

Entropic Quest

by Tom and Johnny Lichtenberg

One

Baudry was notified by squirrel, on what was otherwise just another boring day. He knew he should have been out hunting goals. He was, after all, a Goal Hunter, but he was sick of it. He'd hunted down goals for so long already and the game was going on forever. Of course, it was meant to. That was the whole point of the game - to be endless. Didn't they have all the time in the world? That was another problem.

He'd found himself sitting on the roots of an old gnarled oak tree, staring at the vast green canopy above. He'd been sitting there for hours, with nothing in his mind. He felt the cool breeze on his skin as occasional sunlight filtered through the dense forest. He smelled the dusty duff beneath his feet and heard the chattering of the squirrel before he saw its twitching mouth. It sounded like the usual cluck-cluck-ducking at first and then, as the creature dropped to the ground at his feet, he heard it speaking in his own language.

"The Hidden One calls you to order," the squirrel declared.

"Excuse me?" Baudry blinked a few times, startled but not yet believing his ears. The squirrel remained squatting before him, its large black eyes clearly peering at his own, its whiskers twitching with impatience.

"The Hidden One," the squirrel repeated with impatience in his tone. "Calls you to order."

"What does that even mean?" Baudry asked the beast, though he was pretty sure he already knew. The squirrel began clucking again and, with a distinct sniff, whisked its head about and scampered away.

"To order," Baudry repeated to himself. "It can only be one thing, and yet," he mused, The Hidden One had never yet called anyone to order, as far as he knew. It was only a rumor, a vague superstition that there even was such a being as The Hidden One, and that when she called someone to order, the lucky recipient of that invitation had better make haste and report immediately to The Particular Tree in the center of the Canopus Forest. It would be a bit of a journey, Baudry reflected, casually mapping the entire trip in his mind. He knew the forest as well as anyone, probably as well as anyone could. He'd been hunting goals in it for years by now. Too many years. Far too many in fact. Baudry rose to his feet and decided he might as well begin right away. There was nothing else he had to do. No one he had to inform, and he might even pick out a few goals along the way.

The game had many names - the most popular was Mind Ball, but it was typically referred to merely as 'the game' - and was currently in its seventh season. This number was purely arbitrary. A season ended

more or less by accident, when enough participants decided that it would. There were no official winners. Some Strikers scored more points than others. Some Saviors prevented more from being scored. There were varying degrees of success among the more modest ranks of Smackers, Goal Hunters and Ball Gatherers. The Flower Pickers were supposed to run out of petals, signifying a victory, but often the flowers selected had so many petals it was practically impossible to pluck them all.

Teams were formed by happenstance during the inter-season sessions of drawing up sides. There were moments of excitement, certainly, especially when Strikers struck and Saviors saved, but considering that a season could last for years, and games within it endured for weeks or months, you could never say it was much of a spectator sport. In truth, there were no fans, only players. There was no field of play except the forest, and a goal could be anywhere at any time. A ball, likewise, might be anything. It was the duty of the Goal Hunter to discern what might be an actual goal and the job of the Ball Gatherer to determine the other. Once those objects had been decided, it was up to the higher ranks to carry out the efforts of accumulating or denying points. It was only rarely a contact sport. Often, team members did not even see each other for days at a time, as they went about their various assignments and since it was no one's job to keep track, it was never quite clear what the state of the game or the season actually was, at any given moment. The whole enterprise tended toward chaos, and that was just fine. The players had nothing to gain, and nothing to lose. All of them were in the same boat, or, to put it more plainly, in the same eternal exile.

They were literally exiles, all of them, cast out by society, forbidden to ever escape from these woods. Those who tried to leave discovered there was simply no way to get out or even to see the containment field alleged to be erected all around the wide forest. They weren't criminals. They had done nothing wrong, as anyone would confess, but their kind could not be tolerated within the world of civilization. Every one of them shared a common curse. All of them had been cured of death. No one still living was even sure how it ever had happened. Legends persisted of a witch and a potion, of a mad scientist and experiments, of a nasty God and His revenge, but whatever truth there was to any of it was lost in the weeds of history. Every so often another one was detected. Hide as they might try to, they could not stay hidden forever. Sooner or later their secret was rooted out, they were exposed and, as soon as found they were delivered to this forest, cast in and left to be forgotten by the world outside. There were those who would say it had been going on for centuries but the truth was known by none for sure. Baudry was one of the cursed.

No one knew when precisely when this accident happened first, and no one knew why it operated as it did. Those who were afflicted would continue to age normally until the next binary value and then they would stop maturing, forever. If it struck when you were a baby, you would grow to be eight, and then grow no more, ever. Those a little older would mature until sixteen, and then stop. So it was there were for all practical purposes only four ages in the Canopus Forest: 8, 16, 32 and 64. Although The Hidden One was rumored to be 128 or even 256, no one really believed in it. No one admitted to ever having seen her in person. There were no known cases of anyone hitting the curse past the age of 64. Baudry considered himself unfortunate. He'd been struck sometime in his mid-forties, he later came to believe, and then he hadn't realized it for another forty years or so. It wasn't obvious at all that he'd stopped changing at 64. He felt the same at 70 and that was not too unusual. When he felt exactly the same at

80, he did begin to wonder, and so did his neighbors. He'd been reported, anonymously, as possibly afflicted, turned in to the authorities and made to undergo their "testing". Even after being exiled he'd remained in denial, certain he would begin to decay and diminish all at once one fine day, absolutely sure he'd weaken and develop the customary aches and pains of elderly decrepitude, but it never occurred. He'd never once felt a day older, not since that time, so many years ago he could barely remember, when he'd been carted to the edge of the woods and was basically dumped within.

And now he'd been called to order. He almost wanted to laugh. He'd heard all the fairy tales, naturally. The Hidden One was said to be the first victim, the original subject of The Perpetrator's nasty scheme. Other rumors had it that The Hidden One was The Perpetrator herself, an old woman who hadn't wanted to die and so had invented the cure and became her own guinea pig. Neither of these stories had any basis in fact, or really made any sense. Why was the curse still happening? Why were people still being brought to the woods, people who were obviously afflicted, seeing as they could never die, or even get sick, or even change in any single way after the moment they reached their sticking point. Even their hair stopped growing. How could it still be happening if it was some particular potion or program or substance or drug? Why would it happen seemingly at random, to all different kinds of people at different times in their lives? No one understood it and in time the mortal people stopped caring. They grew frustrated with their futile attempts to figure it out and eventually only wanted not to be bothered, not to have these mutants in their midst, these creatures whose existence only reminded them of their own meager mortality and rather than continue to abuse and mistreat these specimens (as they'd originally done, during the bad old days), they preferred to quietly remove them from their lives, deposit them in this wilderness containment, and pretend that they didn't exist. Easy for them. They could go on changing and dying like normal. It wasn't so easy for Baudry and his fellow outcasts.

They had to live in those dark, damp woods, surrounded continually by trees and rocks and sediment. Some had taken to living up high in the branches. Others built huts out of sticks, while still others preferred to dig holes in the ground and live there. The weather wasn't so wonderful, either. It was often quite chilly at night, and rained more often than not. The forest was long since divested of predators, but there was very little meat to sustain them, mostly the occasional squirrel or bird could be captured and roasted. The people lived mainly on berries and tubers and nuts. In time, like anything else, they got used to it and no longer minded their living conditions. As a 64 year old forever, Baudry did mind. He never came to like being cold and he felt he was cold all the time. This was one of the reasons he was generally a sour type person. He didn't want to be always complaining, but inside his mind was a constant refrain of complaint. He didn't like this. He didn't like that. He didn't like trees, or dirt, or even birds, and he especially didn't like hunting for goals. He didn't have many friends. The other "old people" were too much like himself. The "young" ones were simply too different. And there wasn't ever much to talk about. The weather? The trees? The gossip? No, Baudry didn't have much to say, at least not to anyone else. He did have some news, though, that others might be interested in, now that he'd been "called to order", called by a squirrel.

"Called by a squirrel?" he stopped himself in mid-stride. "Now I know for sure I've gone nuts." He sat right down on a rock and shook his head.

"What am I doing?" he asked himself out loud. "I'm talking to squirrels?"

"It did say The Hidden One," he reminded himself, "and you never believed in that stuff."

"That's definitely true," he had to agree. "It's not something that I would make up."

"Unless you have gone out of your mind," he countered. "It's been known to happen."

"No," he disagreed, "that's only more stories. You'd think it would happen to us, but it can't. Nothing can happen like that. We never can change, remember?"

"You've got me again," he relented. "So I guess that leaves us with the squirrel."

"The squirrel has spoken," he repeated. "We might as well go."

"Might as well," he gave in. "Why not? It's not like we have anything better to do."

"Stop saying 'we'", he scolded himself as he stood up to continue his journey.

"Whatever you say," he replied.

Two

Edeline was informed by crow, and had no idea what it was talking about. The crow, perched on top of an ancient rotting tree stump, cocked its head and gave her a beady stare.

"You're new here, aren't you?", it inquired.

The crow was even closer to the truth than it imagined. She was not only new, she was brand new, having been dumped into the forest less than half an hour previously. She'd spent that entire time on the verge of tears, and would have been weeping for sure if she had been able to believe that this was even happening to her. It seemed like only moments before that she was getting out of bed, preparing to begin another normal day.

She'd had ordinary plans. It was a Tuesday, a work day. She had meetings to attend, papers to present, decisions to make. She remembered thinking about pastries, for some reason, although she had none in the kitchen. Marvin would like an almond treat, she had told herself, making a mental note to pick some up at the bakery on her way home that evening. She'd looked down at his still-sleeping form, a half smile working its way across his face as he dreamed about who knows what. Edeline had gone through her customary routines, carefully applying the face cream, arranging stray hairs in her eyebrows, scrubbing her face and hands, preparing for her morning exercises. She had only just spread out the yoga mat and turned on the instructor's video when the knock came at the front door.

She had considered not responding. After all, she was only wearing her pink terrycloth tights and top and hardly looked presentable, in her opinion. Nevertheless, it was her own home, so whoever it was deserved whatever sight they beheld, so she did open the door. If she'd only known who was there, she would have fled out the window instead.

"Yes?" she asked politely of the two rather large, stupefied men who stood there gaping at her body.

"Ma'am?" one of them managed to stutter while the other one blinked and turned his head away in an effort to avert his eyes.

"Can I help you?" Edeline prompted him.

"Edeline Wills?" he fairly mumbled. This great bulk of a man was beginning to sweat in quantity. His eyes became bleary as he grabbed a handkerchief from his back pocket and began to mop his face.

"What's all this about?" Edeline asked as the second man, blubbery and stinky as well, raised his hand to shield his face.

"A.I.D.," the first officer told her. "You'll have to come with us."

"What?" Edeline was incredulous. "What are you talking about? A.I.D? That's ridiculous." She backed away from the door, and considered slamming it in their faces. She would have to think fast, but she couldn't. Another mistake. The officer seemed to read her mind and suddenly, without any indication that it was possible for him to move that quickly, he'd retrieved some handcuffs from somewhere and slammed them onto her wrists, and pulled her out into the apartment building hallway.

"Let me go!" Edeline shouted, but struggle as she might, the huge policeman easily dragged her down the hall and into the elevator, while his partner closed the apartment door and followed closely.

"If you don't be quiet I'll have to enforce you," the officer told her, once they were heading down toward the underground parking lot. Edeline knew what that meant. They would gag her, blindfold her, put her in a straitjacket, carry her if they had to, like a sack of potatoes. She had heard about this kind of thing. Who hadn't? What she wanted to know now was, why had they mistaken her for one of those creatures? The A.I.D. was not known to make mistakes, but clearly they had done so this time.

"No questions," the officer warned her, hustling her into the back of the patrol car. Both of the men seemed to breathe more freely once they did not have to look at her any longer. The second one drove while the first one tapped a memo into his device, transmitting their status and coordinates to headquarters.

"No questions?" Edeline repeated in her mind. She had a million questions. Well, only one that mattered. Was this really even happening? Maybe she was still in bed, asleep, having a nightmare. The car careened out into the street and sped off, as if it were an emergency. Officer Barge, the driver, was worried. Something like what he was thinking could cost him his entire career. Why had they sent him on this assignment? It was utterly against policy and he very well knew why. Generally, male officers were not allowed to bring in female immortals. Anything could happen and often did. They didn't call them 'mermaids' for nothing.

"Is it true?" he blurted out to his partner, Sergeant Rand, "that nothing can ever happen to them?"

"Silence!" Rand ordered. He did not want to get into it, especially not in the presence of the thing. Mermaids could not be harmed. It was true. No matter what you did to them, they could not be harmed and that was the very problem. You wanted to test that theory. You wanted to do things, just to see, and if you did, if you let down your guard and gave in ... Sergeant Rand had seen it happen before. Good men, helpless against themselves, utterly ruined because of these mutants. It was entirely their fault.

"Pretend it's not even there," he advised his colleague, and Barge did his best to do so. He thought about everything else instead. He thought about meatballs, and pigeons, and the way the clouds seemed to fall when it rained. He thought about moons and parades and pixie dust and the smell of varnish and dried fish. He thought about everything except the thing in his back seat now, and no one was more relieved, no one was happier than he when they finally arrived at HQ and were able to unload their cargo at the docking bay.

Edeline was taken to a small, windowless office in the basement of the large official A.I.D. building by two heavily armed female escorts, who again advised her not to speak or make any sudden motions. She was deposited alone in there, told to sit on one of the two cold metal folding chairs, the only furniture at all in there. The room itself was also cold. In only her terrycloth exercise outfit and slippers, Edeline was already uncomfortable. She was not alone for long. In a few minutes, a small, elderly man came into the room, closing and locking the door carefully behind him.

Captain Snig was long past retirement age, yet he was not allowed to retire. His unique skills and experience were still required, especially in cases like this. He'd been through the procedure many times, and was not disturbed any longer. Still, he wore large dark sunglasses to protect his mind. The glasses seemed to cover most of his face, leaving only a narrow nose and unusually tiny mouth exposed below, and a balding, spotted cranium above. He wore a uniform that might have fit him long ago, before his body had shrunk so. Now he was all hunched over, a mass of wrinkled blue cloth and that face of a bespectacled ancient turtle. He hobbled over to the other metal chair, facing Edeline, who cleared her throat and prepared her defense.

"It's no use," Snig told her. "You might as well save your breath."

"There's been" she began but he held up his hand to interrupt her.

"No mistake," he completed her sentence, but not in the way that she would have.

"How," she started again, and again he stopped her before she could finish.

"Retinal scan," he informed her. "The officer performed it the moment you opened your door. The image was relayed back here," he continued wearily, "and the officer was confirmed before you even said a word. We already knew."

"It's true," he told her, "whether you believe it or not."

"It can't be," she replied. "I would know, wouldn't I?"

"Sooner or later," he assented, nodding. "Perhaps it hasn't occurred to you yet, but I doubt it."

"It can't be," she shifted in her seat. Don't I have the wrinkles to prove it, she asked herself, convinced it was a fact.

"How old is your husband?" the Captain inquired, thinking 'of course the husband would never have reported her. He must have known for some time, but to continue to have such a beautiful woman, forever remaining as stunning as she was. No doubt someone else turned her in. A colleague, most likely, or a neighbor. A woman, in all probability, jealous for sure.'

"Fifty nine," she reported immediately.

"And how old was he when you married him?"

"Thirty," she replied. "We'll be celebrating our thirtieth anniversary this summer."

"And yet," Snig said, "your retinal scan shows your age to be thirty two, and exactly thirty two by the way. How would you explain that?"

"It's a mistake," Edeline said.

"Yet when you look in the mirror?"

"I work hard to stay in shape," she insisted. "I workout every day. I do yoga. I color my hair to keep out the gray."

"There is no gray," he informed her. "Never was, never will be. Miss Wills? Do you truly not know what you are?"

"I'm an ordinary person," she said. "I go to work every day. In fact, what time is it? I have a meeting at nine. It's very important."

"It will have to make do without you," said Snig with a sigh.

"But".

"It's no use, Miss Wills," he went on. "You do know the rules, I am sure. Everyone does. There's simply no place for those such as you in our world. Too much trouble, you know. It can't be allowed."

"Not the forest!" she exclaimed. She waited a moment for Snig to relent but when she saw that he didn't, she began finally to panic.

"No, please no," she begged him, but he only sat quietly. He knew what would come. The yelling, the crying, perhaps even a physical attack. He was old and decrepit. She could crumple him like paper if she chose. Anyone could, but his veneer of utter weakness was sufficient to deter most violence. In any event, officers were posted outside and would intervene at once if it were needed. Snig didn't worry. He would wait out the storm, but Edeline found she was incapable of making a scene, as much as she wanted to. She had always been way too polite and proper. There were ways of behaving oneself, and appearances must be upheld. She would not make a fool of herself (there was her mother again, lecturing once more in the back of her mind. Edeline! do NOT make a fool of yourself!)

So it was she was easily led, loaded into a van and driven out to the boundary. They would not let her take anything with her, not even a jacket. They refused to let her even change her outfit. She was compelled to go into exile exactly as they'd found her when she'd opened the door. They drove for hours to get there, then drove past the gate and up to the edge of the forest, which seemed to stretch on forever. She got out of the car on her own. The female escorts did not have to force her. They pointed the way down a narrow dirt path and told her "get walking and don't turn around". She did. At some point she must have passed through containment. She couldn't tell where that occurred, but when she finally did turn around, the world she had known had entirely vanished. All she could see was the forest.

She turned completely around to be sure, then she stood very still, and listened. She heard nothing at first but the pounding inside her own mind. Then there seemed to be a sound of leaves rustling in wind. Then suddenly a voice, very clear, very close.

"The Hidden One calls you to order," it said. She had no idea what it was talking about.

"You're new here, aren't you?" said the voice, and looking around, Edeline saw no one, only a very large, very black bird, hopping about on a tree stump in front of her.

"Excuse me?" Edeline said, expecting some man to appear, for it was a man's voice that she heard.

"Yes, it's me," said the crow, flapping its wings to attract her attention. "I know it's not exactly what you're expecting."

"Crows don't talk," Edeline said, fixing her gaze on the bird. "At least not where I come from. If you're some of ventriloquist," she called out loudly, "you can come out now. Game's over and I'm really not in the mood."

"I can only reach you this way at the moment," the bird told her. "Consider it an alternate means of communication."

"Right," Edeline snapped. "I'm out of here." She turned and began to walk away from the crow, but it took off and flew just above her.

"You might as well listen," the crow said.

"Leave me alone," Edeline shouted as she waved her arms above her head, hoping to fend the thing off, but it persisted in following her as she stumbled about in the woods. She didn't know where she was going, of course. The bird reminded her about that.

"What do you care?" she yelled at the bird.

"Listen!" she continued. "I'm having a really lousy day, okay? Come back tomorrow if you want. Just leave me alone." At that, Edeline finally broke down into tears, and stopped to lean against a tree trunk and weep. The bird settled down on a branch just above her, and waited. After her tears began to melt into sniffles, the crow spoke again, more gently this time.

"The Hidden One calls you to order," it repeated.

"I don't know about any hidden anything," Edeline mumbled.

"Then I'll tell you," the crow offered. "Come, sit down, and let's talk."

"Oh all right," Edeline relented. She looked around for somewhere to sit but finding nothing, she plopped down onto the ground. The crow flew down and ruffled its feathers, taking a position beside her.

"That's better," it said. "We have much to discuss."

Three

Ember got the news from a cricket that chirped it out in code.

"Call ME to order, will you?", she spat. "We'll see who calls who in the end!"

She leaped up from the boulder where she'd been hunched, and grabbed a hold of a branch above her head with both hands, and with a swing worthy of any trapeze artist, flung herself higher and higher, limb after limb, until she had soared to the top of the two hundred foot elm. There she perched, surveying the vast canopy surrounding her. From this vantage point there was no end to the forest in any direction, but she sensed this was somehow an illusion. She still remembered the outer world and knew it was there even now, though she could never see it, no matter where she roamed, and she was sure she had covered every inch of the territory by now.

Ember was an eight year old girl, but not quite your ordinary kind. Barely over four feet tall and weighing less than sixty pounds, she seemed to float however she moved. Her wavy light brown hair flew about her shoulders, and her small pale blue eyes matched the cloudless sky above. She scanned the horizon from the top of the tree like any worthy captor would. In the back of her mind she held a grid of her captive world and nearly everything in it, alive and breathing in real-time.

Ember was a Savior, and one of the best in the game. It was a Savior's gift to know the terrain, to sense it, to feel it, to see every goal and every ball in play, to spot every player, every Hunter, Gatherer, Smacker or Flower-Bearer. None could move without their intention and direction lighting up on her cranial screen. She would keep in the background, trying to free her mind to focus on the more important details, for the one gap in the Savior's map-ability was their Striker-blindness. They could never know when or where a Striker was or would be, and their entire performance depended on just that. The Savior's job was to stop the Striker from scoring, and to never know where a Striker was at any moment was maddening. It was stressful. It was the key to the entire tournament.

She was an eight year old girl, and had been for more than a century at least. One lost track of human time here in the forest. It didn't help that seasons barely seemed to occur in there. On the more deciduous trees, leaves would turn and drop but new leaves would be budding and forming simultaneously. The temperature fluctuated seemingly at random. The length of the days and the nights never seemed to vary by much. Everything about the place seemed un-genuine somehow. Ember, like the others, could never quite figure it out, given all the time in the world. At least it seemed like all the time in the world. She held her breath and closed her eyes as if that would help her better see if any Striker was on the move. It came to her sometimes. She didn't know how but she trusted her instincts, and more often than not they were right. But this moment it wasn't a Striker that caught her attention, but something new, somebody new had entered their world.

It happened. New blood came seeping in now and then. For years Ember had tried to foretell it somehow. There must be a pattern. From every newcomer's description she knew there was only one road, and only one gate that exiles were brought to, so when they entered the forest you would think they would arrive at the same location every time, but it just didn't work that way. They could appear anywhere and it always seemed they showed up in the middle. There were no visible edges, no boundaries or borders. Ember and the others all wanted to discover a seam, a way in or way out, but it

was another maddening fact of life that no one could find such a thing. You could walk in a straight line for days, weeks or years and never come across an edge of the woods. Instead you would always find yourself somewhere familiar. It all seemed familiar. It was circumscribed somehow, infinite and impossible.

She would never resign herself though. Each newcomer might be a key, and at her sensing of this one, Ember scuttled down the tree and ran at top speed to where she knew it would be. Along the way she met no one, heard nothing but songbirds and the buzzing of bees. She dashed through the duff, leapt over trickling streams, and unerringly made her way to the clearing where Edeline sat on a rock, crying and listening to a crow.

"Scat!" Ember called, rushing up to the bird. She picked the thing up by its talons and hurled it into the air. The crow squawked loudly as Ember continued to threaten it with words, and when the bird saw the girl pick up a rock, it climbed higher and flew off. Ember threw the rock at it anyway.

"And never come back, do you hear?" she yelled at the crow.

Edeline stared at the tiny girl, who was wearing a sort of skirt made of thickly wound ivy, and a scant top of the same. Ember was likewise shocked by Edeline's outfit.

"What are you wearing? A napkin? What is that?" she asked, and without any sense of personal boundaries she reached over and started rubbing Edeline's terrycloth top.

"You'll sure get a lot of attention with that," Ember snickered, and then added, "of course you will anyway. New blood, and sexy too. Look at you! Yeah, you'll get a lot of attention in here."

"I'm lost," Edeline tried to shrug the girl's hand off her, but Ember kept touching until she was satisfied. Then she stood back a few paces and with a hand on her hips, delivered her verdict.

"What did you expect? You had to know what was coming."

"It's all a mistake," Edeline pleaded. "I don't belong here. I'm not one of them!"

Ember laughed, and with Ember laughter was usually cruel.

"You mean one of us, and you are. It's obvious."

"I'm not," Edeline insisted. "I'm an ordinary person. I was just getting ready for work. I have meetings. My husband. My life."

"That's all over," Ember declared. "You might as well get used to it."

"That's what he said," Edeline sniffed, recalling her interview with Captain Snig, and she told Ember everything that had happened that day. Ember stood listening impatiently. Sure, it was important to the woman, Ember thought, but she had been hearing such stories forever. The only detail of interest to her was the rapidity with which the woman had been processed. All that in just a few hours, she considered. They're getting more efficient these days. She already knew all about Snig. Edeline wasn't the first he'd dispatched to this place.

"Look on the bright side," Ember snarled when Edeline was finished and had resumed scrolling tears down the side of her face. "That Snig will be dead and long gone in no time, and you'll still be young and

yourself and alive. Of course that's also the not-so-bright side," she added. "It'll be true for Snig's great-grandchildren too, and so on."

"And what about you?" Edeline asked.

"Me?" Ember said. "I'm hungry, that's what. I'll bet you are too. Come on, it's time to learn a new lesson."

Ember turned and trotted off into the trees, urging Edeline to follow. She did, finding it difficult to keep up. It didn't occur to the girl that the older one might not be as fast or as used to the ground as she was. Despite her vast age, Ember retained the brain structure of a child. She had accumulated much knowledge from all her experience, but certain developments would never occur in her mind, a greater sense of empathy being one of them.

"Over here," she shouted as she jumped straight off the ground and onto a branch ten feet high in the air. Edeline caught up and waited below as she watched Ember scurry aloft.

"Well, come on," Ember urged, but Edeline merely held up her hands.

"What?" she asked. "I can't get up there."

"You have to," Ember scolded. She was already several flights up, but seeing that Edeline remained adamantly earthbound, she relented, and hustled back down. She flew off the last branch, doing a back flip in mid-air, and landed beside the new blood.

"I'll give you a boost," she informed her, and before Edeline knew what was happening, the girl had somehow hoisted her half up the trunk with inconceivable strength in that miniature frame. Edeline grabbed onto the branch and pulled herself up the rest of the way. Getting her bearings, she felt a bit wobbly and decided not to look down. In the meantime, Ember had scurried back up and was quickly above her once more.

"Climb up!" she called back, and Edeline gingerly followed, slowly making her way, one branch at a time up what seemed to be a kind of pine tree. The bark was sticky enough that it helped her grab hold, but also made her hands feel dirty and gross. By the time she reached Ember, she'd managed to get a small tear in the leg of her pants, which were also smeared with splotches of the gooey brown tar.

Ember was holding out a vine which was covered with little black balls of some kind.

"Keriberi," she told Edeline. "It's a fruit."

"Oh," Edeline figured she ought to say something. The keriberis looked like deer droppings to her. She reached out and started to pull one off of the vine, but Ember smacked her hand away.

"Not like that," Ember said. "Do you want us to starve? No, you have to get them off in this particular way. Here, you'll see."

Ember placed her thumb and forefinger around one of the berries and began to twist it, slowly to the left.

"One tum," she said, "then another. Lefty loosey, right?"

On the third turn the berry came off.

'Now look,' Ember said, pointing to the spot where she'd unfastened the thing. Already a new one was growing in its place.

"You take them off this way," Ember lectured, "and they replenish. Take them off any other way and the spot remains vacant forever. You see? This way we never run out."

"I get it." Edeline said, and when Ember gave her the berry, she popped it into her mouth and was about to crunch her teeth down when Ember gave another cry and shouted,

"No, no, don't bite it. Just let it rest on your tongue. You'll get more nutrition that way. No chewing, remember."

"Okay," Edeline mumbled, and kept her teeth up. She felt a little silly, sitting way up in a tree, sucking on a twist-off wild fruit like hard candy, constantly being scolded by this nasty little child. What a day, she sighed to herself. And that was before it started raining.

Four

With the rain came more tears, which only served to irritate Ember even more.

"Look," the girl snapped, "you don't know how lucky you are."

"Lucky?" sniffed Edeline. "Lucky?" she repeated, raising her voice and nearly losing her balance. It would have been a long drop to the ground, but at that moment Edeline didn't care. She was on the verge of just letting it all go. Ember read her thoughts through her eyes.

"It wouldn't do you any good," she snorted and shook her head. "You don't even know what you are, do you? Where have you been? Don't they talk about it anymore out there in the world? No, don't answer, because I know they do. You're not the only new blood to come in lately. We get them regular, a steady stream, but most of them at least have a clue. Most of them didn't have it so easy as you."

"What's so easy?" Edeline shouted, and she turned her back on Ember and began to pick her way down the tree. She'd had enough of the little snot and, without even thinking about it, had decided to make her own way. Ember was tempted to let her go, but there was something she'd wanted to ask.

"Wait up," Ember called, but didn't hesitate and dropped in three huge leaps to the ground, where she waited as Edeline slipped and groped and faltered and slid her way to the bottom. By the time she got down there, her outfit was essentially ruined, torn and smudged in a hundred places. She stood up, looked down at herself and shook with rage and frustration.

"Don't worry about that," Ember chided. "You'll be better off without them. We'll make you something like this," gesturing at her own adornment.

"Great, I get to walk around wearing a pile of leaves. What's next I wonder?" Edeline lamented.

"Actually, it's not just a pile of leaves," Ember informed her, patting her skirt. "It's rootless ivy. It's a living thing. Waterproof, comfortable, warm, sort of. Warm in its own way, I guess. You'll see."

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't," Edeline sniffed and looked around for an escape route. She wondered if the girl would ever leave her alone.

"I just want to know one thing," Ember asked, sensing again Edeline's intent.

"What was that crow telling you?" she continued.

"The crow?" Edeline had nearly forgotten about it in all the overwhelming confusion. She had to think hard to remember.

"Something about getting a call from someone, I think," she reported. "Oh, and something else about being a gatherer. I guess that was it."

"Oh, so now she's back in the game," Ember snapped. "Deciding who's who and what's what is she now? We'll see about that! Wait. You said 'getting a call'?"

"Or being called, I forget the exact words."

"The Hidden One has called you to order?"

"Yes!" Edeline jumped. "That's it. That's what the crow said. Do you know what it means?"

"She's calling a new blood? That's weird. Oh well, I guess you'll be coming with me," Ember sighed. "The Hidden One is calling me too."

"I give up," Edeline threw up her hands. "It's all nonsense to me."

"Come on," Ember said, "let's at least get you settled a bit, get you out of those rags. I'll explain it some more as we go."

"About me being so lucky?"

"Sure, and other things too," Ember told her. She turned, but this time didn't run off, but walked at a pace Edeline could keep up with. The rain fell steadily but not hard as it dripped through the thick foliage around them. At Ember's insistence, Edeline cast off her shoes and found the going more comfortable in bare feet. The paths were worn smooth and kept free of rocks. Ferns grew in abundance beside them. Edeline began to notice the beauty around her a bit as her tendency to burst into tears started waning.

"You said there were others?" she asked.

"Oh yeah, lots of us here," Ember told her, but looking around Edeline could see no one. Ember laughed, and added,

"Most of us stay up in the trees. Oh, there's some who live under the ground, and still others who live in the caves in the hills over that way." She waved her arm about. Edeline couldn't make out any hills. The whole place seemed utterly flat and had since the moment she'd arrived.

"As for you being lucky," Ember went on. "It used to be when they rounded us up they sent us off to be studied. You don't want to know what happened in there. You see, they were trying to figure us out."

They knew there had to be something about us, but nobody knows what it is, even now after so many years. A lot of us never came out. Many of us still bear the marks. Those so-called doctors and scientists did everything they could possibly think of and more. Cut us to pieces. No stone unturned, but nobody knows. The same with the worms."

"The worms?" Edeline wasn't sure what Ember was talking about.

"Sure, the worms. Look, over here. It's what reminded me of them."

Ember stopped and stooped down to the ground where a tangle of worms had gathered in the dirt.

"Watch this," Ember said, and plucking a stem from a plant she reached out and touched the pile of worms with the point of a leaf. Instantly, the worms disengaged from each other and flew off into the air. Edeline gasped.

"Worms can't fly!" she stammered, but she was watching them do precisely that. Wiggling their way up they were flying and Ember pointed out their trail as they turned, like a flock of birds, and headed off in a V shaped pattern.

"Everything like that they just stick in here," Ember snickered. "Don't understand it? Cast it away. Pretend like it just didn't happen. Like they pretend that we're not still here. They don't talk about us anymore out there, do they?"

"Not really," Edeline said. "I mean, I knew that immortals used to go somewhere, but it's not supposed to happen anymore. It's supposed to all be in the past."

"That's what I thought," Ember nodded. "It's what they all say, been saying for a while now, whenever a new blood arrives. They're the only ones they've ever heard of, and most of them don't even believe it. Like you."

"I don't," Edeline agreed.

"But you'll see," Ember said. "Give it time. And boy, do you have plenty of that! But now, here we are, it's my home. Come on up."

Ember had stopped by a large redwood tree. The lowest branch seemed to be at least twenty feet off the ground, but notches were cut in the trunk, serving as hand-holds and foot-holds. Edeline had some trouble getting up. She was not used to climbing up trees, but she made it up to the first branch, then wondered where Ember had gone.

"Keep climbing," Ember called down. She was seventy feet up in the tree, sitting back in a hole she had carved out for herself. Edeline worked her way up and by the time she arrived, Ember was already fashioning a dress from a vine that was growing profusely around her.

"You'll need a lot of padding," Ember advised, "unless you want to be hanging out, if you know what I mean."

"No thank you," Edeline said, a little embarrassed.

"It's just a fact," Ember informed her. "You're a good looking woman and you'll stay just like this, like you have. People around here aren't shy. There's some of them gone pretty wild. You'll have to choose what you want to live like. Don't let anyone else tell you how."

Edeline couldn't begin to imagine what her life held in store for her now. As Ember showed her how to wear the contraption (and she had to go down to the ground to change into it, for fear of losing her balance), she wanted to laugh at herself.

"I've turned into some freak Jungle Woman," she thought. "What would my poor husband say?", and thinking of him, the tears returned to her eyes.

"It's no use," she blurted out loud. "Until I figure this out, I'm not going to cry anymore."

Five

Barque was told by snake, his own pet King snake, Princess. In all the years they'd been together, this was the first time he had ever heard her talk, yet somehow her voice was not very different from how he'd always imagined it would be. Princess herself seemed ashamed, and held a look in her eyes that expressed the notion that none of this was her idea, and that the words she spoke were not her choice. Barque realized this and patted her head gently.

"The Hidden One, you say? Aha! So she does exist! I thought so. Never believe anything anyone tells you, Princess. Take it from me and don't believe a word."

Barque sprang to his feet from a squatting position and leaped a few times into the air, vainly trying to snatch at the leaves of the Black Walnut tree above him.

"Adventure time!" he announced with glee, and wrapping the snake around his bare shoulders, he strode off with great speed, as if it was a matter of great urgency. It was his way. A sixteen year-old, and having been sixteen for a few decades already, Barque loved nothing more than to maximize his physical attributes. He was tall, lean, extraordinarily fit and full of far more energy than he could ever exhaust. Nothing moved fast enough for Barque, not the wind, not the swiftest bird, and certainly not the world itself. He often felt as if he could soar beyond existence if he could only find the path. He searched for it continually.

Barque was a Striker, and it was the only thing that kept him sane. He was driven to be the best, and for a few seasons in a row now, he was. No one amassed more points. No one was more dreaded by the Saviors, who secretly banded together in futile attempts to stop him. He knew all about their weaknesses, and realized they spied on him continually, either in person or through paid agents. He trusted no one. Even his own teammates might be controlled by this illegal gang of salvation artists. It didn't bother him at all. In fact, it merely boosted the sense of challenge and his already quite overgrown pride.

He had his followers too, some perpetual eight-year olds among them, but mostly a legion of sixteen year old girls and thirty-two year old women who competed for his attentions in a continuous carnival of

temptation. Others called it 'The Barque Parade' when they saw these females lining his path when word spread of his appearance in the region. This season was yet another tour of triumph for the Striker. He had pounded home goals in every quadrant, against every competition, compiling a near perfect record. Only two times so far had his shot been thwarted, both times by his greatest nemesis, little Ember, or as he called her, 'The Dwarf'. Somehow she'd managed to spring from nowhere both times, at the very last second, to divert his ball from the goal.

He'd sworn his revenge, but secretly admired her while considering her compatriots with contempt. All he had in this world were enemies or groupies, with the exception of Princess, of course, and he was ready for a change. He had no doubt The Hidden One had selected him, and him alone, for a mission of critical importance, because obviously she would need the strongest, the fittest, the most talented, not to mention the best-looking immortal of the bunch. It did not occur to him that any mission might not call for any such qualities. No such task could be important enough to associate itself with the legendary Hidden One, she who had not been seen or heard from for what seemed like decades. Most people said there was no such creature, it was merely a fairy tale told to pass the time, like the legend of the Green Ripper, or the story of the Lone Grizzly who still wandered the forest, somehow eluding its hundreds of inhabitants. It was true that Barque also believed in the Grizzly, having seen some impressive footprints by the shores of Lake Thor. And he would not have been surprised if he happened to encounter the Ripper in person. He still remembered metal, and blades, though it had been a very long time since he'd seen them. Despite the sage advice he had recently given to Princess, Barque himself believed almost everything anyone told him.

This is how he knew he must go to the Particular Tree. It was a tree unlike any other, although any casual observer would have noticed upon arrival on those parts that this forest contained nearly every variety of tree that was known to the planet. It had in fact begun as a private arboretum, the property of a famous scientific institution which had specialized in experiments of genetic variation. The forest had expanded over time until one day an accident occurred in a lab on the campus, an error which ended up swallowing the institute's buildings entirely and creating a zone of disturbance unlike anything that had ever been seen. People who ventured inside were never known to come out. From the outside there was nothing unusual, but soon it was discovered that anything that went in there stayed in. It became a sort of handy disposal, a kind of infinite landfill. Initially the trash stowed in there were results of other failed science experiments, genetic mutations gone wrong and gone wild, but eventually anything at all undesirable was consigned to the black hole they called the Canopus.

Barque was an undesirable too. A star athlete since childhood, he'd found himself the adored quarterback and captain of the high school football team. He excelled to such an extent that his team made its way to the national finals. There he was recruited by colleges, and he went to the best, the most famous and, unfortunately for him, the most exposed. He was measured and inspected almost daily. It could not go unnoticed that his body didn't change. He didn't gain weight. He didn't build muscle. He was exactly the same at allegedly nineteen and then twenty. He won national championships and trophies for his college, but the rumors leaked out, the media picked up the story, and 'the boy who could do no wrong' became 'one of them'. The tables turned quickly on him, and he was suddenly just as reviled as he'd been previously worshiped. Now he was considered a cheater, a phony, a fraud. They

suspected him of being much older in years than he was. In fact, he had only been sixteen for a few years by that time, but he was hauled in one day and sent to be "studied".

Barque was a willing participant at first. Always eager, ever optimistic, he was certain they'd find their mistake and set him back on his great path to glory. They didn't. They poked and they prodded and they took lots of samples. They twisted and bent and they drilled lots of holes. They took lots of notes. They kept him a prisoner for who knows how long. All he knew was the food wasn't good and the gym was quite insufficient. He spent most of his time doing jump rope or push-ups or running. He would run for at least twenty miles every day. Finally they simply gave up. Putting him down was considered, but he had such charisma and such were the times they decided to dump him instead. He was lucky at that. Most of his generation were disposed of quite differently. It was an era of "Ultimate Purging".

In the forest he fit in right away. He'd come into the game right away and soon became Striker. He'd found this world to his liking and in a short time had almost completely forgotten the other. Now he sped on his way toward the Particular tree.

"This is good," he said to himself. "It's about time we had something new".

Six

Baudry was in a quandary. In order to get to the Particular Tree, he could either go straight ahead, across the Wide Open Field, or skirt around the edges, which would set him back nearly an entire day. The Field deserved its name. It stretched far across in every direction, almost a perfect circle, and contained little more than low-growing weeds and grasses. It was sometimes used for public gatherings, though these were few and far between. There was no government in Canopus, no organized society of any kind, really. There were no laws, only unwritten rules and customs, which were fairly self-evident, such as 'do unto others' and 'leave well enough alone'. There was practically no one in the forest who still believed in any kind of god. Where there was no fear and no death, there wasn't much of a need for safety valves.

What worried Baudry about crossing the Field was exposure. Once you stepped out into the plain, you were visible and very much so. Peering in from the edges he could easily see that there was no one out there at all. People generally stayed off it, leaving it to the rabbits, snakes, moles and squirrels. It was a happy hunting ground for raptors, but kind of a trap for people. Literally, a people trap, because once you were out there, you were sure to attract not only attention, but company. There were those who remained perched high up in the canopy, waiting and watching for someone to brave the field and when someone did, down they'd come. Baudry knew the risk, but decided to take it. He didn't want to lose any time, and, saying a brief prayer of sorts that he would make it through at least largely untrammelled, he stepped out onto the plain.

Three steps. All he took was three steps in the open and there she was.

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