



Illustrated by Vincent DiFate

# Native Seeds

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## Catherine Wells

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Alfonso woke reluctantly, prodded by a full bladder and an aching hip. He had been dreaming of a mountain where others had survived, a hope long dead—well, dormant, anyway—and it left him uneasy. Did they still live, those Men on the Mountain? And if so, why had they never come back? Perhaps *el Jefe* had been right to refuse to join them up there. Perhaps the Mother Earth had let them all perish.

He shifted on his bed of poorly tanned furs, trying to find a more comfortable position for his hip before admitting there probably wasn't one. For a moment he lay debating the virtues of getting up to relieve himself. Spring had returned, but mornings were still chilly in the Valley of the People. He could just pee in a jar and crawl back under his furs—but he hated using jars and other things created in the Before Times, unsure if they offended the Mother Earth. So he

ignored his bladder, ignored the pale light seeping through the sticks and bark of his wickiup, and sought the slippery comfort of sleep.

Yet he could not shake off the dream. No doubt the Men on the Mountain had all died off—wasn't that their plan, not to bring children into a dying world? It had been nearly forty years since they had parted ways, surely the wrath of the Mother Earth had claimed them all. So why did he dream of them now? And why did the thought of them still make him so uneasy?

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Ruben Mendoza sighed as he traced the satellite's descent into the Indian Ocean. "Well, that's it," he announced to the room at large. "We've lost China." He noted the time in his log: 07:42, 10 April, 2284.

Sharon McKay came from her workstation to look over his shoulder, pushing her long ash-blond hair behind one ear. She leaned in closer than was necessary, her cheek hovering next to his, and he tensed. "There wasn't much going on in China anyway," she said.

Ruben eased away from her slightly. "No, but it leaves another giant hole in our coverage." When Ruben was a boy, the series of geosynchronous satellites had transmitted data from around the globe, giving the installation on Kitt Peak a complete and complex picture of climate and conditions as the earth spiraled through violent earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and massive storms. Clouds had interfered with transmissions for months at a time, but whenever there was a break, whenever the radio signals got through, they'd been able to download data and get a comprehensive picture of what was going on. Ruben had been excited to learn from his mother how to access the feeds, how to run the data through the translators and produce stunningly beautiful pictures of the planet's demise.

But even as he had learned how to run the monitoring equipment, the satellites had begun to fail, like the telescopes that once dominated this facility. Some satellites, such as the one focused on China, sputtered through decaying orbits into oblivion; others simply stopped transmitting. The global grid, once so complete, now looked like Alpine lace.

Sharon straightened and shrugged. "Does it really matter? We can see the trend. Things are settling back to how they were before the Evacuation. And it's not like we can send the information anywhere."

She had a point. It had been forty-two years since the last shuttle had lifted off from Earth, ferrying passengers to the transport behemoths headed for other planets. New worlds, some naturally life-sustaining and others terraformed, had gathered in the humanity Earth rejected. But the ability to transmit information to them had failed years ago. Earth's far-flung children had no idea their mother planet was now healing itself.

Ruben rolled his shoulders, thick with muscle from hoeing in the gardens at the foot of the mountain. "They might come back," he said. "I mean, there's no reason they shouldn't send a spaceship back someday to see how Earth is doing."

"Trust me," said Sharon, "they don't care. Settling two dozen new worlds—Just imagine the power struggles, the competition for resources. I'll bet you a day's rations they've had at least three good wars by now. Probably more."

"An easy bet to make, since there's no way to prove it one way or the other." Her attitude always grated on him, that air of superiority because she was twenty-seven to his twenty-two. And the way she assumed they would pair up soon. How he wished the other girls of his gen hadn't all been snapped up, even—

The whoosh of an opening door interrupted his thoughts, and a skirling breeze blew Ruben's friend Vijay Singh into the room. Tall and lean, Vijay wore a light jacket over his khaki coverall in deference to the early morning chill. "Ruben, you busy?"

Ruben sighed. "Just watching another satellite die." It was Sharon's watch—he'd only come in to check on the China satellite.

"Rathna's going on a livestocking run," Vijay said. "The White Mountains. We could use some extra muscle."

It was that, or another day in the gardens. A chance to fly over the healing Earth, a day far from the pressures of survival and—he glanced at Sharon—procreation. He needed only a

moment's thought before he bolted up from his chair. "Can we check out any industrial sites along the way? See if there are electronics worth scavenging?" If they were to keep the rest of the network up and running . . .

Vijay grinned. "You can ask, but you know how my sister gets when she's hunting for livestock."

Ruben grinned back. "Like she gets when you want to look for other survivors."

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Alfonso woke again, no longer able to ignore the promptings of his aging flesh. Growing old brought many joys—and a certain smug satisfaction at having survived this long—but it had many drawbacks, as well. When was the last time he had slept all through the night? Suppressing a groan, he struggled to his bony knees, pulled the smelly deer-hide blanket over his shoulders, and crawled out of his wickiup.

Once outside, the morning sunlight lit his soul, and he paused, blinking at its blessed brightness. He remembered too well the years when only a pale, watery light filtered through to the land, years of want and despair. Heart lifting, he levered himself up from his crouch and looked out over the Village of the People, the Survivors and their children, sheltered here at the foot of the cliff whose ancient cave dwelling had saved them. Overcome, he lifted his voice in thanks to the Mother Earth.

\* \* \*

*Hear, O Mother Earth!  
I remember the dark times,  
And so I greet the dawn with gladness.  
I remember the Rains That Never Stopped,  
The killing waters,  
And so I laugh with your gentle brook.  
You have washed yourself clean  
And you give to your children this  
new day.  
I thank you, O Mother.  
I thank you, O Mother.*

\* \* \*

Chest swelling, he turned first east where the sun peeked over a mesa, then west to the trail that led out of the valley, and finally back south, gazing across the gushing creek to the undulating flood plain where the People had planted their squash and beans. Then, pulling the hide more snugly around his shoulders, he trudged toward the latrine trench downstream from the village.

The women of the village had been up early, stirring their cooking fires, and by the time Alfonso returned, the fragrance of stewed rabbit filled the air. They had run out of squash during the cold months, but now flower buds and tender young prickly pear pads filled out their stew pots. Sometimes Alfonso craved the foods of his youth—popcorn and canned peaches and chocolate—but he'd been hungry too many years to be anything but grateful for whatever nourishment the Mother Earth provided. Especially if he didn't have to cook it himself.

He stopped by the fire of his younger daughter, Squash Blossom, and inhaled pointedly. A round-faced girl of seventeen summers with a toddler slung over one shoulder, she smiled and greeted him. "Good morning, Father. Would you like some food?"

"If you have enough."

The smile faded from her eyes, if not her lips. "Your generosity sees to that." Last fall her young husband had slipped on a rocky slope and broken his neck, and now it was Alfonso who brought her rabbits and other small game to add to the vegetables she gathered or grew. Being widowed was hard enough, but Squash Blossom's sadness was compounded because she knew she must marry again, and her choices for a new mate were limited.

Alfonso stifled a sigh. Having lost his own wife Ernestina several years ago, he could appreciate her despair. He was near fifty, and though the desire for a woman still plagued him, the

thought of taking a giggling, doe-eyed, scatter-brained adolescent into his cramped wickiup to live made him shudder. A more mature woman might be a better companion, but those who had survived the privations of the early years found their wombs dried early. And why disrupt his life and his peace, if not to make children? Love between a man and a woman was a luxury; children were a necessity, if the People were to survive.

Survive. Alfonso lifted his eyes to the cliff wall towering over the village, to the stone houses built into a cave there by ancient hands. That shelter high above the floodwaters, out of the driving rain, was all that had saved them. For eleven miserable days, they had huddled there with no fire and only the meager provisions in their packs. When the storm finally subsided, water still rushed through the valley, and the only escape from their sanctuary/prison was to climb the treacherous slope above the houses to the mesa top. Chico had gone first, always angry, channeling his hatred of their situation into resolve and inching, fingers and toes, up the jagged cliff face. When he reached the top he had thrown back taunts, but also a rope, and Alfonso, Juan, Carlos, Enrique, and Estevan all climbed up to join him in the hunt for food.

Six teenaged boys trying to feed twenty-two empty bellies from a land scoured first by brutal drought, then by savage storm. Alfonso had lain for hours in the prickly sedge beside a rabbit hole until the furry inhabitant poked its head out, and he yanked his snare tight. By then he was so hungry, he could have eaten the rabbit raw; but he put it aside, found another hole, and stretched out to wait again. . . .

"We should have gone with them," Chico complained time and again. "When they came from the Mountain that last time. We should have gone back with them as they asked. It was *el Jefe* who stopped us, that old man and his lies."

"They were not lies," Alfonso always soothed. "He did not try to deceive us. It was what he believed, that we were better off without their help. And we do not know he was wrong. We have seen no more of them."

A bright flash caught his eye now and drew him from his memories. What was that in the sky to the south? A bird? The birds had come back slowly—raptors first, then doves and pigeons, then others. But this—no, that was no bird sailing through the clear spring sky. That glint was the flash of sunlight on metal or polished fiberplas. Alfonso blinked, hardly able to believe what he saw.

Chico appeared at his elbow. "Look! You see that? You see that? It's them! They did not die! All this time, we could have been safe with them up on the Mountain!"

Accustomed to his friend's harangue, Alfonso shook his head. "Was life any easier on that mountain?"

Squash Blossom looked up from feeding her fire. "What mountain?"

"Far away to the south," Alfonso said. "Many days' walk."

"Father!" Alfonso's son Turtle came toward them, up the path from the river. He was a handsome, well-built man of twenty-odd summers, with straight black hair that brushed his shoulders. Ernestina had made his leather headband, pressing designs into it and staining it red with amaranth seeds. Turtle pointed at the object in the sky. "What is that? It does not move like a bird."

Throughout the village, people were taking notice now, looking up at the sky, shielding their eyes against the morning glare. Alfonso sighed. "It is a hopper."

"A what?"

He realized he had used the English word, and he tried to remember the Spanish equivalent. When that failed, he gave it a name his son would understand. "A flying machine."

"A machine that flies? How is that possible?"

Alfonso shrugged and gave his favorite answer. "Magic." Then he added, "It's from the Before Times. I saw one once, when I was a boy."

"And we should have gotten on it," Chico insisted. "Think how many died! We could have shared their food. We could have had their medicine. My daughter would not have died of pneumonia."

Alfonso did not bother to answer. He and Chico had had this argument many times. As scarce

as food had been here, they might have had less on the Mountain. Perhaps the others there would have resented sharing it with the People. Perhaps by sharing too widely, all would have starved. There was no knowing what might have been; they could only be grateful for what they had.

“Flag it down,” Chico said. “Do something! Make a big smoky fire.”

But Alfonso turned to his wickiup, the unease of his dream heavy as the hide across his shoulders. “If the Mother Earth wishes them to pass us by, they will. If she wishes them to find us . . .”

Chico followed him, cursing under his breath.

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Rathna Singh squinted at the wisp of smoke off to the aircraft’s left, then sighed in exasperation. “Wildfire.”

“No, look at this,” Vijay insisted, pivoting the hopper’s infrared camera to focus on the area in question. “It’s not a line of heat, like a wildfire. It’s several distinct heat signatures. Like campfires.”

Ruben had two sisters himself, so he was accustomed to this kind of squabbling between siblings. Still, he wondered why he let himself get suckered into these excursions. As a biologist, Rathna was dedicated to her mission of animal husbandry, fostering a population of healthy animals as a sustainable food source for her community. As a chemist with a wife and two kids, Vijay was dedicated to voyages of discovery that would raise him out of his everyday life into the fantasy realm of books and games.

“You’re supposed to use the infrared to look for warm-blooded beasts,” Rathna scolded. “And those are spotfires. Sparks blown from the main fire always spawn spotfires.”

Eye twinkling, Vijay turned to Ruben in the seat behind her. “Hey—maybe it’s survivors from Leonard Pacheco’s band.” Pacheco had led a group of Native Americans who refused to evacuate Earth forty-odd years before. The notion that any had survived had fascinated the two boys growing up, the subject of many hours of imaginative play.

Rathna, several years older, had scoffed at the notion then as she did now. “Too far south.”

“They could have moved. It’s been what—thirty years, Ruben? Thirty-five?”

Ruben would have preferred to be left out of the debate, but Vijay wasn’t giving him the option. “The last anyone saw of them was before the megastorms hit,” he said. “That was . . . five or six years Post-Evac, I think.” No one on the mountain had thought of having children until the storms passed and things started growing again. Ruben’s brother Victor, twenty-nine, had been the first child born on the mountain, and the storms had lasted about six years, so . . . “Yeah, thirty-five years at least, I’m pretty sure. Mark McKay would know, he keeps those records.” Sharon’s brother was the archivist for the mountain installation.

“Just because there’s nothing left of their settlement, doesn’t mean they didn’t move somewhere else. Somewhere more conducive to survival.” Vijay tapped the screen. “Those are campfires.”

Rathna scowled. “It’s a wildfire. Look, I’ll show you.” She banked the hopper and headed northwest toward the smoke.

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“What is its purpose, this hopper?” Turtle asked. He squatted outside Alfonso’s wickiup, looking up at the sky as he added twigs to his father’s fire.

“Put green wood on it,” Chico coaxed. “Make a lot of smoke.”

Seated in his doorway with his bowl of stew, Alfonso ignored Chico and answered Turtle’s question. “It carries people.”

“Like a horse?” No horses had survived the terrible Food Wars that preceded the Evacuation, but their legend was common lore among the People.

“No, people ride inside,” Alfonso explained. “It is bigger than it looks.” He licked the last of the stew from his fingers and glanced again at the sky. Was it growing nearer, that shiny object?

Turtle’s eyes had gone wide. “People? What people?”

“I think they must be the Men on the Mountain. I thought they had forgotten about us. Or

died off." Alfonso frowned to himself. Had he never told Turtle the story? How the scientists had come one last time, insisting the People should come back to their mountain for safety. How *el Jefe* had turned them down flat. Only he and Chico had been there with *el Jefe*, and Alfonso did not like to bring it up. It only made Chico bitterer. "They . . . were not known as respecters of the Mother Earth," he elaborated.

Turtle threw him a dark look, grunted. "Then it is no wonder they died."

"Except they didn't," Chico growled. "See? Who else could it be, in a flying machine?"

"Apparently," Alfonso said, watching the aircraft draw nearer, "the Mother Earth chose to let some live."

Turtle huffed as he watched the glistening thing come on. "And why have they kept themselves hidden all these years?"

Alfonso did not respond. He knew it was not the Men on the Mountain who had kept themselves hidden. Though they never spoke of it, most of those who remembered the Before Times had wished them dead, those arrogant scientists, wished them punished for their hubris in scorning the Mother Earth and rousing her anger. Wished them afflicted with hunger and loss and humiliation. Wished someone had suffered more than the People.

And maybe they had. Maybe this was some drone, activated after decades by a computer that should have died years before. Maybe it would fly right past them on its unknown, unneeded mission—

Just then the aircraft altered its course and came straight toward them.

Alfonso closed his eyes, felt his heart sink like the weight on a fishing net. It might be different this time. They might have learned, those Men on the Mountain, as the People had learned. They might be humbler now. He opened his eyes again and set aside his empty bowl. "Fetch Carlos," he told Turtle. "And Celia and—" He wondered who else might remember some English. "Dawn. I think we are about to have visitors."

\* \* \*

Ruben watch the shadow of the hopper glide over the land below them, saw green patches resolve into shrubby trees and cactus as they came in low. Sunlight gleamed off a pale rock face where an old cliff dwelling perched on a shelf, its doors gaping, its courtyards bare. Strange, that this ancient mud habitation should have lasted when the concrete and steel of so many buildings had succumbed to the ravages of nature. But then, this place was built into a sheltering cave, protected from the elements on three sides.

It was, however, decidedly unoccupied. Deflated, Ruben chided himself for having hoped there might really have been survivors there.

Then Rathna tilted the hopper's wings, and he peered down at the stretch of land sloping from the cliff toward the creek. Brush huts sat scattered among the saltbush and mesquite, each with a tidy campfire. In the spaces between clustered dozens of upturned faces.

"Oh my God," Rathna breathed. "Vijay, you were right."

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Alfonso watched the hopper dip low over the village, then swoop upward and circle a flat-topped hill just to the east. There it began its vertical descent, bringing back memories of that other hopper so many years ago, landing on higher ground above *el Jefe's* town. He and Chico had been boys then, no more than twelve. How proud they had been when *el Jefe* invited them to go with him to meet the delegation from the Mountain.

"Make them come down to us," Chico said now as the hopper settled on the hilltop. "Why should we go to them?"

Alfonso twisted his lips in annoyance at this abrupt shift in attitude. "I thought you were eager to see them."

"I am, but my knees are not."

Neither were Alfonso's, but he couldn't help wondering why *el Jefe* had chosen to go up to meet that last delegation. He might have remained in his house, made them come to him. What was his reason? Was there something in the town he didn't want them to see? Had he feared the exchange might get ugly and wanted to keep it away from the heart of their settlement? Or had

he simply been anxious to shoo them off?

Chico snorted. "You are still following that old man's advice, aren't you? Wary of *los Otros*, the Others. What good did it do us? We might have died with him and the rest of our people."

Alfonso only grinned and turned to the knot of elders gathering around him. "Come, my friends," he said. "Let us go up and greet our guests."

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The desert vegetation on the hilltop was laced with spring green, and wildflowers clustered around chunks of old asphalt where a road or a parking lot had once been. From the air, Ruben had seen foundations of a building long gone, and Rathna had eased the hopper down cautiously to avoid the rubble and debris. She cut the main engine now, but Ruben noticed she did not fold back the aircraft's wings, leaving it ready for a quick takeoff. "This was probably a park of some kind," she said as she unbuckled her harness. "Historic site. Before such things were defunded and fell into ruin." Long before the Food Wars.

Vijay was already opening the hopper door. "Any structures probably washed away in the megastorms. Looks like the grass and shrubs have been growing here quite a while." Stunted mesquite trees had sunk their talons amid the chaparral. "Look!" He pointed to half a dozen figures winding their way up the hillside single file. "A welcoming committee!" He grinned back at his companions.

Ruben felt his gut tighten as he watched them come. The leader was an old man, his long hair gray and his face deeply lined. He wore moccasins tied well up his calves, with a pair of fibrous mats skirting his loins and an animal hide draped over his shoulders. Behind him came two other men and three women, though one seemed more a girl. She helped one of the older women up the slope.

"If they're Leonard Pacheco's group, they may not be very welcoming," Rathna warned. "Aunt Sara said they made it very clear they wanted to be left alone."

Vijay looked at his sister in disbelief. "Are you kidding? They're living in huts made of brush, and they're not going to be happy to see someone in a hopper?"

"Let's just wait," Ruben said as he watched the emissaries come on. "Let's just wait and see what they say."

So they stood by the hopper and waited as the little band climbed the hill.

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By the time he reached the top of the mesa, Alfonso was winded. "You have grown soft, old man," Chico taunted. "Remember when we used to run to the top of this hill just to see who was faster?"

"There is no denying this life has aged us," Alfonso admitted, glad to stop and wait for the others. "But we do not know if those on the Mountain have aged any better." The scientists had all been adults when Alfonso was a boy. Could these be the same people he had met? He didn't remember the men's names, but the woman—Sara Martin. Dr. Sara Martin. No taller than Alfonso then, but all the men jumped at her command. Blond hair streaming in the wind, blue eyes flashing—

One look now, though, told him his guests were strangers. Three young people stood beside the hopper, dressed in utilitarian coveralls. A small woman with long dark hair was flanked by a tall, slender man and another of stockier build. Both men wore their dark hair cut short.

"These are children," Chico said. "I will not speak English for them."

Alfonso suspected that was a blessing, but he did not say so. Instead he led his band forward, trying to remember the appropriate English greeting for strangers. "Hello," he said. "Good morning."

The woman and the taller man stood silent, mouths gaping. The other man glanced at the dumbstruck pair as if he expected one of them to lead, then straightened himself and spoke. "Good morning." Another glance at his companions, and he forged ahead. "We saw your fires."

"They probably have electric stoves," Chico muttered in Alfonso's ear. "They think we are barbarians because we use fire."

Alfonso hushed him with a gentle elbow. "I am Alfonso," he continued, the English coming

back to him now.

"Tell them what they call you," Chico mocked softly. "Tell them you are He With Faith. They'll be impressed."

"I am Ruben." Ruben waved a hand at his companions. "This is Rathna and her brother Vijay. We were out looking for livestock. Animals. Are you—are you part of Leonard Pacheco's group?"

Alfonso nodded. "He was our *jefe*. Our chief."

The woman Rathna came to life then, sucked in her breath and spoke in a rush. Alfonso caught the words "four thousand" and "people" and "all that's left?"

"Please, slow down." He gestured with both hands to stem her flow of words. "It's a long time since I speak English. Yes, we"—He gestured toward the village—"are all the People. We are the Survivors. Plus our children, and their children."

Celia spoke to Alfonso in Spanish. "They can't be from the Mountain. Those people were all older. Unless they had children after all, which they swore they wouldn't do."

Before he could respond, Ruben spoke again. "*Habla Español a qui?*"

Alfonso's eyebrows rose in surprise. "You speak Spanish?"

"*Un poquito*." Ruben grinned. "It's the language my parents used when they didn't want us kids to know what they were saying. I picked up a few words."

Chico folded his arms and glared at Alfonso. "So they lived well enough on the Mountain to have children. And we could have been with them."

Alfonso repressed a sigh. "Our language is mostly Spanish," he told the visitors, "with some Apache and Navajo and O'odam and Yavapai—" He groped for the right word, then pantomimed stirring.

"Mixed in," Ruben guessed.

"And we have our own words, words that belong only to the People." That had been his idea, to give things new names, for the new world they lived in.

Chico snickered. "You never imagined you'd have to explain those words to anyone else, did you?"

Now Celia addressed the strangers in English. "Why do you come?"

"We saw your fires," Rathna said, her speech slower now but not exaggerated. "We didn't know anyone else survived. We're from Kitt Peak."

Alfonso grunted. "I thought so. But we are surprised." He cocked his head. "We thought you chose to die with no children."

"That was the intent." Rathna stepped forward, taking over now. "There was so much ash in the air for years, and the constant storms, and nothing would grow, even in our hydroponic gardens. We nearly died."

"Us, too." The Time of Storms and Fury. The Year that Summer Never Came.

"But then things got better, and it seemed good to keep the mission going, so—Now there are, what, Vijay? A hundred and fifty of us?"

"Closer to two," Vijay said.

Alfonso drew a deep breath as he considered that. Such a number could easily overwhelm the People. "We are less," he said carefully. Then he smiled and pointed to Celia's daughter Cholla Bud, whose belly bulged slightly beneath her skirt. "But we keep growing."

Ruben's gaze had drifted to the collection of wickiups along the creek where adults conferred while children jostled each other and played an improvised game with sticks. "May we see your village?" he asked.

Alfonso hesitated. "Go on," Chico prodded. "Are you still afraid? Look, they are not dangerous. No guns, no stunners. Don't be rude. Invite them to eat with us."

Alfonso straightened his shoulders, inclined his head. "We welcome you. Come and sit at my fire."

\* \* \*

Ruben counted the brush shelters in the village as they picked their way down the slope. Seventeen.

"You know what I'm thinking," Rathna said softly.

Alfonso and another man were ahead of them, the others trailing behind. Vijay cocked an eyebrow. “That they’re hunting your precious mule deer?” he teased.

She scowled at him. “I doubt they’re equipped to hunt deer. No, I’m thinking . . . bloodlines.”

Vijay snorted. “You’re a biologist—you’re always thinking bloodlines. Tell me how these people are going to improve the bloodlines on any of your livestock. I don’t see any domesticated animals, do you?”

But Ruben knew what she meant. “She’s not worried about our livestock. She’s worried about these people, right? Seventeen huts by my count, a family in each—they don’t have enough numbers to prevent genetic drift.”

Rathna scowled at him. “They don’t have enough? We don’t have enough. But twenty, thirty more adults . . .”

Ruben’s eyes widened as the implication hit him. Their biologists had insisted it was manageable, as long as some couples changed partners occasionally. Some people objected to this, worried about social damage caused by swapping. But if they brought these new people to the mountain . . . if he had a choice other than Sharon McKay . . .

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“You have no food on your fire,” Celia pointed out when they reached Alfonso’s wickiup.

Alfonso shrugged sheepishly.

“Come to my fire,” she commanded. “I have four fine sons—there is always food in my cookpot.” Then she led the way toward the far side of the village.

“You should put that old woman in her place,” Chico said as they followed.

“She is not much older than we are,” Alfonso reminded him. “And she commands as much respect. If she wants to have us at her fire, she is entitled.” He thanked Celia pointedly for making the offer.

Their visitors gawked at the trappings of the camp as they walked on. Alfonso knew how barbaric it must seem to them: huts of brush and mud, rough clothing of woven yucca fibers, poorly tanned hides. “They look on us with disdain,” Chico said.

But Ruben paused to inspect the bindings on a drying frame, the pieces of meat draped on it. “I think it’s amazing,” Ruben said, “what you’ve done with nothing. Or almost nothing.”

Alfonso lifted his chin. “All we have, we have from the hand of the Mother Earth.”

Chico snorted softly. “And their plastics, their refined metals and ceramics and glass, are they not also from the Mother Earth?”

Alfonso was glad the visitors did not understand Chico’s Spanish.

“Is that deer hide?” Ruben asked, pointing to the skin on Alfonso’s shoulders. “How do you hunt deer?”

“I chased this one into a pit.” Alfonso held up the portion of hide with a hole gouged through it, where the deer had fallen on a sharpened stake. As he did, he noticing the cracks and scaly patches. Ernestina had done her best to tan it, but . . . “We were children when our elders were washed away. Worse—we were teenagers. We failed to learn many of the skills they would teach us. Making snares and traps, yes. Food was—” He groped for a word. “Obsession. Never enough food. But tanning hides? Spinning thread?” He shook his head. “We were busy with other things.”

“You have no cloth,” Rathna noted.

“We have no cotton. Or sheep.”

Ruben’s brow puckered. “Can’t you find cloth in one of the old cities? Not everything was washed away in the floods. We get lots of our—”

But Alfonso waved him off. “We prefer to make our own things. We live from the bounty of the Mother Earth.”

“And sometimes go hungry,” Chico reminded him. “And cold.”

They had arrived at Celia’s wickiup. “Come, eat,” she said, dishing stew into wooden bowls and handing them to the visitors. The tantalizing aroma tickled Alfonso’s nostrils, and he had to remind himself he had already eaten at Squash Blossom’s fire.

As if called by the thought, his daughter appeared at his elbow with her child in one arm and

a stack of yucca mats in the other. “Perhaps our guests will sit while they eat,” she suggested, indicating a nearby ramada.

Alfonso nodded and translated her words into English for the visitors. “My daughter has brought mats so you can sit,” he told the visitors.

Ruben turned to her. “*Gra cias.*”

Alfonso noted how the young man’s eyes followed Squash Blossom as she spread the mats on the cleared ground. She glanced shyly at the stranger, then retreated to where two of her friends waited with their babies. “Thank you, Squash Blossom,” Alfonso said, taking a seat and indicating the others should join him.

Ruben dropped with enviable ease into a cross-legged position, his eyes never leaving the girl. She and her friends giggled behind their hands and sent sidelong glances at him and Vijay.

Rathna took the bowl of stew Celia offered and tasted it. “Mm, it’s good,” she said, licking gravy from her fingers. “Nice and spicy. You must grow chiles.”

“It would be better with garlic,” Chico complained. “And cumin. I’ll bet they have those on the Mountain.”

“Yes, we grow chiles,” Alfonso said. “And squash and beans, and we harvest from the desert around us. But we could find no corn to plant, or cotton seeds, either.”

“Ask them, ’Fonso.” Chico urged. “Ask them if they have those spices. And then ask them to take us back with them. Potatoes, ’Fonso. Flour tortillas. Tomatoes and onions and—”

“You have done very well anyway,” Rathna said. “Amazingly well. I’m sure I couldn’t do as well, if I were plunked down in the middle of the desert like this.”

“What happened to your elders, exactly?” Vijay asked. “You say they were washed away, but—all of them? And how is it you escaped?”

Alfonso drew a deep breath, but it did nothing to ease the ache in his chest. “We were not in town when the flood came,” he said, “and so we—” His voice failed.

“You survived,” Rathna said quietly. “You survived.”

Alfonso tried to ignore the burning look Celia sent his way.

\* \* \*

Ruben’s gaze slid back to the three young women seated across the way. They wore knee-length skirts of hemp-like fibers, woven and fringed, with hides draped over their shoulders. What lay beneath the hides, he could not tell. How old were they? Old enough to have a child apiece. Their cheeks were round and smooth, their hair a glossy black, and the eyes that darted his way were bright and mischievous.

This was certainly not what he and Vijay had imagined as kids, pretending to be the heroic explorers who found Leonard Pacheco and his lost band. In their fantasies, they rescued people held in thrall by a superstitious dictator, half-starved and forced to do his bidding. But these people—these people looked content. If their clothes were shabby, they didn’t seem to notice, and they looked as well fed as anyone on the mountain. And all of this—food, shelter, an entire *culture* from what he could see—preserved or created by a bunch of teenagers. He wondered, if someone had plunked him and other second-gens down in the desert with only their wits, would they have survived?

And the idea of bringing these people back to the mountain—What would the administration do, install them in their own village at the base? Find them housing with everyone else? Talk about culture shock. But Rathna was right, both populations could use the genetic diversity. Genetic—He looked at the young women again, and a part of him stirred that had nothing to do with science.

Alfonso’s daughter probably had a husband. They all probably had husbands—they had kids, didn’t they? How would they feel about mating with strangers, with people outside their group?

Then Squash Blossom’s eyes met his, and a jolt of electricity shot through Ruben. That look, that smile—she was flirting with him. Wasn’t she? Ruben was no psychologist, but he was pretty sure she was flirting with him. Maybe they didn’t have marriage as such—they couldn’t really afford to, as small a group as they were. Scientifically speaking. Maybe they had open relationships, and . . .

Vijay's elbow caught him in the ribs. "You're drooling."

Ruben flushed. "Oh, yeah?" He kept his voice low. "Your eyes aren't exactly staying in their sockets."

Vijay sniggered. "I won't tell your girlfriend if you don't tell my wife."

"I don't have a girlfriend!"

"Yeah? You enjoy celibacy?"

Ruben glanced around to be sure no one was listening to their side conversation, but Rathna was asking about the wildlife in the region, what kinds they'd seen, where they hunted. "Just 'cause I'm not married," he whispered, "doesn't mean I have to be celibate."

"Big talk." But Vijay turned his attention back to the exchange on deer and javelina, ducks and foxes.

\* \* \*

"That's what brought us here," Rathna was saying, "we were headed for the White Mountains to look for livestock. Mountain sheep, preferably, or deer, but we'll take anything, really. Not rabbits, we have plenty of those, but waterfowl, or even a bear. We've got one pair of black bears, but we could use more."

"We have seen no sheep," Alfonso told her. He didn't think any had lived in this area even before the Food Wars, certainly not after. "But we have only gone upriver, to the west, so I don't know what you will find in those mountains."

"Hey, did you ever see a *Celux nobilis*?" Vijay asked. "Big quadruped with a single horn? I know they were imported from off-world during the Food Wars—"

"And were all butchered for meat," Rathna scoffed. "Honestly, Vijay, you go from one fantastic notion to another—" She stopped short and took in the faces around her. "Well. Um . . ." She clambered to her feet. "Maybe our discussion of livestock should wait for another time. Right now, I think we better go home and let people know you're here. They are going to be so excited to learn you've survived. We'll radio the news as soon as we're within range. I'm sure our leaders will want to come right back to meet with you."

Alfonso's gut tightened. "Your leaders?"

"We have an administrator," she explained, "and department heads. I'm sure they'll be back." He swallowed. "Sara Martin?"

"Aunt Sara? Oh, no, she gave up administration years ago. She teaches now."

Dr. Sara Martin, a teacher. Alfonso tried to picture it. She had made quite an impression on him, all those years ago. Fair-skinned, fair-haired—he imagined she had been beautiful behind that breathing mask she wore. To twelve-year-old Alfonso, the men with her looked like monsters in their masks, but she—she was a katsina, an otherworldly being. A being of great power.

"You don't understand!" Her voice had been tinny through the mask. "This ash will stay in the air for months. Maybe years. It's not just the monster storms it will trigger—it's going to affect the sunlight. Plants will die. Animals will starve. And so will you!"

But el Jefe had stood with his bare face to the driving rain, gray hair whipping back from his headband, as calm and resolute as she was passionate and determined. "And you think your technology will save us, up there on your mountain? Did it ever occur to you that technology is what made the earth nearly uninhabitable in the first place? That your addiction to machines and computers and excess was unsustainable?"

Dr. Martin had drawn herself up as though to command the storm. "You have to come with us now. The roads are already gone, and when I get back, I'm grounding all aircraft for the duration. It's now or never."

"And why can you not accept," el Jefe had asked, "that we choose never?"

She'd taken two steps forward, her face only inches from his. "I want to talk to your people directly."

El Jefe had laughed. "Do you imagine they will give you a different answer? I have presented your kind offer to them, Dr. Martin. It is their answer I bring."

"It is yours!"

"The Council of Elders discussed it at length. All viewpoints were considered. In the end, it

was unanimous. We will trust in the Mother Earth. We are her children; her wrath will pass.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then we will perish in our homes, rather than on your mountain. Leave us, Dr. Martin. Your conscience is clear.”

For a moment Alfonso had imagined she would rise up and smite him, but she only balled her fists and shouted, “You don’t understand!”

“I understand you have made a decision, and it infuriates you that we will not do as you command.”

Dr. Martin had drawn back as though struck. No warmth colored el Jefe’s smile and he said, “As your people say, ‘You are not the boss of me.’”

Then el Jefe had turned and he, Chico, and Alfonso had walked away from her, although Alfonso could not resist a glance back. Sara Martin had been marching toward the waiting hopper, her entourage trailing after her. Had she lost face with the Men on the Mountain because she could not bring the People back?

And the Administrator Rathna spoke of now—would that person also try to command the People?

Alfonso was brought back to the present by Vijay, who had stood to join Rathna. “Hey, maybe you want to come with us, Alfonso.”

The remnants of last night’s dream stirred in Alfonso’s consciousness, and a chill slid down through his chest and into his gut. Go to the Mountain . . .

Rathna was enthusiastic. “Sure! Good idea. You can come along in our hopper—”

Alfonso quickly held up a hand, shaking his head. “I will not go in your hopper.”

Chico, who had been silent for some time, sprang to life. “What do you mean, you won’t go? Of course, you’ll go! We’ll both go! We’ll both go, and we won’t have to come back.”

“The People—my people—need time,” Alfonso demurred. “To . . . process, is that right? We have long thought you dead like our elders, and ourselves alone in the world. Our council will need to discuss, to . . . consider.”

“We have a council?” Chico demanded. “What is there to consider? They have food, medicine, soft beds—”

“I understand,” Rathna said. She turned to Ruben, who still sat on a mat. “Ruben?”

Ruben looked up. His mind had clearly been somewhere else, and Alfonso was fairly sure he knew where. “Um—sure. Time. To discuss.”

A thought struck Alfonso. The man was young, strong . . . “Maybe you would like to stay with us for a day or two,” he suggested. “You can go back with your leaders, when they return to talk with us.”

Ruben blinked, then turned to his friends, who looked equally startled. “Uh—I’m flattered. Thank you. But—uh—” He straightened his shoulders. “Not this time, okay? I’d like to stay in your village, see how your people live, but—I’m just not prepared right now.”

Alfonso smiled. “Next time,” he agreed, then added, “Bring your toothbrush.” Ruben laughed, startled. “And maybe, if you can spare them, some seeds.”

“Seeds?”

“Corn. Cotton.”

“Potatoes,” Chico suggested. “Wheat.”

“Things that will grow here in our climate,” Alfonso qualified.

“Sure,” Ruben said. “I’m sure I can bring you some seeds.”

\* \* \*

“You are thinking of another kind of seed, aren’t you?” Chico accused when the hopper had lifted off and they trudged back to the village. “You would give away your daughter to one of them?”

“I give away nothing,” Alfonso said. “But if he comes here . . . I simply make it possible for her to have another choice.”

“And if he doesn’t stay?”

Alfonso shrugged. “I will make it all right for her to choose one man now, and another later.”

"You will make it all right," Chico scoffed. "Like you made it all right for me to take my half-sister Elena to wife."

Alfonso sighed. "There were only so many combinations, Chico, and the others had all chosen. You know that. It was either Elena, or wait till one of the children matured. And you didn't want to wait, so I—" He stopped short, went back to the script he had used a dozen times. "So I talked to the Mother Earth, and She said it would be all right for you to marry your half-sister."

Chico snorted. "These conversations you have with the Mother Earth."

"Your babies were fine, weren't they? And now Mother Earth is telling me this Ruben, he can give Squash Blossom fine babies. Babies with new blood. We need that, Chico."

"If we go back to their Mountain, there will be plenty of new blood."

"True." Alfonso stopped and looked at the dirt paths wending between sturdy shelters of sticks and mud. "But will we still hear the Mother Earth up there?"

\* \* \*

News of the survivors had spread rapidly, and several people waited at the landing pad as the hopper touched down. At the front of the pack stood Sharon McKay, and Ruben's stomach clenched. What in the world was she doing here? This had nothing to do with her.

Vijay popped his safety harness and fairly lunged for the hatch, but Ruben stalled deliberately, fiddling with his safety harness, checking the gear stowed behind his seat while Rathna folded the wings and started her post-flight checklist. Sharon, however, was nothing if not assertive. As soon as Vijay cleared the hatch, she thrust her head in. "Hey, Rathna. Hey, Ruben." She smirked at him, and he tensed reflexively. Did she think that was a smile? That she was flirting? "I hear you made quite a discovery out there."

"It was Vijay's discovery," Ruben demurred, waving a hand at his friend who was locking the hopper in its clamps, a precaution against wind gusts that eddied over and around the mountain. "I need to give him a hand." He pushed past Sharon and tried to escape.

She only followed him. "So this is part of Pacheco's band you found? How many are left?"

Ruben shrugged. "I didn't count."

"There were four thousand in the beginning, though I think there were a lot less by the time Sara Martin tried to rescue them."

"We're guessing about fifty," Vijay chimed in. Other onlookers were moving in now, listening, and Vijay raised his voice to include them. "And you should see them: living in mud huts, walking around half-naked—"

"They're wickiups, not mud huts!" Ruben snapped. "I'd like to see you build one."

Vijay straightened, stung. "Oh, excuse me, I'm not up on Native American architecture."

"They've managed incredibly well," Ruben temporized, "considering their whole settlement was washed away in the floods. They've built shelters, kept themselves fed and clothed—"

"If you call that stuff they wore clothing. More like placemats and mangy old—"

"Vijay!" Rathna called, exiting the hopper at last. "Let's go. Feingold's waiting." She led the way past the curious watchers, past the Commons building and toward Administration.

Sharon stayed at Ruben's side, long-legged enough to keep up with him. "They must have been glad to see you," she said. "Did you get a hero's welcome?"

Ruben nearly stumbled as he realized the survivors hadn't actually seemed very excited. Polite, yes, but—*wary* was the word that came to mind. To say that, though, with so many people listening in . . .

Rathna saved him. "Sharon, let's wait with the questions. We really should talk to Dr. Feingold first."

Sharon's mouth tightened. "Why? Is it some big secret?" She waved a hand at the knot of people still trailing them. "Hate to tell you, but everyone knows."

"Protocol," Rathna said. "We'll catch up with you later."

Ruben could have hugged her.

\* \* \*

Celia looked Alfonso up and down like a horned owl deciding if a rattlesnake was worth the trouble to carry off for dinner. "So. You think they will come back?"

“Oh, yes.” Alfonso sat before his wickiup, dragging an antler point across a piece of stone to sharpen it. He did not like having to use bones and antlers for cutting and carving—they were not nearly as effective as the metal knife he once possessed. But Chico had teased him about using tools from the Before Times, and in a fit of pique, Alfonso had thrown the knife into a ravine. “We are like a scab that itches,” he told Celia. “They cannot leave us alone.”

“And is that good or bad, do you think?”

“It’s good,” Chico insisted. “Of course it’s good. We need them.”

“I think it can be good,” Alfonso temporized. They could help him identify flint, maybe tell him how it ought to be knapped to make a sharp edge.

Celia’s face did not change. “They will try to control us.”

Alfonso gave a short laugh. “They tried to control us before, remember?”

Not a smile from Celia. But in a voice so low he barely heard her, she said, “Maybe we should have gone with them.”

Maybe. Would they still be alive, his uncles, his cousins, if they had all gone to the Mountain to shelter with the scientists? “We cannot change that,” he said. “We can only deal with the present.”

“I can’t believe you only asked them for seeds,” Chico grumbled. “You should have asked for flour, for sugar, a good pair of jeans. Or better yet, you should have gone with them, as they offered. Then you could have asked for all kinds of things.”

“What do you think?” Alfonso asked Celia. “Should we go to their mountain, see what they have to offer?”

She thought about it for a moment, then lifted her chin. “No, you were right. They should come to us. We will hear what they have to say. Our ‘council.’”

Alfonso grinned sheepishly. “It sounded good. There used to be one, you know, a Council of Elders. So you and I, the other Survivors—we can be the council.”

“Too many. Three is enough.”

Alfonso considered the possibilities. Carlos, or Dawn—no, they should have someone younger, someone who did not remember the Before Times. “Five,” he countered.

Celia nodded ascent. “Pick the others. Come to my wickiup.”

“Your wickiup?” Chico objected. “Why not Alfonso’s?”

“No one’s wickiup.” Alfonso glanced up at the sunbaked structures high on the cliff above them. “Up there. We will make the Men on the Mountain come to us there. It will be a solemn place for solemn discussions.”

Celia craned her neck up at the dwellings that had been their sanctuary from the pounding rains. “You’re going to make me climb up there?”

“You are hoping I will not make the climb,” Chico accused.

“Plenty of room for everyone,” Alfonso said. “And—” He remembered standing on the mesa top, just he and Chico and *el Jefe* facing Sara Martin and four men—four armed men. That was why, he realized. Because the men carried weapons, and *el Jefe* would not allow weapons in the settlement. So when the Men on the Mountain returned—Yes, the Village of the Ancients was a better place to meet with them. “We are more likely to speak carefully,” he said, “when it is harder to walk away.”

\* \* \*

“This is incredible,” Dr. Feingold said, looking down at her e-slate and the notes she had made. The administrator was an angular woman with short gray hair and a prominent bump on her nose. “And did they say how they survived when the flood washed everyone else away?”

They sat at a large rectangular table in a sunny room of the administration building, twelve of them. Ruben glanced around him, wondered if someday he would be part of administration and meet here to make decisions for the mountain enclave. The thought made him uncomfortable. It wasn’t a responsibility he sought.

“We didn’t ask a lot of questions,” Rathna told Feingold. “We thought it was better if you did that.” Silence stretched around the table, so she added, “We told them you’d be back to talk to them. We didn’t feel we ought to make any promises or anything.” She threw Ruben a look.

Ruben was about to object that he hadn't made any promises when he remembered saying he'd come back and stay for a while. And that he'd try to get them some seeds. But he hadn't *promised*, he'd just said he'd like to. That he'd try.

Dr. Feingold looked around the conference table at her department heads. "What do you think? Should we go out there?"

Ruben's jaw sagged. Should they go out there? Why wouldn't they go out there?

"I think we need to talk to them, at least," Seth Nguyen said. "See what kind of state they're in." Nguyen was Feingold's aide, a second-gen with short dark hair and startling blue eyes.

Esther Johnson cleared her throat. She was in charge of maintenance and facilities. "I can look into what it would take to get them back here. None of our wheeled vehicles would make it, not with all the roads out between here and there, so it would have to be landcrawlers or hoppers—"

"No way in hell."

Everyone turned to stare at Stefan Hadley, Director of Operations.

The thin-faced man leveled cool gray eyes at Dr. Feingold. "We're not bringing those people back here."

Dr. Feingold clasped her hands on the table in front of her. "That decision hasn't been made yet. We're just looking into our capabilities so we don't make promises we can't—"

"Fifty people, with no education and no technology skills? They'll sink us!"

Ruben was aghast. Beside him, he felt Rathna straighten in her chair. A glance beyond her told him Vijay, too, was stunned.

Feingold, however, said, "That's certainly something to take into consideration."

"But we need them," Rathna blurted. "From a genetic standpoint."

Feingold inclined her head. "Also something to consider."

"Genetics!" Hadley was indignant. "What good will genetics do us if we all starve to death?"

Now Feingold pursed her lips as though holding back a retort. "I think you'll find, Stefan, that with the new farm-bots we've recovered—"

"We are one crop failure from extinction, and you know it."

"That's not true!" Rathna interrupted. "We're building our livestock pool and—"

"Are you part of administration?" Hadley demanded, his tone sharp enough to amputate limbs.

"Thank you, Rathna," Feingold intervened. "You've done a marvelous job filling our pens with new breeding stock—"

"Which also has to be fed," Hadley pointed out. "We don't have the resources to take on another fifty people. Especially people with no skills."

Ruben couldn't keep quiet. "They've managed to feed themselves for thirty-odd years."

"So let them keep doing that. Out there, where they won't be tempted to dip into our livestock pens."

"Enough," Feingold said firmly. "As I said, the matter bears further consideration before we make any decisions. Rathna, thank you for your report. Esther, please look into transportation options, and housing, too. Fred, I know you've run projections on our increased food production with the recovered farmbots, but I want numbers on what adding fifty people to the equation would do. Stefan, Seth, Alicia—please stay behind, we have other matters to discuss."

Recognizing the dismissal, Rathna and Vijay rose obediently from their chairs along with the others. Ruben, though, found his muscles reluctant to move. Vijay prodded him. "Come on."

Slowly Ruben levered himself to his feet, willing himself to leave with his friends. He made it halfway to the door, then stopped and turned back to Dr. Feingold "They could camp at the base of the mountain," he said. "All they're asking for is some seeds. Corn and cotton."

Dr. Feingold smiled at him. "Thank you, Ruben," she said. "We'll consider that."

\* \* \*

Outside the Administration building, Vijay nearly exploded. "Can you believe that? They want to leave those people out there!"

Rathna shook her head as they rounded the corner back toward the Commons. "They're not

going to leave them out there. That's just Hadley, blowing off steam. You know how he is, he hates everything."

"And he's going to scare the rest of them to death. You heard Dr. Feingold—she wants numbers on what adding fifty people will do to our supplies. Like they couldn't contribute. Like leaving them out there to die is an option—"

"They haven't died yet," Ruben pointed out.

"Relax," Rathna told them. "Feingold gets it. She's just playing administrator, letting everyone have their say, getting all the raw data. It's called consensus building. And I have to say, she's pretty good at it."

On the patio outside the Commons, Sharon stood up from the picnic table where she had obviously been waiting for them. Ruben stopped short, his gut tightening at the sight of her. "I'll see you guys later, I've got some stuff to do."

"Stuff?" Vijay echoed.

"Yeah." Ruben veered off toward the archives. "I want to brush up on my Spanish. And maybe talk to Fred about getting some seeds."

\* \* \*

Turtle stretched out a hand to help his father up off the ladder. Alfonso took it gladly, and a moment later, he stood in the entrance plaza of the Village of the Ancients. Pleased that he was only a little winded, he paused to look around the multilevel cliff dwelling. He hadn't been up here in years, preferring to let younger knees carry heavy baskets to and from the storage rooms. The houses looked well-kept, although he noted a few spots where fresh mud was needed to patch the adobe before the summer rains arrived. And of course, the view was spectacular.

"I thought we'd use this one," Turtle said, gesturing toward a large house where a wisp of smoke curled through the open doorway, escaping toward the high arch of the cave sheltering the dwellings.

Alfonso turned to his son. "Turtle, do you remember when we still lived up here on the cliff?"

Turtle shook his head. He had been only a toddler when Ernestina, heavy with their second child, had complained about having to go up and down the ladder so many times a day. She wanted a house near the creek, where water was easy get and the latrine pit was closer. "Unless you want to empty the night soil bucket," she had growled at Alfonso.

So he and Chico had undertaken to construct shelters on the strip of land below the cliff. They couldn't manage a hogan, such as the Navajo had built, but after a few tries they came up with a reasonable facsimile of an Apache wikiup. Other families had followed suit, and soon the entire group was living by the creek, using the old cliff dwellings only for storage or temporary shelter.

"Big enough for many people, as you said, and dry inside. I lit a fire to chase out the lizards." He grinned. "Carlos stayed anyway."

Alfonso chuckled. "Are the others here already?"

"Except Celia. You know how she likes to make an entrance."

It was true, but Alfonso wasn't sure he should admit that to his son. "She just doesn't want me looking up her skirt as she climbs the ladder," he said.

Turtle's eyes widened, unsure if his father was joking. Alfonso ignored him and studied the designated council chamber. It was a good choice. "We should mark it, to show it is a special place. Paint a symbol of some kind over the door. I will think about it." Crouching to step inside, he remembered how easily, how carelessly, he had ducked in and out of these doorways as a young man. This had been one of the first chambers they inhabited after climbing down from the plateau above. The roof had been intact, unlike some of the rooms on higher levels, and it was large enough for them to sleep in a heap, sharing body warmth. Once the rain had stopped and they'd collected some wood—and gotten it dried out enough to burn—Chico had started a fire with his lighter. That was Chico—no food or blanket or spare clothes in his pack, but he always had a lighter for his bong.

Alfonso glanced at his old friend through the hazy smoke of the Council Chamber fire now. Chico's eyes twinkled, as though he had read Alfonso's thoughts. That lighter had kept them a

lot warmer than any single blanket could have. And the ancient builders had known their craft—now, as then, the smoke drew easily out through the open doorway as if up a chimney.

“All right, old man, I’m here,” Celia said as she pushed through the opening, puffing from the exertion. Her eyes travelled the circle of those in attendance. “Why is Turtle here?”

“I wanted someone who does not remember the Before Times,” Alfonso said. “There are more of them than us, and we need to know their thoughts, too.”

Celia humphed and eased herself onto a bench built along one wall. “Well, then. What do we do about these Men on the Mountain?”

But Alfonso held up a hand. “Let us call on the Mother Earth first, to keep our minds focused on that which matters most.”

Celia nodded her assent, then lifted her arms.

\* \* \*

*“Hear us, O Mother.*

*We come to you in this house of earth,*

*This womb wherein you bore us.*

*Here were we made,*

*Here did we grow and become*

*the People.*

*Now we have gone out into your world,*

*But we do not forget.*

*We do not forget how you sheltered us,*

*Sent creatures into our snares,*

*Placed food within our reach.*

*Guide us now, Mother Earth, as we meet in council*

*To find the path that keeps us in*

*harmony with you.”*

\* \* \*

It was well said, Alfonso had to admit. He could not have done better. If he had learned one thing over the years, it was how dependent they were on the whims of Mother Earth, and how dangerous it was to forget that.

“Now,” Celia said, dropping her arms. “What shall we do about these Men on the Mountain?”

Silence greeted her question. Around the room, the others shifted, looked at one another. Finally Turtle spoke. “Why do we need to do anything?”

“They can change our lives,” Carlos said. “They will change our lives.”

“They will want us to go back with them,” Celia said.

Again the silence hung like smoke in the room.

“I don’t understand,” Turtle said. “Why do they want us to go with them?”

“They think we are better off with them,” Alfonso explained. “They have machines. Medicines.”

“They want us to be like them,” Carlos added.

“Why can’t we have their machines here?” Turtle asked.

A brief silence greeted the question. Then Celia lifted her chin. “We are not sure their machines are pleasing to the Mother Earth.”

“Their machines are not what killed the Earth,” Chico muttered. “It was their ignorance and their arrogance.”

“Machines can make us proud,” Alfonso added. “They tempt us to think we live by our own cleverness and not the kindness of the Mother Earth.”

Celia sighed. “But their medicines,” she said softly. Her younger sister had been the first casualty among the original survivors, a loss that still hung like a stone from her soul. Alfonso remembered it, too, how the child had burned with fever as they huddled in the damp chamber, how they had passed her among them, holding her close, trying to keep her warm—or using her heat to keep themselves warm . . .

“Do they still have those medicines?” Carlos asked. “Medicines expire, you know. Do they

have a way to make more? Aspirin, maybe. But antibiotics? Insulin? Things like that?"

Alfonso shrugged. "We do not know what they have. We do not know what they want. I think we must wait till they come and talk to them. Only when we know their minds we can decide what to do."

\* \* \*

"Seeds?" Fred Chenoweth lifted his eyebrows in surprise. They were impressive eyebrows, long white hairs poking stiffly in a variety of directions. They matched his thatch of unruly white hair, a stark contrast to his deeply tanned face.

"For the survivors," Ruben explained. "I know you're busy, getting that data for Dr. Feingold, but— They invited me to come back, and I promised I'd ask about seeds. I can get vegetable seeds from my mom, she always saves them, but they specifically asked about corn and cotton."

Fred nodded. They were in his office, a closet-sized space in a tower that had once housed a stellar telescope. "Yes, those would grow well in that climate, with enough water. Be careful about the vegetables, though, they won't all." Fred was a botanist and head of the Agriculture Department. "Too bad all the seed banks on this continent were raided during the Food Wars or we could look for native seeds that— But it's kind of a moot point, isn't it? If we bring them here to the mountain."

Ruben shifted his weight from one foot to the other, always feeling like a school kid in Fred's presence. Fred wasn't just one of the original team, he was the oldest man still living, somewhere in excess of eighty. "I thought—it sounded like Dr. Feingold wasn't sure," he said. "About bringing them here."

"We have to," Fred said bluntly. "Rathna is right: we need their genetic input."

Ruben tried to imagine Sharon McKay taking one of the survivors—one of the People, isn't that what Alfonso called them?—as a husband. Ha! She wouldn't even consider one of the widowers on the mountain because they were too old or too ugly or too—whatever. Sharon, marry an uneducated, half-naked—Not likely. "Well—maybe they need *our* genetic input," he countered.

"Indeed they do," Fred agreed. "We need to have both populations together so they can intermingle, spread their DNA throughout the community. It is necessary to our survival."

"And theirs."

Fred shook his head. "There is no ours and theirs, us and them. We are all human beings, homo sapiens. If our species is to survive on this planet, we must stop thinking of 'us and them.'"

"So you think we can support their added numbers up here?"

"We have to. It may be like supporting children at first, but I'm sure we can train them to do useful things here. We'll raise the little ones like our own, teach them math, science, mechanics, and they can help with the mission. The older ones will have a harder time, but as I said—there are other ways to contribute to our community."

*Like hoeing the gardens and cleaning out the animal pens. The scut work we do in turns, would they do for the rest of their lives?* Ruben drew a breath. "I'm sure you're right. But in case it takes a while to make all those arrangements— It's spring. Wouldn't it be a good idea to give them some seeds to plant? Let them have a harvest to bring with them?"

Fred's face lit. "What an excellent idea! If we gave them seeds now—" He poked a gnarled finger at his display, pushing data around. "Yes, corn and cotton. Are you going back with Dr. Feingold? You could take them along."

"That's up to Dr. Feingold," Ruben said. "But maybe you could put in a word for me?"

\* \* \*

"Celia likes to boss people around," Chico grumbled.

Alfonso sat on a rock at the edge of the field where younger men and women hoed weeds from around the spreading squash plants. "She is entitled," he said, savoring the warmth of the sun on his face. "After all, she is usually right."

"That does not make her less arrogant."

Alfonso smiled. "No, it makes her more. But after so many years, we should be used to that."

“What if those Men on the Mountain never come back?” Chico pestered, his favorite theme in the three days since the hopper had arrived. “We will have missed our chance, and all because you were afraid to go back with them. You could at least have gone to see. And slept in a real bed.”

“I was not afraid,” Alfonso insisted, though he wondered privately if Chico was right. “I have simply learned that it is better not to make big decisions in haste.” He watched as a dozen strong backs bent to the fieldwork, backs that had never known the comfort of a mattress. They did not seem any worse for it.

“Are you just going to sit here? Why don’t you help them?” Chico demanded, waving an arm at the laborers.

“I am helping.” Alfonso picked up a small stone and hurled it at a rabbit nosing at the young plants. It scampered off. “And I’ve cut these yucca leaves to strip for their fibers, so Squash Blossom can make me new sandals.” He looked down at the green blades, knowing he should start pounding them with a stone to separate the tough fibers, but in no hurry to do so. Especially if he could get Squash Blossom to do it for him. “That’s enough work for one morning. For an old man like me.” He closed his eyes and tilted his head back to catch the sun again.

A moment later a cry rose from the field, and his eyes snapped open. A hand pointed skyward. Alfonso followed it and saw the telltale glint of a hopper’s reflective skin.

“They’re back!” Chico’s voice rose in excitement. “Now’s your chance, Fonso. Tell them you want to see their mountain, see how they live.”

Alfonso’s heart had lifted at the sight of the hopper, but he kept himself in check. “We’ll see,” he said. Then, “I hope Ruben is with them.”

Chico smirked. “You only want him to come so you can push your daughter on him.”

“I like him,” Alfonso defended. “And I think Squash Blossom would like him.”

“And do you expect him to marry her and live here in our village to raise children?”

“No, I only expect him to sire children. But if he wants to stay . . .” Alfonso shrugged.

“What if he wants to take her away with him?”

That was a dilemma. “I think she would be too frightened.” At least, he hoped she would. “The children must stay with the People.”

“Unless we move to the Mountain. That could solve all our problems!”

“Or create many more.” Alfonso sighed. “Come. We’d better go meet them.”

\* \* \*

This time a single villager climbed the hill to meet the emissaries from Kitt Peak. Ruben recognized the young man, who also recognized him and addressed him in the formal tones of a rehearsed speech. “Hello, Ruben. I am Turtle, son of Alfonso.” Turtle gestured toward the village below, where Alfonso and several others waited. “Come with me.” Then, “Please,” he added, as if he had just remembered that part.

“Alfonso is their leader,” Ruben told Dr. Feingold as the small party followed Turtle along a winding path down the hill. “At least, he speaks for them. I guess they have a council.” He adjusted his pack, the one with the seeds Fred Chenoweth had given him.

Feingold nodded, picking her way carefully along the rough trail. Behind them came Seth Nguyen, Esther Johnson, and Rathna. Stefan Hadley had wanted to come, too, but Feingold had declined his request, much to Ruben’s relief. “And you say they mostly speak Spanish?” she asked. “I didn’t realize Leonard Pacheco’s group was Spanish-speaking. I talked to Sara Martin about her encounter with them, and she never mentioned it.”

“They were probably bilingual, like my parents,” Ruben said. “They spoke English with us—at least, a few of the older ones did.” He motioned toward a cluster of people waiting at the foot of the hill. “But among themselves, it’s a mix of Spanish and some Native American languages. I don’t think any of the younger ones speak English.”

“Ruben!” Alfonso waved as they approached. “My friend Ruben!”

Grinning, Ruben waved back. “I brought seeds.”

“Good!” Alfonso surveyed Feingold and her entourage as they drew up before him. “Please introduce me to your friends.”

When introductions had been made, Alfonso indicated the bank of adobe houses clinging to the cliff wall above them. "Please, come to our council chamber. The others are waiting. My daughter Squash Blossom will bring food."

Ruben's heart lifted like a butterfly at the prospect of entering the ancient cliff dwellings. Montezuma's Castle, it had been called—he'd located it on an old map in the Archives. And that's what it felt like they were doing: mounting the walls of a castle for a glimpse of a rich and storied past. But he noticed not everyone shared his excitement. As Turtle scrambled up the wooden ladder, Esther Johnson drew back slightly, her face pale. Dr. Feingold examined the rope bindings that held the rungs in place, but Ruben couldn't tell if she was intimidated or simply curious about their construction. At any rate, she grasped the ladder gamely and climbed carefully to the top. Seth Nguyen followed quickly.

Ruben reached around Esther Johnson to take a firm grip on an upright. "I'll hold the ladder for you," he offered, and she threw him a grateful look before placing a cautious foot on the first rung. Two steps up she hesitated, and Rathna stepped up behind her, a hand to either side. As they went up together, Rathna murmuring soft encouragement, Ruben wondered how in the world they would get the woman down again.

When they had cleared the ladder, Alfonso turned to Ruben. "Maybe you could wait here and help Squash Blossom carry the food up," he suggested. He nodded toward his daughter, who came up the path with a basket in each arm.

Her long black hair was pulled to one side, caught loosely by a leather thong into which she had tucked a sprig of purple wildflowers. Similar blooms adorned her skirt, laced into the fringe. A band woven of the same hemp-like fibers wrapped around her back and crossed her breasts to tie behind her neck, accented by a necklace of tiny white flowers. Nothing disguised the smooth working of her muscles beneath flawless amber skin.

"*Buenos días*," Ruben greeted as she approached. Behind him, he heard Alfonso grunt as he started up the ladder.

The girl lowered her eyes shyly. "*Buenos días*."

Ruben had brought an audio translator with him, but it was still in his pack. "*Puedo ayudarte*," he ventured, hoping two nights of sleep learning and a day of speaking Spanish with his mother had gifted him with enough of the language to offer his help.

Squash Blossom smiled in a way that made him wonder if he'd screwed up the conjugation, or an idiom. But, "*Gracias*," she said, handing him one of the baskets.

"*De nada*." He gulped as she brushed past him and started up the ladder. *Lord, look at those legs*. Mesmerized, he watched her ascend until, halfway up, she paused and looked down at him.

"¿Tú vienes?"

"Sí," he managed, placing one foot on the bottom rung. "I'm coming." And he followed her cautiously up the ladder, trying his best not to glance up.

\* \* \*

Alfonso did not quite know what to make of Dr. Feingold. If Sara Martin had been a wildcat, regal and proud and snarling, this one was—what? A fox? A coyote? Clever enough to smile and wait patiently, he suspected. She tasted their food politely and made small talk with each of the council members. Then, with the invocation over and the time for serious discussion at hand, she led with, "We are curious how you survived." Curious? Or resentful? After all, Sara Martin had predicted they would all die without her help.

And they nearly had.

So Alfonso smiled and took his time, explaining about the flower buds and the mesquite beans, the wild squash and the tender young cactus pads, the snares and the nets and the cache of pinto beans that had provided sustenance for the People. Celia recounted their attempts at curing hides, the more successful weaving of fibers from yucca leaves. They avoided the topic of how twenty-two children happened to be out in the forest when a flood swept away their homes.

"And my friend Ruben," Alfonso said, gesturing to the young man, "he brings us seeds, no?"

So now we will have cotton?"

"Cotton, yes," Ruben said. "And some vegetables, including corn."

"Yes, corn!" Chico crowed, and for a moment, Alfonso was afraid his friend would jump up and do a parody of a war dance in the council chamber. Thankfully, he did not.

"If you plant right away," Dr. Feingold said, "you should be able to have a harvest before we're ready to—well, while we continue to discuss what's best for your people, and ours."

Ah, there it was. She expected to have a say in the future of the People. She expected to make a decision about them.

Oblivious to his caution, Chico leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Tell her to give us fields on the Mountain."

"And now we have told you how we survived," Celia said, "tell us, please, how you survived on the Mountain."

Dr. Feingold blinked—she had not expected to be quizzed, Alfonso guessed. "Why—we have fields, too, at the base of the mountain," she said, "and some livestock we've captured and bred. Rathna here can tell you all about that sometime. But you can see we still have the technology you've lost, so we can—"

"The technology we gave up," Celia said firmly. "We chose to stay behind when everyone else took their technology and left. We chose to believe in the Mother Earth, to seek harmony with her and to trust her wrath would pass. And that faith has been justified. We live by her bounty when we walk in her ways."

Dr. Feingold exchanged a look with Seth Nguyen, the slight, dark-haired man at her side. "Yes. Well. Certainly the volcanic eruptions, the droughts, the storms, all that seems to have passed. For now. And with our animal husbandry program, we hope to stabilize the wildlife populations so they can recover—"

Celia brushed this aside with an imperious wave, and Alfonso cringed. "Tell us of your medicines."

Leave it to Celia to dispense with all courtesy and formality and cut straight to the point. "We are wondering," Alfonso added quickly, "if you can still make medicines. Antibiotics and vaccines and such." He was also wondering if it wasn't better to just let Dr. Feingold talk and try to hear what lay behind her words.

Dr. Feingold hesitated. "We have some," she hedged. "It's a priority for our chemists, to search the literature for formulae to recreate useful drugs. Many diseases have disappeared because the people and insects who carried them have died out, but we've located a pharmaceutical plant and are currently assessing the state of its equipment and—"

"So you have no antibiotics," Celia interrupted.

"Not at the moment. Antiseptics, but not antibiotics."

"No anti-venoms for spider and snake bites."

"Not anymore. But we have two trained physicians who can set broken bones and do some surgery, plus several med techs. We have ether for anesthesia, that's not hard to make."

Celia's eyes met Alfonso's over the fire. Clearly, she was not impressed. But the Men on the Mountain were more than their technology, and he wished he knew them better. He hoped Ruben would stay with them for a while. He might get a better sense of them from watching Ruben.

"We can send one of our physicians out to you," Dr. Feingold offered. "Check your people over."

"We have no sick people right now," Alfonso said, uneasy at the thought of medical examinations. What if they only uncovered problems no one could do anything about? "But thank you for your offer. This has been a most interesting conversation. Now, maybe we should step outside—you can see our fields from up here, and our village. You can see for yourselves how the Mother Earth has blessed us."

\* \* \*

The fields did not look like much at this time of year—pale dirt and occasional shrubs with sprinkles of green where vines spread their tentative fingers in the sun. But to Ruben, who had

done his share of tending fields, it looked as if they would produce enough to supply such a small band of people. The irrigation system was interesting, with its levered baskets to dip water from the stream into neatly gouged furrows. For a people with no electronics, no solar generators, no post-secondary education, they had done, Ruben thought, remarkably well. As they had discovered on the mountain, necessity was indeed the mother of invention.

When the fields and features of the village had been duly noted, and everyone had ooo-ed and ahh-ed at the impressive panorama, Dr. Feingold suggested it was time for them to return to the mountain. Ruben quickly offered to go down the ladder first and hold it steady for the others. As he had hoped, Dr. Feingold was next to descend.

“So what do you think?” he asked as she stepped off the last rung.

She gave a weary sigh. “I’m not sure they need us,” she said frankly. “They certainly don’t think they do.”

“They have done pretty well for themselves,” he agreed. “But I was wondering—Alfonso invited me to stay with them for a few days, and if it’s all right with you . . . I could maybe get a better sense of their situation.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “You want to stay here?”

“Just for a few days.”

Rathna was on her way down now, coaxing Esther Johnson one rung above her with every step. “Well . . .” Dr. Feingold glanced up at them. “We do need further discussion, I think, on what to do here, so a few more days . . . It might be helpful, if you’re willing.” She dropped her voice. “I know it makes sense to bring them to Kitt Peak, but I’m just not sure about integrating them into our society. I can see problems there.”

Ruben bobbed his head, not really paying attention. Let administration wrestle with the problems. He’d stuffed a few necessary items into his pack along with the seeds, hoping Dr. Feingold would agree to let him stay. And she had! His heart felt light, tapping out a happy dance inside his chest.

Rathna and Esther were down now, with Seth close behind them. Turtle stood at the top, arms folded across his chest, shaking his head as if in disbelief at their qualms. Then he stepped onto the ladder facing forward, his back to the cliff, and scuttled nimbly down.

Ruben’s jaw sagged. *I’ve got to learn to do that.*

\* \* \*

Alfonso spent a long moment gazing at the stars overhead, then looked around at the faces encircling the bonfire. Most of them were staring, not at him, but at Ruben seated to his right. Ruben seemed unaware of their scrutiny, his eyes fixed on Squash Blossom, who sat on his other side with her son on her lap. Ruben carried a translator and was entertaining mother and son by making it speak for them.

The fire was a ceremonial one, lit at times of celebration like harvest or a successful hunt, though Alfonso welcomed its heat this chilly spring night. He wasn’t sure why he’d called for it to be lighted—to introduce Ruben? Or because today’s meeting had ended equably when he had expected . . . something else. He had expected Sara Martin, and Dr. Feingold was . . . different. At least on the surface.

He turned to Turtle at his left. “What did you think of Dr. Feingold?”

Turtle shrugged. “She talked without saying much.”

“She told us they have painkillers,” Chico interjected. “And doctors who can set bones and do appendectomies.”

“She was respectful, at least,” Alfonso said. “It might not be so bad . . .”

“What might not?” Turtle asked.

“Going back with them!” Chico cried. “Moving to the Mountain, having access to all the technology they’ve saved. Shooting deer with a rifle instead of chasing them into a pit. Letting machines plow and plant and harvest our crops.”

“I only wish I knew their thoughts,” Alfonso continued. “How they see us. If they will respect our devotion to the Mother Earth.”

“We can respect the Mother Earth from the controls of a harvester!” Chico snapped.

Alfonso shook his head. “We have learned much since we lost our elders. But we have forgotten much more. I do not want to lose what we have found—but when I think of all that has slipped away from us . . .”

“Solar power,” Chico suggested. “Pellet fuel. An oven with a temperature control.”

“The skills of our ancestors?” Turtle asked.

It was a phrase Alfonso had used often, and he was not surprised Turtle quoted it. “Our ancestors lived in harmony with the Mother Earth.”

“But not always with each other,” Chico reminded him. “We had wars before the Europeans showed up. And don’t forget the Food Wars.”

Neither Chico nor Alfonso had been born yet when people were killing one another for a can of tuna or a stray cat, though they had heard all about it. And as hungry as the People had been in the early years Post-Evac, they had never turned on each other. But how would the Men on the Mountain feel about sharing what they had with the People? Dr. Feingold had been quick to offer their technology, but what did she expect in return? Did she even know? Bitter experience had taught the People there was no gain without loss. What did they stand to lose?

Alfonso shook his head and levered himself to his feet. Enough pondering of deep subjects. The fire, which he had whimsically named Elvira, crackled and blazed, shooting sparks into the night sky—it was a time for dancing and storytelling. But first, he must take care of some business. “Children of the Mother Earth!” he cried. “I have something to say.”

The murmur of voices died, and heads swiveled in his direction. Ruben took the translator from Squash Blossom and placed an earpiece in his ear.

“We have a guest among us,” Alfonso began, wondering if the younger people even knew the word *guest*. “My friend Ruben brought us seeds, and we will treat him with honor and respect. We will feed him at our fires and allow him to sleep in our wickiups. He comes to learn more of the People and our ways.” Heads nodded in the firelight. “We will show him how we walk in harmony with the Mother Earth.” More nodding. “And while he is here . . .” Alfonso took a deep breath. “If he so chooses, he may take one of our maidens as a companion.”

On the ground beside him, Ruben sat up straight, and his mouth flew open.

“If the maiden agrees,” Alfonso added stily. “And if she does not already have a husband. And now—” He smiled benignly. “Let us sing of the fire, the Elvira. Carlos, you start us.”

\* \* \*

Ruben’s face burned, and not from the heat of the bonfire. Ignoring the hand-clapping and singing around him, he asked Alfonso through gritted teeth, “Did you just say what I think you said?”

“Your machine does not tell you?” the old man asked innocently. “I have told the People you may choose a woman for your bed.”

The crafty old devil! What was he up to? Had he set up his daughter for this? Asking Ruben to help her carry the food, beckoning her to sit with him at the fire? “Why?”

“So we have no misunderstandings.”

“No, I mean—”

Alfonso laid a hand on Ruben’s arm. “You brought us several kinds of seeds, and we are grateful. But we need one more. You understand, yes? About genetics?” Ruben nodded dumbly, and the old man snickered. “You are surprised I know about genetics? I went to school, you know. While there were still enough of us to hold classes, before the big die-off. After that, learning became . . . ad hoc.”

It unnerved Ruben to hear his host speak of science, to use Latin. *Primitives don’t talk like that in vids*, he thought. But despite appearances, Alfonso was the product of a technologically savvy generation, even if they had turned their backs on that technology. Or so they claimed. “Was that when you lost your village?” he asked. “The big die-off?”

Around them, people had risen to dance, stomping their feet in rhythm with the music, responding to a primal throbbing. Squash Blossom stood holding her son’s hands and encouraging him to bob his knees and tap his bare feet on the ground. Ruben felt the tug in his own gut but ignored it, focusing on Alfonso.

The old man shook his head. “No. The big die-off—I don’t know what caused that. Hunger. Sickness. Stupidity. Despair.” For a moment, he seemed to drift away, back to that earlier time. Then he sighed and shook his head again. “But this is not a time for such tales. This is a time to dance. Help me up and I will show you how.”

Ruben obliged by rising and offering his hand, hauling Alfonso to his feet. But he wondered, *Is it my imagination, or is the old man hiding something about those last days?*

\* \* \*

Alfonso squinted in the bright sunlight. “I have heard the story,” he said as he dropped three dried kernels into the parched earth, “of when Europeans first came to this continent and the native peoples taught them how to grow corn. They put a fish into each hill with the seeds, to fertilize the plants.” He sighed and straightened up, trying to ease the ache in his lower back. “We do not have fish to spare. We put nets in the stream, but the big ones we eat and the little ones we let go to grow bigger.”

Ruben was digging the next hole with a sturdy stick. Whatever else the Men on the Mountain might be, they were obviously no strangers to hard work. Ruben had been puzzled by the digging stick—no doubt they used metal shovels on the Mountain, or maybe digging machines, but when Alfonso demonstrated, Ruben quickly took up the work without objection.

He had slept in Alfonso’s wickiup last night, and Alfonso thought he looked tense, a little tight around the eyes and mouth. He wished the young man had gone to Squash Blossom’s wickiup, they would all have slept better. But maybe Ruben felt shy about it. Maybe he had a wife on the Mountain and didn’t want to be unfaithful—Alfonso had never thought to ask.

“We burn our stubble fields and plow the ash under,” Ruben said now. “That helps enrich the soil.”

Alfonso lifted his eyebrows. “Ash. I had not thought of that. We could bring the ash from our cook fires and till it into the fields.” He grinned at the young man. “I think you can teach us many things while you are here. Do you know how to make a good bow?”

“Sorry.” Ruben shrugged. “But I can look it up when I get back to the mountain.”

“On the net?”

Ruben waved this off. “We lost the net decades ago. Even before the satellites started going down. But we have a pretty extensive archives, stuff that was downloaded before all the connections were lost.” He set the stick aside and began removing loosened dirt with a shovel made from the shoulder blade of deer lashed to a stout pole. “We have disrupter rifles, too.”

Alfonso felt a sudden chill. “No. No rifles, or pistols, either. We gave them up long ago, in *el Jefe’s* time.”

“It’s a lot easier to kill something with an disrupter than a bow and arrow.”

Alfonso nodded. “Exactly.”

Ruben started another hole. “So let me see if I’ve got this straight. You’re okay with spindles and looms and the weaving of cotton cloth, but you don’t want anything to do with sewing machines, or even scissors, which are a simple mechanical device.”

Alfonso dropped three seeds into the next hole. “Our ancestors could spin and weave in the days when we still walked in harmony with the Mother Earth. She does not mind these things. But scissors—” He frowned, thinking. “I don’t know about scissors.” Ernestina had used a pair of scissors, back when they were still making garments from cloth they’d scavenged. It hadn’t hurt her any. Scissors were metal, though, and metal must be forged. . . . “We need things we can make with our own hands. Things we can teach our children to make, and they teach their children. These things cannot be lost.”

Ruben paused again to wipe sweat from his brow. “You lost a lot, didn’t you, when your village was washed away?”

“Yes, we did. But our greatest loss was the wisdom of our elders.”

“And didn’t your elders use sewing machines and scissors and things like that?”

A heaviness settled in Alfonso’s chest. “Yes, they did,” he said sadly. “And where are they now?”

\* \* \*

"You left him there?" Stephan Hadley demanded. They had gathered in the conference room to hear the delegation's report on their encounter with the survivors. "Good God, woman, what were you thinking?"

Naomi Feingold had been exhausted when she returned from her visit to the newly discovered survivors, so she had postponed this meeting until she'd slept. She'd also wanted time to ponder the questions raised in her discussion with Alfonso and his council. She hadn't come to any insightful conclusions overnight, but she did feel better able to cope with her operations chief. "I was thinking," she said, "we don't know enough about these people. That includes you, Stefan."

"I know they rejected our help thirty years ago, I was there. You should have seen the stone-faced bastards. We warned them about the disasters ahead—the eruptions, the storms—offered them shelter with us, and they scoffed at us. Called us liars. Said we 'desecrated the Mother Earth.' They ordered us not to come back, and there was a clear threat implied if we did."

Seth Nguyen, at Feingold's elbow, murmured, "That's not exactly the way Sara Martin tells it."

"They hate us, Naomi," Hadley insisted. "And you left that boy out there with them?"

"Regardless of what happened in the past," Feingold said patiently, "these were very courteous and hospitable people. I assure you young Mendoza is in no danger."

"Well, when you find his bloody corpse—or don't find him at all—don't say I didn't warn you."

"So noted." Given the looks Mendoza and that village girl were giving each other, she doubted murder was on their minds.

But if she brought the primitives back here to the mountain, how long would it be before Hadley or someone like him made violence a self-fulfilling prophecy?

\* \* \*

By sundown, Ruben could not remember when he had been so tired. He was accustomed to manual labor, but never more than a few hours at a time. Alfonso had not set a hard pace, and they'd taken frequent breaks, but Ruben had been ravenous by the time Squash Blossom brought lunch to them. Alfonso had gone back to the village after that, but others were still working in the fields, including Turtle, so Ruben had felt compelled to work beside them until they shouldered their tools and headed for the creek to wash and cool off.

Now he sat with Alfonso outside the old man's wickiup, trying not to wolf down the contents of the bowl Squash Blossom handed him. His host ate slowly, and Ruben wondered if that was to savor the food or because he was missing several teeth. "How old are you, Alfonso?"

Alfonso paused to consider. "I'm not sure. My wife used to keep track of such things." He turned to his daughter. "*¿Qué edad tengo?*"

She shrugged. "*¿Cincuenta?*"

Alfonso shook his head. "I don't think so. How long has it been since Sara Martin came?"

Now it was Ruben's turn to shrug. "Thirty-five years, maybe?"

"Then I am not fifty," Alfonso said. "Maybe forty-seven, forty-eight."

It stunned Ruben—he'd have guessed nearer seventy. Life had not been kind to Alfonso. Turning to Squash Blossom, he asked, "*Cuántos años tienes?*"

She bobbed her head shyly. "*Dies y siete.*"

Seventeen? And with a baby. Ruben pointed at the toddler with a questioning look.

"*Dos.*"

If she'd been fifteen when her son was born, then she'd been married—or mated—at—

"Children are the hope of the People," Alfonso said. "We do not delay their coming."

*And I shouldn't delay*, Ruben thought. *Sharon isn't getting any younger*. The problem was, she wasn't getting any less irritating. Or bossy. And giving in to the inevitable wouldn't dampen her smug superiority. Squash Blossom would never be like that. Well . . . she wouldn't start out like that, anyway.

But he would have only a few days with Squash Blossom, if he chose to—well, choose. Unless, of course, they moved her village to his mountain. Then a marriage was possible. If they

relocated the whole village—Ruben tried to envision himself sleeping in a wickiup at night and going up to work with the satellite feeds during the day. The juxtaposition was jarring. But to bring Squash Blossom into one of the little apartments on the mountain, or even to build a house as his parents had done . . .

Alfonso's noisy yawn brought Ruben back to the present. "My old bones are tired. I am going to bed. Goodnight, Ruben." With that, Alfonso crawled into his wickiup and pulled the hide door down behind him.

When Ruben turned back, Squash Blossom had pushed aside half her woven top and was nursing her son. He tried not to notice the exposed flesh. She smiled at him and said something he did not understand, something about her father. He switched on his translator and asked her to repeat it. "My father likes you," the machine said.

Ruben nodded. "I like him, too."

"He is a wise man."

"Yes."

"But a lonely one."

"Is he?"

She nodded. "My mother died three winters ago, and he has been very lonely since."

"Oh." The child appeared to be dozing off in his mother's arms.

"Sometimes he talks to her. I hear him, when he doesn't know I am listening."

Ruben smiled. "He must have loved her very much."

She beamed back at him, her round face reflecting the light of the dying cook fire. "He says both he and Uncle Chico were in love with her, but she chose him." She adjusted the child in her arms. "It is good to be chosen."

Ruben swallowed, unsure where this was leading. In the fading light, he couldn't see the expression on her downturned face, but he thought she might be blushing. When she spoke again, her voice was so soft the translator didn't pick it up. She cleared her throat and spoke more clearly. "And will you choose one of our maidens?"

Now Ruben was sure she was blushing. He drew a deep breath, swallowed, and tried to wet his lips with a suddenly dry tongue. Heart beating like a hummingbird's wings, he asked, "May I choose you?"

\* \* \*

Alfonso wished the Men on the Mountain had not returned quite so soon. Only five days had passed, and there was no knowing if Squash Blossom was pregnant yet, despite the sounds emanating nightly from her wickiup indicating Ruben's dedicated efforts. Another week would improve the chances greatly, and besides, it made Squash Blossom smile. It was good to see her smile again.

But here was the hopper, lowering itself to the mesa top like a man squatting carefully in a patch of prickly weeds. Putting aside the stone he was using to pound the yucca leaves into fiber, he glanced across the creek to where Turtle had been showing Ruben how to work the irrigation system. Both young men were on their way back now, splashing across the shallow creek, their eyes on the hopper. "It is good they get on so well," Alfonso said. "They learn from each other."

Beside him, Chico snorted. "Yes, I am sure on the Mountain Ruben will be glad to know how to water crops using baskets on levers."

"His Spanish is better," Alfonso defended. "That is something he has learned."

Squash Blossom, who had been with her sister, came scurrying back toward her wickiup, anxiously watching Turtle and Ruben come up the path from the creek. No smile lit her face now.

"Father!" Turtle called. "Should I go meet them?"

"No, I sent She Is Pretty already." He waved a hand toward a tall, thin woman who was nearing the top of the hill.

Turtle came to a halt several paces from his father. "I should light the council fire, then."

"I asked Carlos to be Firekeeper. He will not want you to do his work for him."

"I must admit, that is a good idea you had," Chico said, "making Firekeeper an honorary position. My lighter is long dead, and if the fires in the village ever went out, you'd have to rub two sticks together to start another one." He grinned. "I'll bet you'd miss your technology then!"

Squash Blossom had reached them now, and she touched Ruben's arm as she gazed up into his face. "You will go away now?"

"I want to come back," he said in Spanish. "This season. But things I necessary do—" He babbled on, his syntax terrible, but Alfonso made out that Ruben had things to take care of on the Mountain before he could return. Alfonso wondered what they were.

"So there is nothing for me to do," Turtle said, clearly disappointed.

"Keep an old man company," Alfonso suggested, patting the ground beside him.

Turtle glanced at Ruben, who was crawling into Squash Blossom's wickiup, presumably to gather his things. With a shrug he dropped to the ground beside his father. "So what will you tell the Men on the Mountain, now that they are here?"

"I don't know yet," Alfonso admitted.

Chico snorted. "Waiting for the Mother Earth to speak to you?" His tone dripped sarcasm.

Alfonso touched the ground beside him, feeling the dirt warmed by the sun's caress. The sheltering cliff, the life-giving creek, the nourishing crops—was he the only one who heard something in that? Or maybe the only one who listened? "Turtle— What do you think I should say?"

Turtled heaved a sigh. "The Mother Earth has given us this place," he said, sweeping an arm to encompass their surroundings. "It is a good place, and I think we must stay here."

Alfonso wondered if that was fear talking, or ignorance, or if Turtle had heard it, too. In the sighing of the breeze, and the croaking of the toads, that voiceless voice . . .

"These young people have no idea what is up on that mountain," Chico scoffed. "What miracles await. My son has never seen a working vehicle. My daughter has never heard recorded music. Neither of them knows what a guitar is, for God's sake, let alone how to play one!"

Play a guitar! Alfonso twisted his mouth as though he'd bitten into a sour fruit. The People did not need to know how to play guitars, they needed to know how to knap flint and bake ceramics and—

"You don't agree?" Turtle asked.

Their visitors were winding their way down the hill now, only three of them today. He hoped the woman afraid of ladders had stayed behind. Alfonso exhaled deeply and struggled to his feet. "We should go greet our guests."

\* \* \*

Carlos had made only a token fire in the council chamber, for its cool interior was a welcome respite from the afternoon sun. Alfonso looked around the room as they waited for Celia to make her entrance. Dr. Feingold had returned along with Seth Nguyen, but a man called Joe had replaced Rathna as pilot. Was that a good sign, or a bad one?

"I have to confess, I am amazed this structure is still standing," Dr. Feingold said, looking around at the smooth mud walls. "Was it like this when you found it?"

"Some walls were crumbling," Alfonso told her, "and most of the roofs needed repair. But it was a gift from the Mother Earth that sheltered us for several years."

"So you actually lived up here?" Ruben asked. "After the flood?"

"Not right away. We spent several weeks searching for our elders and—" He shook his head. "I forgot the word. Poking through ruins looking for things we could use. Food. Blankets."

"Umbrellas," Chico offered.

Alfonso ignored the jest. "We sheltered where we could, but the flood waters kept rising and we had to find higher ground. The wind blew so hard it pulled trees out of the ground, and the rain never stopped." He looked at Dr. Feingold. "You remember those days."

She nodded, her mouth grim. Alfonso wondered what lessons those hard days had taught them on the Mountain. To be less arrogant, maybe?

"We had small children with us," he continued, "some only three, four years old, and we had to find a safe place for them. For us all." Nightmares had plagued Alfonso for years afterward, desperate dreams of howling wind and slashing rain, and the urgency of finding some-

place warm and dry and quiet, *please, Mother Earth, just some quiet, all I want is a place of peace . . .*

The room darkened as Celia pushed through the doorway, temporarily blocking the light. "Oof," she said. "Early to be so warm."

Alfonso sucked in a breath, hauled back from memories of cold and wet and fear.

Celia plunked herself down on a bench. "What have I missed?"

"Nothing," Alfonso said.

Dr. Feingold smiled brightly. "Alfonso was just telling us how you found this place to shelter in after . . . after the flood."

"Did he tell you how he climbed down a rope from up there to reach it?" Celia asked, pointing upward.

"No! From the top?" Dr. Feingold turned expectantly to Alfonso.

He waved this off. "I trusted the Mother Earth, that is all. The hard part was getting everyone else down here. Especially the young ones."

"There's something I still don't understand," Ruben said. "How is it that only a handful of children and teenagers escaped the flood that washed everyone else away?"

Suddenly Alfonso felt as though all the air had been sucked from the room. He glanced across at Celia, who quickly dropped her eyes, then Carlos, who lowered his forehead to his hand and studied his knees. They didn't have to tell. They had never told their children, why should they tell these strangers? He looked at his son, listening intently to Ruben's translator through an earpiece.

Turning back to Dr. Feingold, he said, "I think you should know." He drew in a breath past the knot forming in his chest. "I think you must know if you are to understand who we are. What makes us the People." To Turtle he said, "This does not go beyond the council chamber walls."

Turtle looked surprised, but he tapped his fist over his heart and said, "On my life."

Alfonso nodded. "We had—we had gone out—" His voice failed.

"We had gone up the mountain to smoke marijuana," Celia said, looking only at the flickering fire. "Some of us"—Mercifully, she did not name Alfonso and Chico—"had planted it in the forest there, and we sneaked out of the village to smoke. The children—we were babysitting. There was a big meeting, all the adults were there, and we were supposed to be home with the children. But we took them with us so we could party."

Alfonso knew they should be thankful they had escaped, thankful they had taken the children along. But the reason—If only it had been a food crop they were after, wild raspberries or edible mushrooms, but no. They had gone to smoke pot and get high, and the little ones were a nuisance, an encumbrance, so they brought them along.

"It started to rain," Celia went on. "It was always raining, but this was—this was different. Hard rain, harder than we'd ever seen." She sighed. "And we were stoned. And the children were asleep, so we stayed up there in the forest. We had a shelter of tree boughs where the marijuana had been drying, and we stayed, hoping it would let up. And then—" She halted, overcome.

"We heard the roar," Alfonso said. "In the night. I suppose a dam broke somewhere. In the morning, we crawled out to go home, knowing how angry our parents would be, how worried, but—" He stopped, breathed, finished. "Home was gone." Tears leaked from his eyes, found the deep grooves in his face. "The whole valley was under water. We searched for others, for anyone who might have made it out. . . ." He shook his head.

"We traveled downstream, searching." Celia wiped at her nose. "We never even found their bones." She lifted a hand to the dwellings around them. "But we found this. A gift from the Mother Earth."

"You found it," Chico said to Alfonso. "We thought you were insane, tossing that rope off the edge of a cliff, insisting a Village of the Ancients was down here. That you remembered seeing it. Was it really faith, 'Fonso? What would you have done if you'd climbed down and found nothing?"

*I would have let go of the rope and let it be your problem.*

For a long time the room was silent. Finally Dr. Feingold stirred. "I'm so sorry," she said. "It must have been terrifying for you."

Alfonso brushed moisture from his weathered face. "Later—months later, a season later, when the rains let up and the flood was no more, Chico and Carlos and I went back to where our town had been. And there was nothing. No buildings, nothing. All washed away." He drew breath deep into his constricted chest. "The Mother Earth makes strange choices. To take *el Jefe* and save a bunch of . . ." He left the sentence unfinished.

Silence expanded, pressed on the walls, and finally began to ebb. Dr. Feingold drew an audible breath, let it go. "Well, I think you should be proud. What you have done here is amazing, the way you've adapted, survived. And now that we have found you—"

Alfonso raised a hand to stop her. "No."

Dr. Feingold blinked. "No what?"

Chico stiffened. "Yes—no what? What are you doing?"

"No, we will not go to your mountain," he said, and Chico growled in exasperation. "I know your intentions are good, Dr. Feingold, and you think it is in our best interests. And I know you have many things on the Mountain that we don't, things that are important to you—but they are not important to us. What is important to us is that we remain the People."

"Who said we would stop being the People?" Chico demanded at the same time Dr. Feingold said, "Alfonso, I'm sure that—"

"Just because we will not come to your mountain, though, does not mean we refuse your help," he hastened. "In fact, we need your help. You have books there, yes?"

"Yes, of course. Files and files of them. Some paper ones, too—we've been collecting a few in our travels. We'd be glad to loan you any of them. There are portable readers—"

But Alfonso shook his head. Ernestina had tried for a while to teach their children to read, but they'd found no paper books not damaged beyond use. With only road signs and posters for material, reading seemed pointless to the youngsters. Turtle had given up first, and he doubted his daughters remembered any of it now. "We don't need books, we need teachers," he said. "People to teach us some things we have forgotten. How to make willow-bark tea for pain. How to make a compound bow. How to find and knap flint."

Chico was outraged. "A chance to spend our old age in comfort, and you want to know how to shape stone into arrowheads?"

Again Dr. Feingold looked at Seth Nguyen, and something passed between them. Then she turned back to Alfonso. "Of course. If that's what you want. We'll be happy to send you teachers."

Relief flooded Alfonso, washing away the sense of unease he'd had since dreaming of the Men on the Mountain and their return.

"I'll go," Ruben said quickly. "I mean—I'll need to transfer some of my duties on the mountain, and there are—there are some other things I need to see about, but . . . I can look up those things for you in the archives and come back to share them." He lifted his hands. "Not sure I'll be any good at knapping flint, but I can bone up on the theory, anyway, and we can work on it together. Turtle and I."

"What is flint?" Turtle asked.

"You will learn," Alfonso said, almost dizzy with the decision he had made. "We must all learn."

\* \* \*

Once again Ruben waited at the foot of the ladder till Dr. Feingold had backed down. "So, are you okay with all this?" he asked anxiously. "Leaving them here, sending teachers?"

She huffed out a short breath. "Frankly, I'm relieved. Things—didn't go well back on the mountain. We held a town meeting to discuss it and a lot of people—" She shook her head. "I was shocked. A lot of people were dead set against it. They're afraid. Afraid it would take a toll on us, on our way of life. Fred and I tried to talk them around, showed them the numbers and how it wouldn't be a hardship, but they weren't interested." She glanced up at Seth Nguyen,

halfway down the ladder now. "It's hard to make people see numbers when their hearts are on fire."

Ruben shrugged. "I'm kind of relieved, too. I mean—I'd love having them closer, but—I think what they've created here is worth preserving. Developing."

Feingold scowled. "Personally, I think they're making a mistake. But it's their choice, we have no right to dictate to them, and it certainly solves my problem." She sighed as Seth joined them. "I'm glad they want teachers, at least. I'm glad they're eager to learn, to grow."

"And I'm glad you want to be the first teacher," Seth said to Ruben. "Man, I wouldn't want to live like this."

Ruben thought of Sharon McKay and the talk they needed to have. How, if they got married, he might be gone a lot. And just what he'd be doing. She wasn't going to like it. "Life anywhere has its drawbacks," he said. Then he glanced down the path toward Squash Blossom's wickiup, where she played a hand-patting game with her son. "But it also has its up side."

\* \* \*

Most of the council climbed to the top of the mesa to see their guests off. They said their farewells, shaking hands in a gesture Alfonso had nearly forgotten. Why shake hands with people you saw every day? "Ruben," he said as he clasped the young man's hand. "Come back soon."

Chico hovered at his elbow, still seething, still muttering in Spanish. "You know, just because the whole village isn't going doesn't mean you and I can't. Come on! Let's go with them!"

"I promise not to take too long," Ruben said.

Dr. Feingold's grip was firm, and Alfonso thought again how different she was from Sara Martin. "You are a very persuasive negotiator, Alfonso," she said. "And a wise leader, I think." Cocking her head to one side, she asked, "You aren't by any chance related to Leonard Pacheco, are you?"

"By blood? No." Alfonso smiled. "But he was my friend Chico's grandfather, and we were always together, so after my mom died, he adopted me."

"Oh?" Her eyes brightened. "I'd love to ask Chico about his grandfather."

Alfonso sighed. "Chico died many years ago. Rattlesnake bite. I still miss him."

"And I would still be here," Chico hissed in his ear, "if we'd been on the Mountain, where they might still have had antivenom."

"Come again!" Alfonso called as the Men on the Mountain climbed into their hopper. "See how your seeds are growing." Then the machine roared to life, filling the world with noise and dust as it lifted off. Behind him, the council members coughed and started back down the hill.

"What kind of fool are you?" Chico demanded. "You could have asked for anything. A plasfoam bed. Wool blankets. A house on the Mountain with electricity and glass windows, heating for the cold winter nights. We could have lived our last days in comfort."

Alfonso paused on the brink of the mesa and surveyed the village below, its familiar wickiups, the sheltering cliff, the life-giving creek. "This is my comfort," he said. "Living from the bounty of the Mother Earth, and by her grace."

Waiting at the head of the path, Turtle looked sideways at his father. "Who are you talking to?"

"Myself," Alfonso said. "Only myself."

*Catherine Wells is the author of numerous novels and short stories of speculative fiction, including the AnLab Award-winning Best Novella of 2015, "Builders of Leaf Houses." For more about her books and short stories, visit <http://www.catherine-wells.com>.*