

The End of the Line

by Tom and Johnny Lichtenberg

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“Trains

Don't run forever.

Fire goes out sometime.

Got to tell you baby,

We've come to

The end of the line.”

J.J. Cale

One

"Let me get this straight," Ember said with a scowl of disapproval on her face. "You simply walked on out of here? And then you walked back in? Just like that?"

"Just like that," replied Soma with a grin that showed off her truly enormous teeth. Soma towered over Ember, something else the smaller one didn't like. Not long before, the two of them had been the same size, both eight-year old immortals trapped in the forest prison world for what seemed like longer than forever. Ember was not the only one who'd wondered whatever happened to Soma and her constant companion Squee. The two of them used to always be around, high up in the treetops, scampering about in their never ending game of "Watchers", a secret spy mission run by the mean old man Bombarda. He, too, had vanished along with them, but no one bothered to worry much about him. They figured he'd gone recluse, like so many other bitter elders.

The forest world never changed, like the people trapped inside whose bodies could not age or develop any further than where they'd become stuck, at the arbitrary ages of eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four and, in a few very unfortunate cases like Ember's grandmother, one hundred and twenty eight years old. It was a strange place, rumored to be the artifact of a university botany experiment gone wild, populated by

every sort of tree and vine which together produced enough in the way of nuts and berries and roots and foliage to provide for all the residents' basic needs. The weird thing was that there was no way out. Somehow the laws of space had been violated in a fundamental fashion such that the forest seemed to fold in upon itself, a maze where every outlet was merely another inlet elsewhere. Many had tried to escape in the immeasurable time they'd been trapped inside it, only to find themselves hopelessly entangled and lost in a world of invisible paths and tunnels, all leading nowhere but somewhere else within. A few, like Soma and Squee, had discovered all the inner routes and used them to great advantage in their game, rapidly crisscrossing the foliage in a network of short-cuts and sidetracks bewildering to the others who could not comprehend their comings and goings. Light-hearted and joyous, the pair recklessly flung themselves about with no sense of risk or danger, like the perpetual children they were.

Ember was also still physically and mentally eight years old after the long centuries of her internment, and her friend Edeline was still thirty-two, though she continued to insist that when they'd arrested her she'd been in her fifties. Edeline was as lithe and lovely now as she had been then, permanently in the prime of life, in mind and spirit as well as in body, calm and confident, a genuine grown-up. She stood beside Ember now, hands on her hips, gazing in admiration at the fully grown Soma, slowly coming to accept that this was indeed the same Soma who'd been their fellow inmate for so long. The difference was remarkable. The Soma they knew had been a slight and stupendously agile acrobat, always happy, constantly in motion, ever sly and secretive. This new Soma was bold and loud and larger than life, especially those teeth!

"The better to tell you with," she'd joked when Ember had rudely commented on that mouth. Soma stood over six feet tall, her long tangly blond hair covering half of her face, her right hand continually brushing it aside to reveal her other unnaturally bright green eye. Her skin was dark and rough and her large hands looked as if they hadn't been scrubbed in ages. She was barefoot and her body scarcely covered in a white pirate shirt and knee-length black pantaloons. She was barefoot, as were Ember and Edeline who were still dressed in the peculiar form-fitting forest ivy vines they always wore.

"But how did you get out?" Edeline asked, confused. "And why did you come back?"

"It was a rat that led the way," Soma told her. "Don't ask me how. I don't even know."

But coming back is another matter entirely. I'm here because I was sent for you. I need you. We all need you. The world needs you."

"The world can go to hell for all I care," Ember snorted. "What's it to me? They stole my life. They stuck me in here. I was just a child and they locked me up and threw away the key. How long has it been? Do you even know that?"

"I do," Soma calmly replied. "I do know that, but it doesn't matter. It makes no difference. Let's just say it's been a long, long time."

"Don't I know it!" Ember snarled. "And now they need us, huh? Guess my answer!"

"You might change your mind," Soma said, holding up her hand and glancing at Edeline to assure her there was no need to get excited, no need to argue about anything.

"When you hear what I have to say."

"I doubt it." Ember was suspicious. Soma was an outsider now, probably one of "them", no longer one of "us" in her mind. She inspected Soma even more closely now, scanning the grown one's face for any indications of treachery or deceit. Ember was very good at reading people. In the ancient forest world game of Mind Ball, she had been a Savior, and the best one at that. Her job was to prevent Strikers from scoring goals. A Striker could "shoot" at anytime, anywhere in the forest, using any object designated as a "ball" by the Ball Gatherers and aimed at any other object designated as a "goal" by the Goal Hunters. A Savior had to be alert at all times to prevent a "ball" from reaching a "goal". No one ever knew how Ember managed to do what seemed impossible, but more often than not she'd appear at just the right time and place in the forest to prevent the point from being scored. Her secret, she believed, was what she called Extra-Sensory Attention. Others assumed she was a mind reader and Ember was content to let them think that. Weren't they all mutants in one way or another? This was the myth they lived by in the forest world. What else could explain their permanent confinement?

In reality, Ember could not read minds, and now she could read no deception in Soma's face either. All she could see was the same old trees, the usual duff on the ground and bits of sky peeking through the canopy high above. Soma had found the pair at their home base. It was still early in the morning, and they'd been munching on some berries when the enormous stranger appeared.

"Then let's hear it," Ember said, plopping herself down on the ground and gesturing that the others should do the same. Edeline and Soma joined her in a circle on the

forest floor.

"It's all over," Soma said. "The forest world is over. Nothing lasts forever, after all, not even this," she added, waving her arms around. "You can walk out, right now, in any direction, and you'll leave this place."

Edeline gasped.

"Since when?" she asked. "How long has it been this way? "

"Since today," Soma said with a gentle smile. Ember sniffed. She did not believe it. Suspiciously, she wondered why she had not seen Soma glance up at the treetops even once, whereas the old Soma had made her home way up there, hardly ever coming down to step on the soil. Ember squinted her small brown eyes even tighter to scrutinize this potential impostor.

"But," Soma continued hastily, "the problem is we only trade one prison for another. Out there it's not the forest, but it might as well be. The difference is that in here, time was long. Out there, time is short, and getting shorter. We need to hurry."

Ember burst out laughing at this last statement. It was all too absurd.

"Hurry?" she snorted. "What is hurry? Why should we," indicating Edeline and herself, "every need to hurry about anything?"

"It's all going to change," Soma said, "and this kind of change is rapid change. Look at me! How old do you think I am? I mean my body."

"How should I know?" Ember shook her head, but Edeline said,

"Thirty?"

"More or less," Soma nodded, "and how long has it been since I left the forest?"

"Again," Ember snarled, "how should I know? We don't track time in here. There's no point. It could be a hundred years since you left. We don't even know what a year is anymore. It means nothing."

"It's been a little more than two weeks," Soma said. "Fourteen days since the change began, and it began three days after I left the forest."

At this revelation both Ember and Edeline sat back, stunned into silence. They didn't know what to make of it. Obviously Soma and Squee had been missing far longer than a mere seventeen days. It had to have been at least several months, if not many years. There had been no Mind Ball in a long time, not since the Hidden One had mysteriously

overcome her own immortal condition, and Soma had been a participant in that miserable episode.

“That makes no sense at all,” Edeline finally said. “Time is time after all, isn't it? Doesn't the sun rise and set? Don't the days and nights follow one another on a regular schedule? What about the moon, and its phases, and the stars and the tides?”

“None of that means anything,” Soma said, shaking her head. “This forest world is entirely artificial. There are machines controlling everything. Same as in the other jail, the one out there, the one I came from, the one we need to fix, with your help.”

"What kind of help?" Edeline asked. "What can we do? And what do you mean by 'fix'?"

Soma shrugged.

"It's kind of complicated," Soma said, “but I will tell you what I know.”

Soma took a deep breath. From here on nothing would be simple. She would tell them what she knew, that much was true, but she could not tell them everything she knew, and even if she did, there were limits to her own knowledge. She quickly reviewed the original plan in her mind. She'd been sent by The Coalition through their spokesman, a man named Red Cliff, a giant with a beard longer than Ember's entire body and a gruff and gravelly voice that always reminded Soma of the fairy tales of ogres she recalled from her distant childhood. Ever since she'd been transformed into a Keeper, she'd turned to him for guidance. That transition had been as rough as it was unexpected. One day she was a little girl, just as she'd been forever. Suddenly her mind and her body were growing as a billion thoughts and feelings swept through her mind and her body and she felt like she would drown in all the change. She staggered through the countryside not knowing where she was and found herself turned up at Red Cliff's abandoned farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. She'd been there before, and remembered there were books there, and thought that maybe in one of those books there might be answers. She remembered a strange creature named Kai who had taunted her about her need for answers. She would have them now if she could.

Oddly, she discovered that she was beginning to acquire them. They came to her out of nowhere directly into her mind. Sitting on the steps outside Red Cliff's house, staring out at the fields, she suddenly understood how it was that her old mentor Bombarda had become a Tanner, one of those skinny blondes who do nothing but eat, sleep and sunbathe at the resort by the beach, and how her best friend Squee had joined the

Flock, a race of crazy bird-people, and she even knew where he was at that moment. She could see him in her mind. She could see Bombarda too, resting in his room, and she knew that she herself was becoming a Keeper, just like the creature Kai. When Red Cliff finally appeared, he confirmed her new knowledge, and told her many other things she did not know as yet.

“There are machines controlling that prison too,” she said to Ember and Edeline. “The machines have the information we need, but we don't know how to get it out of them.”

“What about the people who made the machines?” Ember asked. “Why don't you ask them?”

“They are all long gone as far as anybody knows.” Soma said. “At least they are nowhere to be found in the world.”

“What's it like?” Edeline asked. “The world beyond the forest?”

“It's an island.” Soma said. “There are mountains and plains, marshes and deserts, all surrounded by ocean.”

“And what's beyond the ocean?” Ember asked. “Surely some have gone out, built boats and explored. People still do that, don't they?”

“A few have tried,” Soma nodded. “Even my friend Red Cliff was once a sailor. But the ocean is like this forest. If you sail off and go straight you come right to the other side of the island.”

“So what's the hurry then?” Ember was not satisfied. If the forest world was surrounded by an ocean world that was just a different prison, then what did it matter if they left here and traded in one confinement for another?

“Time itself is running out,” Soma explained. “I told you that change was rapid out there. It's fast, and getting faster. Time has already exhausted the forest world. You'll soon see for yourselves. And you'll start changing too, like me, or maybe not just like me. It's hard to say how you'll change. That's why we need to hurry. I'll tell you more on the way. We have to go, and we have to go now.”

“Now?” Edeline asked.

“Right now?” added Ember.

“Yes,” Soma said, getting to her feet. “The sooner the better. There really is no time to lose.”

"I don't know," Ember shook her head, but Edeline was already rising.

"Come on, Em," she said to her friend. "When you think about it, what do we have to lose?"

"I don't trust her," Ember said, still sitting cross-legged and arms akimbo on the ground.

"Don't you want to get out of here?" Edeline asked. "And anyway, what's the worst that can happen? Do you really want to stay?"

"You can't stay," Soma said. "Even if you wanted to. Like I told you, it's all over for this place. This place is doomed. The system is shutting it down. The machines in here are done and we were too late to get their data."

"I don't know what machines you're talking about," Ember grumbled, but she got her feet anyway and followed behind Edeline as they both trailed Soma who was already walking away.

"The people who made the machines," Soma was saying, "left traces of their work. 'Sample code', Red Cliff calls it. He has some of their books. I don't understand everything but here's what he told me. A long time ago there was a group of people who got together under the name 'World Weary Avengers Incorporated'. Some of them were called "intelligence engineers" and they were given blocks of time called "work-away-from-work time". This group believed in something called Orgone Energy. They thought it had something to do with human sexuality and they figured if they could find a way to capture that and tie it into the power systems they could have unlimited resources until the solar system itself burned out. People themselves would be the source of all the energy they could ever need. So they worked on this project and wrote down a lot of stuff they called "code" which was like writing words but in a special language that machines could understand. Books are made by printing out words, but these people could print out other things too with special machines they had made. They could print out objects, anything really, as long as they put some of this code into the printing machine. One day the engineers put some of their Orgone code into the printing machine and it came out a greenish-grayish foul-smelling glob, so they flushed it down the toilet. Red Cliff says the legend is that once this clump of goo got into the water system it dissolved, introducing a new kind of self-replicating molecule. That molecule got swept into reservoirs and into the atmosphere where it circled the globe and came back down in rain. This molecule, which now only the

machines know about, had a way of bonding with human genetic material.”

Soma was walking quickly as she spoke, and Edeline and Ember had to clamber just to keep up, neither one really understanding much of what Soma was saying.

“There were already a few cases of what they called 'development inertia',” Soma continued, “humans whose bodies could not age, like you and me but not exactly. There were only a handful of them, and they stopped growing at random, some as babies, some as infants, some as children, but they all had one thing in common, a genetic distortion. The bad molecule caused the same mutation in the fetuses of some pregnant women who got it from the water they drank. The result you know. This is where we came from, you, and me, and everybody else in here. The engineers did not understand that they were the cause of us. No one knew. The only clue was how we stopped at certain ages that corresponded to the kind of numbers that machines use, but no one was ever able to solve the riddle, partly because World Weary Avengers was a secret group controlled by the government, and they did a lot of other stuff the government did not want anyone to ever know about.”

“We were not the only result of this accident, but we were the first. You all know what they did to us, how they experimented on some of us, tortured and dismembered and murdered us until they finally just locked us up and forgot about us. In the meantime, all the while we were stuck in there, the world out there and the people in it were changing in other ways. God only know what they got up to. The books we still have don't tell us much about that. Mostly we have some crappy pulp fiction. All the other information is stored inside of the machines themselves, and only machines could get the words back out of them again. There were people who controlled the machines, but we don't know where they are, if they even are anywhere at all! Now we just have the machines themselves. Changes are still happening to us, out there in the other prison world, and we think it's all because of that original bad molecule, but we don't know for sure.”

“I still don't see how we can possibly help,” Edeline said after Soma had seemed to finish her discourse. “We don't know anything about machines or code or any kind of engineers.”

“The Coalition sent me to fetch you,” Soma said.

“But why us?” Ember asked.

“The Coalition knows why,” Soma replied. “But I only know this much.”

“I don't anything about your coalition either,” Ember said, “but I still think I don't even care. I'm not surprised those people made a mess of everything. They were always just doing whatever they could if they thought there was money in it, and damn the consequences. They were like rats sniffing out cheese. Of course it was bound to turn into some kind of a trap sooner or later!”

Ember was considering whether or not to just stop, turn around, and go home. Let the forest world collapse! Let the trees shrivel up and die. Let the sky go black! She would shut down with it all and not mind a bit, but just as she was making up her mind, the three stepped out of the forest, and onto a warm, sandy beach.

Two

Edeline Wills, age fifty one, also age thirty two, also age four hundred and nineteen (but who's counting?) stood on the sand staring out at the deep blue sea in astonishment and wonder. She hadn't seen the ocean since she couldn't even remember when, but she felt it. She felt the waves coming in and the tide pulling them back out again, felt it in the pounding of her heart and the flowing of her blood. She was entranced and without even knowing it she was walking straight towards it, memories flooding back into her brain from the earliest days of her youth, her long forgotten childhood, her whole previous life which she only now realized she hadn't thought about in years. Here she was with her mother, clinging to her hand as together they jumped over the tiny waves at the shore. There she was with her best friend, showing off their budding bodies in brand new bikinis to the boys who were too shy to approach them. Then again, she saw herself on a hot night, sitting by a bonfire on a beach, toasting marshmallows and drinking beer with Maury, the man she later married. All of these visions came tumbling into her head like a rock slide, each one its own precious crystal of history.

In those distant first days of her incarceration she had thought about nothing else, and had recalled them to herself continually, sorting through her memories as if they were a deck of cards, telling one story from the past, and now another, to her fellow inmates, most of whom had let their own recollections slip away. It was pointless, they knew, and eventually she too succumbed to that knowledge as she adapted, and how she hated herself for adapting although she knew she had no choice. We wrap our minds around whatever condition we find ourselves fallen into, and she had been dropped into more than life in prison. She had been discarded and tossed into eternal

oblivion by a world that had no other desire than to keep her and the people like her out of sight and out of mind.

Mere mortals had no use for them, only fear and disdain and horror at the fact that while they themselves would age and decay these lucky few, these randomly mutated souls, had happened onto a life of permanent physical stasis. They would never grow any older, nor would they ever change, no matter what happened, no matter what the others might do to them, and those others did their best, first to examine, then to dissect, then to punish, and finally to abandon. Edeline spent many long nights imagining scenes such as the one now spread out before her, the ocean and the beach, except that in her daydreams the beaches were filled with silly, happy people living out their normal lives as she herself had once upon a time been able to do. She saw them in her mind's eye now, her husband, their friends, and the memories brought tears to her eyes as she stopped and knelt in the sand, letting the waves lap up around her legs and waist.

Suddenly a loud roar rose up behind her, and Edeline heard Ember's voice shouting behind.

“What happened? What's happening?”

Edeline turned around and to her amazement saw the last of the trees sinking down, as if being sucked into a vast hole, toppling and tumbling over each other, smashing and crashing into pieces. Smoke and dust rose up and filled the air so thickly that the forest soon became completely hidden from view. Soma nodded as if she'd been expecting exactly what she was seeing.

“It's the Law of Five,” she muttered, stepping back and raising her hand to her face to shield it from the approaching cloud.

“What?” Ember demanded. “How?”

She could not believe her eyes. They were only a hundred feet removed from the forest that was now being gobbled up by the planet as if it were a tasty dessert.

“The Coalition says that as soon as five immortals left the forest world, it would break apart and disappear forever. They called it the Law of Five. We were just the trigger. But it had to be now. It had to be us.”

“Never heard of any stupid Law of Five,” Ember grumbled as Edeline came back up from the shore and stood beside her, all of them now staring at the dusty sky.

"Is there a Law of Five about this other place too?" Edeline asked. Soma shrugged at first, but then said that yes, there was, according to The Coalition.

"What is this coalition?" Edeline wanted to know.

"Just some people," Soma replied. "The ones who know what's going on."

"Do we get to meet them?" Ember asked. "I'd sure like to ask them some questions."

"I never said they knew everything," Soma answered with some irritation. The clouds were already lifting before them, thinning out and dissipating into the sky. Below them there was nothing, not even a hole. Ember took a few steps towards the spot where the forest had stood only minutes before. Already she could see grasses and shrubs beginning to emerge and fill in the space, converting the former prison into a scrubby plain.

"I'd say it's impossible," Ember declared, "except that everything I ever knew about that place was impossible already."

"Our vines!" Edeline said, "They're withering away."

It was true, the living ivy that had clothed their bodies for so long was already turning brown and loosening its hold on them. In only a few moments, the two stood nude as the plants faded and then vanished.

"At least it's warm out here," Ember said. Her tiny form was already as nut brown as her shoulder-length yellow and her almond-shell eyes. The green of the ivy had been the only contrast in her appearance. Now she looked as if she might blend in with a stick or a small log like a chameleon or a squirrel.

"Don't worry about it," Soma said, "we'll get you some proper clothes at the station. We should get going there now. It isn't that far, but I have to warn you. Time and space out here are not the same as what you're used to."

She started to walk away, and Edeline and Ember hurried to catch up after a few more moments staring and trying to comprehend the unnatural disaster they had just witnessed unfold.

"What happened to everybody else?" Edeline queried as she strode alongside Soma.

"And everything else?" Ember added, thinking of the birds, and the trees, and the other living beings who'd made their home in the forest.

"All gone," was Soma's response.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Wait a minute,” Ember stopped and stood with her arms crossed. Edeline and Soma turned towards her.

“This Law of Five,” Ember said once she had Soma's full attention. “First there were you and Squee and Bombarda, right? And that was three. So you're saying that only two more could ever get out?”

“Right,” Soma snapped, and started to walk away again but Ember wasn't budging.

“So why us? Why me? Why Edeline? There must have been hundreds of others in there. And now they're just poof? After all that? Did they even know what was happening?”

“I don't think they suffered, if that's what you're worried about,” Soma said. “It was quick, like you saw. Dust to dust, you know. In record time,” she added in a lower voice.

“And speaking of time,” she laid, louder again, “like I keep telling you, we don't have much of that. We have to get to the station, to Red Cliff, before your own changing begins.”

“It would help if we had any idea what you're talking about,” Ember said.

“I've been trying to explain,” Soma said, “but we have to go. Now.”

This time when she turned around and started walking, she did not stop. Edeline hesitated, stuck between wanting to keep up with Soma and not willing to leave Ember behind. It was Ember, after all, who had not only shown her the ropes from the very beginning, but Ember who had been her companion and friend ever since, throughout the ages, never once faltering in trust or kindness or reliability. Fortunately, Ember relented, and went along with them again.

They walked for what seemed like hours, in the heat of a sun more scorching than any they'd been used to, and both Edeline and Ember soon became parched and began begging for water, but Soma had none to offer, and only kept promising that the sooner they got to the station, the sooner they'd be relieved, not only of their thirst but also of their nakedness and weariness. The ocean soon lost its novelty and even some of its beauty in Edeline's eyes, and the hot white sand became more of a nuisance than a revelation. It hurt their feet, and the absence of any tracks or other

markings was depressing. To Edeline it seemed they had come upon a wasteland where nothing lived or could ever live. There was only the pale blue cloudless sky, the bright sun which hardly seemed to change its position, the sand, the sea, and the three of them, struggling to move quickly across the endless beach. Ember had remained silent for quite a while.

Ember was not happy. Of course, she never was especially happy. She rarely smiled, even more rarely laughed. She'd kept her mind busy with attempts at ultra-attention, trying to translate the languages of breezes and leaves and insects and roots. She often felt on the verge of a great epiphany, that she was meant for a higher functioning, one that seemed perpetually on the tip of her mind. Now she was without familiar bearings. She felt no wind, heard no rustling. The silence of that crazy beach was maddening to her. Even the sound of the waves mildly crashing on the shore seemed muted and dull. She would have to start all over again, learn everything all over again. All that she knew was useless now, pertaining to a world, an environment that not only did not exist but would never exist again. She had seen it collapse and disappear with her own eyes. And now this. Edeline and others had spoken to her of oceans and dunes and waves but those had always been stories of beauty and joy, not of infinity and the emptiness she was sensing from it now. She concentrated, straining her ears to hear the other noises she knew must be out there, at the highest ranges, or maybe at the lowest. Her auditory senses were acute, but so far she was picking up only hints. She would have to try harder.

Edeline was still puzzling over their own selection. Soma had told them nothing, really, about this Coalition or why she and Ember had been selected for rescue. The stuff she had said about machines and information and time running out was not making sense to her. Ember knew nothing about machines, not even as little as Edeline did. She herself knew a little about engineering, but what she had known about was scheduling and running meetings. She'd been a program manager in her worldly life, forever "herding cats", as they called it, trying to get the brainier people to agree on when they'd get their work done. She'd been pretty good at that, able to keep the work humming along while not disgruntling anyone more than anybody else. The marketing people would present some written plans for what they wanted. Then she'd ask the software people to come up with estimates for the time it would take to implement the requirements and test that the product would work as designed. They all lied to her. No one had any idea how long anything would take! It wasn't like building a house,

where the time for a slab of cement to be poured and dry was a known mathematical commodity. When it came to software it was anybody's guess, and it was her job to keep all the lies in the air like juggling balls.

She couldn't imagine how such a skill set could possibly come in handy now. As for why they wanted Ember, Edeline was willing to concede that the child was far more capable at almost everything than she herself was. Edeline admired Ember perhaps more than any other person she had ever known. There was something about the girl, a sense of competence, but more than that, a quality of mastery. She believed that Ember was capable of accomplishing anything, so maybe she was chosen solely to assist Ember, or because she was Ember's friend. That made enough sense that she finally decided to stop thinking about it, at least for the moment.

Soma was glad to be left alone at last. They still had a bit of a journey ahead of them, and her two companions' continual questioning was draining her spirits. She recalled the day her own changing began, when Kai had taunted her with what now seemed more like a threat than a promise. That day she had been the one annoying him, and he teased her for being so full of questions.

“That's for me to know, and you to find out,” he'd said when refusing to answer any more of her queries. She found out, all right. She found out plenty, far more than she'd ever wanted to know, and here she was, stuck with all that knowledge and the little good it was doing her.

“I should have thought about water,” she scolded herself, not that she needed any, but the two she'd brought out of the inner prison did. It had not even occurred to her. She had brought nothing other than her own physical self, and there was nothing between the forest and the coastal station where she was leading them. It could be dark by the time they got there. It was impossible to tell. Here the sun didn't follow a straight line in any predictable manner. In the meantime, they weren't even anywhere near a river or a stream and the ocean of course was undrinkable. Their bodies would adapt, but not soon enough. They would need water, and as soon as possible. All she could do was hurry and drag them along. That task grew harder by the minute. Ember and Edeline were not out of shape, but they were unused to the heat, and the air was different too, thinner and more difficult to breathe for those not yet conditioned to it. The sand was not easy to walk on, and their feet were tired and sore.

They were sweating and uncomfortable and anxious as well. Ember did not want to

admit it, but she was feeling homesick. She didn't know that it had been more than seven hundred earth years since her initial incarceration, but she did know that the forest was the only place she knew in the whole world. She had been a small child, after all, when she was arrested and deported along with her grandmother. She remembered nothing at all of that previous life, but she knew the forest world inside and out, knew every tree and every branch, every berry and every root. She knew every angle of light and the direction of every breeze. She knew all the stars in the night time sky although she didn't know that none of them were real. They were only lights. It was all just a bubble, a dome, a fake and a fraud. The way it had sunk and vanished so easily left her nervous and frightened, as if she also might disintegrate entirely at any moment, as if everything around her might too. After so long with hardly any change whatsoever, the impact of that sudden transformation had been powerful and profound. She walked uneasily, even unsteadily, behind the two larger females, thinking all the while how odd it was that Soma and Edeline were now about the same age, biologically, when only so recently Soma had been just like herself, forever eight. How long had she said it had been? Two weeks? Two weeks and three days?

“That would mean,” Ember thought, “She’s been growing at something like two years a day, every day, if it even works like that. Or did it happen all at once?” She needed to know and she caught up to Soma and asked her that very question. Soma nodded.

“That sounds about right,” she agreed, “although it isn't precise like that. But more or less, yes. Once the changing begins, you grow every day. Of course only until you reach your full size. Like me.”

She eyed Edeline closely.

“You won't grow,” she told her. “Except older. You'll just grow older.”

“Two years every day?” Edeline asked. She was also doing a rough calculation in her mind, and the results were not pleasing.

“So in two weeks I'll be sixty?”

“Two weeks after the changing begins,” Soma nodded. “I'll probably be ahead of you by then, because you have three days, including today, before it starts.”

“And I'll be like you are now,” Ember said.

“Like I told you,” Soma said. “We don't have much time.”

"I didn't know you meant it like that," Edeline said, thinking about how probable it was that she'd be dead and gone in a matter of days. The thought was new to her. She wasn't sure she didn't like it.

"Come on," Soma said. "The station's not far up ahead. We'll want to get there before dark."

"The sun is still pretty high," Ember observed.

"Remember the trees?" Soma said. "That's how the sun goes down around here too. Just like that. And then it doesn't even go down all at once, but kind of bounces around the horizon a bit like a ball hitting the ground. Then when it's dark it's completely dark all at once."

They set off again, but had hardly gone a few steps when they heard a whirring sound, followed by a whooshing in the air above their heads. Edeline looked up and saw a shiny, silvery metallic disk-shaped object zipping and zooming, diving and climbing as quickly as a hummingbird.

"Think you can catch that?" Soma asked Ember, who was following the thing closely with her eyes.

"If I knew where it was going, what's its goal was, no problem," Ember replied.

"But you won't," Soma told her. "You'll have to guess the next move every time."

"Am I supposed to catch it?" Ember asked. "Like now?"

"Not right now," Soma said. "Not this one, but the machines are everywhere. You'll have your chance."

"Are they dangerous?" Edeline asked.

"They mean no harm," Soma told her. "In fact, they do only good. They're here for us, to serve us, to help us. It's their purpose, their mission. They do it well. Too well, in fact."

"If I catch one," Ember said. "Can I eat it?"

Soma started to reply but Ember interrupted and said she was only kidding. It was obviously a joke. Ember knew what a machine was from other people's stories, but she didn't know about this little flying kind. It had been a long time since anyone had been locked up in the forest world and no one who knew anything about technological advances had arrived since the days of the third-eye patch. That was as far as they

knew about, and it was ancient history already. The machines themselves didn't even keep that obsolete knowledge around anymore. All the ancient data had been deleted, everything from steam engines to telephones to computers to embeds to graft patches to quantal nodes. It was all only so much detritus in the compost heap of time. These machines were only mechanical in name and composition. In reality, they were conceived and hatched and grown like any other living thing, but to people and other human forms they were a complete and utter mystery.

The machine buzzed away, but as they approached the station they saw a few more of them, some just as small, others larger, all of them airborne, all of them intentionally keeping just out of reach. Soma said no more about them, other than that the machines had all the information, all the answers.

“They are the real Keepers,” she told them.

“Can they be destroyed?” Ember asked.

“It's happened,” Soma said, “but it didn't do any good. In fact, it didn't seem to do anything at all.”

“You weren't kidding about the sun,” Edeline said. The sun had just dropped at least twenty degrees in the sky all at once, like an object knocked off a shelf onto a lower one.

“We're almost there,” Soma urged them forward. All day long the scenery had remained the same, glittering white sand below their feet, scrubby plains off to the inland on one side and deep blue gentle sea stretching to the horizon on the other. Everything was flat as far as they could see and then, before them, rising up out of the sand, they saw a small yellowish building with a red tile roof.

“The station,” Soma gestured toward it. “Here we'll find everything you need.”

“I could use some sleep,” Ember groaned. “Do they have any of that in there?”

“I feel like I could use some waking up,” Edeline said. “And then I want somebody telling me that it's all been nothing but a very bad dream.”

Three

As they drew nearer, they saw that the station was indeed just that, the very image of an old-fashioned railroad station. It sported intricate wood-worked double doors and, on the inside, a floor fashioned of octagonal yellow tiles, with occasional ornate

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