now that the path chosen by the Elders was correct. These little ones were as ruthless as the prophecies, and her mother had warned. They were resourceful and prolific. If there was uncertainty of their position before, there was no longer. These were not middle food. They were true hunters. They would not cease their pursuit until they achieved the Tribe's extinction.

She had wondered until now if their initial encounter had not been so violent would this path be as certain? Had there been, in place of the horrific first battle in that cursed exile cavern, a friendly exchange on the open ice, where one of the Tribe assisted a little one; or perhaps if a kindness such as Teresa the mender's was done to one of the Tribe, would the blue boxes have allowed a peaceful coexistence? Perhaps initially the two tribes, for fear of the alternative, would exchange pleasantries. They would pledge peaceful coexistence and negotiate many many compromises on resources. And for a time, they may even be friendly, engaging in trade, exchanging stories... until something which they both wanted, but only one could have, arose. First Huntress was confident that their fates would eventually deteriorate to their current states. The Tribe's drastic path was true. First Huntress ended the dialogue,

“I have nothing more to say to you, Elder.”

## Chapter 14. The Elders

So many had gathered in the map room, the very item that warranted their gathering—the map – was ironically not accessible. Elders complained and bossed the immediate few around them, but their voices were drowned by sheer numbers. So time passed, tensions rose, as did the volume of the dialogue. The stalemate dragged on, until finally, a few cooks who were astute enough to realize what was causing the delay, and how each moment wasted would be less time for them to prepare the evening meal, took it upon themselves to clear any of the Tribe not directly involved with the matters to be discussed off the surface. Nudge upon gentle nudge steadily drifted the curious to the periphery where they found and occupied every corner and nook of every vantage over the carving of the Tribe's range. It was a slow process because so many wished to hear what would be said, and there were so many many nooks. The map room had grown with the Tribe. It was the only room holding an uncharacteristically asymmetrical space, having expanded from its modest original space in the same relative direction and shape as the Tribe had. The map room grew and branched as would an expanding stream. Usually, the small elevated balcony at the entrance was sufficient to satisfy any inquiry. From there, the height and position was perfect to view all that the Tribe considered their domain. Should they want a more detailed look, twin staircases swept downward along the perimeter to the large, open room's floor. The map was extended outward from the base of the balcony anchored on the one border that would not change-- the ocean. A rim of smoothed ice, polished to nearly invisible transparency, symbolized the waters. Sharp thin slabs meeting the false waters marked the glacier cliffs. They were artistically shaped, and followed the shore's contours with reasonable accuracy, but their detail was thin and not linked to reality. The ice jutted, cracked, and calved much too frequently to warrant such devotion. From the cliffs, the map stretched narrowly before fanning away in several directions. The first Tribe construct, closest to the cliffs, was the shrine to their original shelter. Not the actual shelter since that had been barely more than a long ago destroyed slanted hole carved just below the surface by the first to reach the land across the ocean. It was there, nearly on the surface, far enough inland, where the ice was stable and dense yet close enough to the cliffs where they could hunt, and stand sentinel that the few grew steadily to many. They huddled there, growing in numbers as more ships reached them, enduring the brutal dark season's onslaught, surviving hungry and tired for days as the fast among them scouted for a worthy location to begin building their true home for their new unpersecuted life.

The shrine was a library. A place for solace and to pour over the rare written Tribe chronicle etched on perfect squares of middle food skins. The room was small in diameter, but extraordinarily deep. A long winding spiral path descended to the base. The

skins aligned side by side decorated the wall paralleling the path so as to be read as a visitor descended. The Tribe's story was ever deepening, as was the room. New skins were written when events warranted, and the room was cut deeper to accommodate. Librarians had for hundreds of seasons debated what would happen if they ever reached the base of the glacier. Would the Tribe's history end? Would there be need for a new library? Would the spiral anticipate the finality and slant to a new, perhaps upward slope? Given the events unfolding now, some even wondered if the librarians had perhaps indeed already secretly struck rock. Their presence in the map room witnessing the events rather than away in their sanctuary scribbling on the skins did not relieve that rumor one bit.

Further in on the map, where the deep ice truly took hold, rose an exquisite representation of their first and only true home. Mighty as it stood, it had begun humbly. In the Tribe's youth, they had been unsure how to work the ice as they did now, and had cannibalized their massive sea vessels to support the first chamber. Now miniscule by comparison, and partitioned into a few modest homes, it was always a story of wonder how the entire Tribe had managed to live together so compactly back then. Despite their ignorance of the ice, they built true. The great trees they rode on from their original land still rose to the ceiling, a perpetual reminder of how far they had travelled, and how they could never return. Map Artisans had painstakingly reproduced the trees by stripping off the barest of bark to adorn the model.

From there, the map branched dramatically. Housed at an edge of the Tribe, the room could be (and many times had been) expanded to accommodate new construction. Miniature versions of all the various Tribe dwellings, meticulously carved from dense blue ice, decorated the white snow-powdered floor. A lattice of flattened blue cylinders criss-crossing the whiteness connecting all parts represented the tunnel network. Tunnel quality was indicated by the smoothness of the cylinders. Even the exile cavern was represented, its ugly gray rock rims protruding from the white, emanating repulsion, but only in their appearance. The rock was pure. A most impressively dedicated Map Artisan had ventured into the Smiths' world and forged the range of molten rock. The Deep Forge was modeled on white ice; an orange moss had been introduced to the material as a means of simulating the glow. The great hidden Under Lake with its mysterious falls shined in clear ice was included, as were the various reservoirs. All the outposts were here- all the farms, all the factories, all the homes. No one doubted the map's accuracy. Map Artisans incessantly policed the Tribe's range. They daily donned their ceremonial white capes, and meandered on a precise course which only they knew, eyes wide, nearly unblinking collecting the sites from their wanderings with their long memories. While wearing the cape, they traveled undisturbed and unhindered. Out of respect, most disappeared from sight when they saw the Map Artisans approach, so as not to block their view. Map Artisans gathered the visions they sought and returned to the map room for

comparison. In this way, they constantly updated their works. If it still stood, even in disrepair, the Map Artisans carved it in. With the room so full, and their true work halted, they flitted about, nervously sweeping the powdered snow flat to eliminate the countless footfall indentations. Eventually, they too reluctantly relinquished their positions, and stood to one side. The map was needed, and like the remainder of the Tribe, they wished to know what the next course would be.

Finally, the walls bloated with onlookers, but only the Elders and a very tired looking group of young runners remained on the map floor. With their farms and reservoirs so bountiful, the Tribe hardly ventured to the surface. Only Hunters regularly braved the stark exposed land, and those forays were brief, and mostly ceremonial. The Tribe had by attrition ceded the surface to the little ones. There was nothing there that they wanted. The unintended consequence of this cession was evident in this crisis. They had become blind to intrusions upon their land. As a remedy, the Elders had gathered the fastest of the Tribe and dispatched them to all corners to scout for evidence of little ones. They had ventured to the very ends of the good tunnels, and forged through all the bad, and returned with stark news.

The little ones were everywhere.

A large stack of black pillows rested against the model of the council house. One by one, each runner conveyed their discoveries to the Elders. They, in turn, dropped a pillow where the scout had seen little ones. The larger the collection they found, the greater the stack of pillows. In this way, an ominous circle consisting of three arcs grew and thickened. Arc one was the ocean. Vessels had been spotted in the waters- not many- so the pillows were scant, but the descriptions did not match the memories of the Elders who once hunted. The descriptions were of much larger size, and those were not the only markers on the polished ice. It was still the light season, so the runner who ventured there was not certain, but in the early fog, it appeared that the distant islands emitted lighting of various colors, indicative of the little one presence as well, warranting a few more pillows. Together, vessel and island still did not amount to many. On the land, matters were considerably more dire.

The scouts were explicitly instructed to remain invisible, so their observations were likely gross underestimations, making the voluminous pile of pillows encircling the Tribe all the more suffocating. Several handfuls of pillows rested ominously on the far side of the exile mountain range. Flying machines, more numerous than ever before, had been sited disappearing over them on a straight course to some unknown destination. The pillows marked merely the flying machine count. What more lay in wait there would have been cause for nervous speculation had a more immediate threat not loomed. On the deep ice, the elders sent for more pillows. Little ones were swarming in enormous

numbers. Vessels of all manner and size transporting them and their wares by the hundreds were seen trudging through the land. Their paths began from beyond the horizon, and disappeared beyond the mountains. Other transports came from the ocean, having no doubt disembarked from the oversized vessels the scout had described. Their paths reflected those of the flying machines hinting of a great permanent little one gathering somewhere distant, but not too distant. Had it not been for the Fast Girl, they may not have known the scope of that gathering and their huge vulnerability until much too late.

The tale of the Fast Girl was the most prominent and frightening of all. She was known by the Tribe- pleasant, thoughtful, slender, not quite to adolescence yet, easily recognizable because of her unusual light complexion, accented all the more by long, flat, flaxen hair so pale, it faded into her bare skin. She relished the aesthetics of her lightness and always wore white. And she was fast! Though quite young, she had outrun everyone at the festival games last season. Her speed granted her a most important and dangerous honor. She had been the runner who would travel the farthest. It was she who was to scout near the Gift Stone, a task she had performed with a hunter's pace.

The Fast Girl told her story in spurts. A mender at her side occasionally interrupted to tend the injury to her shoulder and replenish the food and water she had burned away in her amazing run. She was too exhausted to stand, and her voice was dry and weak, but the Tribe hushed respectfully, as she was determined to complete her task. She relayed to the Elders that she had arrived at the Gift Stone finding no sign of little ones. An adventurous soul, and having covered so far a range with nothing to declare, she had dared to peer a bit farther than prudence allowed. Unlike her comrades, she shyly admitted she had defied the explicit instructions and stepped onto the surface. The Gift Stone's long ago trajectory had rammed it deeply into the ground, creating a rounded slope of the displaced ice. She decided that she could risk scaling to the summit. From there, she reasoned she would have a clear view of a great distance, which would justify the risk.

Her ascent was uneventful. There was no sound, smell, or sight which hinted of any life, little one or otherwise, in this barren area. The Fast Girl was soon at the lip of the peak. She peered over, expecting more white emptiness, and was bombarded with what the slope had apparently been insulating. Below her, stretching inland seemingly forever, was another ice field. Buried within the ice, she discovered to her astonishment, there was a structure too immense to contemplate. Her description was of a dwelling at least three times that of the Tribe's, shimmering mightily, even through white ice in the light season. And there was not just one. For as far as she could see, more similar glows of presumably more dwellings dotted the ice. On the surface, leading to and from the glows, immense carts, attached in impossibly long tandems, pulled by mysterious forces

she could not discern ran on slides connecting the dwellings. Flying machines landed and lifted away. There were so many many little ones. They and their machines flitted in and out of wide narrow slits, which again, she could only presume descended to the dwellings. It was a frighteningly complicated and intricately choreographed dance. The Fast Girl marveled that they could scamper about so rapidly and so close together without collision. She admitted she was mesmerized and did not know how long she stared dumbfounded at this site. Her next recollection was of her injuries. A large flying vessel, one without the spinning swords, had whisked past her from behind. It must have been quite close since she had sensed the rush of hot wind from its passage soon after it appeared to her. Whether from the vessel's passage or through her own startled response, she did not know, nor did it matter. Either way, the lip she had been leaning on collapsed, sending her plummeting over.

The slope was steep, but not vertical. Her fall became a slide through powdery snow. She dug her elbow deeply into the slope as an anchor to halt the rapid acceleration. The tactic worked, but the cost was a popping sound rendering her arm useless. She skidded to a sloppy halt on a ledge, and was immediately smothered by the avalanche of trailing ice she had ploughed. Mercifully, the first few chunks which struck were large enough to form a crude shield over her, even leaving air pockets, preventing her suffocation. She survived with only a few welts on her back and one very ugly one on the side of her forehead joining the broken shoulder.

Perhaps she lost consciousness, but she was sure time had passed because her next recollection was the very loud and very close sound of the flying vessel that had startled her. She was lying on her side facing away from the slope so she had a clear view of the vessel, simply hovering in the unsupported air a mere step from the ledge. An opening on what she thought was a solid surface of the vessel appeared, and two little ones emerged. Attached to the vessel with brightly colored ropes, they jumped fearlessly to the ledge she was resting on. They walked to very near where she was and remained there for quite some time. She did not dare risk alerting them of her presence by moving. She could only see their legs from her position, and hoped the ice pummeling she endured had been sufficient to conceal her. The Fast Girl recanted her nervousness and uncertainty to the Elders of that inordinately long time she lay so utterly still. They nodded appreciatively, but did not sully her time by interrupting. She told them that she was close enough to hear their shrill little one chatterings, communicating with one another what sounded like a very heated argument of some sort, then, just as abruptly as they had arrived, they returned to their vessel and vanished.

The Fast Girl waited, listening patiently for the vessel, but only heard the distant grinding of their other magical machines. Satisfied she was unwatched, working with her legs and good arm on her ice prison, she rather easily freed herself. She was relieved to

see she had not fallen far, and that her elbow had created a groove sufficiently craggy for her to climb, even with one arm. She shimmied up to the lip and half descended, half slid down to the seclusion of the tunnels. She immediately started her return run, but her shoulder hurt with every footfall. The Fast Girl retrieved her small knife and used it to tear her satchel into a tight sling for her arm. She tested the sturdiness of her work with a few jumps. The sling reduced the pangs to a more manageable ache. Without a satchel, she was unable to carry the food she brought, so she ate what she could...

.. And then she ran. Stopping only to shave some ice off a wall for a drink and when exhaustion forced sleep, the Fast Girl ran hard. She crossed that tremendous distance as lightning across the sky, returning to the Tribe with her resources tapped well beyond their limits, and her information desperate to be told. She had arrived when they were already convening in the map room. Menders argued strongly for time to allow her to recover, but the Fast Girl, desperate to be rid of the burden she carried, insisted on immediately speaking to the Elders. She was carried in, completed her account, and collapsed exhausted in her seat. In response to the Fast Girl's account, Elders blanketed the map room floor beyond the Gift Stone with black pillows as the room parted to allow a very proud and worried father to retrieve his magnificent daughter, carrying her sleeping form away for some well-earned rest. The attending mender followed closely behind.

The Fast Girl had been the final scout to speak. She was by far the youngest and the most worn, but they all showed attrition from having run furiously. They too were attended by menders incessantly pushing them to replenish their stores by eating the dense medicinal porridge they had concocted. The runners complied until exhaustion overcame their politeness. They slept where they sat, draped over each other and pillows designating the location of those who would bring their demise. Though it hindered their view slightly, the Elders overlooked them. It would have been unseemly to disturb their well-earned slumber.

The bounty of the runners' labor enveloped the exquisite work of the Map Artisans, cleanly exposing the little ones' whereabouts. Elders now possessed the last bit of knowledge they sought, and as one, they had all immediately known and agreed on their course. Unaccustomed to witnessing an Elder discussion, the Tribe was mildly disappointed there was no bickering. But what possible argument of any persuasion could be made? There was no viable alternative. It really was quite obvious. The pillows had morphed from a loose circle to a rough triangle of impassable barriers—the ocean, the exile mountain range, and a swathe of little ones too numerous to contemplate. Two of the three- the mountain and the ocean- served to the advantage of the little ones. They were geographically permanent, unmoving and unmovable. They corralled the Tribe, but could be breached with the little one vessels. To challenge in those fronts would be utter

recklessness. One did not approach a quarry where they held advantage, unless in desperation. The Tribe was despondent, but not near that abyss, at least, not yet.

There was still hope. There was still a plan, which would not involve the ocean or the mountains. The little ones had built dwellings in the ice. The Tribe knew ice.

That massive structure the Fast Girl described was near the Gift Stone where the tunnels could conceal their movements until nearly the journey's end. Did the map not also reveal that there were Smith passages in the deep rock drawing them even nearer? Bickering the obvious wasted valuable time, which was equally foolish. A call was put to summon the Smiths. They almost immediately appeared, filing in ever so slowly. Bent, frail, noble, many were carried, or wheeled in on warped chairs only their warped frames could use. All of the Smiths came. For the plan to work, they would need their entire count. The Tribe divided their time between admiring the steady parade of Smiths and whispers of the many unanswerable questions glaring at them from the map and pillows.

How had the little ones been able to settle in such copious numbers in the barrens without their knowledge? Little one lands were far across the waters, and the Tribe stood directly between them and the ocean. They had at times missed a tiny outpost, likely flown in on the belly of their flying vessels. But a dwelling of this size could not possibly have managed to slide past undetected. Smiths had assured the Elders that no material in that region, save perhaps their unviolated Gift Stone, was suitable for their type of construction. They had to have imported their structures. The only explanation forthcoming was that they had not missed them. As difficult as it was to believe, the little ones must have reached where they were from the other side of the land. None knew precisely how far that was. Until now, none really cared. Nothing lived in the barrens. Nothing could. Old records charted on hides of animals the Tribe no longer recognized while they sought harbor for their ships hinted of an enormous distance. Did the little ones really travel across that impossible span merely to build their dwellings on these spots, or was there an even more unbelievable truth...Did their empire truly stretch across the entire land to the far ocean?

Not lost in the swirl of ignorance was an even more simple question. Why would they want to build there? What attracted them to these places? Was there a property of that wasteland their machines thrived on? Were they simply insane? The Tribe fidgeted nervously in their uncertainty. The Elders paced the map room, both equally bothered by the unavailability of satisfactory answers, until the Smiths were all accounted. As terrible as their next stage would be, they appeared almost relieved to start, just to distract themselves from the uncertainty.

A large and powerful Smith began the dialogue. Hunched now, his was still a sufficiently imposing stature to command respect from those who listened and awe from those few who remembered him in his youth,

“Elders, must there be war?” he asked ceremoniously.

“We are hunters. They are hunters. We compete for the same land. We compete for the same resources. If not now, then soon we shall collide. And when we do, we shall lose. We are strong, but they are clever... And they are many... So, so many,” Replied the Elders in unison.

“Elders, must we die?” the Large Smith continued.

“There must be blood. Hunters know blood. Hunters respect the blood of their felled. Hunters respect the finality of the blood... For the Tribe to live? Yes, you must die,” Again the Elders replied, the youngest Elder nearly broke her composure, but, with a quick reassuring squeeze of her shoulder by one, she held herself straight.

The Large Smith turned to his companions for counsel. He waited for each to nod ascent, then returning his attention to the Elders, asked,

“Where is it we will die, Elders?” he asked.

One walked over to the thick collection of pillows beyond the Gift Stone, and pointed with both hands.

And it was done.

Their business complete, the Smiths filed out. Soon after, the Tribe dissipated, the Elders woke the scouts, and they left as well. In the quiet that remained, brooms, mallets and chisels in hand, the Map Artisans descended on their masterpiece.

\* \* \* \*

That night, a magnificent feast was prepared for the Smiths. The clans cooked and ate together on the commons. Families reacquainted themselves with kin they had bid farewell to and never expected to see again. Grandchildren met their grandparents. Sons and daughters reunited with parents. They ate, drank, exchanged stories, laughed until they ached and cried sweetly, until they could not cry anymore. And the queries! Grand counsel on the whereabouts of lost items, to clarifications on historical events, to advice on how to expand a construction project, to whether continuing a courtship was wise, to simply wondering if a grandchild truly did resemble a great grandfather, was sought hungrily from the collected wisdom of this deep well of Tribe long memories. The

Smiths obliged as best as they could. Given their diminished health and the impossible breadth of the questions, they fared quite well. Basking in the grateful attention of their kin, downing good mead, and an opulent meal, the Smiths agreed there could be no better way to spend their last evening on this world.

Eventually, as all things must, the meal and the questions ended, and the Smiths, sleepy from their overfull bellies, minds swirling quite contently with mead and memories, returned to the armory joining the Elders and the Large Smith. Neither had attended the banquet. Each Smith selected his and her armor by fit, ability, and not without some vanity. The latter was not discouraged. Who would fault soldiers for choosing a shiny outfit as their last apparel? Certainly, when the adornments were so overdone and the Smith toppled, compensations were suggested, but all of it good naturedly. They had brought from the cooling Forge enough tools to coax the plating around their various forms, and they helped one another fit and stow their armor. Weapons were a simpler matter. Smiths skilled in a particular armament sought the best of it. Most were content with an axe or sword, and for them, there was a definitive preference for lightness. Few thought they would get an opportunity to wield whatever it was they chose, so they may as well be comfortable.

Guided by the counsel of the Elders, the Large Smith had arranged his wards into as many fighting groups as his population allowed. His numbers were many, but limited because the very lame and invalid had to be accompanied by enough relatively agile comrades to at least appear menacing. Only four fighting groups were formed.

The largest group consisted of the weakest among them. They would challenge the sea. That front was the shortest travel distance, and they need only appear menacing from the shore. A second group, strong, but unable to walk, would set out for the exile cavern pushed in their wheeled chairs by kin who had volunteered to accompany them. Smiths had diluted their revulsion for stone from living within it so long, and the chairs were quite mobile on the hard surfaces. They hoped to find a slope with little ones at the base, and roll mightily into battle with their arms free to wield their weapons. The kin would haul the armor in carts as well, conserving the Smiths' strength for their final acts. It would be the kin's duty to deposit their wards on the precipice of battle, and then retreat, collapsing the tunnels behind them, to deny the little ones from escalating their defense of an attack to invasion of their own once they dispatched their attackers.

The remaining two groups would move to the barrens. The Large Smith would lead one, populated with a small contingent of relatively agile Smiths and a woman volunteer who was not a Smith, but had just lost her son to a hunt and saw this adventure as a glorious means of joining him. He and his would invade directly into the heart of the gigantic dwelling. The final group would press as deeply as the Smith tunnels led and

choose a site far distant to die. If they could breach another dwelling, all the better, but their objective was merely to be perceived as a threat from yet another location far from the Tribe.

Leftover banquet food in tight travel packages arrived, and the armory transformed to a staging area. The Smiths, loosely separated by groups, accepted their portion of the food- still warm and just as aromatically savory- with genuine gratitude. The ocean group joked that the Smiths off to the barrens were lucky to have a long journey- more opportunity to enjoy the magnificent meals. Weapons, armor, and food were loaded neatly into sturdy carts, and it was done. If all proceeded as they dared to hope, the little ones would be distracted at the periphery while the Tribe made its arrangements for their escape. Their only remaining task was to get what sleep they could. Most Smiths had expected to sleep in the armory, but a cook who had delivered food, and was the grandson of one Smith, asked his newly introduced grandfather if he would honor him by sleeping in his home, which once belonged to the grandfather, that final night. The Smith bowed ascent, and they departed. As the cook and Smith left, a steady line was filing in. One by one, the Smiths were whisked away by relatives, or by children of friends, or by kind strangers grateful of their impending sacrifice. The Large Smith departed with two old men who he remembered as his young cousins from long ago. No Smith remained. The Elders took great solace in that. They too retired, and in the privacy of their council house, they finally wept.

In the morning, rested, content, and pleasantly surprised to be less incapacitated than the quantity of mead they had consumed would have predicted, the Smiths reconvened. Accompanied by the relatives who had volunteered to carry their armor to battle, they took up their positions and unhesitantly set off in the tunnels for their final journey. Those who could walk, took the lead. Those who could not, found places on the carts or had wheeled chairs of their own. As one, the entire entourage moved through a wide main street before peeling off to their discrete destinations. The Tribe, too, was awake. They were aligned along the Smiths entire path to the tunnels, silently standing vigil. No words were exchanged. In their place, Tribe hands extended loosely, feathering the Smiths with a continuous light touch as they moved past- A final contact from those they loved to remind them of who they were about to die for.

Where the Smiths headed was doom, but those who stayed behind did not enjoy a reprieve. They had much work to do themselves. There was little time for sadness. Still, each found a moment to grieve and to give thanks.

## Chapter 15: Tali and Chris

“Do you understand me?” the blue box asked again. Tali did not respond... again. The child, who named himself *Crees*, grew more frustrated. He had been pacing restlessly, the blue box clutched tightly in his hand from the moment Cress’ Door sealed. He jostled his blue box, again, swirling his fingers feverishly just above the surface as he had done several times already. Occasionally, he glanced over to Tali and appeared to say something, but the sound was shrill and fast. Only what came from the box was comprehensible. After a few such incidences, as he had done the previous times, the child reached a conclusion. He clasped his hands together, shutting down the lights from the box, and petitioned for Tali’s attention. The box translated his inquiries louder this time. She concluded he was determining whether her unresponsiveness was because she was deaf. She found this as clever a guess as his previous ideas. He had tried slowing as well as speeding the box’s voice. She watched with interest, and not a little admiration as his mind worked the puzzle he was presented. She was nearly as impressed with his thoughts as she was of the magical blue box, which boomed as it inquired,

“Do you understand the words you are hearing?”

Tali did, but she remained mute. Initially, her incredulity had stunned her into silence. Her instinct however had warned her that responding was not the correct course for the moment. Tali dutifully tamped down her urge to answer this most benign and reasonable query. She never overrode her instinct...*ever*. Still, she wondered why she was so hesitant. Clearly, there was advantage to dialogue. If she had guessed correctly, the child held a position of prominence in the little one hierarchy. He may even possess knowledge of First Huntress. Something about him must have alerted her that he would be more revealing with her silence than in a conversation. A few moments ago, she had heard the muffled passage of her pursuers from behind Cress’ Door. They had receded just as steadily as they crested, a comforting indicator that they had not even paused to inspect the wall where the door was concealed. For the moment, she was safe and could work on unraveling her understanding of this mysterious creature she had captured.

The child *Crees* had removed his hood. At some point during their flight, he must have bumped his face. His eye protection had been shattered and discarded, leaving a bruise around his right eye. Tali could only suppose that little one features mirrored the Tribe’s. If they did, the boy was strong, but lithe. Were he of the Tribe’s height, he would be a runner or a swimmer. His skin was darker than hers, but not so much. He had light hair, cut short, and swirled in a nest shape, perhaps so he could fit his head into the various helmets she had seen? His face was youthful, pleasant, suggesting a very young

person, but up close, she noted the hints she had detected of a greater age; the stubs of his slowly growing beard, and a sadness she could not help but wonder about. Little ones were notoriously vulnerable to the wondrous cold, so other than his face, his entire body was clad. The outfit he wore was white, smooth, and covered with pockets neatly sealed into sturdy compartments. But for a blue rectangular emblem over his heart not unlike the blue box, there was no decoration. A thought occurred to Tali that perhaps the little ones worshipped these boxes, but she set it aside.

He was undoubtedly clever, and he appeared fearless. She still could not comprehend why he had provided her with the rope. He had to know she was immovably wedged. His course should have been to run and abandon her to the approaching pursuers. Instead he chose the most illogical of all headings. He aided his own abductor. Why? Tali yearned to know but was still unprepared to discard her decision. She wondered if her precious instinct was misdirecting her this time. Had all those long seasons out of the hunt, conforming to the edicts necessary for responsible citizenship in the Tribe, dulled the mental razor with which she for so long, cleaved her path? She thought not, and held her voice... But time continued to pass, and she was not getting closer to retrieving her daughter.

Crees fumbled another time with his box, and Tali's course was validated when he persisted in a new direction. He set the box down on a rocky outcropping and waved his hand as if sweeping crumbs off an imaginary table. A drawing made of light shot out of the blue box, coming to a rest on a wide, flat wall of the cave. It was of First Huntress. She was bound and injured severely, but there were little ones tending her wounds. The drawing was like nothing she had ever seen. It was alive. Nearly every aspect of the drawing teemed with movement. The one notable exception was the utter stillness of First Huntress. The box, still tuned to her perceived hearing loss, boomed the words of the child,

“This woman is one of you. She identifies herself as First Huntress and has spoken with us successfully using this machine. I believe she is of the society you call “Tribe,” so I would expect you speak the same language. The device I am using to both show you this and translate our languages can also determine that your hearing is functional. I am convinced you understand me, but you are choosing to remain mute... Why?”

Silence.

Tali now understood her silence. Her capture was not of just one. The boy had his machines. His blue box in particular could access much she did not know. Perhaps he could even communicate with his kind somehow. She had considered smashing it to pieces when he first revealed it, but held back. There were many many blue boxes. She

had seen every little one carrying one. Given what had been revealed thus far, the box was quite remarkable, possibly infinitely versatile, but from the manner they wielded it, she was reasonably certain it was not a weapon, at least not one which could harm her directly. If she understood the boxes better, she could pass the knowledge to the Tribe. Had she responded immediately, Crees may not have revealed the breadth of its capabilities. She would have gained nothing by communicating save the possibility of furthering his advantage. Her consolation on the rightness of her course was hollow given the image draped over the wall's contours. Tali felt she was sufficiently in control to have rendered any shock of her captured daughter's image imperceptible, but to hear her Tribe name could only mean the boy was speaking the truth. How else could he know she was First Huntress? Was he aware what the title meant? How deeply had they penetrated into the Tribe's lore? Tali was reeling within. She still did not reply, but her reasons now were more primordial, more understandable. All save one of her fears on the fate of her daughter were displayed bare in front of her. That she lived was her only glimmer of hope. They had felled her. They had bound her. To compound her confusion of these stranger creatures, if the image was true, now they were mending her? Where were they doing this? Why were they doing this? The box continued,

“I have given you my name. It is Chris. I have assisted your escape from my protectors. Had I not, you would likely be in a similar position as First Huntress. From what she has revealed, you are a powerful, but courteous people. Would you please display some of that courtesy by telling me your name?”

Tali noted that the boy's name sounded different when slowed from its feverish squawk. She needed answers. Cautiously, she broke her silence.

“I am Tali, child.”

Her response elated Chris. He spun jubilantly in place, tapped a thumb on the center of the blue box with a victorious flourish, and resumed pacing, this time excitedly. Chris answered her,

“Good... good... So we can speak to one another. What is it you want of me, Tali?”

“I wish the return of the female in that image,” Tali stated plainly.

“How would capturing me...,” Chris began, then trailed off. He again returned to his box. Rather than picking it up, he performed a dance with his hands just above it. First Huntress' image changed, replaced with a close up of her head, face square and awake... A second image, one of Tali's face appeared adjacently. Lines and crosses shot between them for a spell; then the two faces became slightly transparent and merged into one.

“She is kin is she not, Tali? Your daughter?” Chris asked with the intonation that the answer was already evident.

Again, Tali felt she maintained her composure, but she was truly stunned at the magics of the little one machinery. To have rendered a connection so absolutely unsettled Tali to no end. Was there nothing they could not know? Even more cautiously than before, she answered the child, admitting as much as she dared.

“She is kin, Chris”

“And your plan is to barter her return for mine, I take it?” Chris asked plainly, without judgment or dread in his voice. His statement poured cleanly through the blue box, so she clearly understood his words. The child himself, on the other hand, was a mystery. Tali could not fathom how he was so calm. She had no recollection of interacting with anyone as detached as he. Were all little ones this way? She hoped not. The child was just too remarkable. It appeared to Tali that Chris was aware of his predicament only from the perspective of a curiosity, a challenge to his intellect that he relished solving, a knotted rope he wanted to salvage without resorting to the knife. He considered his danger as just another aspect of the puzzle. In a short time, without any input from her, the child had learned her language and put a great deal of faith in an assumption that she was not going to harm him. He was either brave beyond words, or utterly insane. She did not know which would help her more. Confused, but determined, Tali forwarded the conversation.

“I do wish the return of my kin. Does your tribe value your well-being sufficiently to accede to my proposal?”

“My tribe will do precisely as I say, Tali. I govern here. This is my realm. You have chosen your captive quite wisely,” Chris replied, “but I fear there are more complications occurring than you may be aware. If I may, I wish to show you another image.”

“Tell me first what you know of the injuries to First Huntress,” Tali replied, hoping her voice maintained the disinterested monotone she desperately sought.

Chris worked his machine, and the image changed to an awake, alert First Huntress, still bound, conversing with a tiny little one female. There was no sound from the image, but it appeared the interaction was cordial and unthreatening. Her wounds had been covered with white rectangles, and she did not appear permanently harmed.

“She lost much blood, and received formidable blows to her head and ribs when she was captured. She further aggravated those injuries in a failed escape attempt. We

have mended and remended them all. Our knowledge of your workings is limited, but from what we have garnered, you are essentially very large versions of us. We believe we have successfully addressed the harm we inflicted. She should not have any lingering effects from the injuries you see pictured. I hope that alleviates some of your concern, Tali.”

“It does.”

Chris accepted Tali’s response as a cue to reveal the image he referred to. A great dwelling, teeming with little ones, replaced the image of her healing daughter. There was extensive damage inflicted on the structures. Many little one bodies were lined as they had been outside the exile slaughter. An impressive pile of blue bags sat near them. Little ones were placing their dead in the bags. From the numbers, Tali sadly concluded they would run out of bags before they ran out of their dead. The victims were mostly fighters. Their outfits quite familiar to her now, but others lay among them, a few elders, some not in fighter apparel, and at least one child. Their wounds were few, but they were deep, quick, and fatal. From what she could tell, they were all felled with one swift blow. Their exiting souls did not experience much torment. At the behest of Chris, the image panned to one side, and twelve significantly larger and much more bloodied bodies appeared, as did the rubble of a Smith’s bore, cracked into three uneven pieces in the background.

“So, it has begun,” Tali thought, deflating.

“Were you aware of this attack?” Chris interrupted.

Again, silence.

Chris pressed.

“No, Tali. You do not own the luxury of reverting to silence. I am in a desperate position. There are mechanisms in play that must be checked before they unleash a havoc you do not have the capacity to grasp. You must speak with me openly, or in a short time, there will be no one left alive of your tribe,” the boy demanded and was intensely awaiting a reply.

From the instant she saw the bodies, validated by the Smith’s bore, Tali understood that the Elders had revealed the armory. The Final Push was underway. It’s success hinged exclusively on the little ones’ perception of events. Anything she said that would jeopardize that perception doomed the Tribe. Her safe path should be to revert to silence, but then she would lose any chance of gaining an insight that would improve the already miniscule chances of the Push’s success. On the premise that the chances were so

paltry anyway, she decided to hazard more dialogue. Choosing her words as cautiously as navigating thin, cracked ice, Tali set course on her own path,

“We are aware of your lust for and prowess in war, Chris. We have been attacked and suffered horribly by your hand many many times before. In our suffering, we learned that between us, there will never be rest until one is gone. We have also learned that your numbers and savagery are unstoppable. While we may win a battle, if... war... is to reign down on our tribes, it is we who will be extinguished. Since we cannot defeat you, we had sought an escape by disappearing from your lands. Long ago, we built great sea ships and did just that. We wandered for many many seasons, eventually settling here. It is the most remote place in the world. We were deluded to thinking that surely, here, far from where you can possibly endure, here in this cold which we crave, but which batters your kind mercilessly, we could live in peace undisturbed. But you have found us again... We have nowhere else to run, so you are correct child. Now there will be an end.”

Chris approached Tali. Stopping only when he stood directly in front of her, his head craned sharply back to keep contact with her eyes. Tali was in a crouch, but she towered over the brave little one. Her head was bent downward returning the gaze. He had moved so close to her that she was nearly looking straight down at him.

“It will be your end, Tali,” Chris said. The blue box picked up his translation, relaying it dryly, but from this close, Tali could discern the tightness in his voice. She also could see his eyes were glistening. Built up tears forming a reservoir that did not breach because of the sheer will of the child to dam them. “So this boy’s calm was a façade” Tali remarked to herself, as aloud she stated,

“We have prepared for our demise, Chris. We are ready.”

“No, Tali, you are not. You are attempting a ruse, and it will fail,” Chris retorted, not waiting for the box to finish its translation.

Again, Tali hoped she had stunted her shock. Chris continued.

“The first attack on our tribe was a tragic mistake. I believe we stumbled upon a cave where you imprisoned your criminals. This is not conjecture, Tali. We captured one of them alive. She was insane with anger, pain, and hate; but her incessant ramblings fed our machines enough to decipher your language. She screamed many things. Laced between her nonsense was a recurring theme of imprisonment and banishing. The creatures we met that sad day our explorers pierced the cavern were never intended to interact with civilized beings ever again. They were monsters. That was my determination after studying the attack. Your daughter essentially verified my conclusion.”

“They are exiles, Chris,” Tali acknowledged, not knowing what else to say.

“Our fighters severely damaged the exiles in our rescue of the explorers they had captured. Even the lone survivor was, by necessity, extensively mutilated during her incapacitation. We have studied the bodies of your fallen-”

“They are not “ours”, Chris,” Tali corrected curtly.

“Very well. We have studied *the* fallen exiles,” Chris continued, not breaking his rhythm, “and we have concluded with reasonable certainty that not all their damage was from our weapons. Each exile had his and her left hand, foot, ear and eye amputated. I am assuming they were maimed as part of their punishment. The appendages, I understand. Limiting the ability to dig and climb is rational, but why the ear and eye, Tali? You obviously did not intend to blind or deafen them, and just as obviously, the prisoners depended on your tribe for sustenance. They would therefore need to see and hear instructions from you. Of what use would limiting the depth of their senses be in ensuring their confinement?”

To that, Tali would not respond. This child, this brilliant, fearless, and in many ways admirable, but nonetheless adversarial creature was inquiring of the Tribe’s place-sense. How could he know of that? Had the cursed exile they captured revealed it? Had First Huntress? Or were his infernal machines truly that profound? Chris glanced at his blue box momentarily and pushed on.

“I appear to have accidentally approached a sensitive topic. My apologies, Tali. My point was not to upset you by dwelling on the physical attributes of prisoners, but to illustrate that the first attackers were markedly different than First Huntress, than you, and the twelve you see on the image. I can concede that the first incident, tragic as it is, was most likely the consequence of incredibly bad luck on the victims... But this latest attack was purposeful, and unprovoked, Tali. Your tribe has brought war upon itself. You freely admit the futility of such a confrontation with us, which implies it is common knowledge with your kind. Yet...” Chris gestured towards the image. Tali noticed his hand, when outstretched, trembled slightly. He really was as nervous as she had thought he should be. Was there no end to the layers of deceptions playing out?

“I was unaware of this confrontation, Chris. I have been away for quite some time searching for First... my... daughter.”

“But you were not surprised to see it,” Chris replied.

Silence.

“I am learning to interpret your silence an indirect type of acknowledgement, Tali, so I will continue. Like you and First Huntress, the twelve who invaded our dwelling were whole. They were not exile. Their stature was obviously enormous compared to ours, and their attack a blistering surprise, but by every estimation, they were not a formidable fighting force. I am reasonably certain that had it been you who jumped out of that hole, even alone, we would have suffered much deeper loss. Your daughter was unaware that she was fighting an injury causing swelling to her brain when she attempted her escape. It impaired her thinking significantly. Her ribs had been shattered and reassembled with pins so she was unable to use her left side adequately, and she was surrounded by guards. Yet she penetrated deeper into our defenses than the combined successes of all these sad pathetic fighters who burst without warning into our midst. They were broken, they were lame, they were old; the eldest were hardly able to stand in their armor. Even the strongest among them was bent horribly and covered in tumors. They pierced the floor of our habitat, armed with frightening, but limited weaponry and attacked methodically outward until they were slain. It appeared their only intent was to fight until they were destroyed. Is that what has occurred, Tali? Did your tribe send its elders at us just to die?”

“Our tribe is defending itself from extinction, child. We “send” what and who we can to survive,” Tali replied, a bit defensively. She was beginning to worry that the child really was in tune with their desperate plan.

“Since the attack, we have begun to intensely probe the ice. Many more of you are moving about. Are they all also elders?” Chris pressed.

“We are the Tribe, Chris!” Tali replied loudly, smashing her fist on the ground, spraying an even layer of snow, dust, and rock around the room. Chris leapt back, wary of her sudden ferocity, but he never averted his eyes from her. His face and chest were lightly coated with the mist of projectiles Tali unleashed, but he did not bother to wipe it. Tali felt doubt seeping in. She had slammed her hand down in an attempt to intimidate the child, to shake his questioning away from the direction it was heading. Chris, however, appeared unshakable. Admittedly she had detected hints that his demeanor was forced by sheer will. It was unsettling to Tali that he could control it so well. Perhaps she should abandon her attempts to barter for First Huntress and just crush this brilliant child’s head before his mind discovers more it should not. It just occurred to her that his box was capable of so much, perhaps it truly could communicate with his kind. Should he choose to convey even the suspicions he was revealing, the Tribe was truly doomed. Maybe he had already done so, and this was merely a cruel exercise for his pleasure. If so, his death would be meaningless. If he had not passed on his suspicions, then perhaps the boy should be removed. She had to be certain, however. That required dialogue. She picked her words meticulously.

“My anger overtook my judgment, Chris. I apologize.”

“I was looking you directly in the eyes when you yelled, Tali. There was no anger in them. Your actions validate my accusation that your tribe is attempting a ruse.” Chris moved towards his box, but given the outburst from Tali, paused. Pointing to the box, he asked, “If I may Tali?”

Tali nodded ever so slightly, cuing the child. Again the image changed. The macabre scene of deceased Smiths faded, replaced by one of a triangular flying vessel floating in the open sky. Remarkably, the image’s perspective was shifting, and soon Tali was staring at the vessel in flight, from above, shattering any illusion that the vessel was performing something as benign as just floating. Below the vessel, the open waters of the ocean careened by at an impossible speed. This vessel soared faster than anything Tali could imagine. Orcas did not dream of this speed. The great winds which battered the land every dark season did not come close to this speed. Lightning may even lose a race.

Chris kept the image until he was sure Tali understood what she was looking at, and then with a wave, he transformed what she saw to the ground view of a desolate, unimpressive mountainous region. A modest little one structure dwarfed by the mountains was barely visible in the foreground.

“The construction you see on the bottom left is about the size of this chamber Tali. I tell you this to give you a perspective on what I am about to show you.” With that introduction, the triangular flying vessel briefly appeared. It flew from the left side of the image, dropped something, and just as quickly disappeared on the right.

A sequence of unbelievably large fireballs resembling blooming flowers grew from the ground. The flame petals expanded and merged into an unbroken wall of destruction. Billowing, thick black smoke raced ahead of the rising fires, and soon the image was filled with orange and black. That lasted moments. As quickly as they erupted, the flames died down. When the smoke cleared, the mountain had disappeared. Where once there existed a ridge crest, only crumbled rock remained. The image froze. A second image of the mountain appeared in juxtaposition. The contrast was terrifying.

Chris returned to his proximate position near Tali. Pointing to the images, he asked wearily, “We have hundreds, if not thousands of these weapons, Tali. This is what they do to stone. Do you truly believe you are safe under ice?”

Tali had no response. She had no thought. What she had just been shown was the hopelessness of their grand scheme. How foolish they had been to have even considered their survival. They were children wielding tiny play staffs challenging a Hunter. Their impotent jabs and pokes merely tolerated until the Hunter grew bored and eliminated

them easily with a swat. There would be no ruse. The Final Push would fail. The Final Retreat obstructed. The Tribe would not disappear again. They would all be incinerated or drowned in the lake, formed when the fires roaring down from the sky melted the world around them, or they would be separated and felled individually... like the noble Smiths in the image... like the remaining Smith venturing on equally futile paths... like her bound and injured daughter... Like her.

Tali unconsciously touched her shoulder. A prick of blood she had ignored as minor had been trickling since she was pierced in the Cave of Warning. The blood had poured a mostly steady line from her upper shoulder to nearly her fingers. Using two fingers from her opposite hand, she traced it back to its origin, swirling and flattening the thin straight line into a red smear. To her mild surprise, the wound was tiny but still quite steadily bleeding. How curious that the wound did not close. How much would this single wound seep? And how many wounds could each of their weapons inflict? She knew it had to be many. She had heard multiple projectiles zipping by, crashing and ricocheting off rock and ice when she had fled earlier.

“Your wound will not close for some time,” Chris volunteered, anticipating her thought. “There is a fluid in the projectile which was fired into you that thins your blood so it will not seal the opening. I cannot mend it here. We have salves that can plug the opening, but they are in the flying machine I arrived in. You would have to allow me to bring them to you... Or perhaps, you could return with me?”

Silence.

Tali scooped a handful of snow and packed it against her truly quite tiny wound. It would have been invisible had it not been for the hemorrhaging. Within seconds, the snow was darkened crimson. What manner of creature dreams of such concoctions? What chance did they have against a foe willing to dedicate so many resources to bleeding?

Then there was this boy with no hate or fear for his abductor, pacing restlessly below her. His head lowered, shaking side to side occasionally, hands were balled into fists. He had offered to mend the wound she received while abducting him. He had shown her so much. Why? What purpose did revealing their strengths to her serve? Was he lying? Did this magic box conjure images that were not true? Was there perhaps no such thing as a flying machine that leveled mountains with fire? She simply did not know. Her instinct was that the boy was truthful. His entire conversation with her seemed a plea of some sort. But for what? What did he expect to gain from her?

Chris appeared to be digging within himself for one final plea from Tali. His demeanor was still one of strong will, but Tali saw he stumbled a step or two. She saw the hands tremble slightly more. Chris was running out of strength.

“Tali, I implore you to listen to me. I implore you even more to do something that I believe I have earned. Trust me, Tali, when I tell you that the fate of your tribe has been determined. All we have known from you is death. All we know you understand is death. Tali, we know death. We are masters at administering it, and our fighters will reign it down on you mercilessly. I do not speak of intent. This is the course that has already been set in motion. If we do nothing, there will be so much more bloodshed. Some will inevitably be ours, but all of yours will flow freely. Only bold action can alter that. There are matters we need to discuss which must be discussed openly. If you withhold information, your tribe will be no more.”

Chris sagged. That was his last attempt. His quiver of pleas was empty. His demeanor changed to the child he truly was.

“Why does the survival of my Tribe concern you, Chris?” Tali could not help asking.

At this, Chris finally broke his control. Wrapped with his fear, his anger, the tears swelling in his eyes, he flung his words at Tali. The blue box tried to reflect the emotion in them, but failed miserably. Tali found that she could not mesh the words with the explosively desperate little one uttering them. To hear them clearly, she had to look away as Chris shouted,

“Because all this death is my fault, Tali! I am responsible for the fifty deaths of my people by your tribe’s hand. I am responsible for the death of so many of your tribe... And if I do not stop this insane course, I will be responsible for the extermination of an entire civilization... ALL BECAUSE WE DUG IN THE WRONG DAMNED MOUNTAIN!”

Chris staggered back a bit until his back touched wall and then slid to a seated position. His hands sagged loosely to either side, his chin rested on his chest. Chris just sat. No more magics, no more pleas, no more clever ideas to pursue. He was spent.

Tali considered the words of the crumpled boy. Whether true or not, she did not doubt he meant them. For reasons she could not fathom, Chris had mounted the burden of every death on his shoulders. If that weight was not sufficiently oppressive, the boy had piled on all future deaths as well. She considered his plea for her trust, and admittedly, the boy had performed in a manner that earned it. Tali’s instinct called out a decision. She crossed the chamber with a single step, crouched to one knee near Chris. She asked,

“What is it you wish of me, Chris?”

Chris looked up. His face was flat, but the tiniest bit of hope glimmered in the corner of his eyes. “I need you to call off this slaughter of your elders. If you do not, we will annihilate them, but we will not stop there. Our blood lust will be rampant, and we will push onward bringing death to the very core you are trying so hard to distract us from.”

Chris stood, much as a weary old man would. He moved to his blue box, and changed the image to a map. Tali recognized the contours on the lower section as the cliffs nearest the Tribe. Chris spoke, slowly now, his voice as dull as the box. He used his finger to draw on the map with light.

“Tali, this is where we are, near the exile attack.” He marked an “x” on the mountain ridge. “This is where the attack I showed you occurred.” He made a second mark which Tali recognized as quite close to the Gift Stone. “We have detected your fighters emerging from the ice and converging along the shore... here.” Chris drew several more “x”s along the shore. “And as I have told you, our machines have probed the ice. You are quite deeply embedded, but we are certain some of you are also here.” Chris drew a few “x”s beyond the first attack. He made some adjustments and stepped back so he and Tali faced the map together.

“I have made an assumption that your tribe does not wage war often, so you are unaccustomed to the preparations and the deceptions it mandates. You must therefore have started at about the same time and—unfortunately for your tribe—at the same place. If all the fighters we have detected traveled at roughly the same speed, I can easily determine their starting point.” With that, Chris leaned a hand over the blue box. White circles formed around the “x”s. They began to expand equally. Whenever two circles touched, the points of intersection turned red. Red points appeared, slid, and disappeared as the circles grew until a single point emerged and began blinking. A spot on the map that was touched by every expanding circle rested precisely on the location of the Tribe.

Tali was beyond surprise by this point, but any doubts the Tribe’s fate was hopeless melted away with that ominous flashing red light. The pieces Chris had presented fell into place. The little ones knew where the Tribe was. They had weaponry to penetrate the ice and reach them. All they needed was motivation. Chris was correct. The Final Push was completing the circle, closing the Tribe’s fate.

“I do not hold a position to retract our fighters, Chris,” Tali answered sincerely.

“Who does, Tali?”

“Only our Elders and First Huntress may address the Tribe with unconditional authority. You have persuaded me that you are genuine, child. I am convinced you can

repeat your words effectively to my daughter. She has always been more flexible in her thinking. To accomplish what you ask, merely go to where you are holding her, and speak as you have to me. I will reopen the door we escaped through to return you unharmed. Go to her. I merely ask that you release her when hostilities end.”

Chris slumped yet again. That confused Tali. Why would dialogue with First Huntress be a problem? Was there more of First Huntress’ fate he had not revealed? She would soon find out. Chris spoke.

“Tali, you have given me the course I need. For that I am grateful,” He was reverting to his clever self. “But I would ask another courtesy from you.”

“What more do you want besides your freedom, Chris?” Tali asked cautiously.

“I would request your company to convince First Huntress’ cooperation.”

“Merely presenting her the images you showed me should be sufficiently persuasive, child. You do not need me.”

“I am afraid I do, Tali. Without your assistance, I would not be able to plead with her. Were I to approach her now, she would react to me as an enemy.”

“I would expect so, Chris, but her bindings appeared quite sturdy,” Tali responded, suddenly wary that there was an element of her daughter’s captivity she was missing.

“First Huntress is no longer bound in the manner you saw... She is in fact, not bound at all,” Chris continued, not quite embarrassed, but definitely apprehensive of how he was proceeding.

“Tali, First Huntress is no longer imprisoned.”

## Chapter 16: First Huntress

In the darkness of her prison, First Huntress listened. There was little else to do. She had not spoken a word since her final declaration to the quiet elder. Her bindings had been altered to allow some movement. Her left leg and wrist were free, but a tight cuff attached her right wrist and ankle. They had provided a container for her waste. Regularly, but not frequently, she would be visited by a heavily armed group of fighters who carted the waste away and brought food in the form of a thick, cold, sweet tasting broth. Sometimes a mender (not Teresa) came with them to apply salve to her bindings. She was certain that, at least once, the broth had been tainted with a medicine which made her groggy. The quiet elder had returned to her in the midst of her disorientation and asked questions she did not remember. She was suspicious of their offerings after that but really had no recourse. If she fought their attempts, she was certain they'd rebind her and apply it directly into her blood as they had before.

The room was kept dark now. The panels of white tubes were off. A red glow emitting from tiny but intensely bright lights attached to round transparent openings resembling orca eyes in shape and size was her only illumination. She did not understand why they suddenly decided to plunge her into red light, but in the long stack of her unanswered questions, that one was quite a low priority. Besides, she found it soothing. She could think better in the dark. Without the distraction of her vision, and in this sterile, tasteless, scentless setting, she could feel and listen better.

By leaning against various walls pretending to be adjusting to a more comfortable sitting position given the contorted right limbs, she felt with her back, with her buttocks, with her legs, and sensed most definitely, there was a significant commotion beyond her prison. Something was quietly being constructed. First Huntress was certain they did not wish her to know of it because the sounds halted only moments before the door of her prison opened. They only restarted after the fighters who exchanged the food and waste departed. She determined that the little one hearing was not as refined as the Tribe's, else they would have certainly known she could detect their clanging. Likely, they had allowed their senses to grow dull, relying instead on their machines for resolution.

Over time, the sounds waned, but not their tempo. This had to imply they were still doing the work, but it had shifted away from her. Were they building a tunnel? If so, what would be the purpose? Why here, and now? She had to conclude that whatever it was could not be so close to her from sheer coincidence. The construction interested her because it had to concern her. Perhaps they were going to transport her yet again, but this time to another dwelling, instead of somewhere within this one? She had no way of

knowing and dared not break the silence to ask. She had been allowed to keep the earpieces on. The blue box connected to them sat in the room. Should one of her guards need to speak with her, or she with them, the line was fluid. But they never did. And she never would. So, First Huntress sat in the dark.

Eventually the construction sounds ebbed to nothing. They either ceased or moved sufficiently distant to be imperceptible to her. Time passed. She guessed she knew how much, but with nothing to do, she had been drifting to sleep quite a bit. Her bladder and bowels suggested otherwise, but she could not be certain that a day or two had not slipped past her.

A lone fighter entered. His weapon was different than the ones she was accustomed to seeing. It was fatter, white, and he held it in one hand rather than the two. Without hesitation, he pointed it at her thigh, just below her buttocks, and fired three shots. First Huntress felt three pricks and heard the door slam shut. Having apparently fulfilled his purpose for intruding on her, the fighter was gone.

She inspected the area where she felt the entries but could not find more than the tiniest marks. Had she not known precisely where to look, she would likely have missed them. She did not even bleed. First Huntress waited for some adverse effect of the attack to manifest, but there was none. After a short time, she added the unusual instance to the large list of unknowns and ceased considering it.

Not long after the mysterious white weapon attack, the red lights went out. First Huntress was plunged into utter darkness. Immediately, she crouched, tensed for whatever menace decided that it had an advantage without vision. She heard the familiar and most welcomed click of the cuffs restraining her come free. She quickly sloughed them away fearing they would reengage, allowing herself a brief moment of elation for the use of all her limbs again. Another sound- mechanical, whirring, quiet, accompanied by metal slightly rubbing metal- began to one side. She heard it after feeling it through her feet. Cautiously, First Huntress took small steps towards it, probing the darkness with both of her gloriously free hands. She moved much farther than her memory of the room she had been confined in should allow when her foot touched a groove on the ground. She leaned down and ran her fingers along until she had felt the entire length. This groove was precisely where the wall had been when the lights were on. Reaching in with her finger, she felt the cold, dense smoothness of a thick sheet of metal. They had collapsed a wall into the ground. They had freed her... Why?

A sliver of light appeared in the distance, revealing a long, newly completed corridor, the obvious product of all their quiet construction. Without any hesitation, moving as quickly to the source as the dim light and her numb limbs allowed, she raced

towards it. If this was freedom, she could not get there soon enough. If it was a trick, she may as well get it over with.

At the end, she peered out and found a dense, unfamiliar glacial barren a few body lengths drop below. There was no sign of little ones. Her place sense had long ago revealed she was many many days away from the Tribe. She could not return. Without supplies, she would never make the journey. Without cover, the little ones would easily find her. If the Final Push was proceeding however, the shore near here would be populated by Smiths. She wished more than anything else right now to be with her Tribe when she died.

One leap dropped her into the plain, waking her muscles.

First Huntress began her run to the ocean.

Her steps were cautious at first, unsure. The give underneath her, welcomed and familiar, was still vastly different than the rigid unyielding surfaces she had been confined to. How long had she been imprisoned? How much time had passed since she breathed the cold delicious air of the open ice? Whatever the number, it had been too long. Every step she took boosted her confidence, which boosted her speed, which lifted her spirit. In a short spell, she was bounding at the rate she remembered, leaping and sliding through the ice. From the moment of her capture, First Huntress never expected to have experienced this pleasure again. She did not know how long she could run at this rate, nor how long she could stay out in the open before being detected by the little ones who surely have come to realize she was no longer there.

But why wasn't she there? Had they released her? Had someone like Teresa the mender taken pity on her captivity and set her free? The darkness which preceded her freedom may indicate that there was perhaps a failure in their machinery and her escape a lucky opportunity. Had the Final Push reached this dwelling? Did they intend to hunt her? Was she perhaps being followed? That last thought immediately halted her. She turned slowly, tapping every sense, scanning horizon to horizon for any sign of little ones. She saw nothing. She felt, heard, smelled nothing save the wonderful, frozen moisture of old ice. First Huntress resumed her run.

She was heading as best as the geography allowed to the sea. There, she intended to scale down the cliffs to the shore and join the Smiths in their final assault. Scanning ahead to pick her route, she found there was one particularly challenging slope barring her path- an intersection where two glacial floes collided and merged, piling rocky ice steep and high. To circumvent, she would have to run far off course, or she could just scale it. She chose to scale. Reaching the barrier was relatively effortless. Her idle time had likely atrophied her muscles somewhat, and they would be quite sore later, but since

she was rather certain she would be dead before this day ended, she did not give the matter much worry.

First Huntress had decided her path as she was approaching. When she reached the foot of the barrier, she paused to allow her breath to return to its relaxed rhythm. She ate some ice, rubbed her thighs with her elbows to loosen them after their exertion, then without more delay, began her ascent. The climb was easy. The ice was old and stiff. Very few times did she feel even the slightest movement. This was old ice, which had begun its life as snowfall deep in the barrens. It had been countless seasons drifting along this slow stiff river, and would continue countless more before calving back to the sea. A mere footfall from a climber was insufficient to upset it.

At the summit, First Huntress peered to the distance and made out the slim blue line of the ocean. If her strength and luck persisted, she could be at the water in a day. With a bit more luck, she would find Smiths alive and near. She was, from this vantage, able to garner a complete view of the landscape she must cross. She exploited it by scanning for the best route and found that her luck had evaporated. A faint shadow, floating in the air near the ocean, was growing steadily.

Quickly, she slipped back behind the summit and searched for a place to hide. A short drop below she found a possibility and leapt down to an outcropping. A large boulder had fallen on it long ago. First Huntress squeezed her back against the barrier wall, placed both feet firmly on the boulder, and with a powerful shove of her legs, fed by the desperation of not wanting to return to captivity, she tilted it. As she hoped, there was a hollow behind it. First Huntress continued pressing until her legs were fully extended. She held the extension and, using her arms, slid herself sideways. She had to do so carefully. If she relaxed the push on her legs even a little bit, the boulder would come crashing back to rest where she was, likely crushing her. She pushed and dug with her hands and elbow until she felt she had opened enough of a space for her to fit. All that remained was timing.

In one fluid motion, First Huntress, twisted into a ball, plummeted downward just ahead of the crashing boulder. She slammed her lower back on the ground as the large rock closed the gap she had made above. A rain of loosened ice covered her face and torso, but she had been expecting that. She had cupped her hands around her nose and mouth and had tightly shut her eyes. A few sweeps from her large hands cleared her breathing and vision. From her horizontal position, she was able to assess her effort without moving. As she hoped, the boulder held its shape nicely. It was wedged where it had been before First Huntress' push, but now she was nestled invisibly behind the enormous ice rock. She had enough space to sit straight. She could even stretch her legs, but she could not stand, and First Huntress was certain she did not have the leverage to

move the boulder again. She had trapped herself, but compared to where she had so recently been, this was minor and a problem to be solved later. She would address that crisis if she managed to escape detection of the approaching vessel. She could hear it now. A deep, reverberating howl, steadily increasing, it was definitely near.

Straight up, between the crags of the boulder, parts of the cloudless, light season blue sky were visible. Through them, she saw the vessel as it passed slowly overhead. Her tiny chamber darkened in its shadow. Curious, it had been moving incredibly fast when she first noticed it. She had barely enough time to hide, yet now the vessel seemed to plod along. The sound jumped in loudness as it crossed the summit to her side of the barrier, then plateaued. The vessel had stopped moving. She could still see part of it above her. It was growing. Apparently, the vessel was descending directly on top of her. Had she been detected? Could they see her with their infernally magical machines? The quiet elder had claimed their vision could penetrate ice. Was this true? Had she caged herself for them?

First Huntress tensed for conflict. She maneuvered herself to a crouch. The boulder was huge. The barrier more so. Should the little ones wish to reacquire her, they would have to remove them. She would wait to see if they did. The moment she could, she would pounce as the Large Smith had done. She would die in battle rather than in a prison. That, she promised herself.

Outside she heard footfalls. She thought she heard voices, but the vessel's sound was great, and the boulder muffled much. Whether the voices were true or not, she was starting to feel heat, and it was not an imagining. The boulder began to glisten. Its jagged shape smoothed out as large portions of it melted away. Soon, enough had cleared away that she saw the source of the heat. Along the top of the boulder, a white glow was carving a downward line. Because of the boulder's shape, at a point, it should crack in half like a shell. That point was rapidly approaching. First Huntress shifted to be outside the downward path of the beam. She adjusted her crouch to prepare for the opening. If the beam came from a little one weapon as she expected, they had provided her the courtesy of creating a beacon for her to know exactly where they were. It was now merely a matter to wait for her moment to leap. Her hand opened and closed involuntarily. How she missed her spear. How wondrous it would have been to die with it in her hands. But that was not an option available. She would be a weapon of fists and knees and elbows and feet for the remainder of her breathing. She would become a part of the Final Push, another element of the desperate deception to cushion the Tribe with enough time for their Final Retreat. How far along were they? How many would survive? She wondered, what would their new life be like? She hoped there would be peace for them but did not carry much confidence in her hope.

First Huntress thought about singing the Last Prayer, but having no one to carry the story back to the Tribe, and given that the beam was nearly done with its cleave, she decided against it. How different this time than the previous. When attacked before, she was instinct. Thought was not necessary for her response, so she did not bother with that distraction. Her second precipice with death was a blur. The concoctions the little ones had flushed through her and the injury to her head made her thoughts thick and clumsy. What little she recalled was a nonsense patchwork. She may as well have been instinct there too. How different now to be with your thoughts as death approaches. The Smiths chose this path, but they had lived long and bountiful lives. She wondered without resentment if she had been cheated? Had she been given a sparse share of life? Had the little ones stolen what remained? She did not feel that was correct. If thievery did occur, the accusation resonated better on the exiles than on her attackers. Had the banished shown the least bit of restraint, she was certain now that the drastic chain of the events unfolding would not have occurred. The little ones were defending their tribe as she would have done.

The Tribe itself carried some blame. She knew now, much too late, that to have hidden from these marvelous creatures merely because the lore declared so was shortsighted. Perhaps the truth that two hunters in the same range must compete is not so much truth. Did the orcas and sharks not share a realm? Did they not eat the same middle food? Did they not do this in an unspoken harmony? And had they not done so for as long as there had been an ocean? Why then did the Tribe assume they would be less spiritual than a hunting animal?

If there had been a means of damming the tide of aggression, perhaps they would have become acquainted and learned of each other without annihilation. Had there been even a glimmer of a wedge to insert on either side, the tribes may have known peace. She had been immersed by little ones for so long. Their fighters were not cruel. Those she exploited because of their fixation on her body were immature, but not evil. The menders who attended her were kind. Teresa, the mender, had been an extraordinary spirit whom fate had determined as an enemy, but should not have. Even the quiet elder would have been welcomed counsel. Truly, even forgiving the abomination of the exiles, all malevolence in their current confrontation had come from the Tribe.

“So this is the difference between meeting death with the mind and without,” First Huntress mused, “thinking leaks in an avalanche of regret. How sad.”

**CRACK!**

The ice rock’s death cry immediately snuffed the hot beam. First Huntress looked up. Where once rested an enormous boulder, two precariously balanced lesser boulders stood... but not for long. A perfectly linear slit of bright blue slowly expanded. There

was creaking and more loose snow mixed with recently melted ice cascading on her. She steadied herself, watching the slit expand slowly. To help it along, she worked her fingers in, placing a hand on either side and pushed. With her assistance, the creaking increased, and another deafening crack later, the two sides fell away, fully exposing the sky and the hovering vessel.

First Huntress leapt with all the strength she could muster from her legs. She soared from the place which was only recently her chamber/prison directly in the direction of where the beam suggested her attackers would be. She was not to get an opportunity to see whether her guess was correct, for in midflight, she was met by an obstacle.

Coming down hard on her, wrapping an arm around her neck and shoulder, a pair of very familiar arms halted her attack and brought her down firmly but harmlessly on the ice. First Huntress' disorientation lasted for a moment, but she managed to smile as she spoke the very last words she would ever have guessed she would utter here.

“Hello mother.”

## Chapter 17: Four Smiths

Four Smiths remained. In the empty, cooling husk where once the heat and banter saturated the very air, now only the heat remained. The four purposefully maneuvered the unbearably quiet corridors making preparations. Unanimously chosen to be the Tribe's guides for the Final Retreat, they were more learned in the nuances of how to operate the machinery than the others; they knew the best means of transforming the bellows; they knew of the trickery necessary to coax access to the water chambers, and of the ropes, and the pulleys and tracks; they were clever, swift to adjust their tactics when what they had done a thousand times one way, simply did not work anymore. Not insignificantly, they also remained sufficiently agile to travel back and forth from the Tribe the many many times necessary.

Four Smiths remained, keenly acute to the reality that above them, in the Tribe, their comrades were preparing for their bloody demise. They well understood why they had been spared that fate. A task remained to complete, and they were the four best suited to complete it. Had there been a vote, they too would have selected themselves. It was the reasonable selection, and a Smith was above all else, reasonable. Elders so fixated on ceremony had ceremoniously proposed the question at the Forge. Smiths knew their tools. Smiths were tools themselves. Given the arduous task assigned, they all knew which tool they would select. They merely nodded, and they four set off to work, while the remainder set off to die. Both groups with vastly divergent fates, but congruent goals, had been busy from that instant, and only now, with the sounds of the Smith departure reaching them, did the four pause in their work. They had been expecting this moment. Four laden, dirty satchels rested beside the exit to the Tribe. Each found a stopping point in their labors, took one, and left the rock for the ice to interact with their brethren one final time.

Four Smiths emerged as a bent, creaky, gloriously worthy army began its march. As when their fates had diverted, words were not exchanged. Any attempts would have fallen shallow and impotent. They were as useless in farewells with their brothers and sisters of the Forge as a hammer on water. Perhaps if there was a poet or storyteller in their ranks, words may have been found that did not echo palely. But that kind lingered in the Tribe long after their bodies crumpled. They relied on their minds for utility. The mind could be keen in a lame shell, yielding purpose worthy of tapping into the resources of the Tribe. A Smith did not hold such nonsenses. They had been the strong. They labored hard: their bodies had been honed tools for the benefit of the Tribe. They unhesitantly ate from the Tribe meals. When they could not work for their food in the ice,

they descended to the warmth of stone, the warmth of kinship, and the warmth of the Smiths.

To say aloud what all knew as true took time from the necessary tasks. All knew their fate. All knew why they were fated as they were. All knew they would rather have been offered different paths to choose from, but all that was not to be. No words could change that essential concentrated truth, so why bother wasting time with them.

Four Smiths did not speak to their departing kin, but it was of paramount importance that they touched. Wielding a hand as a brush dipped in soft, sticky blackness, they, drifting purposefully through the flowing army, scattered widely to ensure they impressed their grip on every brother and sister. Four Smiths marked their comrades' strong shoulder with an imprint of their palm made from fresh soot carried up in the satchel from their beloved hearth. Each shoulder of their departing friends felt the press of a calloused blackened reassuring grip. Each shoulder was left with the imprint of an unbreakable promise they would take into battle with them. Where armor shielded the shoulder, they gently pried and dug their fingers in. If the fit was too snug, the neck felt the grip. Embedded within that imprint was the oath made to each that the four would be no less devout in completing their portion of the task. When the last of the Final Push was marked, save one, Four Smiths faced the old First Hunter who led them.

He had a name now. His stint as Advocate of the Tribe had long past. If the four really concentrated, they would have recalled what it was, but Smiths did not adhere to ceremony unless it suited them. Any hunter, let alone a First Hunter, was rare in the Smith's realm. First Hunters usually remained in the ice as counsel for other hunters, eventually finishing their lives as Elders. There was a story that he had entered the stone, joining the Smiths the moment he lost his spear, not even bothering to see the menders for his injuries. To a Smith, one such as this would be named First Hunter regardless of his protests. First Hunter had indeed long ago vehemently objected against this title. He had been utterly ignored and had grumpily long ago accepted that his name amongst the Smiths would for his life be his title. Protest would have been futile, so he had been reasonable.

Warped dramatically by the Gift Stone, First Hunter still towered over them. His arms were thick as ordinary thighs. His heaving frame always found difficulty traversing doorways. Even now, to declare him merely impressive was insult. First Hunter's back was so crooked, his hunch so pronounced, it appeared he had been decapitated, and that his head grew out from his massive chest. Although laden heavily with armor, he refused to allow anyone to carry for him. Leaning on his enormous spear, the four were certain he did not need support. They had seen him forge this spear, painstakingly reproducing from memory every detail of the weapon he had wielded for so many seasons long ago. First

Hunter appeared to exaggerate his forward bend to ensure he was making eye contact. When assured he had their attention, as if to prove their notion, he rocked his center backwards, clutched his spear in the middle with one hand, turning it so it paralleled the ground in the manner of a First Hunter challenge. The message he emanated was clear:

“Fight me, or listen to me. You must do one.”

Four Smiths remained reverently silent.

“Have you unearthed the chambers yet?” he asked.

“We have freed one. It is damaged,” One of Four replied.

“Can we move the Tribe with two?” he pressed.

Silence, as the four exchanged quizzical looks.

“Perhaps,” One of Four finally replied. “We can squeeze more in each chamber and accelerate the pace where we can. The bellows holds tremendous capacity. It will provide sufficient air... There is but one limitation. Our success will rely on your success.”

At that, a crease of a smile crossed First Hunter’s lips. He spun the spear, so the tip faced up, crashed it down, where the blunt end sunk deeply into the hard ice.

“Then you shall be quite successful, my friends.”

One of Four stepped to First Hunter, dipped his hands in his satchel, and grasped the great spear marking his imprint on First Hunter’s weapon. He looked straight into his dead comrade’s eyes as he told him, “We will sing of you all forever, my friend.”

The others nodded.

First Hunter appeared satisfied. He popped his spear loose, turned, and joined the Smith exodus.

Four Smiths returned to their labors. No need to linger. Their friends were dead. It was only a matter of location and time now. They descended to their realm through the spiral starting in the rear of the council house from where they had emerged. At the lake, two continued to the forge for the completion of their modifications to the bellows. The other two wielded pikes and resumed unearthing the chambers.

As they had informed First Hunter, there were three in total, but the first chamber they had dug free of the ash where it had long been stored was dangerously cracked.

They had concluded it would require more effort than they had time for to mend, so it had been abandoned, not discarded, because if haste overrode all other options, better to risk drowning in an unsafe chamber than to guarantee demise at the hands of an invader. The remaining two, partially unearthed, seemed sturdy. Whether they were sufficient to successfully serve their function, given the decreased capacity, depended entirely on how large a delay the Smiths' performance could push. Charged with the assurances of a dead First Hunter, two Smiths worked a bit harder now.

Two Smiths pondered thoughtfully on their chances of success as they smashed and pried their picks into the hardened ash. They occasionally commented to one another on their probabilities as an entertainment. Conversations at the forge had always been animated, passionate, and the greatest pleasure of working in the heat. Even now, vastly diminished in numbers, set on these ultimate, nearly impossible tasks, there was laughter. They reminisced on how grumpy a certain Smith would have been that they were using their picks in this manner, and how useful the counsel of the wise but spent Smith with only one functional arm might have been in possibly mending the cracked chamber. They laughed remembering mishaps, romantic escapades, failed romantic escapades, repeating for the hundredth (and likely final) time as many funny stories of their dead friends as they could recollect. Two Smiths worked diligently, aware that time was not an ally, but they did not dread. How much time they would be ultimately gifted was not theirs to decide. How many of the Tribe they could send to the Final Retreat was not calculable. Questions without answers and tasks beyond their control were foolish to fret over, and they distracted from what they could answer, what they could control. It was always best to work unburdened, so unburdened they were. Soon enough they would know whether their labors had been sufficient.

The two unearthing the chambers were perhaps fortunate that the unsettling quiet and their proximity allowed them the familiarity of the comradely chat. At the forge, the remaining two were afforded no such luxury. The noise was intermittently deafening. Diverting the flow of the bellows from the forge where it had pointed since its creation, to the chambers where it was now needed, required them to be continuously running at close to capacity. Rarely had the bellows been demanded to push such large amounts of air in one stroke, and never for so long. On the downward stroke, howling air blasted protesting through narrow channels, combined with the mechanical descent of the lever arm saturated the very air with a screeching whoosh noise that strained to yank thoughts directly out of the two struggling Smith's heads. They enjoyed a respite as springs engaged to reset the bellows. The up stroke was a relatively benign hum as the immense bags billowed. For the time it took the water corralled from the melting ceiling to fill the reservoir, until the next down stroke, they exchanged instructions. The sentences were terse and rushed, nothing like the casual flow of the other two. What needed saying came first, and it was tempered by the unpleasantness of the noise they had just endured and

were about to endure again. They did occasionally laugh a bit at the ridiculousness of their situation, but that was expunged when the howling recommenced. Knowing that their work would require them to venture farther and farther from the bellows as it progressed, they worked quite quickly.

Their task was to lay and attach long, smooth pipes, stored in long smooth openings carved deep into the rock, from the bellows' mouth to the lake shore nearest the chambers. The bellows had assumed the dual function of stoking the forge for the heat to seal the pipes together, and to flow air through the increasing length so they could locate and plug any leaks. A split had been attached to the bellows' mouth, channeling half the air in either direction. The two air paths were identical, save for a valve resting on the end pouring into the forge, whose final purpose would soon be fulfilled. At the moment when the Final Retreat commenced, that valve would be sealed, permanently eliminating air from the fires which had supplied the Tribe so many many seasons.

The work progressed. Two flawless chambers appeared to rise from the stone as the ash cleared away. Pikes, obsolete now, having cracked through the hard surface, two Smiths dug deep, whipping shovels, flinging great collections of gray dust and rock outward. Each swing stretched the hole they had cleared around the immense metal structures. When the legs appeared, they knew they approached the end and swung their tools even more furiously, creating an even fine gray mist which clung to anything marginally moist, which by the lake, under a cavern of perpetually dripping ice, was everything. Neither could see much more than the length of the shovel in front of them, but they did not need to, so they worked on. A series of growing gray mounds forming a ring around their deepening hole marked their progress in displacing the ground most dramatically. Were a spectator to wander by, they would see the mound peaks juttied above the mists in a manner akin to steep cliffs over fog. They would hear digging, grunting, some laughter, and not a little cursing.

The chambers were purposefully buried near the lake, held at bay by a narrowing span, which became narrower with every dig. Two Smiths had considered adding supports to bolster the stone and dirt wall separating them from the immense weight of the water, but determined the risk of a breach was minor when compared to the time they would have to invest to eliminate it. They had thus far been correct. The span protested, leaked in a handful of soft spots, but held. At the point where they reached the wheels, they alternated the shovel with a pickaxe, as they cautiously released them from the ash. A thick glop of black, dense, tarry, lubricant was swabbed over and worked into every wheel. The wheels marked the bottom point of their digging. The mist was dense, and the precipitation continual, so the air quickly cleared after they had ceased feeding it ash. Revealed before them, resting on their four stout, wheel capped legs, were two dusty rectangular containers designed for twenty, but capable of holding... thirty perhaps?

Always keen to show their craftwork in the best light, two Smiths resisted the urge to scrub the chambers clean of their thin gray layer. Already, the cavern's steady waters had run several clean streaks the length of the surface. They knew the remainder would clear out soon enough once they unleashed the waters. Best to consume their time with more pragmatic matters. They did take a moment to dive in the lake to remove their own gray coating, catch their breath, and admire the metalwork.

The two Smiths had never seen so much Gift Stone metal in one place. Even dusty, in the dim blue hue of the lake cavern, enough of the yellow luster of the chambers' metal was exposed to dazzle them. Save for the decorations, the chambers, including the first they had found defective were identical. Four sturdy rectangular legs rose to the just about mid-thigh to the Smiths' where the actual chamber began, and extended upwards so that neither of them fully extended could touch the top with their hand without jumping. They were predominantly rectangular, with a slight narrowing at the bow and stern. The roof was a definitive bow shape. When viewing a thing that is new, the mind best conjures a similarity with a thing that is known. While it did not actually resemble one, two Smiths could not help but consider the chambers' inverted boats resting on four stands. The chambers were open from beneath so one could enter by merely ducking below the lower lip. The front bore three ornate shields, each adorned with the head of a mammoth. The long snouted beasts with powerful tusks were rendered as an etching on the shield, appearing precisely as each Smith imagined it from the stories in their childhood. Two latches, which could be released from within the chamber, allowed the shields to slide to one side, freeing the air satchel.

The monstrously large yellow metal chambers were adorned on all sides with relief sculptures chronicling the significant histories of the Tribe. There were scenes commemorating their arrival to this land. Great beached rowing ships, which had transported them, leaned incapacitated on one side in the background. Jumping out of the seas and throughout the borders and apparently in any space the artisans could squeeze, whales, birds, seals, and fishes, which had sustained them in the voyage, were elegantly displayed, a loving homage to their spirits. Prominent in the foreground were the founders whose children would be the Tribe. Wearing armor similar to that which the Smiths had donned for their deaths, they were depicted noble, but exhausted. More than a few carried injuries inflicted in battle. Whether these images reflected those who were real, or whether conceptual, the Smiths were unsure. They did note more than passing similarities between the many they knew and these frozen metallic ancestors.

Other scenes captured the first shelter, creation of the Tribe, the arrival of the Gift Stone, the discovery of the lake cavern, and subsequently, the forge. There was a display where the chambers were being interred... And one other whose place in the Tribe lore neither recognized- a moment forever frozen in metal of a furious battle involving the

Tribe standing their ground on icebergs engaging little ones wielding their fiery weaponry from within the decks of their many sailing ships. Curious that they easily recognized every aspect of the artwork but this.

Two Smiths from the bellows joined them. They had extended the pipe to the lake cavern, had noticed the Smith's handiwork, and could not resist delaying their return to the howling. Together, they took in the battle sculpture and the repercussions it suggested.

"So we have walked this path before," A bellows Smith finally commented.

"That we must have," agreed the other bellows Smith.

A pause ensued as they absorbed the reality of what this meant.

"Is the third chamber useless?" a bellows Smith asked, breaking the silence to return them to matters they needed attending, rather than matters they could not possibly address.

"It is... unpredictable," a chamber Smith responded. "The crack is minute, but visible. We will free it if we have time after all other preparations are complete. I would not counsel reliance."

"How goes the pipe?" a chamber Smith asked.

"Loudly," a bellows Smith answered with a louder voice than he anticipated.

The four laughed softly together.

"I tire, my friends. The chamber was most deep and wide. I worry we have diminished our ranks too greatly," a chamber Smith said plainly to no one in particular. "As pairs, should one fall from fatigue or injury, all work would cease until adjustments could be mustered. Not so, if we numbered four. We could complete the chamber preparation together and attack the pipe as four." He and the other chamber Smith had imagined that the bellows work would not have been very pleasant. During their dig, they had commented that considering they four were the last Smiths alive, perhaps a nicety was called for.

Quiet pondering ensued. The four considered the legitimacy of the obviously generosity driven proposal. True they had originally deemed their tasks best performed as separate units, but their numbers were so sparse, the one was correct. Should one fall, work would cease until another could continue. Not so if they four united. Three could continue the work of four where one could not for two. They would lose a bit of time, but

they'd increase their prospects for success. Tainted by the consolatory pleasure of doubling their company, Four Smiths rationalized the improved chances well worth the small loss of efficiency. They downplayed other motivations as irrelevant. With a nod, the (mostly) reasonable decision was agreed upon, and they set on the chambers. Releasing the latch anchoring the flap, they removed the seals protecting the more delicate chamber innards, leaned under the rear, and entered the chambers from below. As they had hoped, the seals performed their duties perfectly. The insides had been spared the dusty invasion of the ash. Enough light ricocheted in from the newly opened belly to reveal that the interior was not merely intact, it was meticulous. Smooth, sturdy shelves lined the entire span of the side walls. Rigid, but comfortably contoured benches for sitting and thick rods for pushing ran across the chamber width connecting side to side. At the rear, recessed into the wall, a seat faced a helmsman's wheel. Cables extended from the wheel to each of the legs. Two pipes rose into the interior just above where the helmsman's head would be, running across the entire ceiling. One was drilled with finger sized holes a hand width apart for the full length; another was unbroken, ran just above it, and split at the bow to three smaller pipes which disappeared into the wall. Each of the bow pipes was fitted with its own valve. Long sliding latches, presumably for freeing and trapping the mammoth shields from within, rested between the bow pipes.

As with the exterior, all of it, from the valves to the pipes to the wheels to the cables, was of the yellow, ever shiny Gift Stone metal. Impervious to erosion by water or salt or other metal, or anything any Smith had ever conjured save the forge's oppressively powerful heat, this metal remained as beautiful and shimmery as the moment it had been poured. Unlike the exterior however here the metal radiated its beauty undulled by an ashen coat. Four Smiths fell silent. Their token but until now unfathomable admiration of their ancestral comrades stunned them. A Smith viewed machinery differently than someone not of the forge. They acknowledged aesthetics as much as anyone else, but to a Smith, function was beauty. The dioramic artwork around the exterior were admittedly beautiful, and disturbingly revelatory, but it was here within the chambers, where no seam from a weld was detectable, no give surrendered to their prodding, no part that moved failed to do so, no part that didn't disappointed... Here was craftsmanship of their ancestors, created for a truly distasteful and distant necessity.

Here was beauty.

Here also was selfless dedication in the purest sense. They had built these chambers with the full knowledge that upon completion, their work would be long hidden for its preservation. There would be no accolade other than their own satisfaction that they had performed their craft well. The four were relatively young amongst the Smiths, but the forge was a place of constant chatter. And over time, they had heard every tale of every brother and sister. They were certain none living had touched this metal before

them. How long ago had this been? Surely it was before the little ones had conjured a means of moving their vessels without sail or paddle, else why sculpt the battle with sails, and not the other admittedly smaller but significant skirmishes they were familiar with? Five generations? Ten? More? They would never truly know. No artifacts existed of the chambers' construction which could be clumsily uncovered by an inquisitive soul. There was no secret writing etched on a wall. Even the duteous Tribe chronicles fell quite silent. Knowledge of the chamber's existence and of the plan for the Final Retreat was passed on verbally, maintained in the Smith consciousness through long memory and song. Above, only the Elders and whoever carried the First Spear would ever know. Suffice that it was old, and remarkable, and but for the unfortunate crack in the first chamber, functional.

A Smith sat in the helmsman's chair and rotating the wheel from extreme to extreme as the others applied lubricant to the cables and joints. They made certain the helm responded as it should. Each of the bow valves and latches received the same treatment. Four Smiths secured the seats, double checked the welds along the walls, opened and closed everything that could open and close. Turned what was supposed to turn, and ensured that what wasn't, didn't, until they felt utterly satisfied they had two working vessels. Four Smiths found themselves smiling and slapping one another on the back as they worked, reveling at the good fortune they shared in bearing witness to the fulfillment of such a grand structure's purpose.

Soft steady pattering on the roof had hinted that outside, water was methodically excavating the last evidence of the chambers' extended entombment, and so four Smiths were braced for a more impressive appearance when they exited the insides. They were just not braced enough. Without the dulling of the ash, bathed in the dim but immersive cavern glow, the true magnificence of the chambers finally announced itself, and their marvel, already sated, overflowed. The luster alone from such immense objects was overpowering. And immense they were. Their estimations had been too conservative. Having now been within, they were confident that thirty of the Tribe with their wares could easily be transported within the protection of the shiny chambers, forty if necessary. In dire moments, at least twenty more could be slid into the shelves for the journey. It would be an uncomfortable ride, but if the alternative was to remain and die, four Smiths were sure complaints of the cramped accommodations would not be very loud.

Achieving sheer size was a blunt tool. Where craftsmen earned their standing was in their detail. The water's patient onslaught had been very thorough, eliminating even the tiniest particles of ash. Freed from the ash's veil, it was evident that while the old Smiths worked well in large scale, the minute did not suffer neglect. Had they more time, the four would have devoted more deserved attention to the art. Begrudgingly, they could

afford only a quick light second scan. Of particular benefit to the scouring were the dioramas. Clouds formed, waves tipped their peaks with sprigs of water, more fish, more birds, more everything than they had imagined a generation would have time to carve posed shining before them. It was striking beyond words, but the water had revealed more than just the pleasant. In the battle diorama, the number of ships the little ones had challenged with doubled. Many were distant and therefore too small to have been noticed before. Some were sunken, where only a tattered mast jutted above the waves. And there was more. The water had teased details of the ships' make up. As expected, early little one ships were made of wood. Smiths had painstakingly reproduced the living material's defining symmetrical grains along each of the slats. They also chiseled what passed for decoration. Bolted painfully to the bow of most of the little one vessels, were men, women, and children of the Tribe.

The living figure heads were splayed naked, dangling from rods hammered through their forearms and calves to the hull itself. Ropes rigged around their necks and shoulders forced them to hold a forward facing gaze. They were the bludgeons which met the sea first as the ships knifed through the waves. Their faces forever frozen in terror stricken screams, an obvious indicator that they were alive while their bodies endured that torment. Four Smiths absorbed the image of their enemy's handiwork certain that the early Smith artisans had not embellished. Even ships unadorned by the suffering Tribe bore evidence that their bows were bare not because of some mercy shown, but because their captive had been dislodged. Severed, legs and arms still secured where once an entire being had been latched foretold the eventual fate of the doomed others.

“So this is our foe,” One finally said through clenched teeth.

“Best we complete our task promptly. I would not wish to replace their decorations,” another added.

Pause

“Fret not, old friend. Should you suffer that fate, I will carve an image of you that your descendants will consider lovely,” a Smith said to pierce the somber tone.

“Then you will occupy your own place in Tribe history as the greatest sculptor of us all.”

“Or the most deceptive...”

“Or blind.”

And they laughed, not at their dark humor, but because more work needed doing, and failing to laugh would drag their labors unreasonably.

Four Smiths attacked the pipe extension with renewed vigor. Each segment moaned its acceptance of the bellows' air as it was slid into the elongated opening of the segment before it. Once attached, it had to be secured. Given the pressures they were imposing, clips and latches were futile. For this they required molten metal from the forge as sealant. It turned out to be good fortune they had agreed to concentrate their labors. Sealing the pipes with molten metal from the forge proved challenging in the persistent drizzle. Four Smiths managed by utilizing their numbers. Two pushed the cart holding their tools and the vat of freshly molten metal while the other two shielded it from the cold raining waters with... shields that had been unclaimed by the dead Smiths. In this cumbersome but effective manner, the four together, pushed the air from the bellows out into the lake cavern and finally secured the cap pipe well into the lake itself. Unique of all the segments they had connected, the head of the cap was not simply a narrower version of its tail. In its stead, there were three smaller open spigots that raised the pitch of the bellows air from its rumbling vibration to a shrilly, rather unpleasant whistle upon attaching. Four Smiths were quite content that submerging the secured last segment below the surface muffled that noise, replacing it with restless frothing. White billowy blossoms of water loudly marked the head's location on the already rain choppy surface.

Three Smiths retrieved three spools holding very long, more narrow and flexible pipe. The spools' diameter was nearly their height, but they were balanced and rolled reliably to their destinations. One spool was mounted to the rear of each of the intact chambers. The flexible pipe, made from animal hides supported by a metal mesh was unrolled to reach the frothing nozzle. The other end ran under the lip, up behind the helmsman's seat, and attached to a waiting ceiling pipes fitting. Smiths ensured the fit on both ends were snug and opened the cap valves. The spools bloated until within the chambers a final valve allowed the air to finally flow into its final destination.

Ash that had been stored undisturbed for countless seasons blasted from the symmetrically spaced pipe holes. In the first chamber, the particles settled harmlessly, awaiting a quick dusting. In the other, they caked one Smith who had unwisely remained in the chamber admiring his handiwork. He had taken a concentrated attack of finely ground ash, and to declare him dusty would be an understatement more comical than his current predicament. This one Smith had been painted, and not merely his skin, but every individual hair of his head, brow, beard, and body. In his eyes, his nostrils, his mouth, his ears, dust clung to any portion with the minutest hint of moisture. He emerged as gray as the ground. Blinded, but sufficiently oriented to know where relief lay, the dusty Smith stumbled into a quick dive below the lake water, where he thrashed until he eliminated the invasion to his skin. He arose free of the dust but not of the good natured humiliation that waited. After gargling enough mouthfuls of lake water so he did not taste ash when he breathed, he too joined his brothers in their laugh.

How a laugh ends will always be a mystery. How long a thing is funny is nebulous. Likely, the thing remains funny well beyond the end of laughter. Usually its not so much that the laughter ceases, rather that it is replaced by a matter more pressing. Without choreography, four Smiths found themselves looking again at the macabre figureheads of their ancestors. Before them, two intact functional chambers hummed with the rhythmic flow of air. They were done. The promise they had made to their dead kin had been honored. The urgency of that promise starkly displayed before them. They had not rested or eaten since they began the task, and the wash of fatigue they had been racing against finally caught up. Knees wobbled, tools fell from their hands. One by one, four Smiths buckled under, conceding to their exhaustion. They were in unison drifting from consciousness, enjoying the release.

Between bellows breaths, just before they surrendered, one slurred, “Whichever of us wakes first, muster the others, and we shall see about the third chamber...”

Snores were the only reply.

## Chapter 18: Tali, First Huntress, and Chris

“What of your injuries?” Tali asked of her daughter, fighting the urge to help her rise from the snow she had just ploughed her into.

“I appear healed, Mother. They have strong menders who cared for me. Were they here, I could use their assistance to treat the damage you have just inflicted,” First Huntress replied. She ached mightily from the blow Tali was forced to land across her shoulder blades. It had scrambled a nerve cluster sending painful shards down her arms whenever she tried moving her shoulders. Her upper arms were now useless until the throbbing subsided. First Huntress would not suffer the indignity of lying on the ground that long, but standing proved clumsy without the use of her hands for support. She managed to roll to her back and rise from a sitting position. She longed to wipe the gravel and snow causing an annoying itch smudged across the side of her face, but did not. She would wait. Her fingers tingled slightly, a sure indicator that the spasms had run their course and were subsiding. Better to endure this minor discomfort than reveal how incapacitating Tali had been. Her mother had not only timed her jump perfectly, she had anticipated the direction of First Huntress’ attack and surgically intercepted with only the force sufficient to halt, not harm. As always, when considering the prowess of her mother, First Huntress knew nothing but awe.

Two powerful women, neither having been at all certain she would ever see the other again, stood eye to eye, basking in the glorious reality that the other was present, and while neither could not by any means be declared “unharmd,” both still stood. As different physically and spiritually as they were, when together, kinship was undeniable. Tali with the fairer skin, white straight hair aligned to one side of her head, in the snow colored one piece of Miallo’s mate, was a disciplined, unpainted version of a First Huntress sculpture with its red, brown shades of hair chaotically cascading where it wished, and the brown running outfit. Their height, build, facial features, and even their voice and mannerisms were of mostly an identical mold.

In the Tribe gossip, Tali had been renowned as stingy with her words, First Huntress generous with hers. But that was because Tali’s run as First Huntress had been for so long, the burden had smothered her desire to share. To Tali’s sadness, she saw clearly that the current First Huntress, Advocate of the Tribe, had adopted an equally oppressive stiffness herself. Tali also absorbed with the penetrating eye of a hunter the many many slim creases where her daughter’s body had been pierced. They appeared as healed as First Huntress claimed, but they had been inflicted. Tali unconsciously touched the white rectangle Chris had applied on her one wound, remembering its unsealable flow

with a shudder. She did not wish to contemplate how much blood had escaped when all those creases were open, but she could not tamp down her motherly concern. The best she could do was mask her anguish. And of her travel outfit, was the fabric under her left breast not stained slightly darker? Chris had described an injury to her side. Was that darkness the stain of her daughter's blood? And how much little one stitching was there? It appeared they had reassembled the garment from tatters. Was her daughter's hair not slightly thinner at the base of her skull? And was that not a long crease along what would have been her hair line? Had these creatures cut into her skull?

First Huntress graciously accepted the concerned inspection of her mother. She followed where her eyes darted, acknowledging the evidence of her myriad of injuries, unsurprised, but still impressed that no detail was missed. But First Huntress had keen eyes as well. She too studied the woman in front of her. A wide but healing scrape across her cheek where she must have left quite a bit of the skin from her face, extended downward, ending ironically at the scar she had herself inflicted so many seasons ago to wrest the spear. A shoulder did not straighten as sharply as the other. Both injuries appeared recent. Both appeared minor. There was, however, a more profound harm First Huntress worried of. Tali's familiar posture, ever stiff, shoulders back, chin high, was perceptively lax. Perhaps not to anyone less than a hunter, or a daughter who grew admiring and attempting to imitate the strength of that stance, but Tali was unmistakably exhausted. The wrinkles around her eyes were deep and craggy. She appeared gaunt. How long had mother been searching for her? From the evidence before her, including the nearly empty pack on Tali's shoulders, she was certain that it had been quite a lot of time. When had she last eaten or slept?

Standing just far enough so they both had the other's complete frame in their view, the mutual inspection carried on in silence. They did not embrace, nor did either desire to do so. They were not grief stricken, nor were they weak and in need of consolation. They were gladdened that they were together. That would suffice anytime. They stayed their embrace also because such intimacy amongst kin was a private matter. First Huntress suspected, and through the corner of her senses, she noted her suspicions correct, they were not alone.

"It appears you have forged an alliance, Mother. Would you care to elaborate on how this has happened?" First Huntress asked pointing to a little one wielding a long slender spear with a glowing tip on one end and a rope winding into the insides of his flying vessel from the other.

Tali began to speak, but First Huntress heard another voice in her head coming from the dots Teresa the mender had attached to her ears.

“I am called Chris, First Huntress. Forgive the intrusion on your reunion, but we do not have very much time. Before anything else occurs, I need you to remain still and allow me to fire my weapon on you. I have the means of stemming the damage once I inflict it, but unfortunately, I do not possess the medicines to numb you. It will be rather painful.”

“Why should I allow myself to be injured, child?” First Huntress tensed. She had endured quite enough damage from little ones involuntarily. She was not very receptive to simply allowing herself to receive more.

“A device has been inserted inside you which continuously sends a very strong, but invisible signal. It allows anyone with the machinery to listen for it to track your position from anywhere. It was what we used to find you. The device is dangerous because it will alert others intent on your harm. Until it is removed, they know precisely where to come and kill you,” Chris explained. The box translated methodically. First Huntress considered his words, then she remembered the guard who entered her confinement merely to fire his weapon and depart, and she understood why he did that.... And why she had been set free.

“It was impaled in my thigh was it not?” she asked knowing the answer.

“Yes, First Huntress, may I –,” Chris began, but was interrupted.

“I was to lead your soldiers to our Tribe,” First Huntress accused.

“Yes, First Huntress, and I-,” Chris tried to continue. He took a step towards First Huntress but was halted by her renewed antagonism. “And were I to have done this, your kind would have dropped your abominable weapon from your flying vessel... And we would be no more.”

“Yes, First Huntress, but-,” Chris again tried to speak, but First Huntress was beyond speaking. She had endured helplessly so much insufferable violation. She had been confined so long and had felt so wonderfully liberated. She had considered returning to the Tribe. To discover that now within her was a treacherous beacon which would have guided her enemy’s destruction, meant she was still a captive. And this creature wished to slice her open yet again.

She clenched her hands into fists, and damming the infernal pain shooting through her, she cocked back to dispatch the weapon in the hands of this little one child.

“Hold, First Huntress!” Tali’s voice boomed as she for the second time this day launched herself at her daughter to protect a little one. This time, however, First Huntress was aware of her mother. A quick drop unbalanced Tali’s jump forcing a miss. Tali

twisted in midflight, preparing to leap again the moment she landed, but by then, both knew she would be too slow. Tali was formidable, but there was a reason she held her name, and her daughter carried the title. In a direct confrontation, with surprise and deception no longer an armament, no one defeats a First Huntress... Ever. She reached the little one and his weapon.

The child did not flinch. Curious.

First Huntress whipped her hand upwards cleaving the bizarre weapon in the little one's hands cleanly in half. The insane device which sliced an ice boulder in two, and would have done the same to her thigh, crackled, and sparked from the stump connected to the flying vessel. Blue, foul smelling sparks sputtered from its open shaft. Where they jumped, the ice was instantly steam, and the rock pulverized. The other end flew over the barrier, gone from the line of sight. The child responded by fleeing into his vessel. He raced up a ramp through a wide pair of doors at what appeared to be the rear of his flying vessel, leaped down into an opening in the floor and disappeared. In a matter of a few moments, the weapon silenced.

Even more curious, a direct charge from an overwhelming adversary prompted no fear, but the destruction of his weapon did? What manner of creature was this?

She would soon discover that answer because the child was returning just as quickly. His hands were empty now, and he was more wary... But still he approached her.

"What you destroyed was not a weapon, First Huntress; it was a tool. I will not raise arms against you or anyone else. I speak true when I say you have a device which must be removed. You have unfortunately dispatched my best chance of liberating it."

"Your staff slices rock, child. What resistance would my leg have been?" First Huntress replied, still angry, but her rage had subsided somewhat.

"I had the capability of modulating the strength," Chris answered, with a hint of frustration, "but that is of no consequence now. Do you believe me, First Huntress?"

First Huntress assessed the child. Tali came up and took a knee next to him. The two were imploring her for trust.

"How would you propose to remove this beacon now that I have destroyed your machine?"

Chris seemed to brighten up at this. He jumped to his feet, running over to First Huntress with a blue box wielded in his hand. At First Huntress' side, he ran the box near

her skin as Teresa the mender had done, but he concentrated mainly around the entry just below the hip.

“I have detected the beacon, not far below the surface. It is pebble shaped and tiny. Tali, unsheathe the knife I used to pry the boulder earlier. I can instruct you precisely where to cut, and I can use my hand to reach within to retrieve it. My vessel has patches that can protect and clean the wound once we are done.”

“I am keenly familiar with those patches, child,” First Huntress managed to tell him without too much bitterness. “What would you have me do?”

“Lay down on your belly and lift your garment up to... here,” Chris pointed to a place towards the buttocks still along the hip bone, “while I retrieve the medical supplies. Tali, if you have the means of sharpening your knife, please do so,” Chris instructed as he retraced his steps back inside his vessel.

Tali came to her daughter’s side, her knife was already out. But for the handle she had replaced with a better, but less water resistant material, it was the same knife she had hunted with her entire run as First Huntress. Straight, sleek, flat, the Gift Stone metal gleamed an unwarped yellow tinged reflection as dangerous as when it was given to her by the Smiths as a congratulatory present.

“He would want me to sharpen this,” Tali said.

They both laughed.

First Huntress lay as Chris instructed, propping herself up with her elbows. Tali sat next to her daughter.

“Do you still ache from the blow I hit you with?” Tali queried.

“No, Mother. It has passed. I am ready for you to inflict new pain.” First Huntress replied smiling. They enjoyed the momentary stillness contemplating what had occurred, and what must occur soon.

“So you trust this child?” First Huntress finally asked breaking the silence.

“I trust he is sincere. I trust that he reveals what he believes is true. He is steadfast and undeniably quite intelligent, but he juggles such a mighty puzzle daughter. I am wary of whether he is aware of all the pieces which fall without his knowledge.”

“I, as well, have met little ones of value,” First Huntress said, recalling Teresa the mender. “What do you know of the events which have unfolded so far?”

Tali recanted to First Huntress an abbreviated version of her understanding of what had transpired. First Huntress interjected an occasional clarification from her insights, but mostly remained mute. She had been in a poor position to garner much information. Together, they assembled their most accurate account of the chronology. They both concurred on the horrible misfortune the little ones suffered when they pierced the exiles' cavern, and the successful and conclusive retaliation by the little one soldiers. All exiles were dead. First Huntress informed Tali that she herself had executed the final triplet, but left out the abhorrence it prompted from Teresa. She did reveal the details of the Smiths' attack on the little one dwelling. The implications those actions suggested were quietly acknowledged, but undiscussed. Tali recognized First Huntress' description of the attack as the one whose aftermath Chris had shown. She also knew of the mighty bent Smith who defiantly straightened his back before death.

"He was First Hunter when I was a child. It was he who wrested it from your grandmother, ending her hunts. Daughter, he was utterly and impressively handsome and so so charming." Tali said fondly, "Even your grandmother begrudgingly acknowledged this. He had cracked her arm fiercely in his rise to First Hunter. While the menders attended her, he arrived at her side, kissed her lightly where he had laid the damaging blow, and thanked her for a magnificent contest. She growled at him because it was expected of her, but I was there daughter. She was nearly as content with her replacement as I was. He was keenly aware of his pleasing appearance too. We always jokingly questioned him, "Who thinks you are more attractive, we, the foolishly giddy daughters of the Tribe, or you yourself?" He never answered, but he obviously enjoyed the attention. How appropriate that he and his vanity were so close at his death." Tali trailed off momentarily, lost in the warmth of her memories of the cocky, jovial, and now deceased First Hunter she had declared would be her mate to her parents before even she was aware of what mating was. She hoped that she would at some time have a moment to sufficiently mourn that loss.

Tali continued with her reasoning for how and why she had acquired Chris' company. She described her escape through Cress' Door, and Chris' role in its success. As best she could, she detailed the specific workings of the wondrous tools she had seen. The descriptions were of their observed function, with an occasional implication of other uses if Tali felt sufficiently confident to volunteer. She was understandably ignorant of how the equipment did what it did. That was a matter for Smiths to resolve, and there were no more Smiths.

"Their tools can see through ice and rock. They can capture and project visions of events from their tiny boxes. I believe they can speak to one another through the boxes from vast distances. The child fitted my ears with tiny blue... Oh, I see you also wear them. They can fly incredibly fast across the sky and ride over ice on rails which float

their carts. These little ones have truly built marvels, First Huntress,” Tali informed, with unmasked admiration.

“I, too, have witnessed wonders. Their medicines are powerful, and their architecture strong. I have... explored... within their dwelling. Their rooms are neat, their hallways rigid and unyielding, and at its center; their commons is larger than the Tribes’ by several orders. I am also convinced their blue boxes have a means of detecting thoughts”, First Huntress added, “yet none of this seems sufficiently compelling to justify forging such a tight bond with the child. You must know the Final Push has begun, which must mean the Tribe is embarking on the Final Retreat. If we interfere, we could blunt the Push, which would severely jeopardize the Retreat’s chances of success. All on the mere word of a clever little one child? Dangerous gambles are not your nature, mother. What more do you need to share?”

Tali organized her thoughts before she replied. To speak with her daughter would not require such a disciplined approach, but she addressed the Advocate now, upon whose role the unfolding events pivoted. Tali knew where she needed to navigate but the course was treacherous and utterly counter to everything they had planned for. They would in fact be unraveling the very fabric they and their ancestors had dedicated so much effort to weaving. Should she fail to convince First Huntress on the merits of her course, she was certain, the Tribe would be extinguished. Her own opinions were inconsequential. Only First Huntress’ conclusions could sway events favorably. Cautiously, she plotted her conversation, “The child, Chris, is aware that our Smiths are but a ruse. He deduced this independently of any dialogue with me or any other of the Tribe. For reasons I still puzzle over, he appears to have shielded that knowledge from his kind but I cannot be certain. If he has confided or if some other little one with the means to react has also reached that conclusion then all of the Smith deaths would be meaningless... and there more.

He has revealed to me a weapon they possess which they drop from a flying vessel. A solitary boulder the size of a small orca leveled a mountain of rock, First Huntress. He claims they have hundreds of these abominations... I believe him,” Tali stated plainly. She allowed for that stark revelation to properly register. There was no need for further explanation.

“And they can see through ice and rock,” First Huntress replied, remembering the threat from the quiet elder, and understanding now why Tali had accepted an alliance. She had many questions, most were for the child, but the magnitude of the events in which they were immersed needed time to gestate. First Huntress could not address them until they were fully absorbed, so she diverted herself to a curiosity which had just struck her.

“Mother, the child stated that you tracked me through this pebble beacon you are about to remove. I do not understand how, but I accept it. Still, the flying vessel is quite fast. I can envision his arrival here, but not yours. You are fast mother, but you cannot outrun this flying vessel. How did you come to be here?”

“By ruining my ship’s interior,” Chris interrupted. He had arrived dragging a large cloth which he had splinted into a primitive sled. The canvas sagged, laden with materials First Huntress recognized.

“I would prefer a more direct reply, child,” First Huntress demanded.

Chris did not hesitate from his preparations as he responded. Between opening boxes unwrapping packages, he informed his apparent patient, “Your mother was too large to fit in my vessel’s living quarters, and the hold had too little air, and it was unbearably cold, even for her. So we merged both chambers by eliminating the flooring. My quarters’ heat and air supplies are taxed a bit, but the conditions were tolerable for all of us.”

Neither First Huntress, who was utterly ignorant, nor Tali, who should have been aware, made any indication that they understood what Chris had said. He tried again. “My vessel is divided into two principle decks. One is for my use, the other below it, is taller, and stores equipment. It does not require heat or ventilation, as I do, so to conserve energy, heat and air are not provided. Tali and I emptied the hold of all but its most essential contents. Then using the tool you destroyed and Tali’s strength, we punctured through a portion of the flooring of my deck creating a sufficiently large and livable enough compartment for her to travel with me in comfort.”

“Relative comfort, child,” Tali corrected, recalling the sharpness of the many corners she had slid into as the vessel shifted.

“Mother, you flew?” First Huntress’ astonished exclamation.

Tali did something she likely had not done since she was about the age she was chasing the handsome First Hunter around hoping to “mate.” She lowered her eyes, smiled shyly, and blushed.

“Yes, daughter, I flew... It was wondrous.”

“She’ll know soon enough how wondrous it feels, Tali,” Chris interjected. He had laid out the medical materials in a manner where he could quickly access them; his box was lit and pointed. He simply stated, “We need to do this now.”

Tali brandished her knife. First Huntress braced for the pain. Chris maneuvered his blue box over First Huntress' thigh until a familiar red dot appeared. He slid the box along First Huntress' thigh, allowing the dot to grow brighter until he found the apex of its intensity. Chris retrieved a stick from one of the countless pockets of his complicated outfit, removed a cap, and drew an outline around his box. At the center of the drawing, he drew a rough circle. Chris then moved down, and about a hand width away, right at the point where the buttocks formed a cheek, he drew a small slanted line.

"Tali, you will cut this deep," Chris touched a portion of Tali's knife, about two of her fingers in from the tip, "and for the full length of the line I drew. Withdraw the blade immediately and prepare to smother the opening with the materials I placed over there as soon as I pull out the pebble. First Huntress, you cannot move. I believe my arm is long enough that I can reach the pebble from the incision. The location of the cut avoids nerves and muscle. If you flinch, the consequences will be dire for both of us. You will likely lose the use of that leg for some time, and I will more likely have my arm torn off. Neither will be desirable on any occasion, but given that we are burdened with the responsibility of stopping a war, we cannot become incapacitated.

Do you both understand?"

"Proceed, child," Tali and First Huntress replied in unison.

Chris murmured a discontented complaint. The box collected enough of his words to relay how charmed he was to discover that terse brevity was apparently a family trait. From a tube, Chris squeezed out and coated the knife blade with a brown syrupy liquid, he explained was to prevent infection. He applied a generous coat to one arm, up to the shoulder. One hand holding his box, the other held aloft dripping a brown puddle on the snow by his feet, he readied himself to plunge on Tali's cue. Tali presented her knife against her daughter's skin. She pressed inward until blade touched the entire length of Chris' line.

"Hold, First Huntress," Tali declared.

"I hold, mother. Proceed."

Tali punched the hilt of the presented knife with the heel of her hand, ramming the blade through First Huntress' thick skin. She did not bleed much. The blade's position plugged the majority of the hole it just carved. Deftly gripping the handle, Tali arced the blade tip to the depth Chris specified, and ran the course of the line. She immediately withdrew her knife and dove for the medical supplies. Chris rushed his arm into the steadily bleeding slit, and guiding his progress with the blue box, pushed in up to his elbow with no result.

“Tali, leave the supplies for the moment and please come assist me,” he called out. Tali was nearly instantaneously at his side.

“Hold my box so that I may see the bright part. I need to reach deeper.” Chris handed the box to Tali. She tried as best she could to comply with his instructions, but the box was slippery with blood and designed for hands so much smaller than her own. She found she could maintain a grip by pressing it carefully between her thumb and index finger. Chris had been waiting impatiently for the image to proceed. He plunged further, submerging his upper arm now, half way up to his arm pit in the bloody opening. With the box as his guide, he twisted carefully, maneuvering his fingers to the mysterious pebble. “I’m touching it, First Huntress. It is not lodged, but it is quite slippery. I will need to grasp before I pull. Prepare for one final push,” Chris informed, grunting from the exertions. Tali could not see the box’s image, while she held it for Chris, but she understood by his twists and stretches that he was performing an extraction with his arm as an instrument. Suddenly, Chris’ arm was gone from sight. He experienced a moment of elation, and steadily, slid free of the wound.

“Tali, my box please, and seal the wound as we discussed.”

Tali placed the box as carefully as her impatience allowed near Chris and dove for the supplies. She retrieved the brown salve she was to administer first. It flowed generously, mingling with the pouring blood. What followed was a clear liquid Chris had warned to avoid touching at all costs. As instructed, she pinched the wound shut with one hand and poured the gelatinous material with her other. Throughout, First Huntress endured the violation stone-still, but this application caused a wince.

“Hold, daughter, I am no mender, but I am nearly done.” The liquid invaded the wound and the immediate surrounding area. Within moments of exposure to the air, the clarity was dulling. Tali completed her application and set her materials down. Already, the hemorrhaging had ceased. First Huntress’ mutilation was sealed completely. She turned her attention to Chris.

He was crimson. Enough blood had poured from First Huntress to completely coat him in red. He seemed oblivious to his state, focusing instead on the pebble in his hand. Ironically, it had been wiped clean of blood.

Chris glanced up to acknowledge Tali. “Is the sealant holding?” he asked.

“She does not bleed,” Tali replied.

“If we had the luxury, I would suggest she lay still for a while, but that is not something we can afford, Tali. We need to dispatch the beacon cleverly and soon.”

“Can we not simply destroy it?” First Huntress called out. Her voice was firm, but tight.

“Then we would be squandering a strong tactical advantage. Those who monitor your movements are only aware that the beacon has been stationary for a time. Given your detention and injuries, they would expect fatigue. The most prudent conclusion they would draw is that you are resting. If the signal ceases, not only will there be an immediate pounce on the last location, my involvement would also be known. We have so few assets in our favor that I am hesitant to discard such a large opportunity to exploit one. I would propose a deception instead.”

“What form will this deception take?” Tali asked.

“And will it involve any more mutilation?” First Huntress added as she rolled on her unslashed side.

“I would prefer to discuss it while we move; and no First Huntress, it will not involve more injury,” Chris replied, visibly appreciative of the humor.

First Huntress gingerly tested the bend of her thigh. The sealant yanked unyielding on her skin, but it held firm. Shifting to a crouch, she braved some weight on the leg and found it tight, dully sore, but otherwise bearable. First Huntress stood. At a particular angle, her thigh stabbed a shard of pain up her spine which nearly buckled her, but she held. Vertical and mobile, she tested a few steps and was relieved to have fluid movement as long as she avidly avoided the one painful position. She had run with much worse.

“Let us walk then,” she declared, preparing to descend from the barrier.

Tali and Chris did not move. They both stared at her. Chris in particular looked uneasy. He gestured pleadingly with Tali for assistance that did not seem to be forthcoming.

“You proposed haste, Chris. You concurred, Tali. What freezes you?” First Huntress asked, her wariness returning.

Chris gestured at Tali again, more frenetically this time, pointing a blood soaked hand at the pebble he had extracted. He was victorious. Tali approached her daughter kindly. First Huntress knew this look. She was about to receive information she did not want to know but would be unable to avoid. There was no imminent danger involved because Tali was suppressing a smile, but when whatever they had wrestled to reveal was explained, First Huntress was certain she would not be pleased.

“Our distances are vast, First Huntress. Smiths have spread to the fringes of our territory. We will never reach them all by foot. And to steer clear of this destructive course, all must be reached. We travel much more efficiently if we fly.”

First Huntress could not fathom the words she just heard. Had Tali, the traditionalist- stiff, proper, conventional adherent of all that the Tribe consecrated- proposed that they board a little one flying vessel and soar like birds? In fact, she had. She recalled that just before their talk was interrupted by the pebble’s extraction, Tali had revealed she had already flown. How could they expect her to simply accept their insane suggestion? How did these monstrosities even remain buoyant in the air? There had to be some other means. Desperate for an escape, but unwilling to admit she was utterly frightened, First Huntress groped for an argument,

“We cannot fly, Chris. The pebble is designed to reveal my travel. How would my sudden shift in position be explained? If destroying it alerts them to your involvement, would not my impossible running speed be equally suspicious?”

Chris approached First Huntress warily. The blood on his outfit was dripping downward, slowly enveloping him in red. Shooting an angry eye at Tali, he answered, “It would, if I flew us very fast, or very high. But that is not my intent, First Huntress... You are going to need to hear what I propose before you will consent to board aren’t you?” Chris asked, fully understanding the answer he would receive.

“Yes.”

“Just like your damned mother,” he muttered, and to his embarrassment, his frustratingly efficient box translated.

Tali busied herself rolling up the medical supplies in the sled Chris dragged from the vessel, allowing the cornered little one an exclusive audience with First Huntress, who awaited his words arms folded.

“Here is what I intend to do, First Huntress. I will tell you now... as I told Tali not long ago... Then you must board, and we must fly.”

First Huntress remained perceptibly, audibly silent.

Chris sighed and continued, “I can fly my ship low enough and slow enough to mimic your movements, First Huntress. I will navigate a course towards the ocean in much the same direction you were traveling. At a point near the shore, we will shatter the pebble and hastily depart.”

“But that was precisely where I wished to be,” First Huntress protested.

“True, but by revealing that you know of the pebble, the run transforms into a feint. We will seed a location with the pebble and as much of your blood as I can collect from my person.” Studying his completely blood drenched body, apparently for the first time, Chris added, “I expect we can arrange quite a convincing scene, do you not agree?”

“Convincing them that we have traveled to where I wanted to go is not an advantage, child.” First Huntress admitted there was cleverness in this idea, but she did not grasp the point, and without a point, she would not allow herself to be lifted from the ground. Bravely, but not quite as adamantly, she argued on, “What would we hope to gain, child?”

“Time, First Huntress. They will believe your course had been a deception, and since you will be nowhere near, and I remain invisible, they will backtrack your trajectory studying where you slipped free. We will exploit that time to stop your people from slaughtering themselves.”

Chris completed his proposal and awaited First Huntress’ reply with an air of impatient inevitability. He expected her to be reasonable. First Huntress felt caged again. She could not wriggle another complaint. How insane had the world become that the most reasonable course of action involved flying through the air, pretending to run, merely to drop a pebble in a puddle of her own blood so her pursuers, who could somehow detect the pebble’s location, would think she was going in precisely the opposite direction that she went? And all that, just so they could carve a small moment to attempt an even more desperate measure?

“Where would you have me sit, Chris?” the defeated Advocate of the Tribe sighed.

“Yes!” Chris exclaimed, instantly rushing towards the flying vessel. “Tali, I think we cleared out enough of the flooring for you both to sit. If not, then tear out what you need just as we did earlier. I have to initiate the preparations for piloting... And I need to wash up!” Chris’ instructions poured crisply into their ears through the blue chips, contrasting with his fading actual voice as he climbed a short stairway and disappeared within his vessel through an entrance around a side.

Tali wrapped a sympathetic arm around her daughter’s shoulder. “Come, First Huntress. There is much work to do. The little one is clever, but he sees with small eyes. He gravely overestimates how much space we have. We must widen the opening so we may brace on the turns. I could not before and was knocked around. I will not again be so rebounded in flight. And you are nursing a fresh cut whose depth I sadly know quite intimately. Their mending gel is impressive. I see it has taken a firm hold, but we should not jostle you needlessly.”

They boarded through the large gates at the vessel's stern, ducking almost to kneeling at the threshold. Within, an ugly hastily torn opening in the ceiling provided sufficient clearance to allow them both to stand. The vertical distance was ample enough, even after they fully extended; the ceiling was still half an arm's length above. The breadth was another matter. They were squeezed in the hole quite tightly. First Huntress oriented herself as she rose, noting that she stood in the hold, but ascended through the jagged floor/ceiling boundary into the child's living quarters. She and Tali juttied snugly into those quarters from their ribs upward. Their heads, shoulders, and elbows clashed as they maneuvered so they could both face towards the bow. The effort was futile. It simply could not be done in that narrow hole. The best they accomplished was to face each other, as if in an embrace, and turn to where their attentions wished.

"You flew like this?" First Huntress asked, sensing her earlier fears attempting to rise again.

"I shared your trepidation, First Huntress. It persisted until the actual event began. There are transparent openings along the sides. At the moment, they are shuttered, but upon what I believe he addresses as "take – off," they open for a view of the land most unprecedented. I found the experience... exhilarating" Tali confided, "but as you see, the gap we punctured is too snug. I could not brace for the dramatic banking this vessel undergoes. We must widen the opening significantly. I had been loosening a segment earlier. We should easily crack it free if we both press... here." Tali pointed to locations a forearm's length in front of them, jumped lightly, and landed as much of her weight as the confinement allowed firmly where she had indicated. She continued pressing the living quarters' floor with her elbow for a moment, reset, and jumped again. Each jump sagged the floor allowing her to scoot just a little further in, shifting and escalating the downward strength, adding more and more of her weight over where she applied force. The floor groaned louder with each press. First Huntress quickly caught on and matched her mother's rhythmic pounding until there was a lurch downward, and an entire section snapped cleanly free. Aggressive tugging at the edges dislodged the section completely, and they threw it out the door. They were now free to both face forward in relative comfort. Their shoulders did rub, but that was unadjustable. The compartment was only so wide. Tali appeared satisfied that their duties had been completed, and she sat on the floor. First Huntress remained standing and took in her first real inspection of a little one residence.

Quite a lot of the living area was still intact and visible, awash in the disquieting shadowless light she had known throughout her captivity. The floor was lined with an unrecognizable bristled fur, tinted with a soft pattern of blue and green dyes effectively resembling open ocean waves. There was even an odd white cap drawn in. The walls appeared to be a light wood grain, but that must be illusion. The demolition the vessel

interior recently endured had peeled some sections free. They were much too thin and broad to have been carved from such a delicate material. Likely, they were a fabric. Little ones were remarkable with fabrics. She recognized items which resembled beds and several stuffed chairs, arranged in a manner where the occupants would either engage one another or stare uncomfortably. The singular prominent decoration, a large dark oval table with a surface so reflective, she could clearly see the ceiling details bolted to a sturdy trunk rose from the floor. Eight chairs, also attached to the trunk extended like an array of arms. On the wall were large wide blue rectangles hanging above the shuttered openings Tali said would be windows. The blue was familiar. It appeared the same hue as the boxes. A closed doorway at the far end, hinted of other compartments beyond. Proportionally, this room was as large as the council house. Surely this was not all for the use of one child. Of course not. A vessel this complicated must require a crew. They are probably working on whatever it is they must work on in the hidden compartments further in. How peculiar that Tali had not mentioned them.

The blue rectangles burst into activity, followed immediately by Chris' preoccupied entrance from the far door. Most of the displays were undecipherable, but she recognized images of the shore, and other little one dwellings strewn between. Chris was incessantly tapping and swirling his hand about the glow of his blue box. He had washed and changed. His hair was wet, and he wore a blood-free version of the same garment. Or had he somehow removed the blood cleanly?

"How go the preparations with your crew, child?" First Huntress inquired.

Chris halted, looking up quickly as if suddenly discovering there were enormous guests in his quarters.

"I have no crew, First Huntress," Chris replied recovering his bearings. "I can navigate this vessel, or rather, I can instruct this vessel to navigate itself without assistance."

First Huntress was fatigued with being impressed by the little one marvels, so she muscled the conversation onward forcing herself to take that amazing revelation in stride, "As you see, we have expanded the opening to better suit our fit. Has our work posed a danger to the vessel?"

"No, First Huntress. As I mentioned to Tali, this ship is in two sections. There is a self-contained shell where the vital workings are housed within the walls themselves. The interior is but a hollow to be fitted as the need arises. Nothing inside the walls is essential. If the interior were but a husk, I could sit on the floor and still fly it with my box. I do not counsel such an extreme stripping down. The ride would be quite

uncomfortable, but it would be doable. We are nearly ready to depart. I will be seated there.” Chris pointed to one of the plush chairs. “Are you and Tali braced?”

“Tali believes so. Mother, is there any additional preparation you counsel?” First Huntress asked.

Tali did not answer. First Huntress ducked into the hold to find Tali laying on her side unconscious. A spark of panic tried to ignite within her, but First Huntress quickly quelled it. She rushed over and vigorously shook her mother by the shoulders.

“Kavra... Brave Kavra... Strong Kavra... I am... fine, my child... Merely resting my thoughts for a moment,” Tali slurred, before falling again out of consciousness.

“Mother!” First Huntress shouted, shaking again. Tali tried futilely to hold her eyes open. They were simply too heavy. A dance between First Huntress’ rustling and Tali’s consciousness ensued, interrupted finally when Chris came along side, glowing blue box extended. Much as Teresa the mender had done to her, he ran the box along Tali’s full length, then rushed back the way he had apparently descended because he reappeared in the living quarters. First Huntress rose to find him studying very detailed series of images of her mother on the wall’s blue rectangles. There were close ups of her face, her hands, her eyes, both open and shut. In some, as difficult as it was to absorb, her mother’s skeleton and her muscles, and even her heart and the blood flowing through her, rotated slowly for the inspection of the brilliant, magical child. Scribbles, obviously little one language, (or perhaps numbers?) burst and collapsed from every point in every picture. Chris paced around the centrally located table, never taking his eyes off the images. Finally, he stopped and turned to First Huntress.

“Let her sleep, First Huntress,” he informed, “My machines cannot be certain because you are so different from us, but their best evaluation is that she is exhausted, dehydrated, and slightly starved. Her heart races to keep the blood flowing to her brain, and her muscles cramp because they have no fuel to sustain them. Above all, she needs water. I have a bin which can serve as a cup.”

“We drink our fill with ice, child. I will obtain water for her.” First Huntress slid out of the rear gates before Chris could respond. She returned moments later with several large chunks of ice, which she set next to Tali. Breaking one into a wafer about the size of a tongue, First Huntress propped Tali against the hold wall, opened her mother’s mouth and inserted the wafer. Tali was not quite conscious, but she did respond to the ice. She softly chewed, swallowing whatever melted. First Huntress broke another wafer and repeated. As Tali chewed, First Huntress heard the gates close.

“Tend to her, First Huntress. We must move now, but the ruse thankfully requires a gentle motion. You will be fine down there,” Chris called down from the quarters and then disappeared from the lip of the opening. She heard a rumble, felt the vessel move, but she would trust that aspect of their duties to the child. For the moment, only Tali mattered to First Huntress. The ice seemed to be working, in addition perhaps to the short slumber she completed. Tali’s eyes were still closed, but she managed to speak. “I used to feed you ice like this when you fell sick, First Huntress.”

“So you remember the slight?” First Huntress remarked, introducing another wafer to her mother’s lips.

“Yes, First Huntress. My apologies,” Tali said, accepting the ice.

“Mother, when have you last eaten anything?” First Huntress asked, dismissing both the slight, and the need for an apology.

“My pack held three days rations, which I had stretched for six... It has been empty only a short while. I am weakened, but I am far from starving,” Tali reassured.

“And when was the last time you slept?” First Huntress persisted.

At that, Tali paused. She lifted her head, cupped First Huntress’ face in her hands, and answered, “The day before my daughter went missing.”

They held that moment for what First Huntress felt a lifetime, and for what she hoped would be a lifetime more, but Tali waived. Sleep again crushed in. First Huntress cradled Tali’s head, guiding her down to as comfortable a prone position as the debris riddled, partially demolished hold could offer.

“Rest now, Mother,” she assured Tali. “Your daughter is safe. And because I am yours, I am also strong.”

Tali slept.

First Huntress rose through the hole, leaving an exhausted mother of a First Huntress who was a First Huntress to recover. Chris was, as he had said, seated on one of the soft chairs. He appeared engrossed with the formalities of flying the vessel with a tiny blue box, but he asked, “How is she?”

“She sleeps. She will need nourishment when she awakes,” First Huntress answered.

“There are ample supplies in the hold. I will likely need to open them for her. The containers are designed for hands my size. The portions are obviously too small but there are many portions I can open. Rest assured, First Huntress, we will feed your mother...” and Chris added a bit irritated, “You know, I asked her if she was hungry when we boarded.”

“She refused?”

“She... postponed. She told me she would eat as soon as we found you. Guess she was right.”

First Huntress decided that she liked this child. He, like Teresa, seemed incapable of malice. Also like Teresa, he immersed himself utterly into his work. While he appeared still, bent forward in his seat concentrating over his blue box, First Huntress was familiar enough with the marvels of that machine to know the rectangles projected all around him were under his direction. They spun and changed constantly, displaying an enormous variety of information. One unchanging rectangle fixed an outline of Tali’s prone body at its center, with many constantly changing writings all around. The remaining were frenetic by comparison. Rapidly cycling, moving, and still images of little one dwellings, little one air machines, little one boats, little one soldiers, and little one life popped into existence, held for a time, only to be replaced with another. There were maps as well. First Huntress now noticed a correlation between the maps and the pictures. Each image that appeared was framed in a distinct color. Markings with the identical colors dotted the maps. Like the pictures, the dots popped in and out of prominence, but unlike the pictures, they did not vanish altogether, rather they dimmed to allow other dots to shine more dramatically by contrast. She was comfortable in concluding the dots corresponded to the pictures.

“You can juggle all this in your mind, child?” First Huntress inquired, obviously impressed.

Chris looked away from his box. “You understand the projections?”

“I understand you monitor many many things, and that they are mapped for you there.” First Huntress pointed to an array of three maps on the rectangles closest to Chris’ seat. “The images are revelations of the happenings at their matching dots. You use color to keep track.”

That seemed to impress Chris mightily. He pushed a few things on his box with a flourish of finality and set it on a low table near him. “First Huntress, does your... Tribe... have a written language?”

“We have writings, yes.”

“Do you yourself read them?” he asked further.

“All of the Tribe can interpret the writings child. It is an imperative for understanding our lore.”

“Good, good.... Tell me, can you read this?” Chris swung his hand over his box, and a rectangle near First Huntress lost its image of the shore in place of a spiral set of Tribe writings. The words were a series of brief descriptions of events, a chronology likely, given the expanding format written by various hands. They were short, terse, and quite profane.

“Where are these writings housed, child, and how did you come to them?”

“They were carved in a chamber near where the original attack by your exiles occurred. That is where your mother and I “met”,” Chris replied wincing almost imperceptibly. First Huntress did not comment. His introduction to Tali must not have been very pleasant. The child moved his arms again, and the image drained, but left the writings in crisp white letters on a matte blue backdrop. He continued, “Can you point and read any word?”

“I can read *every* word, child,” First Huntress answered, a bit indignantly.

“Pick any of them then, point with your hand and say the word aloud,” Chris asked. His voice was modulated, but he leaned forward. This was obviously very important and slightly exciting to him.

First Huntress was not quite certain what he meant, but she selected a random phrase written relatively neatly and pointed to it. As her finger moved across the rectangle, the writing it pointed to changed color from white to yellow. She isolated the phrase and said aloud, “We have received no food this season. The Tribe has forsaken us.”

Immediately, the phrase she spoke faded to a dark blue. It was still legible, but lacking the stark contrast of the white, the phrase did not draw attention. Other writings within the spiral also faded. First Huntress recognized that they were similar to what she read.

“Yes!” Chris was elated. “Do you see any numbers? Point to every number you can find and do exactly what you just did.”

First Huntress identified every number she could find. At each instance, once she found a digit, the remainder throughout the screen faded. She found the activity most entertaining. On a whim, without prompting from Chris, on the next number she found, she instead highlighted the entire section and read, “Three of our kind died today. They battled for a particular mushroom, where there were plenty more nearby. The others watched unbothered by the carnage. We ate the dead unrepentantly. Truly deserve our fate.”

A much larger portion of the writings faded. Chris jumped from his seat and moved closer to the precipice of the hole First Huntress jutted from. “Proceed with what you are doing as much as you can, First Huntress. If we can feed enough of your writings to my machine, you will be able to read our words.”

Before she could select another, all the screens flashed. Their images wiped away, replaced by a panoramic view of the land very near the shore. Below the rectangles a series of shutters rose, revealing a landscape much like that drawn on the rectangles.

“Ok, we can work on the translation in a bit. We’ve arrived.” Chris gestured downward with his hands, and First Huntress noted that the vessel descended in response. He hastily returned to his seat and pushed down on the armrests. The chair back grew in response, and two straps with shiny buckles appeared near the shoulder. Chris clipped them both to the lower portion of the chair and called out to First Huntress, “I need to land rather clumsily or the pattern of my ship’s machinery will be recognizable. I’m afraid it will be a pretty strong bounce. Secure Tali as best as you can, and let me know when I can proceed.”

First Huntress ducked down to the hold. Tali was still sleeping soundly. She went through a few possibilities but decided that the best protection she could afford her mother was to simply lie on top of her. Tali was on her back. First Huntress lay against her, wrapped her arms and legs tightly in a hug, and told Chris, “We are prepared, child. Land this vessel.”

First Huntress felt the wisp of free fall, then a crash lifted her off the floor. Since she was wrapped so tightly, Tali lifted as well. Her back struck the hold ceiling, stunting her rise, but her legs were underneath the hole, so they continued upward. Pivoting on the lip of the floor/ceiling oriented her so that she and Tali would be plummeting head first when gravity recaptured them. First Huntress quickly spread her legs out, grasping for wall with her feet. She twisted enough so she could retain Tali in one arm and brace her fall with the other. The combination worked. Her left foot and knee found a ledge in the living quarters floor, the right wedged on the wall, and her hand jarred their two bodies to a halt before either head impacted. First Huntress set Tali down as gently as her awkward position allowed, then untangled herself from the contorted inverted stance.

Tali had not awakened.

“The rear doors are opening. Meet me outside, First Huntress. We don’t need Tali for this. Let her sleep.” Chris spoke, assuming all was well, and he was gone.

She paused only to clear out some debris that had jostled close enough to her mother to scratch should she or the ship lurch, then exited crawling through the open rear.

First Huntress’ place sense was keen again. She was far from the Tribe, but not beyond the frontier. This ice was as familiar as a flat featureless terrain could be, but she was certain she had been here before. Early in her reign as First Huntress, in a symbolic gesture she now considered stupid youthful exuberance, she had decided to run the perimeter of the Tribe’s domain. She remembered this portion in particular because in the near distance, the glacier indented to a bay where long ago a monstrously large berg had calved free, creating a haven for sea life. The Tribe enjoyed an annual harvest of unusual diversity from there. Just before the Dark Season, massive numbers of gigantic squid migrated through on their journey to spawn. At the bay, tides and disorientation peeled some of them away where they became trapped in that deep bay. Dolphin, marlin, shark and orca invaded the gap to exploit the trapped animals; the Tribe invaded to exploit the invaders. Twelve of the strongest Fish Harvesters with twelve large carts and twelve large nets make the journey each year. They cast enough to fill the carts and return to the Tribe with a different, usually delicious surprise every time.

First Huntress noted the particular importance of their location. No place of significance to the Tribe was ever left to the whims of the surface. Near here, perhaps directly below, there would be a tunnel.

“First Huntress, meet me over here.” The chips in her ears projected Chris’ voice, but she did not immediately see him.

She scanned around and found Chris a good distance away and increasing the gap, waving at her with one hand, and dragging a sack with the other. Upon reaching him, he stopped, pulled an item out of his pocket, and handed it to her.

“I need you to crush this when we have properly set the ruse,” Chris instructed between pants, as First Huntress accepted the pebble beacon. She inspected the small device. It was oval, white, opaque, rounded, roughly the size of her smallest fingernail, but not as smooth as she was led to imagine. Creases hinted that it was composed of many smaller components. And small as it was, she was surprised by its size.

“This pebble is larger than the barrel of the weapon which fired it into me,” First Huntress commented in obvious query.

“The beacon enters as several small components, then self-assembles. What material it needs, it harvests from your bones and tissues,” Chris acknowledged.

“So this white material...”

“Around half of it is your own bone First Huntress... Chipped in minute amounts by tiny machines, then reassembled as a shell, and yes I know how bizarre it sounds. Nonetheless, that is how the device works. The beacon is hollow which should make it relatively easy to crush with your hands.”

Chris opened the bag and carefully removed the clothes which had been bloodied by the pebble’s removal... bloodied by her wound. First Huntress unconsciously rubbed her hip. The sealant’s hard surface reassured her. Chris flopped the garments on a snowy patch, swirling them as a brush to stain the ground as red as possible. He was rather effective, because there had been so much blood. He inspected his work, and appeared satisfied. The bloodied garments were returned to the bag.

“As soon as the beacon is shattered, there will be a quick scramble to this location. We need to be far from their sensors when they arrive, First Huntress. I have hidden my tracks by dragging the bag behind me. I can do the same on the return, but I am tired, and it consumes time we do not have. Can you carry me and the bag back to the ship? Tali seemed quite adept at it, and you are obviously stronger than her.”

First Huntress lifted the bag easily with one hand. In the other, she held the pebble.

“Where are we to fly then, child?” First Huntress asked.

“To the west...um... that way,” Chris pointed away from the bay, “Your people are gathering on the shore. We have outposts on some islands a short distance from them, and we have dispatched some very dangerous war ships to intercept any aggression you may attempt. It will not go well if you attack.”

“Very well. Let us depart then,” First Huntress concluded, and with hardly an effort, crushed the treacherous pebble her enemy had inserted within her. It emitted an audible whine as it collapsed. She dropped it in the midst of her own smeared blood, scooped Chris cleanly in her newly free hand, and returned to the ship. Their “take off” was as odd as the landing. Chris tilted the vessel so that it rested on its side, one wing still touching the ice. He maneuvered the vessel, using the wing as a plough to mask the indent he had made, and then cautiously tilted upwards. The moment they separated from the ground, they accelerated phenomenally.

Tali slept through this as well.

Had they remained, they would have witnessed the arrival of an army. Had they remained, they would have met with the quiet elder who inspected the terrain suspiciously and doubted that what he was looking at truly revealed what occurred. Having no respect for such intangibles as “gut” feelings, the quiet elder signaled his fighters to reboard their vessels and trace the path First Huntress had followed to determine where she had veered.

## Chapter 19: Elders

A second army assembled at the council house commons. Like the first, they were soon to march. Unlike the first, both their destination and their fate were unknown to them. Also, distinct from the first, where calm, fatalistic acceptance ruled the ambiance, here there was chaos. Here was the loud, sloppy, ugly angst of utter uncertainty. The gathering army hoped they were to embark on a destiny more favorable than the doomed Smiths. They had not been made aware of any specifics of what form that destiny would take. They trusted the Elders, and were humbled from complaint by the Smith sacrifices, but they just did not know.

The responsibility to organize this unsure, and not a little frightened mob, fell upon the Elders. Everyone remaining for the Final Retreat, which was *everyone* except the Smiths had to be accounted for, packed and sent down. Each family was rationed one large basket for food, and one for belongings. There were no exceptions. What remained would be irretrievable. Elders had anticipated some argument over the strict constraints of the rations, assigning two of their ranks to wander the crowd serving as mediators. Surprisingly, none but token disappointment manifested. Facing annihilation apparently put personal belongings into a trivial perspective. As families completed their tasks, laden with their possessions, they met in front of the council house. Elders at the doorway held a long scroll inventorying the Tribe's population, their members were marked as they entered with the clear understanding that once through the doors, no one could come back out for any reason. Again the Elders miscalculated the Tribe's behavior. They feared delays from lingering and assigned two of their more brusque members to push them on. But while many many tears poured at that doorway, few hesitated. Those who did were more than compensated by others in a rush to jump past the inevitable.

Within, other Elders channeled them to the rear tunnels and the descent to the Under Lake. There, when the path narrowed, a slight backup occurred, and another where the ice surrendered to rock, but steadily, in this way, the Tribe was methodically emptied.

A flurry of excitement occurred when those who were transporting their Smith kin to their battle arrived with their injured. An exception was made to exiting the council house. Several adolescents who did not have heavy loads were recruited to assist them. There was some confusion, but eventually, they all crossed the threshold, and soon, other than the few Elders, at the Tribe, only Miallo and his sons remained.

Miallo stood, back to the council house, facing the main tunnel entrance to the Tribe, arms folded, waiting. Such was their adoration for him that the sons sat near their beloved father, willing to accept any decision he made on their well-being. Elders had

repeatedly approached Miallo to move on. He had repeatedly acknowledged he would be with them shortly and had repeatedly not.

Now it was the Elders who were departing. Miallo realized he was no longer delaying. Soon he would be deciding whether to forgo the Final Retreat on the hope of Tali's return. His sons would not depart without him. They had indicated so with the same stubbornness he was demonstrating, so he lacked the moral authority to be upset. His decision to stay would likely be to his doom. If his adoring sons stayed, his decision would doom them as well. It was his reverence for this adulation that Miallo tapped to tear himself away from the expectation that somehow, Tali would arrive through that entryway.

He turned to his sons, hoisted the heavier food basket, and headed briskly to the council house.

"Why are you two delaying? Come. An adventure never before experienced awaits us beneath the land!" Miallo called out with all the bolster of his loud, happy voice. He would mourn his second love later. Now he would honor his first love by ensuring the safety of their sons. The boys scooped their possessions and followed. At the doorway, a relieved Elder marked their passage. He set the scroll aside with only two names unaccounted and joined the downward march.

The Tribe's trek to Under Lake was mostly uneventful- twisted ankle and some spilled baskets accounting for the most dramatic of problems. Two Elders greeted the Tribe at the lake shore. They divided the groups into two staging areas where a pair of Smiths stood atop a pair of most impressive compartments adorned with fantastical metal art carvings. Each compartment was in a shallow hole near the lake shore. Around the hole were large metal bells with handles along the bell lip. Off to one side, apparently not intended for use, a third compartment of equal splendor sat untended. The Smiths were consulting privately as the Tribe numbers bloated. Their dialogue must have reached a satisfactory conclusion because they jumped down into the holes, and wielding picks, they set on the walls holding the lake waters at bay.

Steadily, expertly, they picked the wall apart, attacking, not bluntly, but specifically, purposefully, and in less time than the Tribe thought was possible, two deep wedges were cut into the separation whose peaks nearly touched the lake. The Smiths exited the holes, nodded to one another, and in unison, smashed their picks one final time crashing the heads into the wedge apex, which yielded easily. Arcs of vertically splashing water traced the pick's path as they completed their swing.

The breeched, expertly weakened walls surrendered quickly to the water, and where earlier, a hole with two very elegant compartments stood, now there was only muddy gray water which was gurgling rather violently.

“My friends, these carriages will transport you to safety. There are shelves along the sides for your belongings. You will load them with these bells. Open the lid, insert what you need, close and invert it, then carry it below. Each carriage may hold thirty of you. The journey to the Final Retreat will commence as soon as the first thirty are secured.”

“How are we to enter?” a man holding his son asked.

“The belly is open,” a Smith responded.

“But it is submerged. How are we to reach it?” protested another man who wore the tunic and sedentary mannerisms of a librarian.

“Why you hold your breath!” laughed a Smith, and plunged beneath the turbulent surface. The mud was settling, so onlookers watched him slide underneath and disappear within the carriage.

There was an uneasy quiet for an uncomfortably long time, then the man holding his infant son stepped up. His mate was carrying a basket of food. Their two daughters shared the burden of the basket of possessions. They inverted and opened two bells, filled them with the contents of their lives, discarded the baskets, sealed the bells, and entered the waters. The father placed his hand over his son’s mouth and nose, took a breath himself, and submerged. The daughters followed with the bell, then the mate. A short time later, the father reappeared with the empty bells, handed them up to the waiting hands of a Smith, and disappeared again, presumably joining his family.

And so it began. Others followed the initiative, added their ranks to the carriages until a distinct clanging sound was heard. The Smith on the surface halted the boarding.

“Stay, my friends. Our first load prepares to depart. We will make haste, and soon return for the rest of you.” he announced, and jumped on the carriage roof. He tapped the metal five times with his pick and jumped back to solid ground.

The carriage lurched forward. It moved directly out into the clear waters of the lake. At first the carriage was hidden behind a mound of bursting surface foam churning from all sides, but as it progressed, the lake deepened, and the churning diminished to a curtain of bubbles. The Tribe watched it progress deeper and deeper until the only evidence was the bubbles on the surface and the trail of unwinding flexible pipe it left as the giant spools unwound. Nearby, the second staging area had sent out its carriage. Two

sets of bubbles progressed across the narrow diameter of the lake heading directly to Hope Cascades.

Within the carriage, the space was snug, but not confining. A series of oil lamps provided light, which the shiny yellow metal multiplied. The shelves were full, but not overflowing. Every seat was taken. A Smith sat at the helm directing every adult and most children tall enough to stand in the water and push hard against the beams strewn across the width. Earlier, after they had awoken from their brief, but gloriously refreshing nap, the Four Smiths had patched the third carriage as best as their limited time allowed. More importantly, one had suggested that navigating merely on the sense that they follow the current was inefficient. On his suggestion, they had coaxed a bladder attached to a long rope over the falls. It rested waterlogged but comfortably on the lake bottom creating an unbroken line from the shore to the falls and likely far beyond. He could see their course by looking in the water directly below his feet. They moved steadily forward, until the ground perceptibly dipped indicating they had reached the falls. The Smith ordered all but the front four adults to cease their pushing and return to their seats. When the ground tilted enough to push the carriage unassisted, the Smith yanked on a lever which locked the wheels.

“My friends, we are at the last precarious leg. All must be seated now. I will steer us to the end. You must keep your feet and your spirits high. Soon you will be at the Final Retreat.” And with a defiant roar, the Smith released the wheels. The carriage shook slightly and then continued its forward movement. Faster and faster the wheels turned. Water raced below their tucked in legs. The only indicator the Smith had that their path was true was the parallel flow of water rushing down to form the Under River. At a point where everyone, including the Smith, felt they were traveling faster than the water beneath them, the ground leveled out. They were no longer descending, but they still moved forward unaided. The carriage had reached the Under River.

Pushed gently, but irreversibly forward, the carriage moved on. The Smith, visibly relieved that they had uneventfully navigated the falls, busied himself checking the air tubes and the steering. He became so engrossed, he nearly missed his cue. Luckily a child idly commented, “Mother, look below. The sand is orange here.”

The Smith slammed the lever abruptly halting the carriage. One unprepared woman fell into the water. She rose quickly about to leap back to her seat, but she halted.

“Smith, the water is still here... and it is warm.”

The Smith acknowledged her observation, and dropped into the water himself. He took a deep breath and ducked below the carriage, knowing his next breath would be air of the Final Retreat.

## Chapter 20: The Second Sea Battle

First Huntress was well into completing the translation of the writings she was now clearly certain came from the Cave of Warning. She had suspected as much after a few passages and lost all doubt when she read the entry where Cress' lover rued the death she had inflicted. Surprisingly, the history extended well before that. Had exiles volunteered their memories? Had those who scrawled simply fabricated events? She thought the writings too unimpressive to be insincere. They complained mostly of long periods with no food, and of injustice, and they chronicled deaths. No exile ever died peacefully, and since First Huntress had violently extinguished their history, no exile ever will.

Chris joined her, quite satisfied with her progress.

"First Huntress, thank you. This is magnificent," he exclaimed.

"Why does this interest you so, child?" she asked. To her, this had been an interesting, but purposeless diversion as they traveled.

"Because now I can do this," Chris answered. With a swing of his hand, he replaced the writings with the image of Tali. As before, it was a rotating impression of her full body in the exact prone position of her mother, but to First Huntress' astonishment, the little one scribble had been replaced with Tribe words. Not all of them were understandable, but she could read. "Heart Rate:10...", "Breathing: 5...", "Blood sugar: 53...", "Blood Pressure 103/59..."

"My machines have trouble with the units you use so you may not get much out of that. How about this?" Chris spread his arms and the wall of rectangles in front of her responded by filling with a mosaic of images, some real, many illustrations. They depicted little ones standing side by side with others whose height, while not all of the Tribe's, were significantly greater than their own. Beside each image was a short descriptive passage. First Huntress was able to discern enough of the content to recognize that they stood as comrades.

"We call you giants," Chris stated. "It is a word from our children's stories. We have legends where you are villainous scoundrels threatening to "grind our bones to make your bread", but mostly you are regarded as powerful and friendly. The green one towering over a field is used to identify a particular farmer's food. The hairy one over

there is called Hagrid. He is the protectorate of a very popular and much beloved fictional character named Harry Potter.”

“He appears real,” First Huntress commented.

“It is trickery with our machines,” Chris replied plainly. “These are real.” A gesture rearranged a handful of images to the forefront. “You do not recognize our units, but you know numbers, so I will use a simple system we call a “foot.” I am a little more than half way between 5 and 6 feet. This is a well-known person we call Shaq. He is seven feet. Our tallest person grew to be nine feet. His name was Robert Wadlow. He lived many years ago and has long ago deceased.”

“How many feet am I, child?” First Huntress asked.

“My apologies, First Huntress. You are fifteen feet. Clearly you are a particularly striking member of your kind, but even an ordinary child of your tribe would dwarf our most ambitious height. And you differ from our tallest in another sense. While you were injured, we studied your bones. They were most revelatory. You are apparently much older than you appear, as were the exiles we encountered. I have not been in contact with my kind because I do not wish to be discovered yet, so I do not have access to the examinations of the giants who attacked us, but I feel I hold sufficient evidence to, with confidence say that compared to us, you all age very very slowly. By contrast, our tallest do not have very long lives, even by our standards.”

“Just how much longer are you implying?” First Huntress asked.

“We use a unit called a “year.” As best as I can translate, you divide your time into two seasons—dark and light. Two of your seasons correspond to one of our years. We estimated that you are nearly one hundred seasons old. Is that right First Huntress?”

“Ninety-seven.”

“And how old is Tali?”

“She has seen one hundred ninety-four seasons.”

“The expectation of a full healthy life in our kind is not quite one hundred years. That would be two hundred of your seasons. You have lived nearly half that. Tali is amazingly strong and fit. She has lived the full span of our lifetime. Some exile bodies aged well past two hundred of your seasons, and they were malnourished and unkempt. Your Tribe lives an amazingly long time, First Huntress. ”

“Your knowledge is interesting, child. And I confess I had been intimidated by the barrage of imagery these rectangles flush out. I am grateful that I can understand some of it better, but again I ask, why is the diversion with our words I toyed with so significant?”

“First Huntress, I have given you access to our libraries. Within them is the collected history and knowledge of our entire kind. We record everything, probably because our life spans are so brief. We yearn for the immortality you own, but our bodies just will not push reliably beyond two hundred seasons. We have exceptions, but they are rare. You may speak with the machine to obtain any information you desire, or you may use your hands as you have done to manipulate the documents on the screens around you. When the document appears, it will automatically be translated to your script. Let me show you...,” Chris accessed a round map on a distant rectangle and dragged closer by pointing to it, forming a pinching gesture with his fingers and simply sliding his hand over.

“This is the region of the world where we were able to find a root for your language. You will not be surprised to discover it too is a very cold place. We call it Scandinavia. You may learn of it by pointing to the map.”

“Where is it relative to where we are now?” First Huntress asked.

Chris marked “Scandinavia.” The map, which turned out to be a sphere, rotated. A second mark nearly at the opposite end appeared, and then a line grew connecting them. He studied the line incredulously.

“Does your history explain how you managed to travel the length of the world? And given your incredibly long age, do you have an explanation for how you accomplished this undetected by us?” Chris asked, with not a little humor in his question.

“It does. You will not like what it suggests.”

“I thought not. Look, we have a little time. I plotted a very circuitous route to avoid detection, but we have weaved nearly to our destination. When we arrive, the time for such leisure will sadly end, perhaps indefinitely if we fail. Take a moment to learn a little of us. I will return when it is time for action.”

Chris left First Huntress with the rectangles. She gingerly pressed her finger in the air towards the “Scandinavia” region. A document opened in a rectangle which described a place that was cold and bleak for one season, then unbelievably colorful and warm in another. There were little ones everywhere in images both in the cold and the warmth. They smiled and played. They toiled in labors she could not begin to

comprehend. The document mentioned that Scandinavia was divided into several sections. Each had its own distinct illegible name. She read little, preferring to brush through the images.

A thought occurred to First Huntress. She looked for Chris, who appeared engrossed with whatever calculations he was endeavoring. He seemed preoccupied, but she had known his attention was deceptively acute. Still, had he not given her the invitation to explore? First Huntress was unsure how to go about doing what she wanted, but there was no harm in attempting. Timidly she spoke aloud.

“Show me war.”

The rectangles cluttered with images and chronicles depicting an eternity of conflicts of infinite diversity. There were battles in the air, on water, and on the ground—so much war on the ground. She found images, moving and still, of soldiers wielding weaponry she recognized—spears, bows and arrows, swords, daggers. She found weapons she could not begin to guess on. Wars fought with dense armored vehicles and on the backs of thin legged running beasts, and even an attack with small tusked mammoths. The outfits of war were as exotic and colorful as the people who waged it. There seemed to be no recurring theme to their actions, other than complete commitment to the destruction of whoever they were waging war against at the moment. She did notice that in many instances there were banners associated with a particular army. Each proudly wielded its banner, at times even into battle, a guaranteed death for whoever was unlucky enough to carry it rather than a weapon. There was so much to absorb, she could not be certain but it appeared that sometimes the banners were opposed to one another, and sometimes they were together. Did they alternatively fight their allies and enemies? Did they oscillate their relationships so much that they needed banners to keep track of who they were waging war on? She could not fathom how much carnage these wars had created. She could not begin to think how much waste, how much suffering, how much needless death.

It sickened her.

“I told you we are good at that,” Chris’ voice broke through her trance.

“We have arrived, First Huntress. Let us see if we can prevent today from adding to that collage shall we?”

Chris wiped the war images away, and replaced them with a wide view of the shore spanning the array of rectangles. Smiths lined a long stretch of ice cliff base, poised for battle. They too wore armor and carried the same weapons as the dead from the attack earlier. The image expanded and angled up to include an armada of little one vessels

waiting for them in the waters, ensuring that they too would soon die... needlessly, in pain... in a slaughter.

“They have been standing there for some time, but I think they are nearly prepared to attack. Look over here, First Huntress.” Chris expanded a section of the cliff base. A cave teemed with activity. Smiths were constantly entering. A few came out as well, but the flow was definitely inward. And within the cave, the unmistakable glow of a forge lit up the darkened ice.

“I have tapped into the images recorded by other ships from earlier,” Chris said as the rectangles split in two across the wall. Above was the current image. First Huntress knew this because in one corner, the word “current” was prominent in her language below what was likely the little one writing. Underneath, and aligned to be the same portion of the coast as the first image, was a much more populous gathering of Smiths. Chris was correct. The numbers were dwindling because they were entering the cave.

“What is in the cave, First Huntress?” Chris asked.

“Boats,” Tali replied, joining them. She appeared to be well-rested. Chris pointed to a metal container which would have held Chris himself easily, but served nicely as a modest bowl set near the wall.

“That is food, Tali. First Huntress and I cannot accomplish much without your assistance, and you cannot accomplish anything if you starve. Please eat. It is a porridge made of many foodstuffs. All of it individually is quite tasty. I cannot vouch for the cumulative result, but it will nourish you.”

Tali grasped the improvised bowl with two hands and unhesitantly devoured it.

“It was bland and unimpressive, child,” Tali said, setting her empty container down, “but it will sit well. Again, I thank you, Chris.”

Chris bowed slightly, acknowledging the gratitude. “Please provide counsel, First Huntress. Where would you like me to send you?” he asked.

“We must halt the boats before they exit the cave,” First Huntress answered, a look of worry suddenly expanding on her.

“She is right, child. Go there immediately,” Tali added.

Chris danced his instructions with one hand waving through the air, and the other tapping his box with his thumb. The vessel perceptibly accelerated, and the images across the rectangle centered on the cave and began steadily expanding.

“I can set this ship down right across the cave entrance-,” Chris started to say.

“NO!” Both women objected loudly.

“Do not allow this vessel to obstruct the entrance in any way. Maneuver to one side. Can you descend low enough for me to jump down?” First Huntress added quickly, realizing they had responded quite adamantly.

“I can... Yes,” Chris replied, slightly shaken at the intensity of the united warning.

“No matter. We have delayed too long,” Tali spoke. Pointing to the cave, she added, “They launch.”

The three watched. Both Chris and First Huntress strained to see what Tali’s rested eyes had detected. Only just before it erupted did they understand. The cave was darkening, but not from a dimming of the glow. A large object was rapidly approaching the mouth, impeding the inside light. And then it burst free.

A rounded metal cylinder with fins in much the same places as an orca shot into the air. It followed a smooth arch, splashed cleanly in the water, and disappeared beneath the surface. Trailing it was a long, flexible pipe capped with a sphere which itself was capped with a cone at the end. The cylinder was nearly double the size of Chris’ vessel. It did not surface. Only the relatively small buoyant sphere, with the cone facing upwards was visible, only it revealed that the cylinder was moving rapidly in the direction of the little one ships.

Another metal cylinder shot out. Then another... and another.

“Are you serious?” Chris asked incredulously, while simultaneously halting his ship’s progress. “You have submarines made of gold, shaped like orcas?”

“They are of a Gift Stone composition. I do not know the material you speak of,” Tali replied.

“Ok, the language scrubbers have connected the terms,” Chris said, as he tapped on his box. “Why is it called a gift stone, Tali?”

“It fell from the sky near where we settled long ago. Until then, our metals were rusting and brittle. Gift Stone does not rust, and it is quite strong while remaining light. Our Smiths forge all our metals from it.”

“Then it cannot be gold,” Chris corrected himself. “Gold doesn’t oxidize, but it is incredibly dense and not all that strong. How many boats are there?”

“We have possibly twenty or more. Each holds four. They are for harvesting fish,” First Huntress informed.

“You all go fishing by launching giant “gold-like metal from space” submarines shaped like orcas out of an ice cliff?”

“No, child,” Tali explained as calmly as she could given the impending trouble she was watching. “Our fish harvesters typically submerge from a lagoon within the ice and travel in pairs or trios down a subterranean river to the open water. They only venture out in large numbers when there is a spawning, and that too initiates from the lagoon. This launch is brazen, but unprecedented. That opening has just recently been created. Its purpose is partially to project the component of “bravado” our lore suggests you recognize as a clear indication of war, but is mostly because that is where we store our boats. The need for stealth is no longer necessary, so we have forgone the meandering subterranean river for the most direct route to the waters... Can we fly to them now?”

“And do what, Tali? They are beneath the waves,” Chris responded, but he was still not done questioning. “What powers them?”

“They pump a center shaft with their legs. It feeds a propeller and a vacuum which sucks air down to them through the dragging cones. Their arms are free to steer, cast nets, and fling spears... The launches have ceased. We are too late to douse the carnage. All the boats are away.”

“No we are not. There’s still time. They do not appear to be moving very fast.”

“In harvesting fish, speed is unimportant. Tactic is all.”

“That also holds for stopping a war. What do you think they are going to do?” Chris asked. He began pacing.

“They will maneuver to any vessel they can find and board.”

“So the submarines themselves do not have any weaponry?” Chris asked, begging for clarification.

“There are spears which can be thrust from the inside, but they are on the broadsides and defensive. Errant sharks sometimes overstep their roles as middle food. If they come after our harvest, they need repelling. If they persist, they join the harvest themselves,” First Huntress answered.

“And the nets,” Tali added.

“A large net capable of wrapping a school of cold food is tucked underneath the bow of each boat. Within, a pipe slowly pushes air into a tight compartment. When in position, a lever floods the air into shafts that fling darts into the water, dragging the net behind them.”

“You have giant “gold-like metal from space” submarines shaped like orcas that shoot nets from their mouths?” Chris could not help but be incredulously amused.

“How well can the occupants see where they go?” Chris pressed. An idea was growing and needed nurturing.

“Reasonably so, given the darkness of the waters. There are modest portals similar to the ones on your vessel on all sides and two large ones to the bow. We mine a gem we polish for use as you do this transparent skin.” First Huntress pointed to the vessel window.

“And are they in a formation? If we intercept and divert one, will the others follow?” Chris continued.

“No, child,” First Huntress replied. “Had the boats been piloted by harvesters, perhaps some loose arrangement could have been inferred. But these are Smiths. They are feeble from age and the crushing heat of the Forge. It is doubtful that any of them have ever been in a boat before this. I do not expect they have much more control of their direction than a seal pup caught in a wave. They pedal outward, likely exhausted already.”

Chris danced his fingers frenetically at a rectangle, and an image of one boat appeared, slowly rotating. “How do they board these... boats?” Chris persisted.

“The dorsal serves as a gate. They are submerged now because water has been flooded throughout the belly. If purged, they are sufficiently buoyant to float on the surface.”

“And how long is the air pipe?”

“Not long- three, perhaps four body lengths.”

Chris replayed the image of the boat launches rapidly.

“I counted twenty two.”

“As did I,” Tali confirmed.

“If I can get you to them, First Huntress, can you communicate with the boats?”

“I believe I can. I have been to the lagoon many times. Harvesters often speak with the submerged boats through the cone.”

“OK, then,” Chris said elated. The entire vessel lurched with acceleration on his command. “Tali, remember that long rope we unfastened from the vehicle we abandoned? Attach it to your pack and attach your pack as securely as you can to First Huntress. I am going to open the rear doors and fly us over a boat. Find a means of scooping up the cone.”

Tali sprang into action. She dropped beneath the floor and scrambled to the bow of the hold. A metal braided rope with a loop hung loosely from a spool. It appeared too thin for significant weight to be thrust upon it, but she remembered that it was originally latched to a vehicle Chris had abandoned to clear space for her. She regarded that First Huntress was nowhere near the mass of that sturdy metal transport... at least, she hoped. The spool turned freely at her tug. Tali threaded the rope to the portion of the vessel where she could stand again. First Huntress awaited. She had fastened Tali’s pack on tightly. Tali worked the rope between the shoulder blade straps and tied the loop in on itself.

The rear was wide open. Below them was sea. As promised, Chris had hovered his flying vessel over a boat. First Huntress could make out the submerged, darkened outline leading the cone. They were less than two body lengths above the water. Both searched the hold and the living quarters for a means of reaching the cone, but came up with nothing.

“How much rope do I have, child?” First Huntress asked Chris.

“It is a very long spool, First Huntress. I would say about twenty of your body lengths... WAIT!” Chris cried out realizing too late why First Huntress had asked.

First Huntress leapt cleanly from the gate, knifed into a dive, and landed in the water between the cone and the boat. Her reflexes adjusted for the drag by the tow rope, arching expertly to break the surface within reach of the cone. Without hesitating, she grabbed the cone and yelled down,

“As First Huntress, Advocate for the Tribe, I speak to you, Smiths. I say hold! Surface immediately and turn back. Return to the shore. Return to the Tribe. We are NOT at War.”

First Huntress pressed the cone to her ear. She could hear sounds, but could not make out detail over the splashing waters and the noise from the vessel above. She was

about to repeat her commands when the cone pipe surprised her by touching her foot. She understood. The pipe was no longer taut from dragging behind. The Smiths had heard! They have stopped, and now, she noticed as the dark shape below grew. They were responding.

Looking up to the flying vessel, First Huntress saw Tali gazing down from the wide open gates. She was about to ask to be pulled up when an inspiration came to her.

“Mother, Chris, can you hear my voice?”

“Yes, First Huntress the ear pieces can also pick up sound,” came Chris’ reply.

“Good. Drag me to the next boat!” First Huntress commanded. Within a moment, she felt a tug and was spun around. Chris was complying with her instructions, but since she was anchored from behind, the drag twisted her. First Huntress reached for the rope with one hand and jerked herself forward. By holding the rope’s tension, she could keep her perspective in the direction she headed. They reached the next boat quickly. First Huntress repeated her commands, and they moved on. In this manner, fourteen boats were turned back. Their gleaming sleek forms had breeched and now skimmed along the surface moving much faster than when they were below, retracing their paths to the shore. Already the first was beached, and Smiths were debarking. Fourteen boats were saved. Their Smith crew would live this day.

Eight were not.

The first Smiths to reach a little one ship were the most effective. Their boat collided unchallenged on its target, selected solely because it was the closest to where they had launched. Likely the little one crews were baffled at the pageantry playing out in front of them. They were unsure whether this too would turn around, and to their credit and doom they withheld their aggression until they were certain. In the hesitation, Smiths fired a net directly into the propellers, rendering them motionless. They maneuvered broadside to the ship, which was slightly longer than them, affixing themselves permanently to their hull by hammering their boats’ defensive spears through the soft little one metal. And they surfaced. Their rising boat violently listed the impaled little one ship. Its crew was wrenched free of their positions, and they slid into the cold restless sea. Those who clung to the decks fared the worst, for in the waters survivors could tread. On the fatally angled decks, there was nothing to do but dangle awaiting their executioners.

A dorsal swung free, and a bent, exhausted crew of Smiths crawled unsteadily out to dispatch their adversaries. They were in obvious pain. Pedaling so far out would have been a moderately strenuous chore for even seasoned harvesters. To the sedentary Smith, it was an endurance far beyond their limits. All lacked the energy to navigate the narrow

opening, accepting the clumsy indignity of assistance from hands yanking above and shoving below. Eventually, while to their ignorance, First Huntress frantically diverted their comrades, these Smiths tried to gain their bearings in the unpredictable bobbing, but found just standing too challenging. One by one, they lost their footing and slid into the valley created at the intersection of the two fused craft. Their number diminished by two. One continued his slide into the sea and was lost. For another, a poor landing collapsed an already weakened knee on the jutting spear shaft, then obliterated its use altogether as the others fell on it, adding their weights to the mush which once held bone. As a mercy, a Smith ended the broken kneed Smith's torment. Using the little one hull as support, the two remaining eventually righted themselves and assessed their positions. They were weaponless, armorless, even more exhausted, and not a little nauseous. Their transportation was lodged permanently. They had spent the entire gamut of their resources. Really, they were very surprised they had reached this point at all. But, they looked around and saw with satisfaction that other Smiths had achieved similar success. A second ship listed uselessly, and Smiths clearly crowned a third. The Final Push was a success. The two decided it was time to finish their task. The stronger Smith cupped her hands and allowed herself to be a stepladder for the other. He climbed to the lip and found his footing on what was the side of a compartment.

Most of the twenty or so little one crew were in the water. They were swimming desperately for smaller craft that had been released from pulleys for just such an emergency. The Hoisted Smith found that quite clever and relayed his observation to the Stepladder Smith. She agreed, and added that if only they had designed something similar on the boats, they could have continued the delightful pedaling they had so enjoyed until now. They both laughed heartily at that.

Clinging little ones were within easy reach. All the Hoisted Smith need do was pull them up, snap their tiny necks, and await the retaliation of the remaining ships. The day would end soon, and their infernal soreness would cease. He leaned down reaching for the closest, a female with one foot on a rail, and another on a pipe. She was precariously hanging, yet she held onto a metal object in her other hand, preferring it to a better hold on her position. He found that mildly interesting as he reached for her, then heard pops as the tip of the object flashed several times, and he felt a stinging prick on his face just above his brow. Blood poured into his eye, from the pricks.

How impressive. This dangling, trapped, helpless little one had injured him. They truly were impressive creatures. And then with a rush, his entire perspective transformed. The Hoisted Smith felt a blunt blow to his side, and his feet no longer touched anything but air. He was flying through the sky at an impossibly rapid rate, and he was being spoken to. The voice was familiar, but he could not orient himself. It was female: she was behind him. He looked down to where he felt the hit and discovered a white, thick

muscled arm wrapped around his waist. Someone was holding him... Carrying him through the air! He concentrated, and the words he heard clarified.

“Hold, Smith!”

“First Huntress?” the Hoisted Smith questioned utterly confused.

“Yes, Smith. The Advocate for the Tribe cries Hold! We are NOT at war. I am going to have to hurl you at another now. When you splash, the shore will not be far. Swim. I understand you are tired, but you need not die this day. If you reach the shore, recover your strength and return to the Tribe. Tell the others. Do you understand, Smith?”

“No, I do not, First Huntress, but I will do as you sayyyyyyy!” The Hoisted Smith felt pressure on his abdomen, then a release. He flew backwards through the sky untethered. He saw First Huntress complete the swing hanging from a rope extended from the rear of a flying vessel, then his buttocks hit a soft target. A deep protesting grunt escaped behind him, and he plummeted to the water entangled in a Smith he had known was in an adjacent boat. They landed hard in the water and came up coughing frantically.

The Hoisted Smith managed to explain to the Smith he just tackled what had occurred. She was skeptical, but luckily First Huntress was still visible in flying through the sky heading for the shore. The Hoisted and Tackled Smiths paddled to shore enough that their feet touched the shallows before exhaustion pulled them under. They trudged the remainder of the distance and collapsed on the rocky beach. Their participation in the Final Push unceremoniously ended. They would sleep for a long time and awake alone. No Smith would be present, nor would any little one vessel. Only they two would remain. Confused, they would help each other up and with no other option, they would plod back to the Tribe, ignorant of what had transpired.

While they slept, Smiths died. First Huntress relentlessly toiled from boat to boat snuffing aggressions. She had reached the frontlines and successfully ended hostilities on two vessels. Their attacks were stunted before they killed, and she diverted the surviving Smiths back to the Tribe. She was approaching a third where all four Smiths had deboarded and were working their way to the little one ship, which unknown to them was abandoned. Having seen the tactic their enemy employed, the entire crew had quickly escaped on their emergency boats as soon as their vessel was impaled. They were furiously paddling to rescue those from other vessels in the cold water.

First Huntress narrowly escaped her own demise. Four muffled bangs from the direction of an approaching little one ship transformed into four fatal impacts. The blows came hard and concentrated in a nearly perfectly round circle on each of the four immediately dead Smiths. The first was quick. His head just disappeared, leaving a

perfect arc at the neck. The second was struck sufficiently fast enough where she was able to observe and even put her hand in the symmetrical hole where her chest had been before collapsing. The third and fourth suffered because their injuries were less vital at first. A hip and part of a leg vanished, as did the entire shoulder of the other. All four toppled into the water, whether lifeless or not on impact, they were soon identically dead. More of the familiar muffled bangs, produced steam where the Smith bodies once floated on the surface of the sea.

In the distance, much like here, the remaining Smiths were eliminated and as quickly as it had begun it was over. First Huntress hung breathless from the rope she had put so much trust in.

“They are gone, First Huntress,” Chris’ voice said, “but take solace. From my count, you saved sixteen of the twenty two. And I do not think there are any fatalities on the other side. Hold on while I reel you in.”

First Huntress felt an upward tug, and the distance to Chris’ vessel diminished. She again twisted so she faced where she traveled. As soon as the hold platform was in view, she grabbed it with both hands and pulled herself in. That was the last of her strength. She crumpled to the floor, gasping heavily.

The rear doors closed while Tali removed the pack which had held First Huntress so well. She noted that there was a tear on one strap that was nearly cleanly cut through. The pack had served its purpose well, but it was spent. She tossed it aside still attached to the rope. Tali examined the wound she had sliced into her daughter’s thigh. She was relieved to see the seal had held. She checked her for new injuries and found chaffing at both armpits, and some friction burns on her hands from the rope, but otherwise First Huntress was on the exterior unhurt. Inside, after what she just did, there cannot be much left.

“Um..., First Huntress?” Chris’ voice called.

“She sleeps, Chris. I counsel allowing that, as you did for me,” Tali replied.

“Yeah... I would like that very much, Tali... But we are not quite finished yet.”

Tali popped up through the hole to the living quarters to see what the next crisis would be, immediately recognizing the danger. Little one ships were moving to the shore. They were targeting the Smiths who remained. They had not been attacked yet, but there were many many ships approaching, and these encounters had not historically ended well.

“Did not all those returning boats tell them there was no war? Why don’t they go back?” Chris complained, agitated that after all they had done, the day may still end bloodied.

“The shore is wide, child. The boats return to a narrow place, not likely visible by many. We do not communicate with machines. We rely on our voice. The message to return was to be carried across the ranks like a chain. It can only carry as far as the weakest. That must have occurred there.” Tali pointed to a place near the cave. She was right. The Smiths near the cave where the boats returned were gone, as were all to the left, where apparently the voices carried enough to reach the last. On the right, however, a long stretch of Smiths stood vigil waiting to die.

“Fly there, Chris. I will wake my daughter,” Tali instructed. Chris set the course, and Tali ducked to her daughter. Gently shaking her by a shoulder, First Huntress stirred well.

“Flying is exhausting, Mother. Small wonder more birds do not drop from the sky gasping for air,” She mused, rubbing her hands gingerly.

“We will be on solid ice soon enough, daughter.” Tali replied sympathetically, “but we have as yet not completed the retreat. A line of Smiths has not heard the message to return.”

“Then instruct the child to take me to them,” First Huntress said as she stood.

“He flies there already, as does the armada of little one ships with their weaponry engaged. I suspect they will strike from the water at some point. You cannot be among them when that occurs.”

“Then I will dangle from the rope again,” First Huntress replied.

“The pack is damaged, First Huntress,” Tali informed.

They let that fact settle for a moment.

First Huntress suddenly stood.

“Child, are we at the shore yet?” she asked with a tone that expected a quick answer.

“Yes, we are at the near edge by the first hold out,” Chris replied.

“Then open the doors again, I would recall them.”

“I overheard Tali, First Huntress. The pack is done. You cannot hang from the rope without it,” Chris protested.

“I do not need to hang, child. Open the doors, and I will climb on the roof. Fly me low and near enough for old ears to hear my commands and for old eyes to see who commands them. I will send them to retreat.”

“First Huntress, this ship is sleek, and the winds out there are brutal, let alone the swaying I am going to have to do as I steer-,”

“Child, I am a First Huntress. I have run through bobbing ice fields in a dark season storm. Do you truly believe your vessel is slicker than ice? Can you fathom a wind stronger than a storm that carves mountains? Our children play on more slippery ground. Open them, or prepare to hear them shatter.”

“Tali?” Chris implored.

“She is First Huntress, child. Open the doors,” Tali answered plainly.

Upon the first mechanical sound of the opening doors, First Huntress jumped on one of them, letting it carry her beyond the vessel’s ledge. She hoisted herself upward, and with a quick leap, landed squarely on the roof of the flying vessel. She moved out on the wing facing the shore, carefully shimmied around the great barrel which propelled them, and planted herself on the tip.

“First Huntress, when we begin to move, I will need to tilt my vessel to accommodate for your weight.”

“Will the tilt be down or up, child?” First Huntress asked, searching for holds.

“Up. Are you prepared?”

“Proceed.”

\* \* \*

On the shore, Smiths lost the excitement of the battle. They had lost the apprehension of death. They were content to complete their duties to the Tribe, but they rather hoped these duties would come soon. They were tired and bored, and their bowels yearned to release the grand meal they had enjoyed. Their armor was heavy and silly. Could they not just sit somewhere comfortable to await their death? Or at least with some company? Spread as they were, conversation was strained. For a time they tried, but yelling gossip and idle chatter was nearly as tiresome as the armor they had to wear. They

longed for something interesting to distract them, and perhaps someone close enough to talk of it.

Then First Huntress visited them mounted on the wing of a flying vessel. To them all she announced,

“Hold, Smiths. Leave your armor. It is useless against their weapons anyhow. Leave your swords. Leave your shields. Return to the Tribe and await me. We are not at war!”

Smiths gladly complied. They stripped off their ridiculous outfits, entered the seas to relieve themselves of the meal, and waved eagerly to the others beside them who were doing the same. Already, they had formulated guesses on what had occurred to divert the Final Push. They yearned to share their thoughts with their comrades. The journey back would take a while, but in good company, with a good topic for conjecture, that would not matter.

## Chapter 21: Lull

Tali watched as Chris engaged in an animated conversation with someone who was not in the vessel. She recognized the face on the image as that of the quiet elder she had originally mistaken for their true leader. She remembered how they arranged when she first saw them interact. They were familiar with one another, mutually respectful, but Chris was definitively the higher authority. There apparently were limits to where that authority deferred. In whatever matter they discussed, there was vehement disagreement, for which Chris was not on the more persuasive side. She could not discern the specifics of the argument because their voices had not been translated for her. She considered the reason for that. Perhaps it was just the way the magic worked. Each conversation was tailored for the conversants. Should she join in, maybe the machines would open up the meaning of the words. Or it could be that the exclusion was purposeful, and there were matters specific to little one interests which they concealed. She had her suspicions of which of the explanations was more likely but did not bother to work them out. She would know with time. Confronting Chris on why he chose to have privacy would be futile. An honest answer would be suspicious, and a lie would be unverifiably plausible. Either way, the argument had ended abruptly. The quiet elder's image disappeared. Chris pondered the darkened, empty image for a moment and quickly turned to Tali,

“I have negotiated a promise that will protect your people as they retreat, Tali. It is... tenuous,” Chris stated.

“Who is the quiet elder you spoke with?” Tali inquired.

“He is my protectorate. Rather, he is the protectorate of all who settle here. He is a good man, Tali. His interests are pure. He has no malevolence, but he is a fierce warrior and performs his protectorate duties unwaveringly. He will honor that promise as long, and only as long, as there are no new aggressions. Should there be another unprovoked attack, he will unleash the wrath of his soldiers and our weaponry. Your tunnels will be flushed with flame; your people will be soot stains on the snow. Those are his words... I- We cannot allow that, Tali.”

“Other than slaying him, how else are we to prevent a warrior from wielding his weapons?” Tali asked, unsure of Chris' direction.

“By convincingly demonstrating that the threat he feels the pressure to wield them on does not exist,” Chris snapped, his exhaustion starting to tell. “There has been more than enough slaying,” he added almost as a mumble.

Chris paced restlessly for a bit, regrouping his composure. Tali granted him the courtesy of silence until he was prepared to continue. “Are you aware of another front where your people will be attacking? If so, please tell me where it is now so we can divert it,” Chris finally implored.

Tali thought on this. She remembered the many intense meetings in the map room where she and the Elders had so many times refined their contingencies for the Final Push and the Final Retreat, sorting their resources, dividing the duties, deciding where to deploy...

Should the little ones attack from sea, do this...

Should they have landed somewhere distant and come from the land, do that...

Should there be two or perhaps three flying machines coming, do something else...

They, and every Council before had been children playing games. She and the Elders grossly and likely fatally underestimated their adversary in every way. They were wrong about numbers, about their intellect, about their resources... Everything! The wisest of the Tribe had taken consolation with a plan conjured so many seasons ago, that the Gift Stone was still molten at its inception. They thought themselves so clever, but all their impotent strategies pivoted on the assumptions that their attackers would carry on as mindlessly with a zest for blood as the legends described. The Tribe had mistakenly frozen their impressions of the little ones and had been blind to their advancements. Most ironically, hers back then had been the one voice modestly raising concerns about the potency of little ones increasing, perhaps more than they could measure, but even she had underestimated by so many magnitudes. Never had they considered an incursion into the land with the population she had seen with her own eyes. How many dwellings had they settled? She was certain she could count at least ten stretching into the barrens, but were there maybe more? How wrong could an idea become before it degraded to pathetic?

Infinitely wrong apparently, because the saddest of all miscalculations was their moral certainty that it would not be them who poured hurt into the land. Never in all their pointless map room exercises had a single Elder pondered for even a moment that the Tribe, or their indistinguishable refuse anyway, would instigate conflict. Never had they considered that they themselves would light the spark igniting their own extinction.

Tali had not been involved in those map room decisions since she lost the spear, but the current spear wielder was exhausted. Resorting to her dated memories, she considered Chris' question.

“Show me a map where your dwellings reside, child,” Tali commanded.

Chris did so. A rather large island appeared. Hundreds of dots of every color speckled the surface. Thin orange lines crisscrossed the landscape connecting the dots in a dense fibrous net. Tali was unfamiliar with the island, apparently teeming with little one settlements.

“Where is this island? How far is it from our position?” she asked, hoping for a clarification.

“Tali, that is not an island. That is the land,” Chris responded. “Here is our current position.” A white dot, brighter than the others appeared on the edge of the island. “Here is where we met.” A second white dot, nearly atop the first appeared.

“That is not possible. Surely your empire does not span the coasts,” Tali countered cautiously, not entirely certain she was speaking accurately.

“I assure you, Tali, it does.”

“How do you survive in the barrens? There is no food there. You cannot obtain sustenance from rock and snow, child, and to transport all your nourishment from afar is folly. How-?” Tali broke off. Chris had addressed her questions with a new collage of images juxtaposed to the map. They were dazzling revelations of little one dwellings at least as large as the one she had seen in that bleak account of the Smiths’ deaths. When she had been introduced to that terrible incident, her focus had been on the event itself, rather than the location where it occurred. Without a dramatic event to skew her attention, Tali studied the world of the little ones. She found it wondrous.

As with the Tribe, and that first dwelling, Tali noted that every dwelling was fashioned with the same characteristic open spherical commons. From there, infinite possibilities, all seemingly tapped, were displayed for her awestruck inspection. Within the sphere walls were the obvious domestic quarters of the inhabitants. She saw scenes of meals shared together, sleeping areas, children tended by tender parenting, and any of a myriad of events which could be considered the “ordinary” activities of daily life. The commons were ringed with balconies, where the quarters opened and onlookers could gaze down on the bustling life their dwelling teemed with. Some did away with the balconies altogether and lined their quarters with transparent windows stretching from floor to ceiling. Each equator seemed dedicated to important work. Tali was uncertain what that work was, but the feel of the little ones moving along that area had a tone of formality the quarters lacked. And then there were the commons. Where the quarters ended a landscape which served no purpose she could discern other than for the aesthetic enjoyment of the little ones, sprawled within the circumference of the base. There were

green fields where little ones played, pools of water where they swam, theaters where they sat and watched performances. Walkways meandered aimlessly and quite inefficiently in every direction, and it appeared that their use was optional. Just as many were off the path as were on.

Tali saw trees! As tall as the stories foretold, and as lovely, the little ones had brought their trees to the land. They were plentiful, but strewn too randomly to be efficiently farmed. Unless there was some aspect she failed to see, these trees were not destined to become wood. They served no purpose other than as decoration.

Not all dwellings were inhabited. As she inspected a bit closer, the structures individualized. They were not homogenous. Many appeared to be dedicated to specific tasks. Some were dense farms where lush colorful things grew from every open section of the sphere nearly to the apex. The bounty of their harvest rose beyond the commons flats, draping over balconies and dangled from ceilings. At the center of these farm spheres were machines resembling an octopus, their arms stretched outward extending the reach of the attendants to fully acquire every iota of food grown. To her utter confusion, one sphere was submerged. It was an enormous tank crammed with more fish than she had ever seen in one place, even when orcas trapped a school for devouring. The fish were large and healthy. The octopus arms in the center here held nets guaranteeing that all would be eventually enjoyed as a robust catch. She could see smaller fish in flooded but isolated compartments which served as quarters in other spheres. Tali supposed these fish must feed the large open chamber when they grew to sufficient size. Beyond her view, likely were compartments holding smaller and smaller fish. Most definitively, the little ones had forgone the unpredictability of the seas and learned to harvest their own fish.

Other spheres projected a chaotic frenzied colorful whimsy she did not understand at all. Were these spheres built merely for entertainment? She could not fathom such a vast investment of resources merely for play, but it would not be even close to the strangest discovery she had made in recent times. Some spheres were dedicated to machinery assembling a multitude of impossible to understand devices. There were fabrics woven at speeds she thought should melt the needles. Lathes and presses outpouring metal sheets with intricate lines interwoven in their construction, moving vehicles in various states of repair, and more... Always there was more.

Whether their dwellings were for specific roles or for living, they were all colors; they teemed with little one life, and they all blazed with a sun as bright as the clearest light season day. Tali was stunned to silence.

Chris allowed the information to settle for a while and gently broke in,

“We recently discovered a material that performs miracles in cold temperatures, Tali, a ridiculously simple porridge of a few unremarkable metals baked into a ceramic. It was not even a clever idea to put them together; it simply had not been done in that particularly perfect proportion before. But because of that discovery, we significantly expanded our capacity for creating power to operate our machinery. Huge, almost limitless amounts of clean, frictionless power was available to us. That same wonderful breakthrough is responsible for our knowledge flowing so freely through these boxes, but as I said, the price is temperature. Without cold, the magic material degrades to ordinary rock.

Even after it was found, we could not efficiently implement it where our lands were because it was too hot to work there. While creating artificial cold was something we did, the cost was expensive, and it negated much of the benefit of the magic. We searched for places where our ceramic would work. The top of the world is frozen water and surrounded by nations who would tease favor from us for building on their territory, so we searched elsewhere. We needed a perpetually cold land no one claimed...

So we came here.

We truly did not know you existed, Tali. Had we known...”

“You would have come anyway, child,” Tali replied.

That struck Chris painfully, but to his credit, he winced and continued.

“Yes, you are probably right; we would have come anyway. But our process would have been bloodless, and you would have benefitted so much from what we can offer,” Chris continued.

“No, child. You have magics in medicine and in flight and in weaponry and with fabrics and so much more. I grant you that. And it truly is impressive. I am awed by what your machines can do, but I have been watching your kind for so many many seasons.

You do not tread softly on the land... You trample.

You do not sift for resources, you scour.

Had we met peacefully, you may genuinely have offered to share your magics with us. We probably would have gratefully accepted them. How foolish would we be to refuse? But your ways are not our ways. We have lived here in undisturbed contentment for so long. We desired nothing other than solitude. Your kind is never content. You had the entire world, and still it was not enough. Inevitably, a conflict would have arisen where something we cherished became important to you, and we would degenerate to

precisely where we are now. By then, we would be softer as you are. It is far better to die as the Tribe than as a weakened shadow of ourselves.”

“If you believe that, Tali, then why are we bothering to stop the conflict?” Chris asked, notably not disputing her assertion.

“Because there will be so much needless suffering, and there is nothing... NOTHING... more abhorrent than suffering. It ravages not just the sufferer’s soul but permeates to the very land, seeping into rock and ice. Suffering stains permanently, suffering lingers infinitely. If suffering can be prevented, then it must be.”

“But this plan, this suicide of your elders was intentional,” Chris protested, confused.

“Some would eagerly embrace suffering to thwart its imposition on someone else. That is noble and acceptable, but it must be their suffering and willingly offered. Our Smiths accepted a destiny of absorbing the wrath of your weaponry to divert harm from their loved ones. You have shown me that your machines would have rendered their sacrifice futile. They would have endured and perished for a false idea. I cannot idly allow so much needless futile pain. It would be worse than had I inflicted it myself.”

“Do you place value in the suffering of others besides yourselves?” Chris asked. He had pulled up the images of the dwelling attack and the bodies of the slain at the exile cavern for emphasis. His footing on the living quarters floor matched his height up to Tali’s in the hold. They were roughly eye to eye, but Chris had shifted his position to stand silhouetted in front of the rectangles. Tali could not make out his expression and the box scrubbed most of the sentiment behind his words. She did not know whether this was an inquiry or an accusation.

“Any suffering sickens us, child. Our Smiths are noble. Turn your undeniably clever and observant eyes on the images of battle you showed me. Study the actions of those who burst through the floor of your dwelling. Learn how we wage war. Where we can strike lethally and cleanly at a foe, there will be no hesitation. But where there may be injury without death, we hold. Even to our own destruction, we hold.”

“I do not need the images, Tali. I was witness to your calculated attack. In a heartbeat, you pulverized three soldiers whose only gaffe was protecting me.”

“You speak of the three at the Cave of Warning who fired upon us and blocked my exit. They are dead because their attack was harming me. Had I allowed their assault to persist, they would likely have pinned me within that confinement until more could join. I would then have been captured or killed. Neither condition would have returned

my daughter, so I resolved the threat, bringing their deaths cleanly. Be assured Chris, that had an injury I inflicted been lethal, but not immediately fatal, I would have remained to end their suffering. Only when I was certain their spirits were gone did I flee.”

“How efficiently you dealt a kill is irrelevant. You killed needlessly, Tali!” Chris shouted accusingly, “And I was just speaking to someone who was quite close to the fallen. They would dispute the “cleanliness” of your actions. Their suffering is real and on your hands.”

Tali pondered what she was hearing. Was one of the soldiers a child of the quiet elder? Was it he or Chris who was upset at the finality of her retaliation? Either way, she clearly understood the resentment. Truly, only now when there was finally a lull and with her mind alert, could she reflect on her own thoughts rather than disengaging to allow her body to run her actions. Until now, there had never been a need. Her world of instinct existed harmoniously with the land. In the attack, she had as always disengaged her mind and allowed her body to run. Since then, events had proceeded so continuously, only now had she been able to contemplate her actions. She had never rued an act she performed as an instinctual hunter. All was fine because all was familiar. She was aware of the irreplaceable fissures that a death, especially an untimely one, carved into the life paths of the living. As a hunter, she factored the loss in selecting her prey. Strong bulls were always preferred. They were many and easily replenished. Cows beyond calving age were also sought. She would never have hunted down a nursing or otherwise indispensable member of the pod.

But that was the code of a hunter. When she attacked, she was not hunting. Hunters killed solely for food. To kill for other motives was the act of a warrior. It disturbed her not a little that she had been so fluid in jumping from hunter to warrior. It disturbed her even more that the child was of the impression she was ever this way. Of that, she had no solution. Within her own conscience, however, she was acquiring harmony. Surely her body had not betrayed Tali’s core. Were they also not warriors she had dispatched? Did they not know of the danger they accepted by donning the role of protectorate? Did they not welcome death as a gift to those who lived? Were they not grateful for the courtesy of a clean kill?

“I killed in battle,” Tali answered unemotionally. “It is the battle itself that is needless, but when engaged, the only effective escape is to kill or die. I chose to kill.”

“There was a third choice, Tali. You might have approached me in good faith. You might have escaped without killing.”

“Restraint is dangerous in a confrontation, particularly when the capabilities of an adversary are unknown. One is either predator or prey,” Tali responded, confused that such an obvious truth needed airing.

“At the hole, when you were wedged in, I was beyond your clutches, and the soldiers were nearing... You were prey. Had I followed your approach, I could have contacted my soldiers to stalk you quietly so you would not know they were behind. They would take careful aim, and you would never know the rain of armament that befell upon you. They could have sliced you in half... cleanly. You would be dead, and the pathetic chain of events leading to your tribe’s xenocidic extinction would be proceeding unrestrained...”

If I behaved as you.”

Tali had no response to that, but Chris was not finished. “Know this as well, Tali. First Huntress lives because we did not honor that barbaric code. What necessity had we to mend the wounds of our prey?”

More silence.

Chris acknowledged Tali’s quietness as a tacit agreement to his point. With nothing more to be added, they let the matter settle between them. Chris appeared more comfortable now, as if his outburst had released a hidden tension that had been steadily gnawing at him. He seemed almost cheery when he returned to their original topic.

“We have been colonizing this land for more than twenty seasons. Only by tragic coincidence had we begun so far from you. I wonder how our first encounter would have gone had we started nearby? Perhaps we may have met in a friendlier manner... perhaps...” Chris trailed off; just as quickly as it had been purged, the profound sadness Tali saw earlier fought to return. Tali was about to question him on it when he snapped back to his cheery step, forcing the sadness down,

“But I think you were asking for a tighter map area.” The map grew around the two white dots, spreading them as the image grew until Tali recognized geography.

Tali was certain that there were two dialogues simultaneously occurring in the mind of the child. The tumultuous inner struggle regarding a guilt he carried for his role in the unfolding events and his relatively benign conversation with her. She could not bore into his head, so she disregarded it.

“I would draw on that surface as you do, child,” She said.

“Just move your hand, Tali. My vessel has devices that can make fairly accurate guesses of your intentions. Point where you wish to draw. A small circle will appear. Stick out your thumb when you want to add to the image. Retract it when you wish merely to move the tip. You can change colors by holding up your other hand to activate a palate.”

Tali hesitantly raised her finger to the rectangle. A small hollow circle did indeed appear and follow her finger’s instruction. She extended her thumb, and the circle filled in. Tali traced a clean simple line on the map until she had encircled an area along the coast.

“I would see only this area with all your dwellings,” She commanded further.

Chris complied. The image tightened even more. Only three settlements were visible now, and one was on the fringe, well beyond the frontier of the Tribe. She checked one of the two remaining, and stated, “This was where the attack you showed me occurred was it not?”

“Yes, Tali.”

“Then we must make haste to reach the other.”

## Chapter 22: Land Battle

“So because we are not so broken, we earn the privilege of a grinding toil?” laughed a Smith deep in the ranks of the marchers.

“But we enjoy the bounty of the banquet’s remainder,” a Smith in a wheeled chair responded. He was devouring a fatty section of seal with little regard for hygiene. His kin, a quiet child who had brought with her many towels to tend her grandfather, struggled nobly but futilely, to clean his face while still pushing his wheeled chair along the tunnel.

“Leave me, child,” he protested. “I would give the little ones a greasy corpse to struggle with. Perhaps they will injure themselves dropping me.”

A few laughs rumbled through the ranks.

“Aye, war is a messy business,” a Smith carrying an axe almost as heavy as he was remarked.

“What logic is that axe, friend?” a Smith with a lean, polished, beautiful bow and a quiver full of fire polished arrows inquired.

“I do not care for shields,” the Large Axed Smith replied holding the axe blade to his chest by the hilt, which admittedly covered as much as a shield would.

“I do not care to be rolled, but the alternative would be to be scraped along to battle,” the Greasy Smith countered.

Another rumble of laughter.

Their party numbered a bit more than a hundred. Forty or so were Smiths: the remainder were kin transporting their weapons, foods, and in some instances, the wheeled chair ridden. They had broken their last rest not long ago. There, aware that this would be their final respite, the Smiths ate, drank, laughed and – those who could – fornicated without restraint. Kin, sensing they were intruding on the frolic, had slinked away, not a little embarrassed. They returned when the bellows for assistance overpowered the moans of pleasure and the revelry of celebration. Gathering up their sodden, slightly inebriated grandparents so they could go off to die was not the most desirable aspect of the honor they accepted, but the kin took the stirring well. The grandparents, in grandiose spirits, were easy to rouse, or when necessary, pry apart.

They ascended a winding tunnel so freshly carved, newly laid shavings spread across the floor to flatten the circular curve were still crisp enough to emit a pleasing crunch under the weight of passing feet. This made for pleasant walking, but the unfortunate who lugged a cart, or worse, those who transported kin, struggled. Pushing entrenched the wheels. Only by pulling, and thus forfeiting the advantage of using their size as an aide, could they make progress, so kin pulled and grunted and pulled some more. They only complained if the Smiths teased them, and their complaints were good natured barbs meant to entertain their beloved relatives.

“Will you stop yanking, youngster! I am trying to sneak a nap before I die!”

“Had the Smith diet been less robust, I may have a more even pull. Grandmother, I dragged whales that were lighter to the ovens yesterday.”

“I would roll beside my friend, daughter.”

“Do you refer to the “friend” I found you entwined with so densely, I was not sure you had not grown new arms and legs? The friend who waves at you from ten carts ahead in a tunnel wide enough to allow only one across? Of course, father. Please wait here while I return to the Tribe to request the Diggers to widen the path. It should be ready in two seasons.”

“Would the Smith in the lead exhibit the courtesy of waiting for the party to pass before relieving himself? It is white snow that best accepts the feet of the Tribe!”

The trek was thankfully not all vertical. Had it been, the banter would have degraded to muttering gasps for air. Sweet plateaus where they could push again, and blessed descents where they could coast provided welcomed breaks in the kin’s labors so they could catch their breath... and perpetuate the verbal sparring that seemed to entertain the Smiths so. If asked, both kin and Smith would readily admit they were sincerely enjoying themselves... Until they crossed to where the vibrating drum of the stationary but spinning Diggers’ Bore was audible. That invisible curtain washed frivolity away as they stepped through, and they completed their journey’s last steps in silence.

The tunnel spilled into a very newly created chamber. Smith army and their support kin filed in, carefully navigating between the heavy molten pots the Diggers had used to smooth out the new walls. The Diggers’ Bore, that massive, ancient, indestructible circular saw, which as far as anyone in the chamber knew had carved every tunnel they had ever trod, faced the far wall. The immense cylinder hummed as its hundreds of identical Gift Stone teeth, larger than a hand, impatiently spun in place eager to bite into the last slab of ice, completing the trail into a dwelling that dwarfed the

Tribe's. Four Diggers resting idly at their stations on the machine, nodded respectfully, acknowledging the Smith's arrival. As one mechanically, and obviously rehearsed... poorly, they spoke,

“Welcome, Smiths. We salute you.”

Diggers consistently worked in the grinding noise of the spinning bore. Conversations were very difficult to carry over the loudness, so they did not engage much with one another. They either learned to embrace the quiet companionship, or they drew from those in the Tribe who intrinsically appreciated it. Regardless, Diggers were notoriously poor conversationalists. The salute was as eloquent a speech as any Smith had ever heard, and was greatly appreciated.

Kin marked the room as journey's end and collapsed, panting on any open section of floor they could find. Smiths continued inward, meandering to the final staging area just behind the Bore. Through the ice, and from the walls, floor, and ceiling in front of them, seeped the soft, strange, yellow glow of the immensity of the dwelling they were to die in.

In short time, after their beloved but spent kin regained their air, Smiths would armor up, align behind the Bore, and burst through the side wall into a world they had never imagined could exist. There they would serve the Tribe one last time. There they would challenge an adversary who had pursued them since before history. There they would lay to rest all the aches and nausea and creaks and incontinence and sensory dullness and weakness and memory lapses. There they would free their spirits from these failing bodies. Smiths yearned for this, but they respected the necessity for the kin's rest. After all, unlike them, kin were nowhere near completing their tasks, and theirs was a responsibility more strenuous than the Smiths'. Upon completing the tunnel, the Smiths only remaining duty was to fight until they died. Kin had to transport them to the brink of battle, then with the aide of the Diggers, collapse the tunnel behind them and run back to the Tribe before the Final Retreat abandoned them. Smiths knew waiting was necessary, but it was still unpleasant.

Chatter always passed the time well, but casual banter so near this enormous stronghold felt foolhardy. Smiths reserved their contemplations for their own heads. And while each kept to him and herself, they were fairly certain they shared the same thoughts... How had these middle food creatures managed to build such an elaborate structure so close to them, and without detection? Surely someone must have noticed the mountain of excavated ice they had to have dug... But perhaps not. This was inland, toward the barrens. Not much reason for a hunter to come this way. Only ice and rock resided here, and that was amply abundant everywhere. The Tribe wanted nothing this way, so the Tribe did not come this way.

And that was the knot which would not untie.

They all knew all the stories. They also were aware that it was the exiles who initiated the hostilities. And this far away, there was truly nothing that interested them here. A strong part of the Smiths' mind, not the strongest, for that belonged to their loyalty to the Tribe and one another, but a reasonably strong inner voice shouted to withdraw and let them have the damned barrens. Smiths certainly did not want them.

"How true do you take the legends, friend?" a quiet female voice near the wall asked aloud. Had her question been directed to a discrete Smith, she clearly missed her mark, for it flowed through the ranks swirling unanswered, leaving a silence more pronounced in its wake. Had there been an immediate reply, a comforting distraction would have ensued. As it stood, the longer the silence, the less likely it would seem to ever be broken.

Smiths fidgeted.

"They do not honor the spirit in kills. Of that I am certain," A hunched, but strong female, with bare, still sinewy arms identifying her as a hunter in her first life, finally responded. Heads turned so quickly to embrace the sound which shattered that abhorrent quiet, a chorus of bone crackings followed by coughs delayed it momentarily. When the coughs resided to wheezes, she continued,

"Many are my memories of their callous slaughters at sea. With spears, they pinned whales still alive, still surrounded by the pod then hauled them up by their tails for transport. The poor creatures endured the journey dry, terrified and dangling, merely to be carved apart alive on a shore. There were times they ceased their slicing because the day ended, and left partially butchered whales crying out for the evening. I risked much, sometimes even having to more than once remove a little one standing vigile... But that suffering could not stand."

"What did you do to conceal your kills?" a mightily rotund Smith leaning close to the Sinewy Smith asked. His interest obviously more focused on the curves of the speaker rather than in what she spoke.

"I plunged them beneath the ice floes. They never recovered the bodies, nor did they really make much of an effort to try. I have seen them regularly partake in a heavy intoxicant drink when their work is done. So much great misfortune befalls their sodden while they laugh and watch, I anticipate they attribute much of what they do not see to the clumsiness their drink induces..." the Sinewy Smith answered, while simultaneously elbowing the Rotund Smith reaching for her breast in his solar plexus. He peeped timidly

and sat as his scrambled nerves relearned how to breathe. “But that is only my guess,” she added, not breaking the stride in her voice.

“So they are dumb?” the Greasy Smith asked.

“I would have concluded thus,” the Sinewy Smith replied, “else, how could they bear to enduring that suffering so near them. And I truly made several of their kind disappear without explanation. Had but one of the Tribe gone similarly missing, we would remove all ice from the land and water from the sea before ceasing our search... Yet they moved on.”

“But you do not conclude that now?” the Greasy Smith added.

“Their ships are sleek and fast. They move with intelligence. I could not sustain my conclusion. I define them as ignorant. I do not believe they are aware of the hurt they are inflicting, nor of the workings of the land they infest. At least that was so when I hunted. Caution, I have not touched the spear for well over two hundred seasons.”

“What of their weapons?” a Smith on a chair missing both of his legs from the knee jumped in with his question. Daggers fitted on each stump protruded forward. They were a clever idea for battle, but for their entire trek, and even now, they jutted below the sight line of those around him and pricked not infrequently.

“I have seen their flying machines. They wield blades spinning faster than the Bore,” a Smith with a gravelly voice answered.

“We will encounter no flying machines within the dwelling, friend,” came a reply from within the crowd followed by a general murmur of agreement.

“They fire darts from tubes.”

“Aye, many many darts,” a tall thick necked Smith and the most petite of women draped at his side, contributed. “There was a large *mirounga* [elephant seal] carcass my mate and I discovered once when we roamed the shore as young wandering lovers. Do you remember it my love?”

“We knew the animal only for the largely undamaged proboscis. No hide below the neck remained of it,” the Petite Smith acknowledged.

“The body was a bloodied pulpy mass. Little ones were rare then, so we had not considered them. We feared the ferocity of a shark,” the Thick Smith continued. “My mate picked through the blood and tissue searching for a tooth and found so many many darts.”

“They were soft metal- smooth shiny and rather tiny. If distracted, a single penetration may have gone unnoticed, but they had fired so many many more than one,” the Petite Smith added, tightening her embrace just a little. The Thick Smith returned her hug with some well-choreographed difficulty. He leaned steeply in her direction, draped his arm over her entire side, resting his palm on her hip, and pushed in, essentially wedging his mate in a loving squeeze between his trunk of an arm and his boulder of a torso. He towered over his tiny lover of so many seasons. In an irony not lost amongst his teasing friends, he was that rare Smith who had not been hunched by the Forge’s heat, but she had.

“Their darts kill by whittling,” the Thick Smith concluded.

“Then perhaps.... I should... lead the charge,” the Rotund Smith declared, still breathing irregularly. “It will require all their precious darts to whittle this glorious form down.” For emphasis, he hoisted his almost spherical belly in his hands, releasing it to jiggle.

The laughter returned, albeit subdued. The Sinewy Smith kissed the Rotund Smith appreciatively on the cheek. The Rotund Smith groped the Sinewy Smith’s breast and received another blow to the solar plexus.

The laughter amplified.

“Will our armor halt the darts?” asked a voice in the crowd.

Silence. No one knew. No one had a story they could recollect where an opinion could be assembled. That was a question they would all know soon enough. Pity they did not know now. The armor was bulky. Should it be impotent, they could forgo the discomfort and run into battle less encumbered. Then again, their kin had transported the carts heavy with their tenuous protection. How insulting would it be to defer?

“Perhaps we can wrap all our armor around our gasping rotund friend and roll him into battle?” the Sinewy Smith suggested. “If that does not drain them of darts, we are doomed.”

Laughter, contagious now, spread. Even the Diggers grinned. Soon the Smiths’ spirits replenished to their usual levels. Damned if the glow of the monstrous home of their adversaries loomed. These were their last times on this world. They were going to enjoy them. They raided the last of the food and drink, finding several untapped skins of mead deep within the armor carts, likely hidden by the slumbering kin. They had companionship. They had food. They had drink, and they would soon slough off their decrepit faltering forms to rise as spirits.

Smiths reveled.

Kin awoke to a scene not unlike the banquet. They mustered one another and unpacked the armor, discovering to their amusement that their carefully packed carts had been raided and the mead drained. With the now familiar sounds of singing, banter, and fornication in the background, kin laid out each Smith's armament and weaponry. They conferred with the Diggers on how best to collapse their exit behind them.

Diggers pointed to the pair of stiff columns of ice supported with large metal wedges. "Strike here... hard," they instructed, pointing to the narrow end of the wedges. Kin understood. With a strong enough blow, they could remove the wedges, destabilizing the columns. They supported one side of a sheet that spanned a large portion of the chamber ceiling. Without the columns, the ceiling would not hold.

When all was made ready and no kin could conjure even a lame task to complete, they approached their parents, their uncles and aunts, their grandparents, tearfully prepared to bid them farewell.

The Smiths would have none of that.

"Be gone, sad ones," the Sinewy Smith shouted laughingly. She was naked and mounted on a very rotund gasping Smith. He had a hand on each of her breasts. "We have no room for melancholy here... Leave it in the far tunnel and return. This fat one should be done pleasing me by then."

Kin retreated. They mulled by the armor confused on how to proceed next. Shortly, a few Smiths joined them. Disheveled, slightly hazy from the mead, glowing in the complacency which settles in after torrid lovemaking, they smiled stupidly and guilt free. Their kin walked them over to where their armor awaited, and they dressed for battle. More Smiths joined in much the same state. Soon enough what may have been the happiest army ever assembled for battle, lined up behind the enormous Digger machine.

Kin embraced Smiths and retreated to the tunnels. The Diggers took that as a signal to proceed. Vigorously, they pumped the rods which spun the saw. The revved cylinder's hum increased pitch steadily until it sung a high ringing chirp. A gear was turned and some of the pumping diverted to the wheels. The Bore advanced.

Smiths watched the Bore disappear into the wall in a rain of ice shavings. Then suddenly the Diggers reappeared as the rear of the Bore pounded down, flattening the ice shavings into fresh tunnel floor. Two Diggers manning the rear which was essentially a giant paddle hinged at the base, were themselves enveloped in ice as they hoisted the paddle up for its next flattening. In this way, a tunnel grew... and grew... and grew, until

a most unpleasant sound of metal on metal tore through them. The scraping continued unabated for a most uncomfortably long time then abruptly several things happened. The scraping abruptly ceased. A light pierced through the tunnel's end, followed by a crashing sound of destructive finality. There may also have been a flurry of soft deep pops.

Shortly, three Diggers emerged from the tunnel. Two unscathed, carried a bloodied third between them. They halted their retreat facing the Smith army.

"They awaited us," one Digger simply said, and the trio resumed their exit. Smiths parted for them, then closed again.

"Have we time for one more go?" the Rotund Smith asked the Sinewy Smith jovially.

"You would not survive another," she smiled back.

"Then there is nothing left in this world for me save this tunnel's end," he declared, and unsheathing a pair of small swords, charged forth as rapidly as his old legs could transport his portly bulk additionally laden with chest and leg armor.

The Sinewy Smith followed, and quickly passed him. She had not bothered to dress after her tryst with the rotund and declined on the armor. Wielding only a spear, she quickly crossed the tunnel and without bothering to look, leapt into the light. In midflight, she assessed what awaited her comrades. They had punctured into the little one commons slightly above the equatorial line. She noted her last few steps only marginally touched ice. She must have trodden on their building materials. Far below her, the shambles that was once the Bore jutted vertically, deeply and permanently embedded in the ground. Having fallen a great distance, and likely spinning on impact, barely any of it was exposed. A snow covered bloodied leg extending from underneath the partially closed paddle marked the fate of the fourth Digger.

The little ones were here. Hundreds of them, spread in an arced formation unquestionably directly facing the tunnel entrance. The Sinewy Smith drew two immediate conclusions. They had known precisely where the Smiths would invade, and they had known it long enough to prepare. Neither fact boded well for them.

Twisting in midflight to face the tunnel, she cried out, "BEWARE! They await us!" hoping it would reach enough ears to justify turning her back fatally on her enemy. The Sinewy Smith landed solidly on well-practiced legs. They groaned and cracked from having been hardly used in this manner for so long, but held enough for her to feel her entire backside detonate with the pain of a thousand thousand stings. From her neck,

down her shoulders and arms and buttocks and legs, every speck of flesh that the little ones could see was punctured with their notorious darts. She dropped to her knees overwhelmed with the wash of pain. The sudden jolt flushed the blood from her back forward, and trickling streams poured down her chest and arms. She weakened. Likely there was little blood remaining within her, and still the darts came. Each tiny prick, which truly individually did not hurt much at all, plunged into her bloodied body, opening another exit for her blood to depart. She was groggy but still alert enough to be disappointed. Her heart raced ferociously in her chest, but it simply did not have enough blood to send to her head. Every pump drained her even more. She knew she would soon lose consciousness and die in a pool of her own blood, having never struck a blow. The pricks were not relenting. She no longer even felt them, likely they had severed all her nerves, and she was paralyzed. Had she any will, she may have tried to lift her arms to test her thought. But she had none. The Sinewy Smith awaited sleep, helplessly watching the tunnel for her fellow Smiths to emerge and accept the same fate dealt her. She could not rally enough will to muster regret, but within her something suggested she should have forgone her warning and at least tried to strike a blow. Her last visions on this world validated her last actions.

Waddling unsteadily from the tunnel, no longer brandishing the tiny swords, but instead covered head to toe in armor that had hastily strapped to any place that could, even precariously, the Rotund Smith, her bouncy enthusiastic, unsatisfactory but exuberant lover entered the theater of battle. In as stark a contrast to her nude and vulnerable form, not one bit of his flesh was exposed. She only knew it was him by the enormous girth, and his continuous bellowing, He panted the words, but she could distinguish them clearly:

“I HEARD YOU, MY LOVE. I HEARD YOU, MY SWEET!”

The Rotund Smith stuttered a few steps in the open and collapsed, planting himself firmly and likely permanently, at a point blocking the little one’s sight of the entrance. His actions created a living shield of Gift Stone metal and flesh thicker than any that could have been designed by the most creative of craftsmen. The Sinewy Smith wondered how he had the strength to have carried so much metal in addition to his enormous body. She laughed, or would have if enough strength remained to fill her lungs, when she detected the movement of three reasonably sized Smiths who had been supporting him. Apparently, he was large enough to hide all three.

Little one darts abandoned their liquefaction of the Sinewy Smith’s back, which was mostly complete anyway, and turned their attentions on the dense pile of metal where deep within sat the Rotund Smith. There the darts found a less pliant target. The armor was impenetrable, Gift Stone metal proving an impervious barrier to the little one

onslaught. Darts bounced off laughingly ineffective. Little ones were quick to realize this. They revealed that they had been reserving their armaments, because in an effort to penetrate their new, more formidable opponent, the full might of their weaponry was unleashed. And the world rained darts. Pings of Gift Stone impacts rang, so many, so close together, their effect was a steady, not all that unpleasant, musical tone. Darts accented the tone with wildly percussive ricochets, flinging their impacts in every direction save one. They did not pierce the Rotund Smith. The Sinewy Smith knew this because above the pops of their weapons, above the high pitched ring of metal on metal collisions, above the flicks and crumbles of damage the diverted darts inflicted on the little one architecture, she heard the familiar rumble of raucous taunting laughter.

“Hahahahahaha!”

“Thank you, my final lover,” she managed to whisper aloud with her last breath.

Smiths exploited the barricade which was the Rotund Smith fanning out from the tunnel. Ducking low, they spilled out onto the ledge the Bore had plowed into, shimmied a ways, and after crawling the last few steps, wound up lying flat against the lip. They were tantalizingly near the edge, and they all desperately wanted a view of their enemy. Unfortunately, they painfully learned any piece that extended beyond the protection of the ledge was instantly obliterated. Still, they made progress. They had assembled their numbers beyond the tunnel and below the sting of the lethal cloud of shooting darts. Only when an errant ricochet from their rotund protectorate bounced in their direction did any feel a sting. In short measure, all who could walk had deployed on the ledge. They formed their own ugly arc, loose, gapped, and hunkered, starkly contrasting their disciplined, uniform offensive attackers. And there they remained. Little one weapons quickly realizing they had no target, halted the rain. Any attempt to advance was immediately blown apart by remarkable aim.

“So we remain here until we die of old age?” the Thick Smith asked frustrated. He had donned an exaggerated amount of armor, but only on his left side. His beloved snuggled comfortably within the metal womb he erected around her.

“I for one am quite comfortable. I have marched much and could use a nap.”

“Aye, but the noise is disturbing. Do you think perhaps we could ask our neighbors below to observe some silence?”

“Agreed, just get up and ask them,” the Petite Smith volunteered, to the surprise and delight of her mate.

“So you select the end of our journey to bite with your wit, my love?” the Thick Smith said loudly, the pleasure of hearing his tiny sweet mate jumping in banter overwhelming him with good spirit.

“I have always had a strong bite, lover,” the Petite Smith replied, erupting the Smiths into another wave of laughter. This one took a while to spread because most could not hear well. The little one weaponry had left a ringing in all their ears. The comment needed retelling, along the chain of pinned down first time warriors. Whether it was the laughter or realization they were hitting nothing but their own structure, the rain of darts ceased. What followed was... nothing.

No darts, no movement, an impasse.

“Does anyone have a suggestion on what we are to do next?” the Petite Smith’s voice asked.

“We can, in unison, rise and charge down,” a Smith suggested.

“The ledge is high. I spied the descent... at the cost of an eye and ear. Cursed but they are as observant as they are accurate. We are slow with age and the forge my friends. We are slower with armor and fatigue. Theirs is a wall of stinging we cannot penetrate directly,” a Smith stated plainly.

“We will be a poor army should we all perish on this ledge,” a Smith said to general agreement.

“If I may suggest,” came an excited voice from the tunnel.

“Yes, friend?” the Thick Smith inquired.

“Stand ready to roll quickly out of our way...,” the tunnel voice continued. “And follow our lead!”

A shrill cry later, the tunnel emptied.

The Smith with daggers for legs shot out first. Propelled by the adrenaline boosted limbs of his terrified kin, he and his wheeled chair tore out of the opening and soared over the ledge. As per an apparent agreement, the kin flopped down and quickly scurried out of the way avoiding the next chair with the next flopping kin, and the next and the next. Each chair took flight from a slightly different spot at a slightly different angle, catching the air generally in the direction of the little one soldiers. They had not coordinated any strategy for the distribution of their assault for maximum engagement.

The bumpy terrain and travel at speeds that ensured lack of control arranged that nicely. Purposeful or not, the entire bulk of the little one army came under assault from above.

The Daggers Smith, being first, was pummeled with such concentrated retaliation, his cart spun in midflight from the barrage. He had added a hefty shield to his seat, and counted on it to protect him while airborne. The spin exposed his face and neck, which the little ones attacked with a passion. His head was nearly off when his chair crashed harmlessly behind them. The jarring impact completely severed the last remnants of bone and tissue. Chair and head bounded away, leaving the Daggers Smith's headless torso standing erect. His daggers had impaled the ground.

Smiths returned the rain of darts with a rain of wheeled chairs. Most crashed well clear of their intended target. Its occupants quickly dispatched under the familiar onslaught. A few Smiths did land amidst the little one ranks. They caused more fear than harm. Suffering a fall, even an intentional one, from the height they risked was not merciful on brittle bones. What damage their landing inflicted was the sum of their offensive. One by one the wheeled chairs' occupants left this world. Their attack, while impressively dramatic, failed to strike a blow...

But that was not the intention.

As the little ones dispatched the flying Smiths, a more terrestrial and more dangerous species of attacker descended unnoticed from a ledge. Little one soldiers realized their misdirection too late, and scrambled to regroup their ranks... too late.

The Thick Smith approached. Pointing his massive shielding towards the little ones, the distance between them decreased until he was nearly within sword length and barely bloodied by a weapon. Just before contact, the Thick Smith leaned back, scooped the Petite Smith by her buttocks in one hand, raised her to his face,

"Farewell, my love," he said smiling. They kissed, and in a mighty spinning heave, the Thick Smith hurled his mate beyond the line of soldiers, and descended with a thud on his the nearest little ones. He felt the satisfactory crackle of instant crushing. They did not suffer. He had worried their armor might have been resilient enough to require multiple blows and was gladdened it was not. His armor, however, was too bulky to easily allow him to stand, and with nothing protecting his right side, the Thick Smith received the stings. They were not painful, but as a former mender, he noticed that they bled peculiarly, more profusely than he would have expected from such tiny holes. With some effort, he rolled to a seated position that partially returned his shield, but the right side of his face remained exposed, and they focused on it mightily. Just before he lost the use of his eye, he saw that the little ones on his armored left side had not retreated far enough. Feinting an attempt to stand to the right, the Thick Smith swiveled around and

sliced with the plating covering his forearm. He struck two cleanly, but the third was running. He severed the trailing leg and crushed the pelvis, but the creature lived. He rose to complete his attack to free the spirit and was confounded by a strange behavior. Little ones rallied around their mortally wounded warrior. Did they not see the injuries were fatal? If they did not wish for him to end the suffering, surely one of them will perform the courtesy. But they did not. They dragged the suffering creature back beyond his reach and doubled their attack on him. He heard a bang, louder and singularly strong, above the pops of the dart tubes. He was very large, he knew, and still retained much of his strength, yet the single blow knocked him off his feet. He fell back to the ground. A fist sized indent that burned fiercely appeared on the portion of his chest not protected by shielding. That most definitely was not a dart. Leaning on an elbow, through the bloodied curtain of the lash on his one remaining and failing eye, he saw that the dart flingers were retreating, being replaced by a different group of soldiers with larger weapons, most of which were pointing at him. His aching chest was evidence that, for at least one, they were not merely pointing. The Thick Smith knew his time was drawing to a close, and he decided he wanted to die standing, perhaps catching a glimpse of his mate. Try as he may, he could not rise. He heard a boom, and his elbow disappeared, knocking him flat. The pain was overwhelming, but not nearly finished. Another boom and his face grew numb. He lost his vision, and his mouth filled with blood, forcing a coughing fit. Instinctively reaching for his mouth, he touched where he thought his cheek should be but felt air. His jaw had been blown off, along with the side of his face. He felt his surroundings spinning lazily. He heard one more boom and never heard anything again.

The Petite Smith had unsheathed her long slender sword in midflight intending to slice through her enemies while traveling across the air. Her mate had heaved so mightily, however, she was too high to reach them, and even fully stretched, merely “Tinked” their helmets harmlessly with the unbraced tip. She landed so far from the battle, she could not see her enormous lover. From the frantic concentrated barrage aimed at where she estimated he should be, she knew the little ones definitely saw him. He was either felled or masked by the haze of their projectiles.

Pity, she would have enjoyed seeing him in battle. She was about to engage the flank of the little ones when sounds from behind turned her around. Another wave of attackers was approaching. They were as numerous as the first, but their weapon was larger and attached to a pack by a rope. Having no particular agenda other than to inflict the expected carnage war mandated, these soldiers were just as acceptable a target. The Petite Smith raised her sword high for her charge and heard two dull booms. Her sword disappeared along with the hand that wielded it. In its place, half way up her forearm, was a stump cut by a pair of clean, smoldering crescents not much unlike bites. There was surprisingly little blood at first and no pain. The Petite Smith halted her charge. It seemed foolish to advance when your weapon was vaporized. She studied what was her

hand. Blood now seeped, and an ache was building. Nerve and vessel were caught as unprepared for the amputation as she, but they were catching on. She remembered a dagger on her thigh and reached to unsheathe it, only to hear another pair of booms. Her dagger disappeared along with the sheath, the thigh it was strapped to, and the three fingertips that were reaching for it. The Petite Smith dropped from the sudden imbalance and struck her head on the ground. She lost consciousness and bled out peacefully not much differently or very far from her beloved.

Of the Smiths on wheeled chairs, only few still lived, but only one still fought. Ironically, he had been the most bent of the group. His chair was not much higher than a sled. That low clearance had allowed him to ride unchallenged through the little one ranks below the sites of the new deadlier projectiles. He dispatched a worthy number of soldiers with the blades he had fitted on his chair's wheels and with the dagger on his one strong hand. The little ones had accommodated and given way. He was now surrounded by adversaries too far to reach and too fast to charge. He heard a boom similar to ones he had been hearing, but much more proximal; then, his chair lurched to one side, and he toppled on the ground. One wheel had disappeared, and he was too feeble to crawl. They had immobilized him, leaving no remaining task to do other than lie down and await death. He rolled on his back, his dagger clutched tightly in his less weak hand. Maybe one will come too near, and he could make another kill before exiting the world.

Of the forty who descended the ledge, half still stood, but the battle had again stalled. Their enemy encircled them, but had drawn back beyond the range of their longest reach, which now was not far at all. Smiths primarily wielded axes, swords, daggers, elbows and fists- all weapons of contact, none of which required training. The logistics were simple. Swing hard, hit things. Projectile fighting, a much more sophisticated art, they had never needed in the forge. Their few archers were shepherds who joined the Smiths when age withered them below a standard they deemed contributory. They had brought their skills with them and had quickly been dispatched. Gone from the enemy were the annoying, but individually ineffectual dart tubes. In their place were weapons which fired something hot and deadly, which was not slowed by flesh and bone, and mocked their armor.

“How fair you, my friend?” a Smith backed against another Smith asked.

“I bleed from my throat, and one leg is useless,” she answered gruffly, coughing as she replied.

“Ah, but you have a leg,” a weak, but desperately cheery voice was heard from below them. The back to back Smiths chanced a downward glance to find the Greasy Smith lying on one side between them. His numerous dart wounds rendered his chest porous, and his chair was nowhere near they could see. Both legs were crushed together

and snapped at the femur, a likely consequence of how he had lost his chair. His lower body was thinned from disuse anyway. His injuries lent the illusion that he jutted from a hole in the ground.

“And how did you get down there, my friend?” she asked.

“My chair rolled through the ice as a seal through the waters, but it soared much like that same seal.”

There was a pause where mirth tried to kindle, but it passed.

“Our chaired friends have saved this day. These little ones cannot marginalize this battle. We have hurt their kind have we not?” The Large Axed Smith, who was relatively uninjured, validating his selection of weaponry.

“Aye, to the sentiment, but I question the plurality. Your weapon is as clean as the day it was forged, my friend,” the Greasy Smith said, not unkindly.

“Friend, I leapt heartily into battle, prepared to land and swing my mighty weapon in a circle until I breathed no more,” the Large Axed Smith responded a bit defensively.

“What accounts for your pristineness then?” both Back to Back Smiths pressed simultaneously.

Pause.

“Do you have other matters distracting you from a reply?” a Smith voice interjected.

“No, friends. I fear that my memory of my agility forgot my knowledge of my deteriorated body. This axe is quite heavy, and when I pushed into the air, it soared where I did not intend it to. I clung to it, lest I be exposed to the darts, and my torso was swung to align with the ground... I landed, hit my head, and this accursed heavy slab of metal deflated my air... I only just now awoke.”

Pause.

Then from below, the now familiar voice of the Greasy Smith was heard, softly at first but it quickly built to a crescendo...

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA”

The laugh was contagious, and glorious, and liberating and right. The Large Axed Smith, eternally grateful that on a day such as this he could bring joy to his friends, laughed loudest of all.

Brandishing his enormous weapon, the Large Axed Smith curtailed his merriment enough to call out, What say you, all, that we finish this world together? We lunge as one on our Greasy Friend's word?"

"AYE!" roared the replies, with hardly any coughs or wheezes.

The Greasy Smith began the Last Prayer. "*My time is done-*" but got no further than that first line before a grand shattering from the ceiling drew the attention of Tribe and little ones. A flying vessel had burst through, and surrounded by debris it created, descended rapidly on them. From its belly, boomed a familiar voice too loud to have been pushed out through lungs, but clearly distinguishable as the Tribe's.

"Hold, Smiths!" it cried out. "I am First Huntress, Advocate for the Tribe, and I declare on my authority that we are not at war!"

Another voice, shrill and squawky as a gull's, spoke as well, but the Smiths could not discern any meaning from it.

The vessel halted its dizzying path at the tunnel entrance, and a female figure who had apparently been perched on top, cleared the empty space to the ledge. She landed just to the side of the Rotund Smith/Shield and dashed into the tunnel, disappearing within moments.

"Was that Tali?" asked the voice of a Smith to anyone who would be willing to reply.

"Aye. I believe it was. Do you suppose she flies that ship?" a Smith replied.

"I would never underestimate her resourcefulness. She has found her daughter. I am certain it was her voice that spoke to us."

"She runs to her peril. The tunnels should be collapsing now."

"But she is so resourceful, surely-"

"No resource can halt a collapsing tunnel, friend."

"Is anyone among us still sufficiently agile to run after her?"

Pause.

“Hold, Smiths. There will be no more running this day.” First Huntress’ voice, proud and strong, but no longer supernaturally loud, was heard. After dispatching Tali, the ship had continued its descent. Little one soldiers had retreated somewhat, and the ship touched ground where they once held their position. A large pair of gates swung open, and a ramp extended downward. A lone little one child emerged, his hands outstretched; a blue rectangle glowed from his shoulder. He descended slowly and turned to face the little one soldiers. Again the squawking sounds came from the ship. The soldiers relaxed noticeably.

Then First Huntress appeared. She had to crouch deeply to exit from the same gates but stood to her full stature to step down from the ramp. The Smiths, while they had heard the tales, could not absorb the actual existence of a flying ship, nor could they account for the emergence of their Advocate from its belly. They focused instead on First Huntress’ appearance, as something tangible they could comprehend. Her trek to the exile cavern and subsequent disappearance was known to them, as were the fears and apparently justified suspicions of her mother. They noted she wore her travel outfit, but it had been stitched in many many places. Her skin, too, bore the markings of stitching—some narrow, some long. There was no dispute that she had recently suffered mightily. They also noted she wore the amulet of First Hunter but did not wield the Spear.

“My mother is reaching the Diggers’ with haste. If she succeeds, you will have a path to go home,” First Huntress told them.

“Where is your Spear, First Huntress?” one of the Back to Back Smiths accused.

“Lost in battle,” came her hurt reply.

“Then how are we to validate the authority of your words?” the other Back to Back Smith shouted.

“Aye, who is to say whether the true First Hunter is elsewhere Advocating for the Tribe while you sabotage their work as a broken tool?” the Back to Back Smith added in support.

“What cause could possibly entice me to run a course counter to the best interests of the Tribe?” First Huntress almost growled.

“We all know the legends... Kavra...” the Other Back to Back Smith responded, stepping away subconsciously as she uttered First Huntress’ true name. “You bear the marks of many many torments... There is a word for what these little ones do to the captured.”

“Torture? You are claiming that I have been tortured into compromising the marrow of what I care for? Heed me, brazen Smith... This once, for your willingness to sacrifice, and from my respect for all which I see fallen around you, your slight will be forgiven. But know full well that I am First Huntress, daughter of a First Huntress, who was daughter of a First Huntress herself. Smiths will accede to my direction, or it will not be the little ones ending your time on this world. Drop all your weapons. They will not be needed. Slough off your armor. It is heavy and impotent to resist the onslaught they point at you now. End the suffering of those who need it; my voice will join yours in their Last Prayer.”

Satisfied that only a true First Huntress could have spoken thusly without hesitation, swords of both Back to Back Smiths dropped clanged to the ground. They began unfastening their armor. The others followed suit, and a shining, metal pile of war discards grew, obscuring their view of the little ones. They were nearly stripped back to their travel garb when Tali, in full stride, shot from the tunnel; and using the Rotund Smith as a spring board, leapt unhesitantly into the air. She cut her form, spiking in midflight to a dive, landing and rolling to a crouched position facing the Smiths.

“DOWN!” Tali cried out, just as a white tube blasted from the tunnel.

Smiths, the abandoned armor pile, flying vessel, and little ones alike were engulfed in a deluge of ice fragments. The Diggers and Kin had beaten Tali. They had collapsed the prechamber before she could reach them, bringing down a crushing mass of snow and ice. The newly mobile avalanche selfishly sought avenues to prolong its rampage. It had embraced the tunnel with fervor.

First Huntress reflexively leapt up to the ship roof, catching Tali in midflight with the same instinct. They landed together and buckled down in the well-remembered embrace Tali had taught for surviving such collapses. Slanted to one side, leaning on an elbow, they formed a triangle wedge with their bodies creating an air pocket. Each protected the other's head with their free hand. Tali felt the seam of little one stitching along the base of First Huntress' head, and hoped she did not wince. In this way, they endured the outpouring, helpless to do more than simply hang on. They both did hear Chris' voice asking them if they were safe. He had managed to jump back inside the ship and was himself sheltered from the flow, but replying seemed futile given the roar around them.

As quickly as it began, the spigot of snow and ice drained away. They were not too deeply buried, so a few strong whips of their elbows opened an exit above them. First Huntress and Tali looked to the new geography around them. Had they not known what just occurred, it might have appeared that they were on an ordinary ice field. The pouring snow and ice had filled the commons floor up to a point slightly above the top of Chris'

ship. Somewhere below, smothered, and likely suffocating, were the remnants of the Smith army and their little one adversaries. Chris' voice had been constantly calling out to them. They had not been able to reply earlier so they had disregarded him. Accustomed as they had become to ignoring him as noise, it took a moment for them to notice him again.

“Tali! First Huntress! Can you respond?” he kept repeating.

“We are both perched on the roof of your ship uninjured, child,” First Huntress finally replied.

“That is great to hear, First Huntress... Brace yourselves. I'm going to lift the ship so we have an opening to reach any survivors.” And without a pause after they heard the words, the ship rose to parallel the ledge. Loose snow had accumulated and continued to trickle as a mildly aesthetic snowfall from the ledge lip. Planted unmoving, contrasted by the white, and now glistening impressively with shine after an intensely thorough scrubbing, the Rotund Smith still perched as sentinel.

Below them, amidst the uniform whiteness, First Huntress saw the snow tremble at various pockets. She was uncertain of the cause, wondering if she was merely witnessing a shift from the imbalance of the ship's rise, until a bloodied arm burst through... then another, then a leg. The Smiths were freeing themselves.

To the other side, she recognized the familiar blaze of many hot knives carving round openings in the blanket. The little one soldiers were freeing themselves too. A few had already wiggled out from their confinement and formed a defensive line, keyed supposedly to allow their comrades time to complete their escape unchallenged.

“There are many many survivors, but neither group can tend to them because of the threat of the other. We must neutralize the element of adversity immediately, or we will have more death. Tali, can you wait for me on the ground?”

“Yes, child. How do you intend to descend?”

“You will catch me.” Chris answered.

Tali jumped to the ledge and shimmied to the surface below the hovering ship. She looked up to see open sky through the hole they had punctured on the ceiling and the ship which engaged in the puncturing silhouetted. It took a moment for her eyes to acclimate to the contrast, but she saw Chris at the open gates tenuously leaning over the edge.

“You can do this right?” Chris' voice asked.

“Would it not have been better to have asked this before?” Tali responded.

“No, because I can’t land the ship without endangering the trapped, and I was afraid you might have said no,” Chris said as he stepped away from anything that could keep him aloft.

Tali watched him fall with hunters’ eyes. The child was clever and brave. He had chosen his descent wisely. He fell in an extended seated position, spreading his arms wide, legs together, providing a large surface for her to grab. She vigorously shook her hands to limber them and reached high for the plummeting little one, catching him evenly by his back and legs. Tali loosened her shoulders and elbows, cushioning his landing until she had halted him completely, and he stood.

“Nice catch,” he called out as he broke into a run towards the soldiers. “Tali, work on freeing the trapped by you. First Huntress, join her. I will assure we are not attacked and bring assistance when I can.”

Tali grasped the first hand she ran across and yanked mightily. A Smith slid out easily at first but jammed once her arms were outstretched.

“I clutch another. Pull harder, Tali,” She cried.

Tali did, and the tearing pain on the Smith’s shoulder grew with her cries for more effort. At a point, where Tali worried she was removing the arm at the socket, a second Smith’s hand appeared, clutched inseparably to the Smith who implored Tali so vehemently. That Smith fell unconscious the moment she saw that hand. Tali, released her, and with some difficulty, unclenched the hand holding the second Smith. She pulled him out as well. He lived but was also unconscious. She dragged them both out of the way, leaving the Back to Back Smiths asleep side by side.

First Huntress could be heard growling just beyond Tali’s line of sight. No doubt she was freeing bodies as quickly. More often than not, they came across bodies where the release from the ice was unnecessary. But with effort, ten relatively unmarred Smiths lay exhausted before them. Three more lived, but their wounds were excruciating and intolerable. Tali and First Huntress gathered around the first, an exhausted woman, her right side riddled with the never ending blood trickles from her face to her thigh. Her hand had been crushed as had part of her ribcage. From what First Huntress could see, she breathed on merely from stubbornness. Tali took hold of the softly moaning woman’s neck and braced for the mercy she was about to deliver when a hot white beam injected itself on the ice by her foot.

“HOLD TALI!” Chris voice boomed yet again.

Tali looked up to find Chris wielding a weapon similar to that which First Huntress had destroyed earlier. In line with him, bearing similar weapons, were many many freed little ones.

“He betrays us Mother!” First Huntress shouted. She had retrieved a spear from a fallen Smith. Armed and furious, she planted herself defiantly between her fallen and the advancing soldiers.

“No, First Huntress, I do not. Just hold! We may be able to assist your wounded,” Chris beseeched, immediately dropping the weapon to demonstrate his sincerity. Had the soldiers also committed that courtesy, First Huntress would feel slightly more assured.

“She is mortally wounded, child,” Tali said patiently as she would a newborn. “She is groggy and unaware. She will feel no pain unless your delay allows her consciousness to surface.”

“First Huntress was mortally wounded, Tali,” Chris argued, continuing his advance. Reaching First Huntress, ignoring the glaring physical disparity as well as her fury, Chris demanded, “Tell her!”

First Huntress stiffened somewhat. Her mind raced with the awareness that a crossroad had been reached. What transpired after was determined by the course she set this moment. Time slowed, then halted, frozen, awaiting her selection. She remembered her injuries and the treatment she received. She remembered Teresa the mender and her genuine and healing touch. No doubt, they likely possessed the magics to treat even wounds as severe as these, and they had already demonstrated their willingness to heal their enemies. What would the consequences be should she deliberately disregard the child’s plea? Most assuredly, the child’s abhorrence would match Teresa the mender’s. He would shift his allegiance from ally to adversary, and drop the restraining force he was imposing on the soldiers. They were already stressed to saturation. Very little besides Chris held their onslaught at bay. She, Tali, and the surviving Smiths would die, gruesomely, and likely with great pain. She was prepared for her own suffering and tacitly resolved that such a fate was what the Smiths accepted, but not wholly comfortable inflicting it upon her mother.

First Huntress was reasonably certain she could snap Chris’ neck before they dispatched her. Their brilliant, thoughtful, guilt-ridden leader would be gone, and perhaps maybe his insight that the Final Push was an enormous ruse would die with him. Perhaps the quiet elder’s claims that they could level mountains was simple bravado? Perhaps they could not see as well into the ice as they hoped. Although they had tried to halt it, The Final Push had been an undeniable success. Perhaps the Final Retreat could proceed to fruition after all. Even Tali’s failure at the tunnel would give the kin a chance to return

to Under Lake before the last chamber set out. First Huntress was sure that if she merely fulfilled the role she was expected to perform she would quickly find peace and the Tribe's history would unfold as they intended... And if the substantial collection of "perhaps" all lined up in her favor, then perhaps...

It could all still work.

Perhaps.

But what if Chris had revealed his suspicions through those accursed blue boxes to the quiet elder? Or what if other clever little ones had created their own suspicions? What if the quiet elder did not bluff and their machines of war could do precisely what he claimed? What if they could see through all their deceptions? Then every death which was unfolding, truly was as wasteful and unnecessary as the child claimed. What if the plan conjured by a frightened council of elders well over a thousand seasons ago was no longer relevant? She had experienced kindness and trust from little ones. They had experienced nothing but ferocity and death from them. The Tribe was blindly following a course for piloting a destructive storm plotted by long dead navigators with no leeway for modifications at all. Not for changes in the wind or sudden ice floes or anything. Nor was there even a contingent for checking occasionally to see if the storm really wasn't a storm after all. Originally, she had been convinced that to stand down was the correct course. Why was she hesitant now?

Because had it been she in Chris' position, she would not have shown mercy.

"Step back, Mother" First Huntress concluded. "Allow them to tend our fallen."

"You are certain of this, daughter?" Tali asked, but complied.

"I am. What would you have us do, child?" First Huntress asked Chris.

"We have mustered rescue forces. They are within this structure and are approaching now. Inform your tribe that we will be tending them and to not strike out."

Tali and First Huntress crouched to each living Smith and repeated that the Tribe was no longer at war. They explained that the little ones were here to attend their wounds. All agreed to comply. Most were too weak to muster resistance anyway. They proceeded without incident until nearly at the end of their task. Higher up, above the smothering blanket of newly blasted ice, they found a pile of avalanche polished armor stacked in a tight ball on the ledge near the tunnel where the Bore entered. Tali walked by it unimpressed, but First Huntress paused. She heard moaning. Between the two women, they dislodged a very rotund, but mostly uninjured Smith from a prison of apparently his own making. He stood stiffly, anger still burning in his eyes. First Huntress feared he

would not comply with her command, and braced to as mercifully as possible, subdue him, but the rotund man could not sustain the energy necessary to stoke his ire. It quickly burned off, leaving only gut-twisting anguish. He remained standing, unattended, unmoving, occasionally bleating a whimper that sounded like “farewell”. A ring of soldiers loosely watched him. Their weapons were aimed at him, but largely reflexively. No sentient being expected the sad rotund old man would ever be dangerous again.

Chris took the release of tensions to swirl his blue box into action. Little ones were pouring into the commons from all sides. Soldiers, unsure what to do next, their enemy still present but suddenly declared not to be, busied themselves with rescuing more of their trapped comrades. A very purposeful group carrying gurneys arrived to cart off their own injured. Others brought large hovering carts full of exotic machines to the Smiths. They unpacked tubes and ropes and many many other unrecognizable, but important looking things. Throughout, Tali watched Chris grow more animated and angry with his blue box. At one point, he nearly flung it away.

“Tali, First Huntress, the hostilities continue. We must go,” he finally called, exasperated.

## Chapter 23: Final Retreat

“How is there light here?” a child asked.

“It is the mushrooms. See?” the child’s mother replied. She reached against the brown rock, hesitated for a moment, then snapped off a section of the disc shaped fungi. She handed it to the child who enjoyed the novelty for less time than it took to snap it free. The mother took it back and returned it as best she could to the cave wall. She knew that some fungi reengaged. Perhaps this one might too. Regardless, they were still wet from disembarking from the chamber and too new to this place to litter it.

Theirs was one of the final chambers to arrive. Already the Tribe was spreading out to form the loose arrangements of the clans, and representatives for each were stationed at the riverbank to guide them to where they should go. The child asked one of four questions almost every newcomer immediately wanted to know. The other three were of the temperature (which was indeed noticeably warmer than the ice because the rock was dry), of the rock’s purity (which they were reassured, was quite pristine) and of why this had been kept secret from the Tribe (which the one Elder they saw deferred, promising that all will be clarified once the migration completed). The answers were sufficiently forthcoming to satisfy for the moment, but that of the rock’s unblemished nature also created a cautious tension. To permanently mar pristine land was an abomination. What they did now that they were on this terrain bore consequences on all who tread here forever. There was very little wandering. Given the chaos unfolding, that was not a bad thing.

Fish harvesters recognized some of the many fish zipping curiously around them in the Under River as they disembarked. They were, of course, sweet water dwellers, differing drastically in both appearance and flavor from their sea dwelling kin. Under Lake burgeoned with them, and some reasonably successful attempts to farm them in pools had been tried over the seasons. In those experiments, the harvesters quickly discovered that neither could a sea fish survive in the sweet water of the melting ice, nor could a sweet water fish at sea. Should one of these fish concede to the river’s push and venture downstream to presumably the sea where all waters end, the brine would strike them on contact sucking all their water out, leaving them to shrivel and die in what must be excruciating pain. A return journey against the powerful push of the current the Tribe had just fought through to the Under Lake would batter them to oblivion. These fish were essentially trapped within the Final Retreat, prisoners of the Under River. Saltiness and currents barricading them, segregated from the remainder of the world. Word of the fish’s confinement spread unsettlingly. Comparisons to their own predicament were inevitable.

Was the Tribe too now as trapped as these fish?

Clan leaders tallied their people. Runners were sent to check on each other and to inform the Elder recording arrivals. Nearly all were accounted for. By all reckonings, two chambers more, and the migration would be complete.

The Under River was only wide enough for one chamber to navigate at a time. The pattern the migration had taken was to send both laden and in tandem, then return empty in the same manner. Fighting the powerful current and the incline to retrieve the chambers manned only with the Smith helmsman was accomplished by inflating a series of bladders at the bow and stern to buoy the chamber sufficiently so winches connected to the forge bellows were sufficiently strong to yank them back. Both chambers were currently at the Final Retreat and had just been emptied of Tribe and content. The Smiths clanked the signal for the winch to commence, and one at a time, they disappeared. One more run then should reunite them all. The Tribe recognizing the finality drifted to the banks and awaited the final chambers' arrival.

Time passed.

Too much time.

The chambers had been reliably surfacing enough that their travel was predictable.

“Be at peace,” the Tallying Elder, who was definitively not at peace, assured, “They are merely ensuring that all is complete for this last journey.” He may have been more convincing had he not been drifting into the water squinting into the Under River’s mouth for any sign of the chambers.

“Was that a tremor?” asked a woman leaning against the steep bank walls.

“Aye, I too felt the ground shake,” acknowledged a woman sitting above her.

“Perhaps the river has collapsed,” a frightened voice proposed.

“Unlikely, we would have been inundated with a swell of water from the pinching rock,” someone tried to reply in a calming voice.

“A swell comes!” the frightened voice cried out.

All eyes turned to the Under River’s mouth. A swell was most definitively pushing out, but within it was the shine of metal. Rather than the water from a tragedy, the swell was the shoved displacement of an approaching chamber.

And it was approaching quickly.

Had several pairs of strong arms not pulled the Tallying Elder aside, he would have been slammed against the rising bow.

The chamber blew well past the usual resting area, which had kept it partially submerged. It roared ashore completely, stopping only when it finally crashed against the stone river bank walls, a full ten lengths further away. Exposed on the shore this way, it was frighteningly evident that much more than the speed of its arrival was wrong. The chamber was damaged. Large dents warped its roof and walls. The air pipe was severed; a bell appeared to have been shoved in the hole from the inside to hold the waters at bay. No sounds came from within, but slowly, feet appeared from the belly followed by legs.

A bloodied exhausted Smith helmsman flopped to the ground. He crawled out from under the chamber belly. Using a dented chamber leg as a crutch, he stood himself to face the Tribe. Thankfully, his injuries were more ugly than dangerous. His forehead was gashed, seeping more profusely than most other parts; one forearm was bent at an impossible angle, the cracked bone visible through stretched but unbroken skin. Menders were already running to him, but he shooed them away.

Pointing to the Under River's mouth, he shouted to all who could hear,

“SAVE THEM!”

“Save who, friend?” queried the nearest mender.

“How are we to save them?” the Tallying Elder pressed.

But the Smith helmsman was spent. He slipped to the ground, the accumulation of the pain from his arm, blood loss and exhaustion overwhelming him.

“The forge is overrun with little ones,” a deep sullen and familiar voice spoke. It was Second Hunter. He too had been in the chamber. His long straight black hair, soaking wet, covered his shoulders and back, partially hiding the large swelling bruises he was disregarding. “They spilled out onto the Under Lake shore as we were completing our boarding and attacked the chambers with bludgeoning weapons. Our chamber was already laden and descending when the air pipe dislodged. This brave Smith immediately plugged it with a bell. He held fast with his now shattered arm, steered with his feet while driving us to push hard. I exited the chamber, surfacing to the roof hoping to assist the others, but I was useless. Their weapons were projectile. All I did was show them our location. We were pummeled, and they never left the banks. I did not last very long on the roof. An impact threw me. I live only because where I landed was in this chamber's path. They yanked my stupored body inside. Before the blow I did see that the other

chamber was destroyed. We were further along. The other chamber shielded us. We live because they absorbed our blows.” Second Hunter fell silent after that.

“So if they have left this world, then who is it we were pleaded to save?” queried a trembling man’s voice. He had just exited the chamber. His mate and children did not travel with him because he had ridden here tending some of the more feeble of the Tribe.

No answer.

Menders tried futilely to revive the spent Smith for clarification. He did not stir. Second Hunter waded to the Under Lake’s mouth, took in a deep breath, and tried mightily to fight the current hoping to discern something, but he returned gasping and ignorant. Others tried- the best swimmers, the strongest among them, the cleverest. None made much progress against the relentless Under Lake push. A blackness descended. Worse than knowing of a horror, was not knowing. The Tribe was frozen. Other than the menders tending the wounded from the solitary chamber, all found a vantage somewhere to simply stare at the river mouth... Wondering... Hoping...Lost...

Then a bladder the size of a head surfaced, an inconspicuous thing compared to the width of the waters. Had so many eyes not been fixed longingly, it would have been missed. Unusually, rather than continue its journey, it halted, stationary, floating in place as if held from below. Second Hunter shook off the menders attending the bruises, which had blossomed to welts, and rushed to investigate. He lifted the bladder and found a rope attached to it that extended away into the current. He grasped it tightly, and he pulled. The rope gave line to a point and stopped taut. He tested to ensure there was no more give, then gave the rope three, sharp, quick yanks. As a starving fisherman, he waited, grasping the line expectantly. He was rewarded with three distinct matching yanks. Turning to the on looking Tribe, he commanded,

“PULL!”

Strong men and women splashed through the water finding rope and complied. They were waist deep in the river, so a foothold was difficult, but the currents favored them, and they were many. Each pulled individually until Second Hunter growled his efforts aloud, synchronizing them. The rope stretched so tightly it vibrated; foam frothed where it touched the water. There was fear that the rope may snap, but on a particularly anxious yank, there was a lurch. Quickly they recovered, lest they lose the momentum. They drove their thighs to burning, pushing against the rocky bottom continuously. And they moved a step, followed by another and another. Progress accelerated as those tugging at the fringe reached shallower waters allowing for a more robust return to their efforts. Soon, all were on sufficiently shallow ground to heave fully. They tired, but did

not relent. Whatever was on the other end of the rope meant hope, and whenever possible, one does not surrender hope.

“The river’s mouth darkens!” Second Hunter called encouragingly. His was the most advanced position. Wrapped at the anchor, the man with a mate and children missing cried out a thunderous roar, passing strength to all who pulled; and a cracked, beaten, dented chamber rose from the river mouth. A curtain of water flushed from its belly when it was brought to rest beside the other. As the curtain waned, several legs, blue and trembling, but standing erect, appeared. Some dropped to their knees and crawled free of the chamber to be embraced by the Tribe. Others were frozen in position and had to be pried free. They sputtered bits of their ordeal as they sobbed and hugged. In a patchwork of raspy, exhausted spurts a descriptions of the events of the final migration of the Tribe came to be known:

“Our chamber was pounded repeatedly!”

“Water came flooding in from a crack in a wall.”

“The water pushed our stores upon us. They cut and killed those unfortunate who were close to them.”

“We were drowning”

“We could not breathe.”

“But the helmsman, great will be his story, did not despair.”

“He would not let us leave.”

“”Stay!” he said. “STAY!””

“He promised to bring rescue, and plunged into the water.”

“We were drowning.”

“The bellows had ceased. The pipes no longer pumped air.”

“The water rose to our laps.”

“And there was noise.”

“Outside, screeches and rustling, outside.”

“Then nothing.”

“For so long, there was nothing.”

“And the water continued to pour in.”

“We plugged where we could with garments and cloths, but there was so much water.”

“Water reached our chest.”

“And the pummeling outside did not cease.”

“We were rocked.”

“Almost, our chamber toppled.”

“More died.”

“Then the Smith burst from the belly.”

“Hold a deep breath, and swim that way.”

“He pointed to the side with the largest crack.”

“And we did as we were told.”

“This chamber awaited, not two lengths away.”

“He had pushed the chamber to the water alone.”

“He could not have. It would require three to four strong,”

“Alone. He had no aid, yet the chamber appeared.”

“He was alone.”

“And we boarded quickly.”

“The task was easy without our supplies.”

“And there were so few of us.”

“Aye, so few.”

“Still the little ones attacked.”

“We were struck.”

“Aye, many times, and a crack appeared.”

“Small.”

“Small, but growing.”

“And we pushed. Mightily we pushed, with the noble Smith at the helm navigating us, we crossed over the falls and away from their weapons.”

“But we were damaged.”

“And so few.”

“And we had lost the bellows.”

“There was no air.”

“The Smith could not inflate the bladders to get us over the hump in the river.”

“We stagnated.”

“And despaired.”

“Not he.”

“No, not the Smith.”

“Aye, he never despaired.”

“There was a rope on the shelf.”

“The strong rope you found.”

“The only item on the shelves.”

“The one item...”

“Shelves were empty save for the rope...”

“And he tied one end to the beam closest to the bow.”

“But he needed a float.”

“Yes, there was nothing that floated.”

“So he tied the rope to his waist and again plunged into the waters.”

“He was gone a while.”

“Aye, and he knew he would not return.”

Silence...

“We waited as long as we thought his breath could hold and pulled him back.”

“And he did not breathe.”

“No, but he held a bladder.”

“He has swum to the bow and sliced free one of the useless bladders.”

“It was tied around his waist.”

“He could not carry it back against the current.”

“He had no way of telling us when to pull him.”

“And he feared we would yank prematurely, losing him the bladder.”

“So he tucked the bladder in and died.”

“He drowned.”

“We pulled his body back. And we inflated the bladder.”

“But it leaked.”

“It leaked in so many places.”

“Little ones had struck the chamber while it sat idle.”

“We found a section that could be shaped into a ball.”

“We cut a section into a ball.”

“And the rope attached to the ball with my belt.”

“His belt could grip the rope and ball.”

“We released the ball into the current.”

“His body rests on a shelf.”

“The shelf which held the rope.”

“There was nothing but the rope.”

“We will forever honor him.”

“The rope stopped asking for feed.”

“We despaired.”

“But then you tugged three times.”

“And we cheered.”

“And pushed so hard.”

“We pushed.”

“The chamber moved!”

“The chamber moved!”

“And we were saved.”

Chatter gave way to sobs of relief and cries of anguish for those who perished. The Tallying Elder piddled around, gently inquiring names and clans until he had a reasonable count. Twenty one of the Tribe were unaccounted. First Huntress and Tali never showed. All the Smiths save the one surviving battered helmsmen have by now perished, and he remained the one Elder. Given the violence at the Under Lake shore, he doubted his brethren still walked this world either. He shuddered at the phenomenal cost of their exodus. He wanted to lie down somewhere and sleep for a season, perhaps awakening to find he had been suffering a nightmare all this time, and the Tribe still enjoyed the blanket of secrecy. But rest was reserved for all those many many dead. He was tasked to continue living because he was the best of them at communicating. The Tribe needed knowledge now, but not just yet. Let them recover and mourn and reunite. There was nowhere else to go now. What mattered a short respite? He approached the stirring, sole surviving Smith.

The Smith had been mended well. His arm hung in a sling, and his forehead was stitched and sterilized with a salve. With his back propped against a wall, he sat eating a strip of dried meat, which he broke in two, handing half to the Elder. The Elder sat beside him, and they ate in silence for a spell.

“The rope in the chamber was his idea,” the surviving Smith said.

“A most reasonable precaution,” the Elder acknowledged.

“They think it a miracle, but it was merely reasonable planning. We Smiths are nothing if not reasonable,” the Smith answered and ruefully added, “and it appears that we Smiths are now nothing.”

“There is still you friend,” the Elder consoled.

“Oh, glorious consolation,” he laughed, but the jostling hurt his ribs. “What say you the advantage of being the sole Elder?”

“I envy my brethren. They will know more peace,” the Elder answered.

The Smith nodded with strong understanding. He looked around at this new, exotic land that until this day had been hidden from Tribe lore. It was warm here. Nothing near the baking of the forge, but distinctly more than the Tribe was accustomed to. He remembered how unsettling the heat had been to him, and how he had come to embrace it. Still, he had chosen to enter the forge, so he accepted the levy it demanded. None here had wanted to come. The Tribe all had been herded. They had compliantly accepted the decisions of ghosts, tearing themselves away from a place that had sheltered them and their ancestors for how many seasons? Five Hundred? A thousand? To do so willingly and at such a great cost humbled him. They had utter faith that the course the Elders and Smiths had plotted for them was necessary. He tapped the shoulder of the Elder who acknowledged the thought with water swelled eyes.

A librarian approached the two resting old men. He was alone but trailed by other librarians. The remainder of the Tribe sauntered back a ways but had crept up to within hearing range.

“Elder... Smith, a word?” the librarian asked.

“Speak freely, librarian,” the Elder responded.

“At your bidding, and deferring to your collective wisdoms, we have come to this mysterious place. Where are we? How long must we remain here? When can you speak to us of it?” he asked.

“I have eaten with my friend and sat enough to regain my strength. If you will gather, I will tell you of this place,” the Elder replied to the elation of the librarian. He sat. The remaining librarians rushed to join him. Mapmakers- not a little upset that this entire region was not only new, but they could not add it to their precious craft- followed. The rest of the Tribe in waves rolled in, eager to receive any enlightenment on their

surroundings. The Elder finished his meat strip while he waited for the Tribe to fully gather. The rustle of settling in waned, and he began,

“Our most profound apologies for hiding this place from you. Truly we hoped to never need reveal it. Where we rest now is within the rock of our Final Retreat, but once this was called Larso’s Cavern...”.

## Chapter 24. The Tale of Larso's Cavern

A most remarkable series of lucky chances led to the Final Retreat's discovery. For as long as the Tribe had known of the Under Lake, Smiths had been pulling interesting and exotic carcasses from the shore. This was a mystery because the lake itself sustained only a modest population of fish, and while occasionally, a few reached harvestable size, they never approached the massive bulk of the discoveries. More significantly, where a fish would be scaled, there was fur and skin. A partial resolution to the puzzle was uncovered by the explorations of a clever fish harvester who had become a Smith. He had dismantled a discarded boat and reassembled it piece by repaired piece on the Under Lake shore. The Harvester Smith spent much of his leisure time mapping out the lake bottom. Of note was the discovery that the dripping glacier above was not the sole source of the lake's water. Two small submerged streams wide enough to accommodate the boat, but simply too swift to navigate, also added their waters. The lake portion where these two streams fed in was quite deep. So deep he nearly collapsed his boat seeking it. Luckily, he was as stubborn as any Smith, so along with learning of the streams, he found a second secret of the land. Resting, frozen forever in the trough formed by the gently eddying waters were so many many skeletons of very large animals. He lingered at the bones long enough to recognize legs designed for holding weight, not for swimming. Such creatures could not possibly live on the land. The geography was too barren. The thought was that perhaps somewhere far upstream there were hidden caverns with all manners of creature living their lives within them. The thought was interesting and romantic, but given the powerful currents, impossible to explore.

Exploring downstream, over the falls was discussed, but not seriously. Then a most terrible and exciting and legendary accident occurred...

.. Larso got angry.

According to long ago accounts passed on forever, Larso was a big, extraordinarily strong man. Had he the desire, he may have been Hunter, but instead was quite content as a bricklayer. When prodded by friends to snatch the Spear, his deference was that his strength came at the expense of quickness, and the prodding would immediately cease. The only rival to Larso's strength, was indeed his slowness. Larso could shatter a stone boulder by squeezing it against his chest, but the task would take all afternoon, and he would happily and unhesitantly invest that time. His temperament and his strength were perfectly suited for chiseling bricks from the quarry.

Larso's father, equally strong, but impetuous, was a failed hunter himself, and lived his days in the Tribe without a defining trade. He dabbled in fishing, then switched

to cooking, and farming, but never clung to one thing. He was clumsy too, a poor complement to impetuosity. Over the seasons, his injuries accumulated, and he lost his ability to contribute. He told Larso he was joining the Smiths. Larso was happy for him. Smithing had become a much more prestigious craft since the discovery of the Gift Stone, and he knew some who were Smiths because he had laid brick at the ice to rock perimeter. They seemed hovelled more than their age should warrant, but they were always laughing. Larso was grateful that his father would finish his days laughing too. The following morning, Larso went to his father's home to help make the arrangements and found a young couple moving in. Larso's father had apparently forgone the slow transition to Smith, given away everything to this couple and taken himself down to the forge without bidding farewell to anyone. Larso's brothers laughed a resolute acceptance, but Larso was furious.

He followed his father down the path to the forge with the intent to drag him back to the Tribe for his proper farewell. At the lake shore, Larso paused to drink. He usually replenished his fluids with ice, but he was sweating, and that bothered him. He did not like the churned muddy shore water, so Larso waded in a ways, and leaned down. His foot caught a loose rock. Larso stumbled. Not knowing how to swim, he panicked, and in his frantic sloshings writhed himself deeper than his foot could reach. Then the current took him. Larso screamed but there was no one to hear him. Larso flailed enough to keep above water, but he could not fight the pull to the falls. He managed to take a deep breath, right before tipping over the edge.

Larso flushed through the falls. He banged and slid, helplessly whooshing along at the mercy of the Under River current for what felt like an eternity. Just when his lungs were surrendering their grip, the river relented and his head again broke the surface. He took his next breath in an enormous, open, and eerily lit chamber which became the Final Retreat. He was still afloat, and unable to maneuver to the shore against the relentless push, so he traversed the entire cavern flailing in the Under River. A few times, he touched the bank walls, but they were smooth and slick at those points, and not even his strong hands could maintain a hold. The river plunged again through a wall taking Larso with it. He did not have as large a breath as his first, or perhaps he was more fatigued, but his lungs burned for air, and none was available. He lost consciousness. The Under River transported his unresisting body bouncing and ricocheting until it vomited him out of a cave near the sea, but far far from the Tribe.

Larso awoke, utterly confused and disoriented, but miraculously unharmed. Three days later, he was found returning to the Tribe along the shore by a Hunter. Larso recanted his story to the Elders. They listened with bemused politeness, but riveted to keen interest when he spoke of the hidden cavern. After a quick consultation, the Elders commended him on his strength, and bravery. Curiously, at least from Larso's

perspective, they asked that he keep his discovery of the cavern private. They suggested concerns that a secret place with glowing walls may be too enticing for the wilder youth seeking an adventure, noting that he had barely survived, even with his renowned strength. Larso, more embarrassed that his clumsiness nearly killed him than proud of his perseverance, agreed that washing through Under River to the sea was a sufficient explanation. A feast was called, where Larso entertained the Tribe recanting his story with the one prominent omission. His father was brought from the forge to hear his tale, and they said their good byes with the appropriate decorum. Larso returned to the quarry, and lived a peaceful life, content to never consider the glowing cavern again.

Knowing that there was a hidden cavern a single breath away from the falls began the Elders' thinking for the Final Retreat. This was soon enough from their wanderings where some of those Elders had been children of the original settlers. Their fears of little one hostilities were engrained from firsthand accounts of their horrific and overwhelming cruelties. The Elders approached the Smiths with Larso's complete story, and a question;

“We would see this cavern...Can it be done?”

Smiths embraced the challenge. They fashioned a helmet indistinguishable from a bell, save for a long flexible pipe extending out the back. A hand churned bellows on the shore pumped in a continuous stream of air through the pipe. The first few versions were loud, ill fitting, cumbersome and so oppressively very heavy. Their only visibility was in the downward direction, from the open bottom of the bell, and that was frothed by the escaping bubbles. All early attempts were notoriously dangerous. Bells came off at inopportune times, a snag of the rope suggested to the shore that the explorer was in danger, leading to inadvertent, and nearly fatal rescue yanks. Yet Smith volunteers willing to don the untested equipment and walk across a lake bed over a submerged water fall were plentiful. Eagerness to enjoy the rush of exploring an unknown, was never limited to the young and strong, only opportunity. Elders had insisted on secrecy, granting the exclusivity of opportunity to the Smiths... And they were reveling.

Surprisingly, no stories of tragic deaths were in memory. Rather, the lore was saturated with accounts of so many many injuries. With each attempt, however, they improved their equipment, and extended their reach. Smiths kept track of their progress with a marker. A cane was forged with a flattened Gift Stone sphere base about the size of a foot. When set, the cane stood erect, with the curved handle protruding upwards, to about the height of an unbent adult's waist. Whoever explored moved along until they came to the marker. They would take it on, advancing it to their furthest progress. Sometimes, that progress was measured in mere steps, sometimes, just retrieving the explorer with life still flowing was sufficient reward.

Finally, after so many futile attempts, Smiths abandoned the idea that Larso's cavern existed anywhere except the air deprived, and bludgeoned head of the drowning Larso. They continued their forays anyhow. If asked, Smiths would claim they anticipated the Under River might eventually open a route to the sea, but if pushed, they freely admitted they loved the excitement of mapping a truly new body of water. One day, an explorer no different from the many before him, expecting no different an outcome more notable than advancing the cane, arrived at a place where the Under River current distinctly ebbed... The water warmed... And grew brighter... And he teetered from the sudden heaviness of his bell helmet.

This Smith, who merely by chance became the Last Explorer, reached upwards to adjust the weight, and sensed his hand breaking the surface. Excited beyond rational thought by the implication his drying hand suggested, the Last Explorer filled his chest with a lungful of air, and removed the bell. He opened his eyes to a room much larger than what the Tribe had carved in the ice, but less open. The light was dim here, but quite acceptable. He later aptly described the brightness by saying that he could read if he had to. The Last Explorer spun slowly around, searching for details of where he was, lost in the reality of Larso's ridiculous, yet apparently utterly factual story, until his lungs drained the air they carried of its usefulness, and burned for more. He refilled them with the cavern's, unsure of its quality, but having been mesmerized by the glow of success, there was opportunity to do not much else.

Thankfully, the air was good, a bit warm and dank, but rich with a sweet fermented smell suggesting strongly that life thrived in this cavern. The Last Explorer, keenly aware of the honor he was enjoying, ever so carefully carried the bell helmet as close to the river bank as his strength allowed. He did not get as far as he would have liked, but even the compromised location he settled for took more time than he would have preferred. Without the buoyancy of the water, the bell was quite heavy, and if he jerked it, his worried comrades monitoring the pipe might have considered it a plea to be retrieved. The Last Explorer did not want to be retrieved.

Methodically, patiently, reasonably as with all Smith acts, he worked the bell onto a rocky ledge before conceding to the burden. Half was still submerged, escaping bellows air gently gurgled from all sides. He unfastened the safety rope from around his waist, and securely tied it to the bell itself. Finally untethered from his old world, hesitantly, reverently, unconvinced yet that he too had not bumped his head on the same rock that had prompted Larso's vision, the Last Explorer took a step on a dry new world.

His first impressions of smooth, brown, striated stone were not very memorable. The Under River ran through rock that it was methodically eroding into more cavern. He was not particularly tall, and Smith life had begun to bow him. Fully erect, by his

standards anyway, his eyes were barely above the bank walls. He could tell the cavern was immense by the enormous heights of the many columns extending to the barely visible ceiling. He was certain there was detail and splendor, but -- until he had a more favorable vantage point -- not much else. To see, he needed to find higher ground. Treading softly, having no notion of the nature of the rock he was on, the Last Explorer left the banks, and continued his explorations. His uncertainty did not prompt much worry. This had to be a pristine place. After all, he pondered, how much suffering could have occurred in the belly of a mountain? He found and with a minimum of groans and clicks from his protesting body, scaled a wall to the entrance of a large cave. From there, before turning to gather the geography of what would become the Final Retreat, he invested a brief time meditating to fully hone his long memory. Upon his hopefully safe return to the Tribe, the questions of what he saw this day would be relentless. He knew this, because were the explorer someone else, his own questions would be quite loud. Behind him was a new world, another gift from the land, and it was his honor to first gaze upon it. The Last Explorer would do the honor justice. He would take in as much as he could for the consumption of his beloved Tribe.

All thought cleared, all outward projections of intellect halted. One by one, the Last Explorer opened his senses as a mouth opened for a meal. He became as he had been taught as a child, a net cast widely to capture the entirety of an event. The use of long memory had waned as he aged, but once learned, it was never forgotten. He remembered the way, rather his senses did, and he gratefully appreciated their good recollection. His eyes dilated to near black, his ears popped clear, his nose and throat purged their distractions. He was still dripping water from the river, so he did not miss wetting his hands and face to enhance the feel. To be certain, he moistened his fingers on the water dripping from his clothing. Attuned in this way to accept and recall the barest detail, the Last Explorer turned to examine Larso's discovery.

He peered over an enormous excavation at the center of a mountain range unknown to the Tribe until this moment. That this range was a discovery hidden from the map makers, indicated it was either too small to break the surface of the ice, or had been overrun and ground to obscurity. His current view from the cave mouth he had climbed to overlooked what he oriented himself to consider as a grand commons. If the dark spaces along the distant walls were openings similar to the one he stood on, a vast network of pathways extended from it in all directions. The commons was much larger, but less symmetrical than the Tribe.

Bisecting the entire room's length, continuing the relentless systematic expansion responsible for gutting solid rock into open space, was the Under River. Emerging from a hole onto a lagoon which was where the bell rested, it weaved a wide drunken path through the diameter, wiggling indecisively between the thick stone columns stretching

from the floor to the distant ceiling, splitting and rejoining at several points, before slamming directly into a wall. Fish similar to the inhabitants of Under Lake populated the river at every nook where the geography slowed the currents. In the illuminated shallows, contrasted by the orange rocks lining the river bottom, they were starkly conspicuous, and teeming with abundance.

These were sweet water fish, large, fat, slow moving, they had grown lazy in their predator free environment, and lived only to feed and mate and feed again. Their taste was not unknown to the Tribe. Lacking the brine of the sea, they were a novel delicacy. Some were occasionally harvested from Under Lake, and there were pools within rock that adventurous fishermen braved, but always for a treat. The numbers were never large enough to consider a staple. The Last Explorer considered that this cavern may change their frequency in the Tribe stew.

As his eyes accustomed to the eerie green hue, the Last Explorer expanded his already impressive original estimate of the commons size, and the number of caves. What he considered a giant space, was really two giant spaces that had merged. A second open area, substantial, but more modest, set slightly higher, and also skirted with caves, and supported by columns faded into view. Other than its size, its only true distinction was that the Under River did not wind through it.

As with most caves, the majority were merely shallow indents. The Last Explorer focused on a few which hinted of more. From one such cave, a musty smell touched his nose, as if there was slowly decaying food. Another sent warmth to his face and hands. One had a breeze that swayed the hairs of his forearms. Noises from another tickled his ears, barks and wheezes and the scurrying of many feet. There were caves where the stone was of color different than the others.

The Last Explorer absorbed all that the cavern divulged indiscriminately, until his fatigue dropped him to his knees. The urge to see more was still grand within him, but he knew the sensible thing to do was to bank his discoveries and return to tell of them. His friends at the bellows were likely starting to feel concern, and there still remained the more arduous return journey against the current. His knees loudly creaked their approval of his decision as he rose, making it eminently clear that he was not a Smith because he was too young and spry for other work.

The Last Explorer returned to the river, diverting his path only enough to discover the source of the glow, and to accidentally step into the mushy, fresh irrefutable evidence that animals did indeed inhabit this domain beyond the waters. The glow came from a circular mushroom growing in abundance embedded against any vertical edge their spore landed. Each slightly larger than his hand, they accumulated in clusters numbering in the hundreds. Their underbellies were the brown frilled textures he expected, but the bonnets

emitted a dim pale green light. Alone, the light would be barely visible, but the mushrooms were not alone. They grew everywhere, along the rocks, columns, the river bank walls, even up to the ceiling. He hastily snapped off a sample and continued to the bell.

Pausing at the river bank to wash his foot of the sticky brown dung that clung to it, looking back at his path, the Last Explorer was not a little embarrassed to find smudges of his soiled footprint marking his travel from where he misstepped to where he was. Not wishing the Tribe's first foray into a pristine place to be marred by a stain, he considered backtracking to wipe up his mess, but dismissed the notion since the creature who originally deposited it seemed indifferent.

The amount of evidence he stepped in suggested a rather large animal. Fearing more the irony of being eaten by an undiscovered creature before returning to reveal the undiscovered cavern, than the animal itself, the Last Explorer finally abandoned Larso's Cavern, donned the bell and rope, yanked his request for return, and commenced the journey back. He took with him the glowing mushroom, and his long memory impressions, leaving the Gift Stone marker prominently on the shore where his dung foot prints ended.

Returning was uneventful. The Last Explorer warmly greeted his comrades at the bellows, describing all he saw, heard, felt, tasted and smelled over an excellent skin of mead which had been long ago hung on a wall awaiting just such an occasion. Then he described it again to a gathering of Elders, Smiths, and as a courtesy, Larso. He refused to accept accolades for the good fortune he enjoyed, insisting that any Smith who would have ventured that day with that length of pipe would have done the same. He snuffed any protests, and descended into the warmth of the forge. He politely answered curious questions from fellow Smiths, but he never again repeated his story at length, nor did he ever return to the Under Lake shore. Enough time passed, that his name and description were lost from the story. He became known only as the Last Explorer.

Searching for a thing which may exist was a hobby; exploring a known thing was a task. Now that the cavern's whereabouts was verified, Smiths felt justified in dedicating significant resources to fortify the route. A more robust helmet with a durable harness around the chest, and a visor for forward viewing was forged. A bellows fitted with new flexible pipes was built on the lake shore. Powered by the legs of strong Smiths, sufficient air was moved to pump air to three Smiths at once. A lever slid a secondary gear in place to operate a winch attached to one end of a safety rope for retrieval against the current. They tested and retested their new device, and when finally satisfied, they answered the Elders;

“Don this helmet Elders. Follow our path, and yes, you would see this cavern.”

Elders did. One by one, escorted by a Smith, gurgling and wobbly, they sank below the surface, crossed the Under Lake floor, descended the falls (which to the puzzlement of the Smiths, an Elder had named “Hope Cascades”) and walked the length of Under River to the lagoon. Each Elder met Larso’s Cavern accompanied solely by their escort Smith, but they may as well have traveled in unison. Their reactions were identical. All wept openly with joy... And posed another question;

“We would know... Can we live here Smiths?”

Smiths asked the reasonable counter question,

“Why would we want to live inside a rock?”

“We ask not whether we shall, but whether it can be done.”

The clarification was not forthcoming, but it satisfied. Moreover, for even less forthcoming pretexts, the Elders further requested that Larso’s Cavern remain the private knowledge of the Smiths for now. Gladdened to retain their role as exclusive explorers, Smiths were only too happy to comply.

Smiths embarked on countless forays unwrapping the cavern’s secrets layer by layer. Traveling in pairs, reserving the third harness for emergencies, they worked slowly but continuously. From the moment of the Elders’ mandate, always there were Smiths in the Cavern. And as becoming any Smith project, the work was meticulous. A map grew in a side room by the forge carved by a mapmaker who chose Smithing rather than surrender her usefulness. She was aided by some apprentices interested in learning the craft as a curiosity. Too feeble to make the journey herself, the apprentices were her eyes. She sent them to the cavern with specific instructions on what to look for, how to count steps, how to engage the long memories while constantly monitoring for size and orientation references, and relied on their detailed descriptions. A second, cruder map mirroring the first maintained by the apprentices resided at the cavern itself. As portions were uncovered, and the map bloated, the vastness of the cavern became apparent. And another impression too, but one there was no way to truly confirm. Regardless, Smiths were certain that they tread on a place that was very very old. That was unsettling. Unlike ice and the sea, and even the sands on the shore, the rock here was permanent. The things in this labyrinth of stone tunnels and rooms did not grow here originally. Like them, they had arrived from outside. Perhaps the Under River had transported them all like Larso’s unwitting plunge, but a more plausible explanation was that this place once opened to the air. How much had happened in this place that they would never know of? How much pain had been inflicted locked forever in the rock? How much torment were they unwittingly absorbing with every step they took? Perhaps none, after all, surely only animals had lived here, and an animal did not hate. It hunted without regret or remorse,

and there was no benefit in allowing prey to suffer. Quite the contrary, the rationale step to securing meat was a fast kill. Thrashing wounded prey could damage a hunter, or worse, escape to die somewhere beyond their reach, wasting the energy spent. This consolation ran through the minds of the Smiths whenever their old dread of stone surfaced. Reason always soothed a Smith.

Their exploration uncovered so much newness. Some areas they discovered were teeming with vibrant moving life. Other areas were barren, and yet others were dead, but hinted that they long ago teemed. Skeletons of every size and shape, brittle fragments of fungi and what might have passed as stunted trees were strewn everywhere. Petrified by the steady seeping of mineral rich waters through their dead husks, they laid where they died, unmoved for a lifetime of lifetimes. It appeared that every attempt to suck an existence out of the meager offerings within the mountain had been tried. The failures were forever immortalized; statues of all that once lived dotted the interior landscape, an unforgettable testimonial to both the tenacity for life to find its rhythm in even the remotest of environments, and how unforgivingly difficult success was.

Smiths discovered wondrous things, more lakes, strange creatures, new minerals. They even found the source that plopped the feces the Last Explorer had trounced in. Deep within a path branching from one of the more elaborately compartmented caves was a pool fed by an eddy of the Under River. Lazing around the pool was a small pod of the slowest, fattest palest sea elephants ever seen. They were nearly blind, but did not miss their vision very much. The pool they lounged around appeared so crammed with fish, they could almost waddle on the surface, and not sink. Somewhere in its waters must lie a submerged route to the commons. There had to be. The feces was most definitively there's, and it was unimaginable that these floppy things could sit up for any length of time, let alone maneuver the narrow path.

Larso's Cavern was another new world possibly as diverse as the land itself, but as they learned more of it, there was another certainty too. It was far less bountiful. Without the sun and the vastness of the seas, a small population could exist, and even thrive, but adding more taxed the resources gravely, and they did not replenish anywhere nearly as quickly.

The system was fragile too. Smiths asked Second Hunter to test the resilience of the cavern by instructing him to venture to the pool, and take meat from the sea elephants. Second Hunter cordially complied. He killed an old male, hoisted it on his broad shoulders, and successfully braved the powerful return current, presenting his gift to the Tribe, who enjoyed the fatty sweet meal. The cooks were curious of the flavor, and the pale coloring, but Second Hunter was requested to deflect divulging knowledge of Larso's Cavern. He complied merely by stating truthfully that he believed the sea

elephant had been feeding from fish that did not swim in waters as briny as others he had brought. The cooks did not remotely believe that was sufficient explanation, but they liked Second Hunter and respected his need to hold some knowledge.

Smiths kept track of the sea elephants to determine how the removal would fare. They were saddened to note that they fared quite badly. For many seasons afterwards, the cavern sea elephants became thinner. A few died, and there was no sign of calves for a very long spell. The fish in the pool thinned as well. They had been relying on the carcass of that old male to sustain them. Without those nutrients, the fish numbers dwindled, which in turn starved several of the remaining sea elephants. Smiths approached the Elders with their conclusions,

“Sadly Elders, Larso’s Cavern cannot sustain us.”

Elders did not flinch at the answer. They had yet another question ready,

“If we cannot build a life... Smiths, can we build a sanctuary?”

## Chapter 25: The First Sea Battle

“Sanctuary?”

“A place of Final Retreat? Retreat from what?”

Smiths did not understand the question, and the Elders were as reliably not forthcoming as always. While working the forge, they were contemplating several possibilities explaining the Elders’ request, when their answers came to them as the most terrible times of the Tribe since they settled the land descended. In those early days, the Gift Stone was quite oppressively hot, and the Tribe relatively unskilled in smithing. Mining the metal was difficult work. Their mastery of the forge was raw as well, so even if they managed to acquire a goodly amount of good Gift Stone metal, they could not get more than a small amount of it at one time hot enough for molding. As such, there was simply not enough useful material to make boats.

The Tribe’s prowess in bricklaying fared better. They were quickly learning how to best exploit the ice for their building materials, so some of the wood from their ships that they cannibalized for their homes freed up to again become water vessels. The wood remained sturdy and reliable, but it was buoyant. Harvesting fish from the sea back then was constrained to the exposed inefficient surface. Fish harvesting parties consisting of several small boats would paddle out to an iceberg, where they would anchor and spend the day netting and harpooning cold food from the edges. They would finish their day, and return with their boats laden with fish. If the harvest was going well, rather than finishing early, and missing out on a run, a boat filled with fish would be paddled to shore to return empty again for more.

Just such a bountiful harvest was occurring on the terrible day. Truly, until the world became dark, it had been bright and wonderful. An enormous school of thick strong silver tuna had chosen to skirt the iceberg where the fishing party perched. The fish harvesters had filled their boats, and were stacking their catch on a hollow they had chiseled into the iceberg. One boat laden with catch was paddling to the shore when a fleet of little one sailing ships appeared around the edge of the land. The sails were fully set, and they glided at impressive speeds directly at the boat. As the remaining fish harvesters watched helplessly from the iceberg, the flagship, without slowing, rammed the fishing boat at the center, cleaving the light craft sloppily in two. Wood fragments, fish, and crew flew in every direction, forming a wide floating field of litter. The boat was utterly destroyed, without warning or provocation. The harvester boat held four. One was clearly dead. She floated on her belly, and should have been face down, but her neck had been so severely twisted, her face forever frozen in fright, stared at the sky. Three

other ships following their leader each hauled a survivor onto their wooden decks, one a mere child, binding them securely while they were weak from treading in the water. The crew entertained themselves by relentlessly tormenting their captives with their sharp nasty weapons. From all accounts, there was no motive for the torment. They simply enjoyed inflicting harm. As a group, the tormentors appeared to relish their captives' terror. Of particular offense to them was the lone surviving female. On her they took an enhanced cruelty, poking her female parts savagely with the tips of their blades, careful to avoid the ropes they constricted her movement with. Her cries for mercy were unheard over their laughter at her suffering. Enough of the old world was remembered to give that practice a name -- torture.

The tormentors would have tired of their twisted play eventually, and simply tossed their captives overboard to drown, but one of their sailors noticed the Gift Stone amulet the child wore, and snatched it painfully from his throat with a chop of his blade. The child's screams were washed out by the riotous scuffle that ensued as the entire crew of the little one ship set upon one another to claim the amulet. They were mad with desire for the useless trinket, a mere child's decoration. They stripped the child searching for more, and found a Gift Stone buckle, sparking more violence. Gift Stone metal drove little ones more insane than they already were.

Their leader watched the melee, smiling mirthlessly as his own crew slaughtered one another. He ended the confrontation by firing a round ball from a tube into the head of the crew man currently holding the amulet. He walked to the corpse, snatched the amulet with both hands for himself, and disposed of the body of the man he just killed by kicking it overboard. The leader approached the child, grunting from the weight of the amulet, which was about the size of his head. He held it close to the child's face and made it known he wanted more. The boy did not reply. He did not know where more was. This amulet was a present from an aunt who these creatures had just killed by ramming a ship over her. The leader was not at all satisfied with the child's response, and he yelled something to his crew. They tied the child's hands and feet to a rope, and threw him over as well, but he never reached the water. Instead, he dangled from one hand and one foot against the ship's hull. He felt a tug on his other hand and foot, and fought mightily, but futilely as they wrapped his body around the bow. A rope came down encircling his neck. In short time, he was straddling the bow of the little one's ship, receiving excruciating poundings every time it smashed through the waves in the turbulent seas. Between gulps of air, he saw two others also bound and decorating other ships in the same manner. They were heavier than he, so they sagged deeper. The child hoped they would soon snap free and leave this world enveloped by the peaceful darkness of the deep cold waters, but the monsters on those ships were not about to allow such a mercy. They had leaned over the sides and impaled the forearms and calves of the suffering harvesters with swords, hammering the blade through muscle and skin into the hull until only the hilt protruded.

In all, the little one ships numbered ten. The fish harvesters had but three boats, one of which was floating in splinters. They had not been seen yet, but would certainly follow the fate of their unfortunate brothers and sisters if they attempted to paddle to shore. And they were too far out to swim. One harvester, the eldest brother of the captured and tormented child, and kin of the others who suffered, shook with uncontrollable frustrated rage. He was essentially a kind man, but known for his temper flares. The harvesters occasionally bristled at some of his tantrums, but tolerated them because he was so apologetic afterwards. He was also generous with his broad back and shoulders, lightening the load for the rest. They had seen him angry many times before, but those were mild warm breezes compared to the white hot rage flushing through him now. He was rage embodied.

A cry, primordial, pure, unrestrained poured from him as he fastened a strong rope to the end of his harpoon and the other to his waist. Enough of his mind remained outside the hot anger to gauge the wind, and double check the knots, but little else. Harpoon high in hand, he set into a full run to the iceberg's edge and hurled a mighty throw at the nearest attacker. The harpoon soared across the waters and plunged through the hull skewering the ship. His momentum carried him over into the water, and he disappeared momentarily. The rope quickly went taut, and creaking from every plank, the little one ship listed sharply to one side. The Angry Harvester shot out from the water, and was whisked away. The remaining harvesters watched as the ship dragged him across the sea, and cheered when it became apparent that he was moving steadily up the rope hand over hand. After their unprovoked savagery, there was little room for pity for the creatures the Angry Harvester was hunting. The harvesters did wince with apprehension when they considered what would transpire when the Angry Harvester reached his destination.

Apparently, on the shore, the befoulment of the waters did not go unnoticed. First Hunter was at the cliff watching the battle. From his high vantage, he had seen the little one ships approaching from far off. He had sent word to the Tribe that a danger was eminent before racing as fast as he could to this place. Enraged at both the violation, and his inability to arrive promptly enough to prevent it, but measured as a First Hunter should be, with his hunter's senses, he studied the little ones movements while moving along the cliff's edge until he arrived at a favorable position to jump. The Angry Harvester's attack had drawn the little ones' attention to the iceberg holding the remainder of the fishing party. Perhaps convinced that fish harvesters also carried Gift Stone metal, they were attempting to turn to confront them as well. Their ships were at full clip, so the turn was slow, and wide, unwittingly skimming some vessels close enough to the shore to fall within First Hunter's leap. They were singularly focused on preparing to battle the harvesters, completely ignorant of any danger from above. First Hunter gladly exploited their stupidity. Backing up several steps from the ledge, he ran

with all the speed his powerful legs could churn, and using his spear as a spring pole, flew into the sky attacking a little one ship from above. He landed on the deck near the bow, crushing through the flooring. The ship's bow dipped deeply from the sudden increase in weight, then bounded nearly vertically as the sea's buoyancy rejected the submerged wood. Little ones unprepared for such a violent lunge were flung far over the sides. Masts cracked, and water poured into the hold. First Hunter held his position with a hand firmly on the stump of a mast, and emptied the ship of the few remaining crew who clung to it with his long spear.

Completing this kill, First Hunter turned to the next vessel. It was one of the three who held a captive. The bound female, he hoped with the greatest intensity was already dead, hung limply at the water line. Her arm had been torn free of its painful piercing, and she flopped violently with every surge. She was large, and the blows her limp flailing form inflicted on the little one vessel damaged the ship as much as her own body. The bow masts were gone, dragging in an impossibly tangled nest of rigging. A wide, and deepening dent encompassing the upper hull and adjacent deck steadily growing with every upward surge that hammered her head and torso on it. Her tormentors had not anticipated this and were working furiously to sever her free. First Hunter assessed that the ship was fatally wounded. He took a grim satisfaction that the dead harvester was the instrument of her tormentors' execution.

Another ship, smaller, unencumbered with captives, and therefore more maneuverable, slid parallel to the pummeled ship attempting to assist in releasing the corpse that was crushing its sister vessel. First Hunter was close enough that he could gain a grip if he dove to it. Without hesitation, he leapt, but traveled less than he expected because his platform was rapidly sinking, and yielded to his shove more than he had anticipated. Nearly missing altogether, one outstretched hand touched and clung to rail. His extended frame smashed against the side, cracking a significant dent. The sudden introduction of his weight, listed the ship, sliding little ones against rails and masts. First Hunter swung his spear around, planted it deeply into the deck, and used it as a handhold to quickly shimmy onto the ship, rolling over surprised and screaming little ones. Reflexively he stood, and became entangled in one of the ship's billowing sails. Tearing and crouching himself free took enough time for little ones to regroup. They attacked while the fabric blocked his sight. Their blows were sharp and persistent, but shallow, and no higher than his thigh. Wide, blind swathes of his spear cut and bludgeoned his assailants long enough for him to unravel the nest of sail and rigging he had accidentally acquired. His first clear view of the deck showed that his blind offensive had been surprisingly successful. The sea had claimed some little ones when he boarded, and his unguided spear had dispatched most of the remaining. Only one pocket of survivors stood. They were huddled at a nook by the stern, crouching around a small black metal

cylinder which held a flame. First Hunter, not wanting to repeat his earlier mistake, crawled under the partially shredded sails towards the last kills of this ship.

Then there was a boom.

The deck fogged with acrid smoke, and First Hunter heard before he felt the upper bone of his spear arm crack. He had been leaning heavily on it. The sudden injury jarred his support and his jaw banged the deck hard. Quickly, he regained the crouch, and inspected his newly injured and increasingly useless arm as the wash of pain poured into his head. He found a small, very hot ball firmly embedded. Picking with his fingers, he removed the ball, and examined it. He compared the ball to the smoldering opening of the metal cylinder, and drew the logical conclusion. They had shot it through the air at him. This was their attack. And by their terrified looks, they had anticipated a more fatal result. While not successful, it did damage him. First Hunter needed a moment to disregard the pain, before he could continue. He dropped the ball on the deck, and was mildly surprised it did not roll, given the steep pitch. The ball was dense enough that its impact dented the deck, forming a crater where it now rested. Fixing a quick stare directly at his adversaries to prolong their petrified immobilization, he focused on the wash overwhelming him. First Hunter allowed the pain free reign for its course, and then slowly purged it from his consciousness by replacing it with thoughts of his surroundings. This ship was listed heavily to one side, and would soon be crewless. The recoil when it righted after his landing, had ensnared the sister ship's masts. Both ships were locked together. The sister crew was still furiously cutting and chopping to free the body of the dead captive that was sinking them, but their work was diluted by the new entanglement. The combination of his attack and the damage the sister ship took from the female's pounding had veered the fused vessels' course to an arc which will eventually crash them on the rocks near the shore. First Hunter's consolation that he need not worry of his own rescue was tainted because it meant that the several ships further out already beyond his reach and stretching their span would escape his wrath. Even with two good arms, he could not swim to them.

His pain smothered around the time First Hunter heard another barrage of wood giving way. A splintered mast he had been leaning on snapped, and fell through several layers of sail, rigging and wood, landing flat on the sister ship's deck, permanently dashing any hope that little one crew held of escape. A silence fell. Little ones recognizing the futility of their attempts ceased their frantic shouts, cuts and hammerings. The mast's fall, listed the two ships even more acutely together, steep enough to dislodge the embedded ball. In the ensuing quiet, First Hunter could hear the sound of the ball rolling along the ship's width, cracking through the railings, and plunking into the sea.

The ball's impact on the water acted as a trigger, springing him back into movement. He lunged dead ahead, his spear centered, and straddled wide in his weaker hand decimated the frozen little ones. Their flimsy bodies crumbled as the shaft struck them mid chest, gathered them up, and carried them away from their smoking weapon. They splattered against the deck, flattened at the point of contact by the strength and size of First Hunter's attack, instantly dead. First Hunter was sorry about that. He abhorred pain as much as anyone in the Tribe, but these monsters had needlessly inflicted so much on ones who would never have shown malice, he had hoped for a bit more suffering. A quick look confirmed he now sailed a ghost ship.

First Hunter, still had his balance, but was aware that with a solitary hand, a sudden lurch would be precarious, rather than leaping, he crossed to the sister ship with one carefully placed step on the just created mast bridge. Remembering the entanglement, he crouched low, spear extended, anticipating another smoking ball, but the crew did not retaliate. Their ship was low enough that the listing brought water in from the sides as well as the massive hole pounded into the bow. Before he stepped on board, they had been defeated by the corpse of the female they imprisoned and tortured so heinously. Cowered, and pathetic, they knelt, awaiting death.

First Hunter ignored them. He worked to the bow, already low with the added weight, it sagged more and more as he moved to the dead harvester. Reaching her just as the scraping of the bottom on rock commenced, First Hunter wrapped his functional hand affectionately around the female's face to protect her from the impending damage of their beaching. As he hugged in, the soft pulpy bloody mess that was the back of her head gave way. There was not much blood, since the seas had been constantly cleansing, but gravel rattled where skull should be. First Hunter braced for impact, and for retaliation. Surrender or not, the violation he embraced would not be ignored.

The two ships slid to a halt abruptly. The sister ship, closer to shore, and riding much lower, struck first, whipping the other around. Neither weakened ship could withstand this final stress. They did not so much fling debris as become debris. Their entire structure, including the pathetic crew, exploded in a wide radiating arc. First Hunter held fast to the body, protecting her from further damage by leaning to a side. At the end of the impact, she was finally free of her imprisonment, not because she had been undone, but because her prison was reduced to litter.

First Hunter heard some quick high pitched yelps followed by blunt impacts. The Tribe was here. They had followed the attack from shore, and were eliminating the few little one survivors. They would tend to matters now. First Hunter's arm ached profoundly, and he knew his role in this fight was through. Still, he had strength to complete one more task. Using his one arm, he set about freeing the slain body of any

vestiges of the prison that killed her. Drawing a long sword from her calf, and many many splinters from the nest of her hair took some time with one hand, but no one else came to assist, and he managed. Satisfied finally that he had erased all connection to the little ones from her. He saw the victim for the first time as an individual, more than merely a member of the Tribe. On her back, she appeared nearly uninjured, and quite beautiful. She was young, probably not a Fish Harvester herself, but more likely their daughter, brought along because she was strong, and could help, but also because they probably thought she would enjoy an adventurous day on the iceberg. Silently, he cursed the monsters capable of wracking pain on such innocence. He knew not of the parents' fate, but should they survive, he would spare them the horror of transporting their pulverized daughter back to the Tribe. Hoisting her body as tenderly as he could with his one hand, First Hunter lifted her as he would a child. He draped her gently over his shoulder, and began his return journey to the Tribe. At one point, someone had taken notice of First Hunter's load, and quickly draped a hooded cloak over the girl to cover the open collection of wounds.

At sea, the Angry Harvester was closing in on the ship he harpooned. All the ships were turning. He realized that if their arc continued, and he could somehow gain some maneuverability, he could perhaps reach another. That seemed prudent because the impaled ship's crew was desperately attempting to sever the rope he was tethered to. He was uncertain he would cover the span faster than they could cut. The Angry Harvester bent and shifted his legs gauging their effectiveness as rudders, and he found to his satisfaction that he could somewhat control his position. Arching high to find the nearest vessel, he put his idea to work, and abruptly bent his legs and torso. The water resisted the new position so strongly, he lost his grip. Fortunately, he had tied the rope to himself, and after a bit of imbalance, reoriented himself on the surface. The new, more distant position actually helped him. The crew had stupidly paused their attention on the rope to jeer, and he was now in a much better angle to strike a nearby ship. He repeated his attempt but more slowly reacquiring the bent position. The water's push was still strong, but more moderate. He began sliding to one side in a wide turn. His new trajectory would bring him behind another ship, slowed because they had attached the male harvester to the bow. The rope slid on the surface and grabbed the new ship, instantly tangling around the rudder. The Angry Harvester felt a sag as both ships suddenly attached and slowed. He quickly continued his arm over arm run and reached the closer ship before the crew realized what had anchored them.

Unfastening his knife from the sheath on his leg, the Angry Harvester cut the rope around him, and wrapped it tightly on the rudder. Without hesitation, he reached for, but missed the rail to board. Noticing, the rail was lower on one side, he held the knife in his mouth and moved along the hull until he found a spot he could grab. The next few instances were reflex. He did not recall, but he must have sprung over the rails, and

slaughtered the crew. All he remembered when later speaking with the Tribe was a boiling sensation overcoming him, and a loud scream, that frightened even him. The next memory he held was that he the sole living being on the deck. In one hand was a little one clutched by his crushed head. His other hand held his upright knife with a little one skewered through. He was bloodstained, but the blood was hardly his. He faintly recalled that sounds came from the waters, so he assumed many of the crew jumped overboard rather than confront his outrage. He dismissed their presence. Even if these monsters had consideration enough to want to rescue their own, he rode the rear vessel of their fleet. No other ship could reach them in time, and the shore was too distant for even him. They would soon perish in the cold unforgiving waters.

The Angry Harvester rushed to the bow to find the imprisoned harvester still alive. Through excruciating effort and pain, he undid the ropes, yanked out the swords, and managed to somehow rest the poor fallen man on the deck. He breathed. He bled, but for reasons that would never be known, he had been less injured than the woman and child. The Angry Harvester made him as comfortable as he could, and turned his attention to the remaining attackers.

From the distance, several areas of attention caught his eye. Near the shore, two ships were locked and sinking. Bounding between them, the Angry Harvester was heartened to catch a glimpse of First Hunter. He followed his rope and found it was still tethered to his original prey. The other ships were heading to the iceberg with the harvesters. Try as he may, he could not think of a way to help them. He would leave their rescue to the resources of the Tribe. His remaining tasks would be to return the injured harvester to the Tribe, and to ensure the tethered ship never fought anyone ever again.

The Angry Harvester leaned over, and snagged the rope. He climbed to the ship's foredeck, curled the rope around the fore mast, and he pulled. The rope remained still, so he pulled again. This second time, the ship nudged. A few pulls later, it was pointing towards the tethered ship. He unwound the rope from the stressed mast. The bow now pointing where he wanted to go, he resumed pulling in sharp, jerky snaps. No effect seemed to be resulting from his efforts, but he did not relent. Finally, nearly ready to abandon his task, he felt enough sag on the rope where he needed to adjust his grip. Encouraged that something was happening, still seething with anger, he pulled on. Sea distances were deceptive, but he was certain by the growing length piling on the deck at his feet that each jerk decreased the distance between the two vessels. He pulled on.

At a point where even visually, he was certain that they were close, the Angry Harvester heard a boom, and a moment later, a mast on his vessel cracked. Smoke appeared on the tethered ship's deck. Another boom, another crash, this time on the deck

behind him. More smoke appeared. The little ones were attacking him with something they threw from the tethered ship.

Boom!

And a mast behind him fell forward, nearly landing on his unconscious shipmate. The Angry Harvester realized that they both were too exposed. He dropped from the foredeck, to the main deck, made a quick adjustment to better shield the former captive, then, laid on his back shielded by foredeck's support wall. He placed a foot on either side of the doorway leading to the quarters whose roof he had just been standing on, straddling the frame, he silently hoped little one construction was sturdy, and heaved on the rope. At this angle, with his legs engaged, a much more perceptible amount of rope conceded to the pull, charging him with more zeal. The booms continued. What he now knew from the various near misses were fast moving hot metal balls, crashed around him, sometimes quite close, other times harmlessly in the water. The Angry Harvester ignored them all. He pulled on. His hands were bloodied from the rope's chaffing. His legs ached from exhaustion, his heart and lungs bilged furiously trying to keep the muscles he was taxing so gravely fueled. He ignored all of it, and pulled on. By dropping to his position, he was somewhat shielded from the little one attacks, but he was blinded too. The foredeck that protected him also obstructed his view. To see, he would have to cease pulling. He was certain that if he stopped, he would not have the strength to recommence... So blindly, exhausted, bloodied, he pulled on. The attacks shattered wood around him. The unconscious harvester took a hit on his foot. He moaned softly, but mercifully did not awake. And still, the Angry Harvester pulled on.

The booms were very loud now. He smelled the smoke, and he heard the shrill squawky panicked voices of those he was about to kill. Then he felt a mild bump, and some splintering. Immediately, the Angry Smith tied the rope to the closest mast he could find and leapt to the foredeck.

Boom!

Little ones fired their weapon that shot the metal balls, but he had anticipated their attack. The instant his feet landed on the foredeck surface, he jumped sideways into the sea. The ball whizzed by him harmlessly, cracking a section of decking at the stern. He twisted in mid jump, to flop flat on the water. His arms and now his legs shook from exhaustion. He did not trust them to carry him to the surface should he sink. Quickly, he thrust his hand, snagging the slack of the remaining rope, completed the shimmy and was reunited with his embedded spear. The knot he had tied was down to a finger's thickness of thread. The little ones had nearly sliced themselves free, but apparently abandoned their hacking to concentrate on their impotent metal balls. It was a costly stupid mistake made by the frantic. How fortunate for him that their cruelty was matched with

foolishness. He leaned his weight on the spear, and the little one ship listed to him. He heard shouts of panic from above, and the sliding of metal on wood. A black cylinder burst through the rail above him.

BOOM!

The cylinder exploded with noise. The Angry Harvester heard a zipped splash behind him. He realized that this was the weapon they used to throw their metal balls. Along the sides of the hull, he saw hatches, all which had similar but larger cylinders facing out. If they were armed with so many weapons, why had they shot so sporadically? He had no time to consider his good fortune. A series of popping sounds came from the rails. His shoulders and head felt tiny, but sharp stings. A few of them drew blood. The surprise attack forced him to release the spear, and the ship righted itself knocking back his attackers. The cylinder as well, slid from view. An idea he could not help but find humorous came to him. He reclaimed his spear, and leaned the ship again.

Screams.

When the cylinder protruded, he released, and the ship rocked back...

More screams.

He timed his reacquisition of the spear to coincide with the maximum tilt, and was rewarded with a much more dramatic list. The cylinder thundered overboard through the weakened rail, disappearing under the waters. And he released. The ship shot away, and he heard crew falling into the water. And he again leaned on the spear.

Through a steady rocking, he was evacuating the little one ship of its crew, and decimating the fighting strength of those who clung to it. The amplitude of the rocking was so extreme now, the sails were touching the water at the full tilt. The Angry Smith continued this rocking tactic for a good long time. It was steadily achieving his goal, and required little effort on his part other than just holding on. He eventually regained sufficient strength to snag a mast when it commenced its next swing, and used it to lift himself out of the water. He released his grip when the mast was vertical, landing lightly on the little one deck ready to address his adversaries, but found only a few, who were in no condition to do more than moan as he casually swept them into the sea with his foot.

Without his rocking, the ship eventually stabilized. The Angry Harvester assessed his circumstances. His battle had taken him far from the iceberg. He could not even see his fellow harvesters. The land was visible, but too distant to swim, and he could not abandon the injured man. He looked back on the ship he came on, and saw how extensive the damage from the metal balls had been. Pocked holes along the hull,

especially near the bow, were letting in water. The ship rode low, and would soon sink. Had that been their intent? Were they trying to sink him? Did they not realize that if they sunk a ship they were tied to, they were doomed as well? And why did they only throw their projectiles from the one tiny weapon on their deck while their arsenal laid idle below?

The questions were not relevant to his current problem, so he dismissed them. Regardless, even impaled by his spear, the ship he currently stood on was clearly more seaworthy. Remembering the frayed knot holding them together, he briefly returned to the water to retrieve his spear, and better secure the two vessels with his rope. On the better ship, he wondered if any little ones remained hiding within the ship. He doubted it. The rocking was violent enough on the decks, below with so many more walls and objects to be crushed by, they would have been bounced and churned even more vigorously. Still, he needed to be certain before transferring someone helpless. He opened the hatch to the quarters below and found it empty, and at least one answer.

The many weapons he knew were there, sat on fixed rails. They had some lateral movement, and they could be tilted slightly, but unless the ship was broadside, they were impotent. He had been stalking this ship from directly astern. How fortunate for him. How frustrating it must have been for them. How glad he felt that he had frustrated them.

The Angry Harvester used his spear to prod the two ships parallel. From the foredeck, he snapped off the mast and with the rigging and sails still attached, crashed the cross beam like a pick onto the sinking ship's deck. He repeated this with the aft mast. Securing his tangled mooring, as best he could, the Angry Harvester stepped across to the sinking ship. He retrieved the still unconscious harvester to the better ship, setting him as comfortably as he could on the deck, and then sliced off the moorings with his spear. The two ships immediately drifted far apart. He had been on water long enough to understand the separation was relative. The heavier, sinking vessel with no sail remaining was not moving much. The main mast of his current craft was still fully unfurled, and pushing him along a course parallel to the shore. Given that it was seaworthy, and moving on its own, he wondered if he could steer it.

The rudder was definitely at the stern. He had seen it as he stalked. On the deck, nearly directly above was a large spoked wheel with handles all around. He chanced a few turns, and distinctly felt a course change. The sails flapped their adjustment to the wind, water built up on the landside of the ship. This was definitely how the ship was guided. He knew because he had just turned it away from where he wanted to go. The Angry Harvester corrected for his error. He set the course on an arc where the distance between shore and his position would eventually pinch off. The Angry Harvester inserted his spear between two spokes to prevent it from spinning.

He sat. Nothing left to do now but wait. The Tribe was very far from where he was, and would be even further by the time he reached the shore, where an arduous journey laden with someone injured awaited. Out of tasks, out of enemies, out of fuel, the rage within him extinguished. He had no distraction but the lapping of waters against the hull.

The Angry Harvester, who would never be angry again, wept for his dead little brother. A snuffle at first, a small peep of sadness for the snuffing of such a joyful life, he built steadily, escalating by the time he thumped the shore to a crescendo of unrestrained mournful wails of sorrow. The Never Angry Again Smith, still crying loudly and openly, lifted the injured harvester over his shoulders and commenced his return journey.

They found him, still crying shortly after. A rescue party had been running steadily along the coast tracking his battle. They relieved him of his load, and escorted him back to the Tribe. He did not cease his lament the entire journey, and slept two days under the menders' care. When he awoke, the menders would not inform him of the fate of the remaining harvesters. He numbly accepted their censorship, with only a small note that his trackers had witnessed enough of his battle for it to be known by the Tribe, yet he was not to hear of the fate of those he fought for.

It was First Hunter, arm in a sling, who came to his side, and explained that all the harvesters were lost.

The little ones had discovered them on the iceberg and brought their ships broadside. They rained a storm of their accursed metal balls until all the harvesters were either dead or incapacitated. Afterwards, on rowboats they pillaged the dead and wounded of all Gift Stone, and left the bodies to rot, and the injured to suffer with them. The Tribe took two boats with the strongest archers, and managed to eliminate one other ship, but still the rest made their escape. The dead have been laid to rest. Of the original party, only he and the harvester he rescued lived. First Hunter congratulated him on his bravery, and returned him to the quiet of his room.

A council was called.

First Hunter spoke of the unprovoked ferocity of the little ones.

Elders and Smiths of very old age recalled stories told to them by their grandparents, verifying that the relentless blind savagery was not unique to these attackers.

The surviving harvester spoke, of their madness for Gift Stone metal.

The Angry Harvester was present, but notably silent. His battle had been told and retold to all in the Tribe. He was showered with accolades, and he politely acknowledged their gratitude and compliments. None of which would bring his little brother back from his unnecessary and painful fate.

Elders met, and declared that they could no longer rely on their remoteness for safety. The little ones were ravenous, selfish, and mad for Gift Stone. They would never be satisfied. Preparations must be made for the return of these monsters.

Smiths set to work cooling the Gift Stone with snow for more extensive mining. Using the rusting, useless weapons they had stockpiled in a room as templates, an armory of sturdy, eternal Gift Stone metal was forged, the weapons laid in neat rows along the commons for quick access. Sentinels were assigned to perpetually monitor seas for little one sightings. The tunnels were expanded to minimize exposure on the surface. Boats that moved as orcas were built, and the harvesters hunted below the waters. More and more, the Tribe learned they did not need the surface.

Quietly, with the Elders behind him, First Hunter approached the Smiths. His arm would never heal enough to retain the Spear. He was about to forfeit his title, and wished one final deed as his legacy. He spoke plainly, but passionately;

“Smiths, you have been asked to create a sanctuary. Sadly, you now know what it is we wish to hide from. For many, many seasons hunters now have been sighting little ones in vessels. They almost always skirt by in the distance, ignorant of us. They show no interest in the land, but as their madness for Gift Stone demonstrated, we have no understanding of their wants. Someday, they will want what we have, if for no other reason than their dissatisfaction that it is we and not they who have it. The land is grand. It is bountiful, it sustains us. But at some point, we may have our claim on it challenged. Until the good fortune Larso’s tumble revealed, our only recourse was to fight.

And we would lose. Had we the ability to win, we would not have run long ago. There are simply too many of them, and they are mad. To fight them is to die. If such is our destiny, then so be it. But if we can survive elsewhere, I would put it to you... Would you choose life?”

The Smiths concurred that they would.

Plans were laid. The chambers were built, decorated with the critical moments in the Tribe history, both wonderful and awful. Foods and materials were stockpiled in Larso’s Cavern. To ensure sufficient time for the Tribe to evacuate, an elaborate ruse was devised. All was ready for the little ones’ return.

But they never did.

Time passed. The generation that remembered the harvesters' slaughter passed on, as did the children of that generation. The Tribe flourished, and the armory took up valuable space, so it was decided to cover it with ice and build above it. After all, with the sentinels so efficient, as long as everyone knew where the weapons were, they could easily access them. Then the generation that buried the weapons passed, and a new council house was proposed, with a platform for the presentation of tribe councils. The Elders still knew of the armory, as probably did many Smiths, and – if pressed—some of the Tribe as well, but the bricklayers built above it anyhow. The chambers made transporting meals to and from the forge cumbersome, so the Smiths buried them. Over time, the Tribe enjoyed a spell of undisturbed peace, and the little ones atrocities retreated to the realm of scary stories. Caution was still shown to avert contact, but the original Gift Stone frenzied savages never returned. And other than a handful of shipwrecks, little ones faded from importance.

The plans, the cavern, the chambers, the armory fell dormant, but for an Elder meeting each season, and that merely because no Elder wished to be remembered for allowing the Tribe's sanctuary to go idle, the matter was forgotten, stored waiting for the day where peace would be shattered. At a point, Larso's Cavern became known as the Final Retreat, and the offensive by the Smiths, the Final Push. Named more in irony than sentiment, for none considered entering a rock as "retreat", nor did Smiths anticipate their offensive would create much of a "push".

Such was the length of the unbroken peace, the Tribe believed it would be eternal....

\* \* \*

".. The events which have brought everyone to this place must teach us..." The Last Elder said to the Tribe which had been patiently listening to his accounts,

".. Nothing is eternal."

He completed his story, and paused for the inevitable bombardment of questions. None came. Dumbfounded, the Tribe simply stared in utter silence, absorbing the new reality of what their world was now like. In this complete silence, they could hear the lapping river against the banks, and something more. Distant, yet all around, as if within the rock, came a muffled vibrating pulse of the pace of a fast beating heart.

The din of war?

Was it growing?

Was that dust landing on the floor?

## Chapter 26: The Quiet Elder

They traveled down the long entry tunnel in silence mostly. Chris had hoped to fly directly to the Tribe, and asked Tali to guide them to their widest entrance. The tunnel she had revealed that they currently walked through was slightly wider than the wing span of the flying vehicle. Unlike the linear rigid little one architecture, it wound gently, but continuously, following the strengths of the ice. No piloting, no matter how skilled, could have navigated the twisting path with so little error room. Chris tried anyway and a wing clipped a wall nearly collapsing the entrance. He quickly reversed course and they abandoned the idea of flying.

Tali and First Huntress walked side by side. Chris, politely but vehemently refusing to be carried as before, rode between them on a large, bizarre, wide, and solitary wheeled vehicle that emitted a not unpleasant whine tuned with their velocity. Tali could not fathom how it supported the child, and the “indispensable” equipment he had brought down from his ship without toppling. She had asked if he was truly a talented rider, or if there were some machinery involved. Chris laughed lightly, deflecting the compliment, acknowledging that machinery maintained the vehicle vertically, and went into an impossible to follow explanation. She allowed his chatter to flow unbridled, because she saw it calmed him. He was clever enough to sense on his own that his words were falling to the floor unabsorbed, and soon, unprompted, faded to quiet again.

Both Tali and First Huntress were armed with spears they had obtained from the Smiths. They were solid weapons, of good construction, but made from ordinary Gift Stone, and therefore heavy, stiff, wanting imitations of what they truly coveted. First Huntress, more than Tali yearned for the smooth unbreakable feel of the weapon she had lost in battle, and felt incomplete. She finally could refrain no longer,

“Chris, when I first encountered your kind at the exile cavern, I carried a spear of great importance to me...” she began.

“Yes, an amazing alloy of titanium and gold”, Chris answered, anticipating her thought. Wiping his fingers through the blue box face, he held it out for First Huntress to inspect. She leaned down a bit too eagerly, her knee crunching the layer of neatly laid ice shavings flattening the floor, flinging snowdust in a spray over Chris and the box. Chris reeled the vehicle, winced, and wiped the box face with his sleeve. More cautiously, he reoffered the view to First Huntress, who peering into the small rectangle, and did indeed see her precious spear. It rested as the sole Tribe artifact on a table in a room strewn with a neatly arranged assortment of other Tribe artifacts. Weapons, armor, some clothing, she even thought that in a corner she could make out a partially reconstructed boat as well.

“It is the same material as all your other armor, but stronger somehow, and it is so light.” Chris concluded, obviously impressed.

“The First Spear is forged from the heart of the Gift Stone. Very difficult to mine.”

“I can imagine. If we ever settle all this, First Huntress, I promise, I will make sure your weapon is returned undamaged.”

Tali and First Huntress exchanged such an obvious glance, Chris spoke of it,

“Why does that astound you?”

“Because it is Gift Stone child. Our lore says your kind go mad with lust for it.”

Chris pondered First Huntress’ reply for a considerable length of time. They were nearly at the Tribe when he finally answered,

“You have been attacked by our kind in the past haven’t you?” He asked, but did not bother to wait for the obvious answer, “How long ago?”

“Our history is strewn with death child.” Tali responded.

“Yes, I can assemble a compelling explanation leading to your exodus. I allude of a specific violation here in the land.” Chris repeated, brushing aside Tali’s distraction.

Tali recanted in very brief detail the terrible fate of the fish harvesters. First Huntress listened solemnly, having never enjoyed that story, but could not help being slightly bemused. She remembered the poor storytelling abilities of her mother, and enjoyed noting that time had not honed them any sharper.

Chris absorbed Tali’s account, intensely following along while simultaneously working furiously on his box. He occasionally interrupted with seemingly unrelated questions, “How long ago was this Tali?”

“Long long ago child, a thousand seasons perhaps.”

“Was it near where we currently are, or had the Tribe once lived elsewhere?”

“We are where we have always been child.”

“Did they ever return?”

“No.”

Chris fumbled a bit more, and finally finding what he had been tinkering for, shouted a most triumphant cry of, “YES!”

Tali and First Huntress expecting some important revelation to match the outcry stopped walking. They turned to Chris, who completely absorbed in the newfound knowledge that so delighted him, continued the forward movement on his vehicle oblivious to their stationary status. They watched as he moved a bit further, finally looked away from his box to find himself a lone traveler. Without skipping a step, he whirled around and rode back to his patiently waiting companions wildly swinging his box. In as excited a tone as they had heard from him, Chris gushed,

“I have found your attackers! They are dead. All of them. You were pretty close on when it happened too, Bravo!”

“You appear so certain. How can you know of this?” First Huntress interjected.

Chris examined his box, and scanned down the tunnel. “We really should continue. I can explain while we move.” The three set off again, and with a deep breath, Chris spoke, “Our lands do not organize in tribes. We instead divide ourselves into collections of tribes connected by geography. We call these entities “nations”. One of them, an ironically quite modest and peaceful one today, long ago, was a formidable seafaring empire. They enforced their reign with a fleet of sleek powerful ships of war manned masterfully by the greatest sailors the world had known. They called themselves “Portuguese”.

At the time of that terrible slaughter you described, their empire was young, and small, but they had strong ambitions. There are accounts of attempts to navigate around the southern tip of an enormous continent that dwarfs the land you live on. Tali, First Huntress, forgive this question, but how much of the world’s geography do you know?”

“We know of the continents child.” First Huntress replied, slightly indignantly, “We drew detailed and accurate maps throughout our wanderings. All are... were displayed in our library.”

“The large continent directly north of here we call “Africa””, Chris continued unaware or unfazed by his possible slight, “Portugal, the land where the empire began rested on the west coast of yet another continent further north. They sought to trade with a collection of tribes that was far to the east, but with a dozen other nations between them, they were at a distinct disadvantage. By circumnavigating Africa, they could create a route for themselves, and expand their trade without having to pay tribute. The Portuguese were so desperate to achieve this goal, their leaders were susceptible to deception. On the promise to accomplish precisely what they craved, a braggart merchant

convinced the rulers to commission him a fleet of somewhere between ten and fifteen of the most modern vessels of that day. He pledged to make the journey to the east, and upon his return, share his discoveries for the glory of the empire. In reality, he was a ruthless man who only wished to advance his own wealth. The Portuguese leaders fulfilled their part of the bargain, delivering twelve strong, sturdy ships capable of holding more than any vessel before them. Three even had weapons affixed to their hold, something that did not become common until many seasons later. The braggart set sail with full crews, laden with supplies. The last verified sighting of the fleet was when they docked at a group of islands called “Cape Verde”... Very very far to the north. From there, they sailed south, and simply disappeared. Back then, ships did that.”

“How are you so certain they perished?” First Huntress pressed.

“Because the fleet was never seen again, but the decaying wreckage of one ship was discovered many seasons later spread over a rocky beach on the African coast far far north of here. Coincidentally, it was the Portuguese who found it. Accounts of the discovery claim that a single skeleton remained onboard clutching a figurine the size of his head made of pure gold. None of the other ships were ever found. And given the lust for gold you have alluded to, I can bet they searched hard. The lone skeleton was probably the last survivor of a mutiny. They killed one another fighting for the figurine. He died too, he just did it slower. There is no way any single person could have piloted a ship that complicated alone. He likely dumped the bodies overboard to avoid the stench, and died at sea of something... Injuries he sustained, thirst, hunger...Madness? Ships don’t need pilots to crash into the shore. I am sure the currents drifted the wreck to the beach where it was found.”

“What of the other ships?” First Huntress questioned.

“Same fate I am guessing, and I know I can not be certain of it... But I am. No stories of encounters with a tribe of giants who destroyed a fleet of the mightiest ships of the greatest nautical force in our history are found anywhere in our histories. Had but one sailor survived, the stories he would have told would have been legendary. But that’s not all...

Here is my favorite part... Immediately, after hearing of the gold figurine, demands were made by the Portuguese rulers to know where it came from. The suspicion was that deep in Africa lived a civilization with a vast hoard of gold. The Portuguese assumed the braggart merchant had known of its existence, and intended to loot them with his sailors, load his mighty vessels with gold and disappear forever as quite possibly the richest man in the world. They viewed his request for such large capacity ships as a revelation of just how much gold he knew this mysterious tribe held.

Abandoning their ambitions for the Far East, and even relinquishing their claims to the new discoveries to the west, for the length of their empire, the Portuguese colonized Africa in search of that gold. They never suspected where it truly came from. In a way, the death of your harvesters insured your privacy for hundreds of seasons. To be fair, I do not know if an army of the smartest people in the world would have guessed the truth. It is just so much more impossible.”

“I do not understand how the truth can be impossible child.” First Huntress interjected.

“You are an impossible people First Huntress. You are impossibly large versions of us; you live without protection in the impossibly harshest region of our world; you operate a gold mine so impossibly huge, you make your weapons and tools from it. Oh, and that gold mine came from space. Even if you had not hidden from us, your very existence is so fantastical, many would not have believed you exist.”

Chris paused, and reverently added, “You are amazing.”

Realizing that he had originally been asked a question, and wishing to step back from his admitted candor, Chris continued, “First Huntress, yes... Gold, your “gift stone” is quite precious to us. And even today, there are some like the butchers who killed your fish harvesters, eager to descend great lengths to relieve you of your resource. But they are the fringe. They are our exiles. Long ago they may have been us, but they are not us anymore First Huntress. Those attackers were monsters. If we can disarm the hostilities between us, I would invite you to add your account of that attack to our history. You will see that we would abhor it just as vehemently as you.

As soon as I can make it happen, your weapon will be returned.”

First Huntress, too overwhelmed with a combination of relief, gratitude, and expectation, merely replied “Thank you.”

Tali listened to the exchange between Chris and her daughter. She could not help but compare the events at the exile cavern with the updated story of the heinous attack on the harvesters. If the child’s description of the attackers proved truthful, some powerful and disturbing parallels could be drawn. Both had been unprovoked atrocities committed on innocents. Both had been the deeds of selfish malevolent beings deserving no voice in guiding Tribal direction, yet both did so. She almost fell sick from the obvious conclusion. Rather than with the pensive guiding benevolence of Elders, the Tribe’s history had been ruddered to the actions of the monsters. How sad that such an undeserving lot had been given so much value. And she was only now coming to discover these truths. What other turns in the history of the Tribe had been clandestinely

influenced by the wretched? And what of the little ones? Did monsters not adhere to their rudder as well? Tali struggled with these thoughts, and welcomed First Huntress' bounding interruption,

"Lay back child, we come to the Tribe." First Huntress instructed as she broke their side by side alignment, taking the lead position. Chris slowed to let her pass without resistance. Tali slid behind him protecting his rear. They were indeed near the tunnel's end. Their engrossed conversation had passed the time invisibly. Before them was a final bend, where the tunnel visibly widened. Turning the corner, they would be back at the Tribe.

First Huntress, from the instant of her capture, had not believed she would ever see her home again, yet as unimaginable as it seemed, here she was. But was this the home she missed? Given the progress of the Final Retreat, she worried what she would find. Never one to hesitate, spear hoisted, she boldly crossed the turn, and stepped into the Tribe commons... And immediately cut down three badly shot arrows. Chris wheeled in from behind, and from underneath a mound of snow he had buried himself in, came a lame coughing battle cry. An Elder brandishing a dagger performed his best version of bursting through his camouflage, attempted to strike Chris down. Chris easily maneuvered his vehicle away, and Tali caught the Elder before he fell on his face.

"Hold Elders" First Huntress instructed loudly enough for both the Elder in Tali's arms and the hidden archers to hear, "We are not at war!"

A clanging sound came from the roof of a nearby home, followed by a question, "First Huntress?"

"Yes Elders, it is I. We are NOT at war!" First Huntress repeated.

"First Huntress, I suggest you direct your words this way!" Chris shouted. From a doorway where he had retreated, six slow moving, but heavily armored Elders emerged "charging".

"AAAAAAAAAA!" they shouted/spoke/mumbled.

One swung a sword he could barely hold in a wide arc generally towards Chris' vehicle. Chris easily dodged it by reversing, but he need not have bothered. Tali had leapt between them, and intercepted the sword with her spear. A quick spinning kick knocked it far from the already falling Elder's hands. Tali caught him, and deftly disarmed two others with precise pokes using the blunt end of her spear. The newly weaponless Elders, more relieved than alarmed, immediately halted, but were bumped forward by the momentum of the three behind. Tali fluidly set down the Elder she cradled, and caught

the front two before they harmed themselves. When next they looked up, First Huntress had moved to them. It was she they saw, spear firmly extended as a barrier across both hands,

“Hold Elders. We are not at war.” She repeated one final time.

Relief flushed across the faces of the old men and women. They sloughed off their terribly fitting, poorly donned armor while rummaging their surroundings for a comfortable place to sit. The archers, wearing no armor themselves, joined the group and were able to assist their comrades. Soon, Tali tended ten perplexed Elders seated on benches in relative comfort. She had bruised the hand of the first assailant whose sword she smacked away, but otherwise, they merely needed time to catch their breaths. Only then did First Huntress relax. Chris took her decompression as a cue. He whizzed away, fumbling through his pack of “indispensables”.

“Are there more of you?” Tali asked. She had run to the nearest dwelling and returned with several jugs of water for the Elders.

“No. We ten were sentinels. The last three followed the Tribe to the forge. Two lay as sentinels there. One has gone to the Final Retreat as our voice. You know of this First Huntress, and she who was First Huntress. Would you explain your little companion to us?” An Elder replied between thirsty gulps.

Tali was about to answer her, but Chris’ mesmerized voice cut in through her chips,

“Tali, First Huntress, your city is magnificent!”

She glanced around but although she could hear the whir of his vehicle, she did not see him. Just ahead, First Huntress was perched on a balcony looking at something. Tali ascended the short staircase and joined her. From this vantage, she found Chris. He was wheeling between streets and alleys, a white sphere raised high over his head with both hands. Tali still could not comprehend how he maneuvered the vehicle, and had absolutely no idea what the sphere’s function was. She did recognize unmasked utter jubilation on Chris’ face. He had been bombarding First Huntress with questions.

“First Huntress, what is that large structure with the steep roof?”

“That is our council house, where our Elders live.”

“And this? Oh, hello Tali” Chris was looking directly at them pointing to a round opening against a wall.

“It is one of our ventilation ducts.”

“And those balconies all around this huge room? Living quarters?”

“Yes child.”

“So that is where your tribe is hiding then?”

“No child. All who remain in the Tribe are assembled below.”

Pause.

“No no no no... This is wrong.”

“What bothers you child?” First Huntress inquired, confused.

“There is no one here?”

“None but the tired Elders you see, and we three.” Tali replied.

“No no no no... This is wrong.” Chris repeated, the worry escalating. He had stowed his sphere and was returning at a frenetic, not entirely safe speed.

“Who did you expect child?” Tali interjected.

“Everyone should be here.” He said, a notable trembling in his voice. Chris’ vehicle darted about the commons searching futilely, “Where are you dammit? Where are you?” he repeated over and over.

“Who do you search Chris?” First Huntress called, agitated that still there was danger, and still she did not understand its origins.

“Everyone dammit!” We had to get to your tribe as soon as possible because an attack on your people was imminent! The General, that gray haired man I described as our protectorate, revealed his protocols. Should you attack again, he would retaliate at your core. You attacked our city First Huntress.”

“We halted that offensive Chris.”

“But you attacked. You don’t understand. The General is a man of rational logic. He lays out a plan coldly, and follows it without fail because he knows that in the heat of battle, emotional elements influence decisions... And emotions are unpredictable. He is attacking... now!”

Tali and First Huntress both instinctively crouched, tightening their legs to spring at any adversary unlucky enough to be near, but looking around they found no outlet for their stance. Save for the impossibly confused Elders, there was no one there, and obvious though it sounded, they felt that needed pointing out. Tali panned the commons with her spear signifying their solitude.

“That is why this is so wrong.” Chris decried, pulling in, “He is attacking your tribe right now!”

Tali and First Huntress descended to reunite with their increasingly nervous companion, “But you see we are unassailed.” Tali said, still uncertain.

Chris placed his box on an unoccupied bench near a relatively flat opaque wall, and, as he had done for Tali at Cress’ Door, waved an image on the wall. Several frames opened up to the awestruck amazement of the seated Elders. Prominent in the center was the view from a window of a sturdy vehicle descending down a rocky ledge to the base of an immense cavern, where a large population was encircled.

“They are in the Final Retreat!” an Elder cried out.

Tali and First Huntress immediately acknowledged that truth. Both had visited the cavern before. They recognized the shade of rock, the columns and the winding water. Chris widened the dimensions of the vehicle’s view to the edge of the wall, revealing another two vehicles at the periphery. At the image’s center, sandwiched between the Under River and the approaching little ones, laid the corralled entirety of the Tribe. They were perceptibly worried, which was expected, but they were converting their worry to agitation, which was dangerous. Most precarious of all was the agitation’s rapid transformation to defiance. Little ones had forced them to abandon their homes and face exile within rock, and still they were unsatisfied. They were now threatening their very families. Their children. And with absolutely nowhere else to run, all looking on knew with certainty, the Tribe would fight here.

Given the weaponry the little ones would surely bring, First Huntress was even more certain that they would die here as well.

An image overrode the projections on the wall. It was the quiet elder.

“General, stop this!” Chris cried out, desperation unmasked in his voice.

“I cannot son.” the quiet elder replied unemotionally, “We have been repeatedly and mercilessly attacked. I will not give the order to strike, but they will not hurt on our people ever again. If they come at us, we will open fire.”

“Then at least halt your advance. Can you not see that they do not understand what you are doing?” Chris implored.

“My soldiers are moving to positions of advantage. They will halt when they acquire them.” The quiet elder replied. He did not appear to be relishing his role, but he was definitely not shrinking from it.

Chris split the projection into two images. The quiet elder filled a box at one corner of the wall, the view from the still advancing vehicle returned to span the remainder. Tribe had shifted the children behind them. Men and women holding rocks, shovels, pans, mallets, various tools, whatever they could scrounge, stood shoulder to shoulder in a rough line.

First Huntress was fuming, “You would slaughter my Tribe this way elder!”

“Instruct them to surrender First Huntress, and once we have secured the vantage I seek, I will hold my position until a more permanent solution can be achieved. But your aggressions on us have ended.”

“Is there a means where I may address them?” First Huntress asked Chris loudly enough for the general to hear.

“I can stream your voice through the lead vehicle. If you speak, they will hear you.” The general spoke as if the mere utterance would create the path he decreed. He was correct. First Huntress saw the surprise from the Tribe when she commanded, “Create that path old man. I would speak with my Tribe.”

Chris tapped many many places in the air that splotted responses on the wall images, and shortly, both Tali and First Huntress were receiving the words of the Tribe’s response. There’s were many many voices, but merely one question,

“First Huntress? You live?”

“I live. And I speak. As, First Huntress, who is daughter of a First Huntress, who herself is daughter of a First Huntress, I as Advocate of the Tribe, say “HOLD”! We are not at war.”

“We may not be, but the machines you ride in bear vehement disagreement with your declaration.” A mother clutching two small children accused.

“I-...Nonetheless, I beseech you all to hold! These vehicles merely move to a position of rest. They will not attack, only retaliate. I have experienced their weaponry first hand, and been subdued. These are much more severe. They are too potent to

confront. If you do not hold, they will unleash them, and you will be annihilated. So by all the respect I have earned from you, by all that I have done for you, I call this boon. Please trust me when I ask you to stand down.”

For a short spell, the arms lowered. Rocks fell to the floor. Eyes erased some of their edge, but only for a moment.

“I will trust the face of my beloved cousin First Huntress. You wish me to hold? Step out of that metal carriage, and speak with me as always you have, not from the mechanizations of these infernal toys, but with your hands in mine. I will then gladly drop my weapon to embrace you.” a woman wielding a pick in a manner that appeared both casual and menacing called stepping forward. Tali recognized Zoy, her sister’s oldest child. How could she not? Until adolescence diverged their paths, she and her daughter had been inseparable. Zoy was as large as First Huntress, similar in frame and features, but so vastly different in personality. Where First Huntress packed muscle, Zoy curved fluidly. Where First Huntress’ hair was a chaotic mound of unbridled tangles, Zoy’s flaxen impractically long, yet perfectly straight hair aesthetically adorned across her perfectly stitched outfit selected because it precisely matched the brown hue Zoy insisted best accented her coloration. Even here, at the cusp of a battle, after enduring the chaos that was the Final Retreat, she was immaculate. As children, Zoy and her sisters had been Kavra’s... First Huntress... her daughter’s... nearly exclusive playmates. Her sister’s children were as unapologetically fixated on feminine matters, as First Huntress was on training for the spear. They were smart, and strong willed, and unwaveringly loyal.

They were the tightest of friends.

Zoy folded her arms defiantly, pick tucked at her side, resting on her hip. She continued her challenge to First Huntress, “I await you cousin. Will you exit the little one toys, or have they, as I suspect, broken your body to stuff it in there?”

“I am whole Zoy.” First Huntress replied.

“Then show me.” Zoy pushed.

“I... cannot... But my words are my own cousin. How may I convince you of that?” First Huntress beseeched, frustrated at the impasse.

“By taking the pick from my hands... Before I crash it on the head of an invader.” Zoy responded belligerently.

Impasse.

“You do NOT understand cousin!” First Huntress shouted.

“Then convince me cousin. Come to me. I will listen to you as I always have. But I must see you.” Zoy said, laying out the gauntlet.

First Huntress growled. She slammed her fists into the nearest bench, instantly pulverizing it. Chris kept back, but Tali approached, placing a sympathetic arm on her daughter’s shoulder. First Huntress accepted the arm for an instant, then reeled quickly to the Elders,

“Is the path to Under Lake still whole?” she blurted quickly.

“Yes it is First Huntress, but the chambers have all gone by now.” An Elder replied.

“You have no means of reaching the Final Retreat.” Another Elder added.

Other Elders interjected their counsel, but First Huntress had not been listening beyond the initial reply. She was in a full sprint towards the council house. Through the ear chips, she spoke to Chris and Tali,

“Do what you can to cease the hostilities. I go to the cavern.”

“How First Huntress? Did you not hear? The chambers are long gone.” Tali protested.

An uncomfortably long pause followed between Tali’s question, and First Huntress’ eventual response. Tali was on the verge of repeating it, when First Huntress’ reply came through just as she disappeared into the council house.

“Larso managed.”

Chris was lost with the answer. Tali reflexively began a run to follow her daughter before the futility halted her. Elders were partially aware of the events taking place. They were not privy to the conversations in the chips, but they could hear what First Huntress said, and they were wise. They could conclude where First Huntress sought to travel, and how she intended to travel there.

“Can you intercept her Tali?” an Elder asked.

“She was faster when I was First Huntress. Now she is lightning to my sunrise.” Tali admitted.

“And the child? The little one rides a vehicle that may intercept our First Huntress before she plunges to her likely death.” Another Elder pleaded.

“He may perhaps reach her, but he lacks the strength to divert, and his vehicle cannot transport me.” Tali explained, looking to Chris, who acknowledged the accuracy of her estimates with a frustrated nod.

“So we lose our First Huntress to the little ones after all” an Elder casually concluded.

Chris bristled at that Elder’s comment. He rolled to the wall, where the quiet elder’s image still loomed,

“General, First Huntress attempts to reach her tribe to dissuade their aggressions. You will allow her unobstructed passage.”

The general had been attuned to the exchange between Zoy and First Huntress. His quiet demeanor made it seem as if he was not there, but his response revealed he not only understood the predicament Chris, Tali, and especially First Huntress were faced with, he appeared to support their efforts. The General responded,

“If she attempts to harm my soldiers, they will retaliate.”

“Then instruct your soldiers to grant her passage.” Chris ordered.

The General moved his hands in the manner Tali had seen with Chris.

“Our sensors have found where you are son. I know where she is headed, and I have cleared the way. First Huntress enjoys an unhindered path to the lake Chris.” The General declared.

Chris visibly sagged at this. He managed to squeak out an exhausted “Thank you General. Stand by.” before he relinquished his mount on his wheeled vehicle. He staggered off the one wheeled craft, which Tali noted, did indeed remain vertical and stationary despite the absence of a rider. He zig-zagged an uncertain path for a few steps before Tali came to his side. She clumsily attempted to console him with a tepid hand at his shoulder. She patted him softly, but the sheer size of her hand knocked him on his belly. Chris did not rise. Tali worried she had damaged the child, more so because Chris’ chest was heaving and he was making a noise that sounded like a wail. Tali and even the Elders encroached Chris uncertain what to do. Chris laid on his belly, face buried in his arms, crying long unbroken laments. Tali tried to roll him over to see if perhaps she had damaged him, but he resisted. An Elder came to Chris’ side, and asked sympathetically,

“What is it child? How can we relieve your sorrow?”

The very question must have amplified his grief, the laments intensified. Chris was irreconcilable, at least that was how he appeared initially, until he rolled over on his own, and Tali realized his perceived grief was laughter. Chris was caught in a spasm of rolling uncontrollable mirth.

“You almost crushed me by trying to make me feel better!” Chris gasped between contagious laugh fits, “You’re like Lenny with the damned rabbits!”

Tali asked who “Lenny” and what a “rabbit” was, drawing another wave of laughter from the child. His laugh was genuine, but detached. What he laughed at was not so much funny to him as a vector for the release of so very much tension. With his release, Chris flushed out every knot, every dread, every nightmare he had been stashing. His merriment, however motivated, spread a lightness to the Elders. Even Tali fought down a smile.

Eventually Chris’ delirium faded sufficiently where Tali could ask him, “When is the last time you slept Chris?”

“I do not have a memory of sleeping on this continent Tali.” Chris admitted, wiping tears from his eyes with the heel of his hand, and with a tone of seriousness returning, he added, “Nor do I foresee sleep for a while.”

Chris straightened himself up. The laughter had visibly relaxed him. He appeared energized, resolute. He studied the pictures on the wall. The General remained a statue still figure. Only an occasional blink revealed he was not merely an image. The vehicle had, as promised, halted, but the Tribe was agitating again.

“Tali, speak to them.” Chris instructed.

Tali hesitated, “What am I to say?”

“Tell them that First Huntress comes. And to wait for her. She will be there soon.”

“I do not know if that is certain.” Tali confessed.

“But you do not know that her failure to arrive is certain either.” Chris pushed. His intensity refueling, “And she has accomplished so much that has been unexpected. Who are we to decree this moment, this action is the limit of her prowess?”

“Tell them.”

Tali called to the Tribe, “Hold my friends. First Huntress approaches.”

“Tali?” Zoy queried, “Are you in there too?”

“Watch for First Huntress in the river Zoy. She comes to you.” Tali instructed.

Using her pick as a wand, Zoy directed a pair of boys to the lagoon. Tali was reasonably certain she recognized Zoy had sent her sons, but they darted off too quickly for her to be sure.

Tali checked on Chris. He was again immersed in his box on something engrossing. She left him to his task, and returned her attentions to Zoy.

“Are your mother and father with you?” Tali asked.

“Yes Tali. Mother was injured in the journey. She rests behind us, along with our many many other injured... And our children.” Zoy replied. Her edge was returning. Tali needed to dull it.

“How is it that you speak for the Tribe now?” she asked.

“Because I spoke first.” Zoy answered plainly.

“Your sons are at the river mouth?” Tali asked.

“Yes Tali. They await your daughter’s magical appearance. I too am eager to witness the marvel of escaping from the vehicle in front of me to the river at my rear. It would be even more impressive than how you both managed to fit inside a vehicle too small to hold one of my sons.” Zoy retorted with unmasked skepticism

Tali did not know how to address her niece. She could not explain the little one magics because she barely understood them herself. She was certain that if she admitted they were not in the vehicles, Zoy and the others would surrender what little hold they had on their nervousness, and all would be lost. Chris walked beside Tali, and whispered, “I think I can show you First Huntress.”

The wall transformed again. The General kept his corner, but Zoy and the Tribe’s panoramic image slid downward. In the newly created space above, a series of windows appeared. They were a continuously changing collection of views from various places deep within the Smiths’ realm, presumably in the present. Each image captured a moment, fleeting on its own. Banded together the events that have transpired below assembled themselves for Tali.

The forge was decimated. The heat teased up from deep in the world so long ago smoldered and dimmed under a pile of rubble that was once the heart of the Smiths’

work. Large gaping holes at several structural points had been surgically inflicted, collapsing the bellows and much of the equipment upon it. A Smith's disassembled body draped over the wreckage. It appeared that he had been blasted by the same weapon that brought down the bellows. Arm, leg and torso parts belonging to the same person were scattered linearly over a very far distance. Another window revealed how the little ones had reached the forge. Soldiers were mounting a series of support rings to bolster a tunnel freshly carved through the stone. Still more windows exposed the scope of their infestation. There were so many. And they were everywhere in the forge. Tali noted they had found and were examining the Gift Stone reserve. But she saw that they were examining everything, and the Gift Stone received no particularly special attention. She shifted her focus nearly as fast as the images searching for a glimpse of First Huntress, but still found nothing.

Tali caught an image of little ones lined at the base of the tunnel from the Under Lake to the Tribe. Pointing to it quickly before it changed to another, she instructed,

“Chris, I would see this image.”

The image grew on the wall. Remaining mostly on the tunnel, it occasionally shifted enough to reveal it was mounted on the head of a soldier. Tali and Chris watched as the tunnel darkened and a blur they immediately knew was First Huntress burst into the Under Lake cavern. The soldier followed First Huntress' run as she made her way to the shore and unhesitantly plunged into the waters.

Chris changed the view to another, closer, and more sturdy image, likely mounted on a vehicle near the lake shore. First Huntress could be seen steadily swimming towards the falls.

“Where is she going Tali?” Chris asked, confused.

“She attempts to reach the Tribe.” Tali answered.

“But-” Chris protested, he displayed a map of their positions, ran his fingers rapidly through them, and declared, “That is too far Tali. She cannot hold enough air to complete the journey.”

“She is strong child. She swims as a First Huntress, and the current is swift. My daughter will reach the Tribe.” Tali answered more to reassure herself, than anyone else.

Regardless of the danger, or Chris or Tali or anyone else's opinion, First Huntress plunged below the surface.

“Zoy, hold, First Huntress comes!” Tali shouted excitedly.

“Was she not coming before Tali?” Zoy replied as skeptically as before.

“Yes Zoy, but her arrival is imminent. Be on diligent watch.”

At this, Zoy’s disbelieving resolve waivered. Her eye glinted something besides defiance... Was it hope? Perhaps so. Her head turned ever so slightly towards the lagoon.

Chris could not stand the waiting. He readdressed the General,

“When she arrives, First Huntress will hold her people at bay. What will your next move be General?” Chris asked.

“To disarm them. And establish a sustainable truce with their leaders.” The General replied.

“Why can you not engage in the truce negotiations now General? Their leaders sit here. Let me show them to you.” Chris retrieved his white sphere, and panned it across the seated Elders, and Tali now knew its function.

Tali drew Chris’ attention, “Can we speak in a manner undetected by the quiet elder child?”

“Excuse us General” Chris said, and pinched his fingers together. The General’s image disappeared.

“How did you know these were our Elders?” Tali asked suspiciously.

“These are REALLY your leaders?” Chris laughed incredulously, “That may make matters so much simpler Tali. I had no idea. I was lying boldly and broadly. I think I know what the General is trying to do. It was I who solicited his services as protectorate. My principle motivation for selecting him is his abhorrence of death. He is as repulsed by it as much as I. He is a man of war because he hates war, so he wages it with finality, ensuring its extinction. He is notoriously stingy with his words. Those he chooses however are meticulously selected. He has given us an exit from this crisis.”

“What are we to do child?” Tali asked.

“You must declare yourself a nation Tali.”

“You mentioned a nation as a collection of Tribes.” Tali responded, not following the direction.

“Yes, yes, it is, but the rules are rather... vague. A collection can consist of one can it not?” Chris replied, obviously spinning strategies again.

“It would be quite a meager collection.” Tali answered, acknowledging Chris’ point.

“So it would Tali... But it is a collection nonetheless. You qualify. Your Tribe needs to be a nation because there are well established protocols for dealing with hostile nations. We are constantly negotiating with them. Up to this point, the general has been responding to rogue attacks that from our standpoint are purely acts of terror committed by a band of very large terrorists. If you are a nation, then you are entitled to borders and rights we must respect. Do you understand any of this Tali?” Chris paused, recognizing the familiar blankness.

“No child.”

“Well, yeah, sorry, but it doesn’t matter if you do or do not. Just trust me and accept your title. This can work.” Chris replied, the spinning in his head accelerating, “Who amongst our distinguished seated friends here can speak for the nation of Tribe?”

Tali studied the tired, pensive Elders. They were good, wise, and ever so feeble. She would trust them to solve any riddle, any conflict, any disagreement where a judgment was necessary, but none of them... not a one, could hold their own. That was the principle reason for the First Hunter’s assumption of the duties of Advocate. Only a bold soul could speak boldly. The position of Elder discouraged boldness.

“None child. Only First Huntress may fulfill that task.” Tali admitted.

“Well... Damn!” Chris blurted, and kicked some ice shavings into the air.

“LOOK!” and Elder cried out. The ten old men and women had been quietly captivated by the magics on the wall, staring unblinking the magic that revealed it nearly as much as what it revealed. Tali and Chris swiveled to where on the displays the Elder’s cry alluded. Floating face down in the lagoon within the Final Retreat, the body of First Huntress had surfaced. Zoy’s sons were already wading out to retrieve her. They arrived, rolled her on her back, and pulled her to the shore. First Huntress’ forehead had a slight gash, bloodless at first, the rushing waters far more efficient at removing the blood than the gash was at producing it. Absent the waters however, her face was soon painted crimson, frightening the boys to double their efforts.

Zoy leapt down to the bank to her cousin’s side. She quickly hugged her boys and shoed them away. Pressing tightly on the gash, Zoy called for menders. They fought through the frozen crowd, and descended to the aid of their fallen. While one mender

replaced Zoy, retaining a tight hold on First Huntress' gash, two others rolled her to one side. Her arm was hung over the shoulder of a mender and she was lifted off the ground, expanding her ribcage, then returned, recompressing it. First Huntress' breathing was done for her repeatedly. Her head was turned downward. After what felt like several eternities, First Huntress' spasm knocked the menders on their backs. Menders quickly recovered as she vomited copious volumes of river water. Between fits of coughing and spewing, her head wound was sealed, as were a few other nicks she had suffered in her amazing journey.

Zoy jumped down to the bank and planted a monstrously uncomfortable hug on her still vomiting cousin. More of the Tribe descended, wrapping First Huntress in an affectionate albeit suffocating embrace. First Huntress' could not speak yet, too much water lingered in her throat, but she could hug back. She could touch grateful faces. She could reassure her people, just by smiling confidently, that matters would improve. Most important of all, and the force which drove her to successfully traverse the impossibility of the Under River, she could reclaim the position her brave cousin had assumed in her absence. First Huntress was immeasurably proud of Zoy for her stance, but now that she was here, Zoy could return where she most wished to be, between her sons. First Huntress, Advocate of her People belonged in front of her Tribe. Steadily, still weak, and a bit dizzy, she climbed up the bank. She was so engulfed with people supporting her, there was little danger in falling. In other times, the overt affection may have been suffocating, but in this reunion, she was with the Tribe. She accepted their support. She was happy.

First Huntress disappeared under the smothering crowd, resurfacing momentarily, shaky, but standing on her own on the wall's image where Zoy once stood.

"First Huntress, I am gladdened that you are well." Chris' voice came through to both Tali's and First Huntress' chips. "I am reasonably certain I can resolve this matter, but we are going to have to engage in a deception in order for it to succeed. It is imperative that you can still hear me, and are in agreement. If you can hear me First Huntress, raise your hand in the air, palm open, please."

First Huntress did as Chris instructed, and the Tribe, thinking it a signal to them, erupted elated.

"Good, I was worried you might have damaged the chips. We never tested whether they were resistant to unprotected transport through underground rapids." Chris said relieved, "Tali, I need you to send the Elders away somewhere. I do not care where, just as long as they are beyond hearing. No one can know the true nature of the events we are about to unfold."

Tali acknowledged with a nod. She moved to the Elders, and gently raised one off her bench. "Go to the council house Elders. Sit and speak. We will be negotiating the retreat of these little ones from our lands, but we will eventually need to present a list of expectations. That is how they operate. If you can assemble a list, the more detailed the better, we will be in a better position."

The Elders did as they were bid with-- unusual for them-- not one question. These days had been strewn with unfamiliar unpleasant decisions. They welcomed a task of quiet contemplation surrounded by the familiar.

Chris and Tali were alone.

"What is this deception child?" Tali asked.

"First Huntress, I take it you earned your title by wresting it from Tali?" Chris asked.

"Yes child." Both women responded in unison.

"Can Tali regain the title?" Chris continued.

"Yes, by taking my spear." First Huntress responded. Tali was silent. She did not anticipate the direction the dialogue was proceeding.

"The spear you no longer have, correct? The one in our vaults." Chris said, comfortable he knew the answer.

"You are not First Hunter child." Tali interrupted.

Chris laughed at the idea, "That is a very very clever thought Tali, but no I am not, nor was I scheming to become First Hunter... But you can."

Pause.

"I need a leader, a spokesman for your people here with me to negotiate a peace. You are out of reach First Huntress, and I cannot trust our words to be clandestine once I open the channel to the General. Tali must speak for the Tribe. You can win back your spear when this is over."

Pause.

"Mother, do you trust the child?" First Huntress asked.

Tali turned to Chris. She recalled every action he performed from his gesture at Cress' Door to this moment, and could find no instance where he performed any other than the most generous and trustworthy of actions. She saw him now, expectantly waiting for her approval, and Tali realized, that yes indeed, she did trust the child... and she said so.

Chris was elated. He spoke excitedly as he laid out the events to transpire.

“First Huntress, when next you speak, inform the tribe you have lost your spear to your mother. It has to be a recent thing since you spoke as First Huntress to them. Tell them you lost it when Tali challenged your decision to shoot through the river.”

“Tell them that Tali holds the spear. I will make certain when they see her next, she will be.”

First Huntress froze for a moment, gathered her courage to, for the sake of her beloved Tribe, do the hardest thing she had ever done. She drew a deep breath, turned to the Tribe to speak, but her throat was still raw, and she broke into a cough. First Huntress beckoned for Zoy, who bolted to her cousin's side. First Huntress whispered Chris' ruse to her, and asked that she pass the message on.

Zoy's face was glistening with tears as she explained to the Tribe who the new First Huntress was.

Chris instructed Tali to address the Tribe moments after Zoy concluded.

“Tell them to drop their weapons and wait. Tell them that the soldiers will soon be departing.”

Tali hesitantly faced the wall. She gazed at the collection of expectant eyes, awaiting her next words. The entire Tribe, her daughter, Chris, the General's image had reappeared in the corner. He too was listening. The weight of the moment, and the consequences of misspeaking were staggering. Tali felt something she had not ever felt before...

.. Uncertainty.

Chris seemed to understand her reluctance. He reached over and held Tali's hand, rather, he wrapped his hand around one of her much larger fingers and mouthed, “You can do this... First Huntress.”

Tali did.

“I would speak with the Tribe... My Tribe. I am First Huntress, daughter of a First Huntress... MOTHER of a First Huntress. And I say Hold! We are not at war! Be patient my friends. Drop your weapons, and relax. The soldiers will soon be departing.”

The Tribe was dumbfounded, but again the rocks and picks and shovels, and pots and anything they held with aggressive intent fell to the floor. First Huntress accepted Zoy’s embrace again. She whispered to Chris, “Make this work child. You do not fathom what I have surrendered for you.”

Chris absorbed First Huntress’ sacrifice reverently. Still clutching her finger, he leaned up and whispered the final ploy Tali,

“Do you see the red dot on the corner of the General’s box?”

Tali did.

“When it turns into a green dot, he will hear you. When that happens, say this,” Chris swept his hand and, in the language of the Tribe, a declaration came into view. “Can you read it “First Huntress”?”

Tali squinted, grimaced a bit, but she indicated that while it was a clumsy translation, she could indeed understand the text.

“Adjust what you need to make it smooth, but it is imperative that you keep the essence intact... Ready?” Chris asked.

Tali nodded.

The light turned green,

“Hear me invader. I am First Huntress. You stand on the soil of the sovereign nation of “Tribe”. We claim all land and sea within the coordinates on the map I have just sent you. We have occupied this land unchallenged for a thousand “years”. Remove yourselves beyond our borders or we will consider your intrusion an act of war.”

The General contemplated Tali’s statement. He carefully examined the map Chris had sent. A few adjustments on his end later, he responded,

“First Huntress, my apologies. We had no knowledge of your existence. We respect your claim to sovereignty, and to the territories you mapped, and will withdraw immediately.”

Pause.

“Is that it?” Tali asked.

Chris was so overcome with relief, he was barely able to speak, but did manage to squeak out, “Yes Tali.”

At the Final Retreat, the image of the Tribe was receding. The General had initiated the withdrawal. There was no sound, but the jubilation the Tribe was enjoying was nearly palpable.

“Chris?” the General spoke, “First Huntress, I would speak with Chris.”

“Yes General?” Chris replied without standing. Exhaustion, and relief finally crippling him.

“Well played son... Well played.” The General said, and the window closed.

## Chapter 27: Chris and First Huntress

“Did you have to break her Jaw?” Chris asked.

“I did.” First Huntress responded, “She left her face vulnerable after she swept my leg. It is a tendency of hers, a rare weakness that I would have been foolish not to exploit. One she would not have passed up, had I presented it. Besides, she deserved it. Mother would not relinquish the spear until she completed all three hunts for this season.”

“You were recovering First Huntress. She was just trying to give you a rest.” Chris pressed, but he knew as he heard his own words that he was on the losing end of the discussion.

“And your medicines have already set the wound.” First Huntress added as if her argument needed additional weight, “She is mended better than before. Moreover, I believe I have done her a service. From the jeers of Miallo’s children, her mate is exploiting her injury to pamper his new lover.”

The two were traveling along a rim of a newly excavated crater overlooking the rock within which resided Larso’s Cavern. Chris rode his one wheeled cycle. First Huntress, still enjoying the reunited feel of her precious spear in her hand, strolled casually alongside, using it as an unnecessary but welcomed walking stick. Around them, and stretching beyond the horizon, a line of beacons marking the dividing line between Tribe and nonTribe land were being installed. Chris had insisted on them as a token of respect for the Tribe, but also for clarity. When operational, ownership of a place would be indisputable. Chris was determined that no other incident from a misunderstanding would occur again... Ever! He would not allow a repeat of the destruction spiral they recently survived. The borders were generous, encompassing all Tribe lands and a comfortable cushion beyond. The Tribe had free range within their country, but had to petition to travel beyond. This was not a concern for anyone save fish harvesters and hunters, who confined their travels to the unpopulated coast. Beacons were sophisticated enough to detect what crossed them. Sentinels detecting a boat or single life sign incursion merely followed their activities from high overhead with drone aircraft.

Likewise, no uninvited incursion in the other direction would be tolerated. The only exception their negotiated peace allowed was a courtesy the General offered. The discovery of a race of giants living in ice was spreading throughout the world. Knowledge of their enormous bounty of gold was spreading too. Tali, while still First Huntress had agreed to allow the occasional flights around the perimeter to watch for intrusions.

Operation of the beacons had taken time to arrange because they were dually monitored. One station was from a little one dwelling and the other from freshly constructed room within the Tribe. Large versions of little one monitoring equipment had been assembled, and some Smiths were learning how to use it.

By permission of First Huntress, an embassy was also under construction. A small eclectic team of little one scientists, artisans, historians, doctors and architects had requested permission to build a modest structure near enough to the Tribe where they could initiate visits. They had been granted a lot on the Under Lake shore. That area was too uncomfortably hot for the Tribe's liking anyway. Moreover it was sufficiently close to the Smiths where Teresa the mender (the original petitioner for the embassy) wished to focus. She had examined the injured Smiths, and found many many tumors. She treated them in addition to their injuries from battle, and was abhorred to discover they had simply accepted them as the levy for working in the forge.

In their first conversation after the hostilities ended, Teresa indicated to First Huntress that she had detected a toxin in some of the Gift Stone metal, and claimed it was responsible for the warping and tumors. She wanted to teach the Smiths how to detect and remove the toxin, and cure their ailments. Smiths need never be bent and crumpled again. The idea of the embassy was born of that dialogue. First Huntress found pleasure in knowing the Smiths would not suffer so much, and that Teresa would be near enough to visit, should she ever need to.

Chris and First Huntress reached the top point on the rim, where Chris' flying vessel waited. They watched from this high vantage the construction of the beacons, along with an expansion of the tunnel the soldiers had dug to enter Larso's Cavern. It had been the means of the Tribe's escape from within the rock, but all had to crouch to do so. The Tribe had been sufficiently interested to rethink their revulsion to rock and were considering the tools necessary to bore through the mountain, when Chris arrived at the Tribe entrance in a large carriage bearing all the armor the Smiths had abandoned. Other than melting it down, First Huntress had no real use for it. She offered it all to Chris, who laughed riotously.

"First Huntress, you casually offer to make me the richest person in the world."

First Huntress considered that, and responded, "Would you use your wealth wisely Chris?"

Chris did not reply at first. He considered First Huntress' question intensely before turning to her with his reply, "I would."

“Then, take it... We have so much stored, and the Gift Stone will provide us with more than enough. The Tribe owes you a debt. This will hopefully go far in satisfying it.”

Chris broke into a mischievous smile and answered, “I believe I can repay your generosity as well.”

Hence the embassy, and the tunnel expansion, and the medicines, and the beacons, and the additional security measures only he and the General put in place... Just in case.

Chris bid farewell to First Huntress, and started to board, but First Huntress had a question she was mulling the entire walk. She did not know the answer, and was certain no one really could, but she would hear the clever child’s opinion on it. Rather than losing a chance she asked,

“How long will this peace last Chris?”

“I do not know First Huntress... I am not prescient. My guess holds no more authority than any others.”

“False modesty is nearly as abhorrent as unsubstantiated bravado. I ask not for an oracle, but a prediction.”

Chris stepped off his ship and approached First Huntress. He was solemn when he spoke,

“You ask sincerely, and I owe you the same with my reply. My study of history, ours, and now thanks to you generously opening your library to our scholars, yours, suggests that people in general are noble and good. Noble and good people unfortunately do not steer history. They are too busy with the important matters of everyday life. Sadly First Huntress, history is determined by monsters. Whether mindless as your exiles were, or cruel like the braggart merchant and his crew, or some other form of selfish obsession is irrelevant. Monsters have a clear advantage because they are not restrained by the bounds of decency or mercy. And the only prediction one can make of a monster is that they will show up. The best we can do is be vigilant. We can with constant effort, postpone conflict, but eventually, complacency seeps in, and we relax thinking our world is at peace. Monsters never relax.

I can further add that this is not a thought unique to me. Tali has shared a similar skepticism. I trust her wisdom much more than my own.

I am gladdened she is unharmed, and happy First Huntress. She was a most magnificent companion. I will miss her. When next you see her, please inform her that

my ship is ever at her command, as it will always be for you as well.” Chris added frankly.

First Huntress nodded. They continued in silence.

When they reached Chris’ ship, he added, “I am sorry that I could not provide a more optimistic answer.”

“Optimism would make us rather complacent would it not?” First Huntress replied. They both shared a smile. The doors to the ship closed, and the craft whisked away. First Huntress began her walk back to the Tribe. A storm had passed recently, and she decided to follow the path along the coast to see if it had been altered.

She occasionally glanced to the sea searching for monsters.