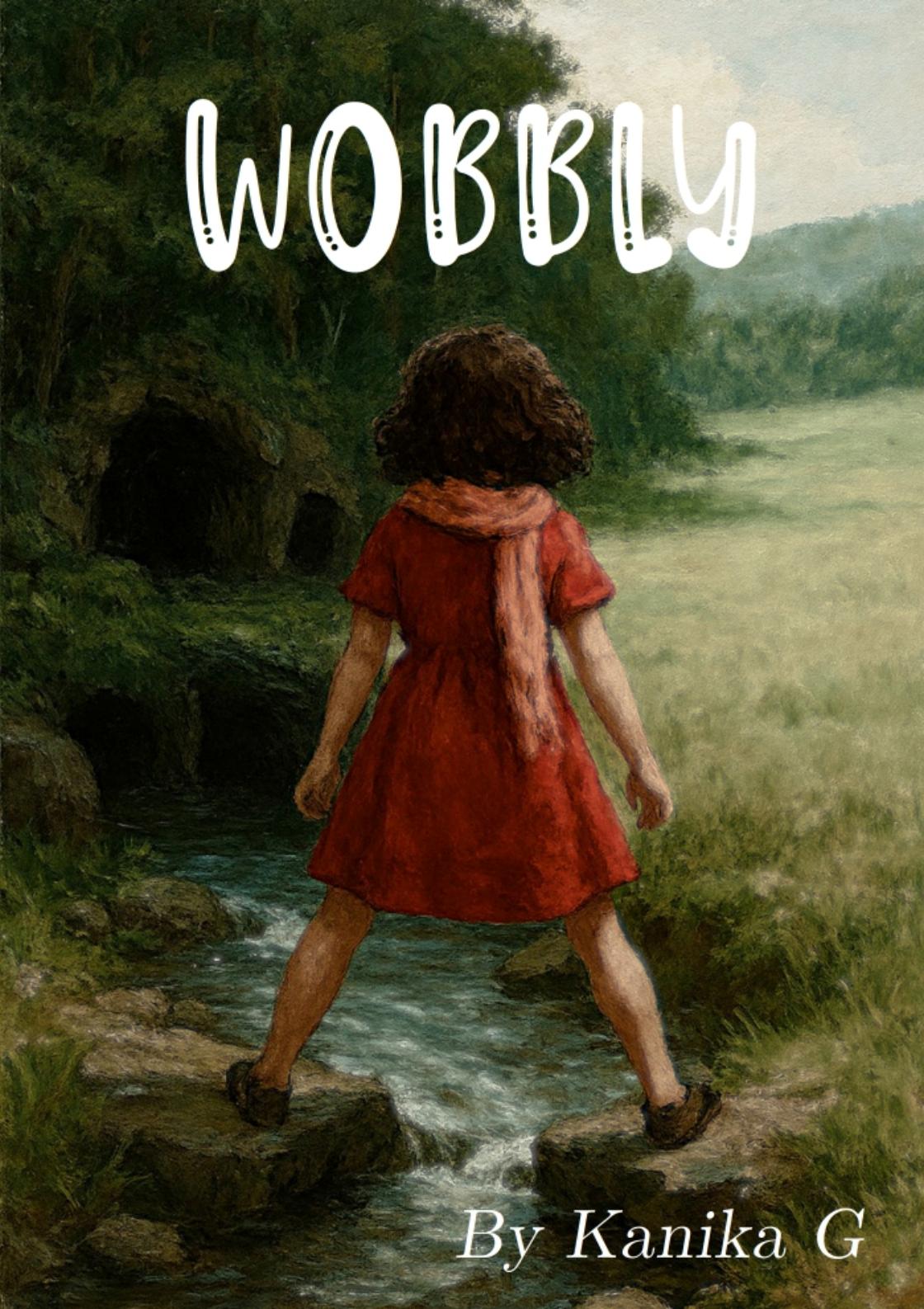


# WOBBLY



By Kanika G

# **Wobbly**

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# Wobbly

Iris lived a blissful life in an idyllic village, until the day her sister disappeared. Her quest to find her sister led her to cross the line. Then, there was no turning back. Life became *wobbly*, and the only way to balance, was to learn on the move. Read on to find out what Iris discovered as she wobbled over to the other side of *The Boundary*.

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*Dedicated to my younger daughter,  
who inspired the character of Iris.*

— — —

# In Search of a Sister

Iris sat looking out of the window, a tear glistening on each rosy cheek. Her thick dark curls cascaded down to her shoulders hovering like dark clouds about her gloomy face. It had always upset her to hear Mom and Dad fighting, but last night was worse than usual.

She wondered if any of it was her fault. *Or is it all because of Tempy?* she mused, pulling her thick dark eyebrows together into a pensive frown. Would she ever see her beloved sister again? Where could Tempy be? Had she been kidnapped, or was she dead? So many questions, but no answers. At first, Iris had wondered if Tempy might have just got lost, or perhaps run away, but after so long, that seemed unlikely.

Iris dabbed her dark brown eyes, with her orange scarf and sighed. Usually, she loved Saturdays. It was the one day of the week she was left to her own devices, free to indulge her inquisitive and restless mind, flitting from one curiosity to the next. But today, she just felt sad. *Everything is falling apart*, she thought.

Iris blinked, as the morning light filtered in through the fine netting covering the cottage window. She

could feel the warmth of the sun on her honey colored skin contrasting the chill in the air. In spite of her sadness, Iris noted that it was going to be a fine day. The sky was azure, without a cloud in sight. Iris stepped out hoping the cool breeze would cheer her up. As she breathed in the crisp morning air, she had a sudden but intense feeling that Tempy had returned.

"Tempy," Iris called out, but nothing happened. She searched the shed, and all the hiding places Tempy had used, like inside a clump of trees behind the haystacks and even inside the little hen house. She was about to give up and go back home, when she heard a rustling sound in the hedges around the cottage grounds.

The hedges were too short to hide Tempy, but as she approached them, Iris felt certain Tempy was close by.

She cupped her ears listening carefully for the sound to repeat, so she could figure out the direction of its source. This time, the sound was accompanied by a whine, and it was coming from her left. Puzzled, Iris walked over to the source of the sound and peered over the hedge. What she saw there, astonished her.

It was Toto, the stray mongrel that Tempy had adopted a few months before she had disappeared. He used to follow Tempy everywhere. No one had seen Toto

since the day Tempy had vanished, and now here he was! No wonder Iris had felt so sure Tempy was back. It was Toto's doggy smell she had recognized in the morning breeze.

"Toto, where is Tempy?" Iris asked. But Toto only wagged his tail and licked her hand. "Where is Tempy?" Iris repeated. Toto clamped his teeth on her loose red dress that had been flapping in the breeze and tugged, before letting go and charging off westward.

"Toto, Toto," Iris ran after him. "Slow down. Wait. I'm coming," she panted, as she stopped to tie the shoe laces she had almost tripped over. Toto paused, waited for Iris to get close, and then continued at a steady pace.

After chasing Toto for a few hundred yards, Iris began to pant again. A few minutes later, she had to stop to catch her breath. Her heart raced, and sweat trickled down her neck and forehead.

She looked around and was relieved to see Toto waiting, for everything else was alien. Iris had never been this far away from home on this side of the village leading to the forest. These must be the grazing pastures, she guessed. Children were not allowed beyond the yards and animal pens. If Mom or Dad

ever learned she was here, they would be livid and terrified.

Toto pawed the ground and whined. He wanted to go on. Once again, he tugged on Iris's dress, urging her forward. Iris squinted into the distance. "Where is Tempy?" she demanded.

Toto tried to pull her forward while she peered into the distance. "Goodness, that's the fence!" she exclaimed pointing straight ahead. "Only the wood gatherers go beyond it, and even then they go in large groups. Toto, that place is dangerous. There are ferocious monsters. We can't go there."

Toto whined and begged Iris to follow. When she hesitated, he dashed over a few yards and emphatically pointed at a large stone. Iris walked over to the stone and examined it. It had a stick figure of a girl drawn on it with chalk, and a fancy *T* written next to it in Tempy's familiar handwriting. Her curiosity now aroused, she followed Toto. A few minutes later, she felt a shiver down her spine as she crossed the fence. *What am I doing? I hope I don't die*, she crossed her fingers, took a deep breath, and continued.

"How much further?" she grumbled, as her legs ached. She wasn't used to walking on uneven forest paths, but

Toto just kept going.

Iris shuddered as the forest became more dense. "It's getting cold," she complained rubbing the goosebumps on her skin. "Do you even know where Tempy is?" Iris demanded, feeling foolish about following a dog into the forbidden forest. She looked around, terrified. If Toto didn't take her back, she would be trapped through the night in the deep dark forest. Worried about monsters, she began to panic.

"I'm here," a voice called out of the shadows, making her jump.

"Wait, is that you Tempy?" Iris asked, wondering if her mind was playing tricks on her. The voice sounded so familiar and comforting.

"Yes. It's me. Come here," Tempy clasped Iris's hand to lead her forward.

But Iris would have no more. "Wait, you're okay? You look fine. What are you doing here?" she screamed. "You deserted us. We were worried sick about you. I cried for days. Mom and Dad have never been the same since you left. And you just ran away! I hate you." Iris stomped about and flailed her arms in a frenzy, flecks of hot tears spraying everywhere.

Tempy waited for Iris to finish venting. "I'm sorry," she ventured, once Iris sat down on a tree branch, exhausted. Tempy hesitated before hugging Iris. She was relieved when Iris did not push her away. "I hated leaving you all. But it had to be this way. Please come with me. I'll explain," she promised. Iris, pressed her head against Tempy's chest, and nodded between sobs.

§§§

Tempy and Iris had shared a room. Mom and Dad had read them a story every night before tucking them into bed. Once they had turned off the lights and left, Tempy, a couple of years older than Iris, would take over. She knew her little sister was scared of the dark. Tempy would whisper soothing songs, until Iris fell asleep.

"Aren't you scared of the dark too?" Iris had once asked.

"No. I find it relaxing," had been Tempy's surprising reply.

Soon after Tempy had disappeared, Mom and Dad had spent a lot of time with Iris, comforting and reassuring her that they would find Tempy soon. The village had sent search parties in every direction, but there had been no sign of the pale faced brown haired quiet girl,

most noticeable in her absence. It was as though she had completely vanished. Could she have been swallowed by the darkness she loved so much, Iris had wondered.

Too scared to sleep alone in the dark, Iris had insisted on leaving a candle on in her room, and her parents had given in. Every night, she had gazed at the pencil sketches Tempy had made of each family member, including a self portrait, drawing comfort from them. Then she would close her eyes and hum the soothing songs Tempy used to sing to her until she fell asleep.

As hope of Tempy's return had diminished, Mom and Dad had started fighting a lot more, and unlike earlier, Tempy wasn't there to comfort or distract Iris while they fought.

# The Sister That's Not a Sister

As the girls walked deeper into the forest, the trees blocked out most of the sunlight, so that even at high noon it seemed like evening. Iris thought she could hear people talking. She looked questioningly at Tempy.

"That's coming from our settlement," Tempy explained.

"Your settlement?" Iris raised her eyebrows.

"Yes, I belong to the *Boundary People*. My parents want to meet you." Tempy shuffled her feet, unable to meet Iris's eye.

"Your parents?" Iris hissed. "Your parents?" She balled her fists and gritted her teeth. Words could not express her anger. She took a deep breath. "*Our* parents," Iris emphasized, "love you. They cared for you, and you ran away to find new parents, here!" Iris snarled.

"Honey, Soola did not mean to hurt you." A woman emerged from under a thick canopy of woven leaves laid over a large cloth strung up between some trees. "She had no idea who she was. You must forgive her." Iris felt a comforting hand on her shoulder. She did not know the woman, but her voice was soothing and Iris felt at ease.

The woman urged Iris to sit on a flat rock under the canopy. Iris looked around, and noticed a pencil sketch of herself hanging next to one of the hammocks under the canopy. She instantly recognized it to be one of Tempy's drawings, just like the ones on her wall at home. With the memory of home, her rage returned. "I must? Who are you to tell me what I must do? You have kidnapped my sister, you wretched woman."

"I am sorry, but you must let me explain. This hasn't been easy for me." The woman sighed.

"For us," Iris heard a man say. She looked up and saw a man with sad eyes, leaning against one of the trees holding up the canopy.

"My .. my Dad," Tempy stammered, worried that Iris would punch her. "Please Iris. Let us explain," she begged.

Exhausted, Iris sighed. Determinedly looking away from Tempy, she nodded.

"As soon as Soola was born, I had to give her up." Sooti choked, and in spite of her anger, Iris turned to look at her. She could see that the sadness was real.

"Give her up! What do you mean? Tempy, she is Tempy, not Soola, and she is my sister. You stole her. And now you've brainwashed her. Goodness knows why she thinks you are her parents!"

"Because we are. She was born right here, and I can prove it to you. Look," Sooti thrust a closed walnut shell in front of Iris's face.

It looked familiar. Iris took it in her hand and gasped, as she recognized the tiny hand crafted hinges. She pried it open, just to be sure. Inside, were three smooth shiny red seeds the size of pomegranate kernels. Iris was livid. "How dare you?" she shouted. "How could you take this from Tempy? A gift from your mother, Mom always said. How could you take this from her?"

"I didn't," Sooti replied, and Tempy stood in front of Iris wearing her red thread necklace with the intact walnut shell hanging from it. Iris looked at it

skeptically. The hinges she noted were the same. She looked questioningly at Tempy.

"Go ahead," Tempy nodded.

Iris pried open the walnut shell hanging from Tempy's neck. There she saw another three red shiny seeds. Iris blinked a couple of times, before staring at Tempy in bewilderment.

"See, she really is my mother. These red seeds are not from any tree we have ever seen near our house. But it does grow right here. Tempy pointed to one of the trees, the hammock next to the sketch of Iris was hanging from. Besides, Mum always said, it was a gift from my mother." Tempy fingered her walnut shell pendant. "Those were always her exact words. A gift from your mother, never, a gift from me. Iris, she never gave you one either. Did you ever wonder why. I think she wanted me to know that the pendant was from my birth mother, but could never bear to tell me I was adopted."

Iris sighed. Everything Tempy said was true. "Mom gave me a baobab pendant, just like every other girl in the village had," she admitted. It had always bothered her that she couldn't have a special pendant like Tempy. "She wanted me to have the protection of our Life Tree, but she did not offer it to you. She said your

pendant too protected you in its own way." A tear trickled down her cheek.

"I know. I hated her for that. The girls at school teased me for having a different pendant. I couldn't understand why Mom would not let me have the normal one. Now I know."

Iris nodded. "They're still fighting about it, you know. Dad thinks you ran away because she wouldn't let you have the normal pendant." She glared at the woman.

"You may be her birth mother, but you are a despicable person. Soola? Is that what you named her?" Iris asked. "Why would you give her up? You abandoned her, and now you want her back, even if that means hurting everyone who loved and cared for her. You're a horrible selfish woman!" Iris fumed.

"Yes. Soola, daughter of Sooti and Latim," the woman replied calmly. "I did not abandon her. She was chosen. Soon after she was born, she was taken away from me. I did not even get to kiss her until she returned some months ago." A tear trickled down Sooti's cheek. "She never cried, though, not even a peep as she was hurried away from here. Tempy is what you call her, right? It's appropriate."

"My mother thought so. Tempy, short for Temperance, because she is so calm. But if you abandoned her, then

you can't have her back. I won't let you hurt my family, Sooti," Iris declared, her eyes blazing. She turned to Tempy. "My parents took you in when these monsters abandoned you. They gave you all the love and care you could imagine. Yet, you selfishly ran back to these losers. You broke their hearts Tempy." Iris lashed out.

"Do you know who we are? Do you know why we live here?" Latim asked. His voice was soft, yet gruff. Iris looked at him. He was bare chested and wore a simple knee-length dull white cloth around his waist. Sooti was wearing a gown of the same light material, Iris noted. Tempy was wearing the black dress she had disappeared in. Latim was lean, muscular and had scars. He had a lot of light brown facial hair. But his eyes were no longer sad, Iris realized. They were distant, as if he was looking into another time.

Iris shook her head. "No. I didn't know anyone lived here. Tempy said something about *Boundary People*. Is that who you are?"

"Yes, that's what we call ourselves. We are knowledge seekers. We spend our entire lives learning."

"What has this got to do with you abandoning Tempy?" Iris asked, feeling impatient.

"We did not abandon her! Your parents send you to school, don't they?" Latim demanded.

"Yes they do, but what has that to do with anything?"

"When they drop you off at school, do they not abandon you for the day?"

"That's not the same!" Iris was outraged.

"It is the same." Latim thundered. "They temporarily leave you in the care of some other people, so you can learn things they can't teach you." Latim pointed out.

"We did the same. Just like your parents, we too made sure Soola would be with good people who would take care of her. It's how we learn about another culture, through the unbiased eyes of our young."

"It's not the same," Iris insisted, "because my teachers know they are only temporarily substituting for my parents, not permanently replacing them . My parents gave Tempy their heart and soul. You broke their hearts and left them feeling empty. You hurt me too." Iris glared at Sooti and Latim.

Sooti stared at Iris. "I'm sorry, Iris. It had to be this way. It was the only way. But I suppose we did not realize the extent of pain we would be causing you and your parents," she admitted.

"Of course, not. We're just curiosities to you, aren't we? Something to be studied and discarded." Iris raged.

"That's not fair. You don't understand our circumstances," Latim objected. "Our motives are not selfish, but we must survive. It is for your sake, and that of the others too, that we did what you so ignorantly call monstrous. We are all on the brink a catastrophe, and our ways will save many."

"Fair! After what you put my family through, you have no right to talk about what's fair." Iris glared at Latim. "Tempy, don't you miss Mom and Dad?" she asked turning to face her sister.

"Of course, I do. But there are some other things to consider, Iris. If you knew what is happening, you'd understand their ways. You still wouldn't forgive them. I don't. But I must do my part, and as you will soon learn, so must you. Perhaps, they were doing their part too. It's what they hold sacred."

"Other things to consider? What madness! Do you think you are some crucial piece in a cosmic conspiracy? That's a bit conceited, isn't it?" Iris snorted.

"Not a cosmic conspiracy, just a critical moment in our history. Do you know why they call themselves the *Boundary People*?"

"Because they live at the boundary of civilization, Duh!" Iris rolled her eyes.

"And what, Dear, do you think lies beyond our settlement?" Sooti asked.

"The forest, animals, trees, the end of the world, who cares!" Iris shrugged, irritably.

"We do," Latim replied to her rhetorical question. "Sooti and I will leave you two alone. You have much to catch up. We know you have no reason to trust us, but the two of you grew up together, and that just might save us all." He looked significantly at Tempy who gulped and then nodded.

As Sooti and Latim left the canopy, Iris and Tempy looked at each other in silence.

# A Glimpse of the Devil

"I know you have a lot to be angry about," Tempy acknowledged. "But Iris, the nicest thing about you is that you have an open mind. Won't you even listen to this side of the story?"

"Okay," Iris sighed, consoled by the fact that Tempy had said this side of the story, rather than my side of the story, but then again, Iris shook her head, Tempy always weighed her words and spoke carefully.

Tempy took a deep breath. She was about to tell Iris about the world beyond the boundary, but her emotions got the better of her, and she gushed like a river that had broken a dam. "How is Mom, Iris? I really do miss her sweet voice and soft touch. I miss her sparkly eyes and the way her nose twitches when she has a sneezing fit."

Iris stared. "Tempy, are these people keeping you against your will?" she asked, the horrifying possibility occurring to her for the first time.

"Um, no. It's not like that. I know I have to be here. But that doesn't mean it's not hard for me. I miss you

all, but especially Mom. I hate that I left without even telling her."

"Why did you do that, Tempy? You could have told them, at least. Mom and Dad are fighting a lot. They're both heart broken. What did you expect? Clearly, you miss them too. So why can't you just give up this rubbish and come home?"

"Because, I know this sounds dramatic, but there is indeed a looming crisis. Sooti asked you what you thought was beyond our settlement and you said you didn't care, but you should."

"Why?" Iris was baffled.

"Come with me, and I'll show you." Tempy extended her hand. When Iris took it, Tempy led her out of the canopy and down a wooded path to what Iris guessed was a storage unit. It was a very large wooden box about four feet high. Tempy stooped down, carefully opened the door a crack and slid in. She urged Iris to do the same.

Puzzled, Iris complied. As soon as she entered, Tempy gripped her arm and held her in place. Once her eyes adjusted to the dim flickering illumination of a single lantern hanging from the ceiling, Iris gasped realizing that if it hadn't been for Tempy's firm restraining grip,

she would have walked into a pit, probably four feet deep. At one corner of the pit, facing the opposite wall, was a figure in a hooded black cloak hunched over a stone platform. Iris looked at Tempy in confusion. "Why are we here, Tempy, and who is that?" she whispered, as Tempy and she descended down some rough cut steps to the floor of the pit.

"Rayel," Tempy called out. The person's hood fell back, as he turned to face them.

Iris covered her eyes and screamed. "It's the Devil," she shouted in terror. "Get me out of here, Tempy," she begged.

"Iris, calm down, please." Tempy squeezed her hand.  
"This is my friend, Rayel."

"Devil? What's that?" Rayel demanded.

"Tempy, please. I'm scared," Iris whimpered, burying her face in Tempy's chest. Tempy put an arm around her waist and caressed her head. "Iris, you're brave. I know you can do this. Please look at Rayel. I promise he won't come close, or hurt you." She raised her hand gesturing for Rayel to wait.

Reluctantly, Iris peeked towards the corner of the pit. Rayel was still standing there. He hadn't moved.

"Hello, Iris," he mumbled not meeting her eyes, and Iris suddenly realized that he was shy.

The thought gave her courage. "Hello Rayel," she gulped and willed herself to look at his face. His skin was deathly pale, much whiter than Tempy's skin. But it was his hair that repulsed her. It was pale yellow. Iris had only ever seen youngsters with dark hair. As people aged, they grayed, of course, but yellow hair on a young boy was unnatural. As for his eyes, Iris noted that in spite of the dimness of the light, his pupils were mere dark pinpricks, but stood out in stark contrast to his glittering pale green iris.

"Why does he look like the Devil, Tempy?" Iris steeled herself to ask. "You know the stories Mom read to us. You know the Devil has yellow hair and green glinting eyes. Tempy, how can the Devil be your friend?"

"What is the devil, Soola?" Rayel asked, perplexed. "And why does she keep calling you Tempy? Why is she so afraid?" he asked, concerned.

Iris was surprised by the gentleness and warmth in his voice. "You don't sound like the Devil," she remarked.

"I don't know what a devil is," Rayel shrugged, "but I have been looking forward to meeting you. I do not

wish to distress you Iris, but may I approach, so I can give you the gift I made for you?"

"A gift?" Iris was alarmed. "The Devil always comes bearing gifts, Mom used to say." She turned away and refused to look at him again.

Tempy shook her head in exasperation. "This is my fault," she mumbled. "I did not prepare her properly for this encounter." She bit her lips. "Rayel, I need to go back to my dwelling. I will see you later tonight and explain everything. I must talk to Iris now."

Rayel nodded. "Of course, Soola. I will be here." He sighed before returning to his work.

# The Devil That's Not a Devil

Back under the canopy, Tempy sounded annoyed. "Why did you have to go on about the Devil? Those were just stories Mom told us. There's no such thing as a Devil. You're such a baby!"

"But, Tempy, how can you be sure?" Iris raised an eyebrow. "He looked so much like the picture of the Devil in those books. If he isn't the Devil, then why does he look like that? Is he one of your *Boundary People*?"

"No," Tempy bit her lips. "Goodness, this is so hard to explain. That's why I wanted you to see him first. You'll think I am mad, but Iris, there is another civilization of people, and they live underground."

"Underground? Whatever do you mean? In holes? Like Rayel was inside the pit?"

"No, Iris. That's just a makeshift accommodation, so he can spend some time among us, learning about the overground world. I mean there is a sprawling village, much like the one you live in, but it is underground."

"What? That's impossible. You're crazy."

"I am not crazy!" Tempy asserted. "I have been to their village. Rayel is visiting us now to learn about our lives. The *Boundary People* hope, that if Rayel and you get to know each other and learn about each other's villages, then the crisis may be averted."

"Tempy, you're making no sense. How do you know these people? If they really do live underground, then how did you visit them? Did you just grab a spade and dig a hole?" Iris scoffed.

"Of course not!" Tempy was irritated. "The *Boundary People* have known of Rayel's people for ages, just like they have known of our village. And as for how I visited them, that's easy. I used The Entrance."

"The entrance? You mean like a door?" Iris was incredulous.

"Not quite a door," Tempy scratched her chin and paused for a moment before resuming. "Deeper in the forest, are some caves that contain an opening to an underground passage way. The passage is a long and downward spiral leading to an underground network of large caverns."

"No way!" Iris's eyes were as wide as saucers.

"It's true." Tempy nodded.

"Wow!" Iris blinked. "But even if that is the case, why does Rayel look like the Devil?" she demanded.

"Iris, you know there is no such thing as the Devil." Tempy gritted her teeth. "It's only a metaphor for evil. Even Mom said so, when she told us those old stories."

"But Mom doesn't know about these underground people, does she?" Iris looked at Tempy, who shook her head. "Maybe, the people who wrote the old stories did know them. Do all these underground people have yellow hair? Maybe they are the Devil's people, all evil, you know." Iris shuddered.

"Why do you think that, Iris?" Tempy tried to stay calm.

"Because, it's too much of a coincidence that those old stories should depict the imaginary Devil to look just like the people from the underground civilization."

"Fine," Tempy gave in, "I didn't want to bring this up until you got to know Rayel first, but now that you have forced the issue, I won't lie. A very long time ago, Rayel's tribe fought a war against your people. Your people were defeated, and banished from the forest."

"What? So they are evil!"

"It's not that simple. War never is. The earliest historical records of the *Boundary People* indicate, the forest contained two tribes that had existed for a very long time, centuries perhaps. The *Tree People* lived on the trees, and the *Ground People* lived on the forest floor. The forest was supposedly so dense at that time, that almost no light reached the ground, even during the day."

"No way!" Iris was incredulous.

"It's true." Tempy nodded sagely. "That's why the *Cave People* either have yellow or white hair, or they are bald, and their skin is white too. The *Boundary People* have inferred over the years, that skin, hair and eye color of a tribe depend on the extent of their exposure to sunlight," she explained with pride.

"So what happened? Why did they go to war?" Iris asked.

"I'll explain, but first you need to understand how the tribes lived and what happened. The *Ground People* and the *Tree People* had a friendly symbiotic relationship. The *Tree People* collected fruit, nuts and honey. They also hunted birds and collected bird eggs for food." Tempy began.

"Basically stuff you find on trees," Iris remarked.

"Yes," Tempy nodded, "and the *Ground People* collected mushrooms, tubers and berries. They also hunted rodents and snakes and collected snake eggs for food. The tribes exchanged foods with each other, so all of them had access to a large variety of nutritious and flavorful foods."

"Sounds great! So then what happened?"

"At some point, the *Tree People* began fashioning clothes and shoes out of leaves. Initially, this made the *Ground People* very happy, because it made walking a lot more pleasant and protected them from insect bites. But then over a decade, the leaf cover began to dwindle, suddenly letting in a lot more sunlight. This made the *Ground People* very angry. They started falling ill, and some took refuge in the small caves, nearby."

"Oh that's horrible. What happened to them?"

"They started getting headaches, and over time their eyesight became impaired, making it much harder for them to hunt. They begged the *Tree People* to stop using up the leaves, but they wouldn't listen."

"Why not, if they were friends?" Iris asked.

"I think, because the *Tree People* were adapted to the sunlight, they could not fathom the extent of the difficulties the *Ground People* were facing. They did not take their complaints seriously. Also, over the previous few years, the *Tree People* had grown used to the comforts provided by several leaf based products and did not want to give up these luxuries."

"So what did the *Ground People* do?"

"As more and more of them became sick, they sought shelter in the caves, but the caves could not accommodate so many of them. In their desperation, one of them came up with a plan. The *Ground People* knew a lot about stones. So in the night they collected some very hard stones and sturdy fallen branches. They used these to make rudimentary pickaxes and started digging to enlarge the caves, That's when one of them stumbled upon The Entrance to the underground caverns."

"Oh, so is that when they moved in there?"

"No, the underground caverns were too dark, even for them, but some of them moved into the passageway close to The Entrance. The *Ground People* survived by foraging for food during the darkest hours of the night, but they were miserable."

"Did the *Tree People* know this?"

"I'm not sure, but I think they assumed that the *Ground People* had perished from their illness, so they continued to use leaves as they needed. But they too needed the trees to flourish, so," Tempy waved her hand around, "the forest is still quite dark."

Iris nodded. "So when did the *Ground People* start living in the caverns that are deep underground?"

"In the passage to the underground caverns, one of them accidentally discovered fire."

"What? How?" Iris demanded.

"Since food was scarce, the *Ground People* had made a rule that when one of them caught a rodent, they would eat it, except for the fat. The fat tallow they would store and share among themselves during celebrations or in dire emergencies."

"What's this got to do with fire?" Iris was confused.

"I'm coming to it. You see, the *Ground People* were still trying to expand their habitat by digging into the walls and pushing them farther back. The clashing of stone on stone often caused sparks, but when it

happened near a little mound of tallow, the tallow caught fire."

"Oh, goodness!"

"Frightened by the blaze of light and heat, the ground people huddled together, and when the fire died out, they mourned the loss of the tallow. But a young boy among them was curious. He tried to replicate the incident the next time he had a bit of tallow. After a few clandestine attempts with the stones and the tallow, he found that he could have his own personal flame of light, if he kept the tallow in a little stone bowl before lighting it. He wondered what else would light up, and found dried leaves and twigs worked almost as well, if they were introduced to the flame of the tallow."

"Wow, so that's how fire was discovered. That's so cool!" Iris was impressed. "But how do you know all of this?"

"The *Boundary People* are meticulous record keepers. For ages, they have diligently documented all the knowledge they have gathered. I have read through a lot of their historical archives, but I need to tell you something about Rayel's people, and we don't have much time. You need to get home soon or Mom will worry."

"Oh right. I completely forgot. Okay continue."

"The *Ground People* used fire to make better tools and moved deeper into the caverns. There, they found some grease and oil deposits for fuel. But they were still angry with the *Tree People* for their cruelty. So one night, an angry mob of *Ground People*, took lanterns with them and torched the trees where the *Tree People* lived."

"Oh my goodness!" Iris gasped.

"Many people died that night. The *Ground People* themselves had not quite grasped the power of the weapon they had unleashed. The fire spread from tree to tree and a large clearing was burnt down, before the rain rescued the situation." Tempy stopped to take a breath.

She cleared her throat and continued. "A war ensued, in which the *Ground People* found their stone tools, and their ability to navigate the dark forest and caves to be a significant advantage. Even though they did not use fire as a weapon again, the *Tree People* were frightened that they might, and they surrendered. The *Tree People* were banished from the forest. Their numbers diminished, they moved to the grassy plains, where they started a new life. They vowed to keep their distance from the forest, which they now

believed to be the abode of evil, or the kingdom of the Devil."

"So that's why the villagers think the Devil looks like Rayel's people. I see." Lost in thought, Iris chewed on her lips, while she tried to assimilate everything Tempy had said. "I should go home. Mom and Dad will be home soon. They'll worry, if I'm not there." She got up to leave. "Can you show me the way out, Tempy?" she asked.

"Sure, come on. But you can't tell Mom and Dad where you were. They cannot know about these people. Promise me."

"You want me to lie to them?" Iris was shocked.

"For now, yes. In time, you will have to tell them, to establish peace between the two communities. You see they are heading for a new conflict, and neither of them know how imminent it is. Rayel and you need to work together to prevent it."

"Wait, what? Me? What can I do?"

"Today was just a start. I'll send Toto again. You need to visit here many more times before the looming disaster can be averted."

Iris's eyes widened. But then she sighed and nodded.  
"I'll wait till I learn more, but I am not promising anything. I guess Rayel isn't really the Devil. I still find him scary to look at, but I will try."

Tempy smiled, and then her eyes sparkled. "There is one more thing I wanted to tell you. When the *Tree People* entered the grasslands, they were distraught by the absence of trees. Perhaps, they began to understand how the *Ground People* had felt about the diminished tree cover. Anyway, they sought shelter in the first few trees they found. They were all ..."

"Boabab trees," Iris interrupted fingering her pendant, as she understood the true significance of it. "That's why it is the Life Tree."

"Exactly!" Tempy nodded.

# A New Friend

"Mom, why do we never go into the forest?" Iris asked, when her mom came into her room to kiss her goodnight.

"Because it's dangerous," Mom replied, tersely.

"But how can you know, if you have never been there? Don't you want to look at least? Aren't you curious?"

"Why are you suddenly so interested in the forest?" Dad inquired, overhearing their conversation.

"No real reason. I was just walking around today, looking for a new path. I've been on the usual ones so many times. Then I realized that the only path I have never taken, is the one leading to the forest."

"And with good reason," Mom piped in. "The forest is dangerous. It's full of cunning, violent creatures of the night."

"You mean the Devil?" Iris asked.

"No, Silly. Those are just stories. There's no such thing as the Devil, but the forest does contain real dangers. The wood gatherers have seen the bloody

carcasses of mauled animals. Some of them have recurring nightmares of bodies of animals whose flesh has been ripped by something sharp and savage." Dad explained.

"But don't any people live there at all?" Iris pressed on.

"The forest is too dark and inhospitable for human beings, and especially dangerous at night. So although we have never actually been there, we can be quite sure that no people live there." Mom's tone of finality discouraged further questions.

"I guess that makes sense," Iris nodded, and her parents smiled. "Mom," Iris ventured, "can I ask you another question?"

"Make it quick, Honey. It's getting late."

"Where did you get the pendant you gave Tempy, Mom? I've never seen anything like it."

Mom looked like she had seen a ghost. "I lost Tempy and the pendant, that day," she mumbled, as she stared into the void.

"Was it precious?" Iris asked, wondering why the pendant mattered. She was surprised by her Mom's

reaction. She had simply brought it up to get confirmation that Tempy was adopted.

"Tempy is precious," Mom said, her voice breaking, as she hurried away.

"I wish you wouldn't keep reminding your mother of that day. It upsets her so much." Dad sighed before leaving.

After they left, Iris searched for a book to read in bed. She pushed aside the gardening books that had been of particular interest to her lately, and found one of the old children's story books Mom used to read to her. She leafed through the book until she found the picture of the Devil. "Yup, it definitely looks like Rayel," she sighed. At least, she hadn't imagined the likeness.

Iris looked at the candles on her desk. The light was reassuring, but sleep eluded her. Her brain was restless. Was Tempy adopted or not? Sooti's story seemed so convincing. But if it was true, why did her parents not tell her when she brought up the pendant. Something was definitely weird about the pendant, she knew it in her gut. But she would have to wait and find out more before she made up her mind about anything, she decided.

She thought of the day she had spent with Tempy. It was so nice to see her again. Tempy wasn't just her sister, but also her calm, thoughtful and sensible best friend. While Iris often got carried away by her imagination, Tempy kept her grounded. If Sooti had convinced Tempy that she was her mother, there had to be some truth in it. Iris decided to ask Tempy for more details the next time they met.

I can't imagine a nicer sister, Iris thought. No wonder her parents had never mentioned anything about Tempy being adopted. They loved her just like she was their own. But why not say something now? It bothered Iris.

Besides, didn't the other adults in the village know? They must have, but no one had ever mentioned it. Not even when Tempy had disappeared. Iris wondered why. She knew she couldn't ask her own parents, but perhaps Sooti might know. Iris decided to ask her the next time she visited the forest.

Oh yes. She planned to go there again. Tempy had convinced her. In fact, she couldn't wait for her next visit. Her heart raced as she thought about it. She thought she'd be up all night reliving the adventures of the strange day, but soon exhaustion caught up with her, and she drifted into a fitful slumber.

It wasn't long before Mom was waking her up for breakfast. Iris felt tired. She had barely slept. Her dreams had been haunted by images of the Devil. Only Iris couldn't wait to see him again. She wondered why.

§§§

It was Saturday again. The one day of the week that Iris was home alone. School was closed on Saturday, but her parents still went to work. Mom worked as a weaver, while Dad was a carpenter.

On Saturday, the children were free to play and indulge in their hobbies, while the grownups worked. The school teachers used this time to grade assignments and prepare lessons, activities and assignments for the following week.

Before Tempy had left, every Saturday, Iris would accompany her on long rambles near the outskirts or the village. They would chase butterflies, study the shapes and patterns of leaves, pick up fallen wild flowers, admire the intricate patterns on the shells of snails as they slowly slithered over the muddy ground. If it was raining, they would sit by the pond watching frogs jumping from one lily pad to the next. On hot summer days they would jump into the pond for a swim.

Tempy always carried her sketch book along. When they sat under a tree to snack on some fruit and nuts, she would whip it out and sketch the most interesting pattern she had seen, either on the wings of a butterfly, or on a flower or snail shell. Sometimes, she copied the weird shapes of the clouds in the sky.

Ever since Tempy had disappeared, Iris missed her most on Saturdays. She continued the rambles and eventually learned to enjoy them in solitude. But today, she wouldn't be alone. She was going to see Tempy again, and she could hardly wait.

Having finished her bath and breakfast, Iris walked around the cottage, listening intently for Toto's yappy bark, and it wasn't long before she heard it. This time, as she followed Toto, she paid attention to the way and noted any interesting rocks, trees or other distinctive features she could use to find her own way in future.

It wasn't easy doing all of this, and still keeping up with Toto. Iris had to run for some stretches to catch up with him. So when she finally arrived in Tempy's shelter, Iris was panting.

Sooti fetched some water, and Iris thanked her once she caught her breath. "Sooti," Iris began taking sip of water from a clay cup, "May I ask you something?"

"Of course, Dear." Sooti smiled encouragingly.

"My parents never told me that Tempy was adopted, so I can't ask them this. That's why I must ask you. Can you tell me how it all happened, and why all the villagers kept the secret, even after Tempy disappeared?"

"Of course. I'll tell you," Sooti nodded. "Would you like some tea?" she offered. When Iris politely declined, she continued. "When our children have to be sent to be raised away from us in your village, our people take utmost care in choosing a family for them. Mala, who lives in your village, is one of us."

"Mala, our teacher?" Iris was astonished.

"Yes, she came to your village a couple of decades ago, pretending to be a traveler from far away lands. She was learned, so she offered her services as a teacher and settled down. She is considered wise by your people and often consulted on various matters including healing potions. She does her best to serve them well. But she also carefully follows all the village gossip and reports to us once every new moon night."

"Then, why did you need to send Tempy at all?" Iris grumbled.

"Mala is a grown up, and as much as she is respected, she is still an outsider. A child growing up in your village will have an insider's perspective. We need someone who thinks of your people as their own, to help us really understand your culture. Also, for the looming crisis, we needed someone who would empathize with your people."

"What crisis?" Iris demanded.

"All in good time. We will explain that, when you are ready to find out. I promise. But first you have a lot to learn."

Iris nodded. "So Mala chose my parents to adopt Tempy?" Iris frowned, trying to connect the dots. "Why?" she asked.

"Mala had learned that your parents had been trying to have a child for two years, but hadn't succeeded. There had been a couple of early miscarriages. Eventually, your mother got pregnant, and it stuck. But then she lost the baby."

"Wait, what do you mean lost a baby?" Iris interrupted. "Like the baby was kidnapped?"

"No," Sooti bit her lips. "I mean the baby died in her womb. It was a stillborn." Sooti pointed to her abdomen.

"Oh," Iris blinked.

"Mala knew we needed caring parents, and she thought your mother could really benefit from adopting. So in the darkest hours of the night, soon after she was born, Soola was wrapped in a cosy blanket and placed inside a little basket, was left at your doorstep. Mala knew your parents were brave, kind and loving people, who more than anything else, wanted a baby. She was sure that if they found a baby in a basket on their doorstep, they would love and look after her."

"But why didn't anyone talk about Tempy being adopted?" Iris persisted. It just didn't make any sense. If a baby just showed up like that suddenly, wouldn't the whole village be gossiping about it. "Didn't people wonder where she came from?"

Sooti took a deep breath. "Actually, no. Our people have been occasionally placing our babies just so for hundreds of years, as we have been placing teachers. It's how we keep ourselves informed about your culture. When we feel the need to learn more about your world, our teachers let us know about any suitable loving couple that is having trouble conceiving, or is too old to have a baby but dearly wants one, and the next baby born among us is placed there. Since ancient times, our teachers have planted

the myth of the divine baby gifted to parents who deserve it most. The people in your village have been led to believe by the wise teachers that such God given babies are to be treasured and loved, so no one speaks of them as adopted, lest they feel like outsiders. The child is usually retrieved after he or she reaches adulthood and becomes independent."

Iris stared at Sooti. Her eyes widened in horror and her face contorted with rage as she processed what she had just heard. "You're evil."

"We do what we believe is best," Sooti replied unabashed.

"So why was Tempy retrieved so early?"

"Like I said. There is a looming ...." Sooti was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Iris, you got here earlier than I had expected. Look what I brought you," Tempy smiled holding out a wicker basket. This time she was dressed in a knee-length version of the simple gown Sooti wore.

"Blueberries! Wow! Thanks Tempy," Iris licked her lips. "How did you find them? They're so rare."

"They grow all over the forest, and I remembered how much you love them. Out there, the sun is too harsh

for them, but in here they grow like weeds. So what were you talking about?" Tempy asked.

"Sooti was just going to tell me about the crisis." Iris replied.

"It's not something I can explain. There is a lot more you need to see and learn before you can understand." Sooti sighed. "Soola tells me you have met Rayel."

"Yes, I have. Am I going to meet him again today?" Iris hoped she didn't sound too eager as she chomped on blueberries.

Tempy smiled. Iris was never very good at hiding her feelings, but she had always loved that about her little sister. "Yes, we will. Are you ready to see the underground village?"

"I think so," Iris beamed, but then she hesitated. "I hope it's not too dark and scary," she added in a whisper.

Tempy clutched her hand. "I promise it won't be. I'll be there with you the whole time. So will Rayel." Tempy's lips twitched and Iris frowned as she wiped away the bit of blueberry juice smeared across her lips. For just a moment Iris felt like she was back home a year ago, and none of this had happened.

§§§

Soon Tempy and Iris were standing in front of a pile of rocks blocking most of an entrance to a large cave. The remaining space was so narrow that they had to squeeze in one at a time.

When she emerged on the other side of the opening, Iris gasped as the darkness engulfed her. She couldn't see a thing. "Don't panic," Tempy clutched her hand. "Just wait for your eyes to adjust."

"Iris," Rayel whispered. He had been waiting for them inside. "Um.." he hesitated. "I made something for you."

"What?" Iris asked, as her pupils slowly dilated, so she could see where he stood, even if he was just a vague shadowy figure.

"It's the gift I tried to give you the last time we met." He took something out of a pocket in his garment. It sparkled and shone, faintly lighting up the place.

"I made you a bracelet with glowberry seeds. I collected a lot of them and put them in this mushroom membrane pouch, so the light would shine through and then glued it to some string. I stuck glowberry seeds along the length of the string too." He offered her the bracelet.

Iris smiled. She was glad for the darkness, otherwise Tempy might notice her blush. "Thank you," she whispered, joyfully accepting Rayel's gift. "I'm sorry," she added, "for the way I behaved last time."

"No worries. Soola told me all about the stories in your book. I'm glad you agreed to meet me. Do you think we can be friends after all?"

"Friends," Iris smiled, extending her hand.

"Friends," Rayel responded, taking her hand. He proceeded to tie the bracelet on her wrist. "In our culture, we call this a friendship band," Rayel explained.

Iris smiled as she nodded. In addition to being beautiful, the bracelet was practical. Iris could see that Rayel was wearing simple short mid-thigh length pants. His bare upper body was painted with white chalk lines that shone brightly in the light of the bracelet, making it easier for Iris to follow Rayel and Tempy through the dark maze of passages. She marveled at their ability to see through such darkness. Rayel, at least, was a creature of the night. He could barely withstand any sunlight. But how did Tempy do it, she wondered.

§§§

It took a while, but eventually, the trio reached a large cavern bathed in an eerie dim blue light. Iris looked around for the source of the light and located the glowing blue dots that lined the edges of the ceiling of the cave. "What is that?" she asked mystified.

"Those are glowing mushrooms," Rayel replied. "We use them for lighting."

When Iris still looked confused, Tempy chimed in, "When the *Ground People* first explored the caves with their torches, they discovered patches of glowing mushrooms growing in some damp places. Flames were not a sustainable way to light the place in the long term, so they cultivated these glowing mushrooms."

"Wow! This is so cool." Iris marveled at the sight. "Are these like the glowberry seeds then?" she asked, fingering her bracelet.

"No, actually they are quite different," Rayel pointed out. "Glowberries grow in the forest. Their seeds absorb sunlight in the day. They shine brightly at night, but get dim after a few hours and then stop glowing a little before dawn. Then again they absorb light during the day and the process repeats." Rayel explained. "The seeds continue to behave this way even after they are removed from the plant and dried.

"These mushrooms," he pointed at the ceiling, "don't need any sunlight. But they only emit light as long as they are alive."

"Alive!" Iris gasped. "No way!"

"Yes, alive and growing," Rayel emphasized with pride, seeing Iris suitably impressed by the network of living lights.

As Iris got accustomed to the fascinating blue lighting, she began to realize just how strange her surroundings were in so many other ways. When Tempy had mentioned a sprawling settlement like her own, Iris had envisioned something quite different. As it stood, this place had no houses, yards, farms or roads.

"This," Tempy gestured at the large cylindrical room, "is the entrance hall of the settlement."

With a puzzled expression, Iris noted several large ledges and niches carved into the walls loaded with a variety of items, most of which she did not recognize.

"The items on our right include local products which they export to us, meaning send to the *Boundary People*, and the items on our left are items imported, meaning obtained from the *Boundary People*," Tempy explained.

"We store them in the entrance hall for efficiency. Whenever one of us has to engage in some task outside, we try to accomplish as much trading as we can, so as to minimize our travels. Off late, I have been shouldering a lot of the trading duties." Rayel added.

"Trade, what's that?" Iris was puzzled.

"Trade is the word we use for exchange of items of equal value between our communities. Exports are what we give in exchange for the imports we need." Tempy explained.

"Oh, so this is like one of our warehouses," Iris concluded, happy to notice a similarity with her own village.

"Yes, exactly, Iris. I couldn't have put it better." Tempy nodded. "Warehouses are where individuals in the village store their surplus production, to make it available for the rest of the community," she explained to Rayel.

"And do you see those?" Tempy pointed at several wide passages branching off in various directions, "They lead to various sections of this village."

"That's the way to my family," Rayel pointed to one of the passages.

"Your house?" Iris asked.

"Well, sort of. You'll see." Tempy shrugged.

As the trio emerged at the other end of one of the passages, Iris was even more surprised. This was clearly a residential section, she realized, but so bizarrely different from her own village. There was a large central area with a big flat block made of many large stones compacted together, but the top layer comprised of a few large flat polished slabs of stone. Iris approached it and was amazed that the surface was so shiny, she could see her own reflection.

"That's where we eat our meals," Rayel explained.

"Your family?" Iris asked, astonished that a family dining table could be so huge. "How big is your family?"

Rayel seemed puzzled, so Tempy explained, "Iris, a cluster of about four to six families eat a such a table." She pointed to various small irregular openings hidden away in the cave wall. "These," she explained, "are entrances to cavelets, which are naturally occurring or carved private rooms sheltering individual families. Family, that is, in the way you think of it, but to Rayel, all these five nuclear families make up one large joint family and they all eat together here."

"Those are the houses?" Iris blinked, and then squinted at the irregular shaped entrances. "But none of them have a front door. If fact, I don't think I have seen any doors here at all!" she remarked.

"They don't have doors down here," Tempy clarified. "There are no weather considerations, or discernible day and night. As for privacy, the entrances are small, and the rooms are large. With large joint family units living in close quarters, there is little opportunity for theft. Besides doors of stone are not easy to operate, and wood is too scarce. Sometimes, a curtain is used to enhance privacy."

"Oh!" Iris responded as she contemplated the strange lifestyle of the cave dwellers. "But what about farms?" she asked, "And how many such joint families are there? And is there a village council? And ..."

"Wait, stop." Tempy shook Iris, knowing it was the only way to stem the tide of her curiosity fulled by her abundant imagination.

Iris took a deep breath. "Right, so what's next?" she asked, feeling a little irked as she saw Rayel's lips twitching as his eyes danced with amusement.

"We have around five or six family clusters per sector and about a few dozen sectors." Rayel began. "Each

sector also has a few workshops and local trading posts. Would you like to see a workshop?"

"Sure." Iris shrugged.

Rayel led the way through some narrow tunnels. "Why do your people travel through these tiny passages? Can't they widen them?" Iris was disgruntled after bumping her head a couple of times.

"No, not these. They are not safe to widen. Any tampering with these could lead to a structural collapse. We have mine mappers who study the stability and composition of various sections of the caves and tell us where we can dig safely and conveniently. They developed a guild about a century ago after some catastrophic digs."

"Then why are you taking us this way?" Iris demanded.

"It's not safe to make these passages wider, but they are safe as they are," Rayel assured her, "We all use them. They are shortcuts connecting various sections."

"Okay," Iris shrugged, "but what are your mappers?"

"What?" Rayel was bewildered.

"Iris," Tempy shouted, as Iris stepped into a parallel tunnel. She grabbed her wrist and pulled her into the right passage. "Iris, you could get completely lost. These tunnels are a complicated layered maze, and only the people who live here can navigate them. Please pay attention and don't wander off," Tempy begged.

"Yes, sure Tempy. I didn't realize. I've never seen anything like it." Iris rambled, feeling a little shaken.

"Yes, I know," Tempy nodded. "And mine mappers are not his. They scour the area for lucrative mines, which are large deposits of metals, valuable stones, coal or oils under a thin layer of rock. He'll explain what metal is, later." Tempy gestured towards Rayel. "But searching for mines requires an understanding of the rock structure, so the mine searchers also map out the caverns with details about rock structure and stability and are called mine mappers. They know how thick and hard the rock ceiling is everywhere and exactly what it is made of. Just like the village surveyors study the soil and water on the ground, these people study the rock above and below them."

"Makes sense," Iris nodded.

The trio soon emerged into another large rock chamber, but this one was loud and noisy,

reverberating with thudding and grinding sounds and unpleasantly hot.

"This is our workshop sector," Rayel declared. Iris could sense the pride in his voice. "Next year, when I come of age, I will work here too." He dashed off to a very strange workstation. "This is metal working."

"Metal? The thing Tempy said you find in mines. What is it?" Iris asked.

"Don't you know what metal is?" Rayel was incredulous. "What are your utensils and tools made of?"

"Ceramic and stone of course," Iris said haughtily, offended by Rayel's tone.

"Stone? But that's primitive," Rayel scoffed, and Iris could feel tears of anger and shame well up in her eyes.

Tempy cleared her throat loudly. "Rayel," she scolded. "The two cultures have evolved in different ways and have different strengths. The goal is to learn from each other, so both can benefit."

Rayel took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Iris. I was just taken by surprise. We take metal for granted, and I did not know that your people do not use it."

Still feeling hurt, Iris refused to meet his eyes.

"If it makes you feel any better, I have no idea what ceramic is," Rayel whispered.

Iris's lips twitched. "So what is metal?" she asked finally turning to face him.

Rayel took her to the tool desk where, Iris marveled at the smooth reflective surfaces of a variety of metal instruments.

"This is a knife," Rayel explained, using it to cut through a chunk of limestone.

"Oh we have those too," Iris nodded.

"You do? Without metal? How?" Rayel was perplexed.

"We make them from ceramic." Iris told him all about clay, and its hardened glazed version, ceramic, which her villagers used to make various utensils, tools, weapons and even decorative items. She rummaged through one of her pockets and fished out a little finger sized painted ceramic doll resembling a little girl. "Here, you can have it." She handed it to him.

His eyes lit up, and he ran to a crevice behind the nearest wall. After fumbling around for a moment, he

returned with a finger sized shiny metal figurine of a man. The fine details of facial features and clothes were all carved instead of painted, Iris noted. He pressed it into Iris's hand. "Thank you," she mouthed. "Tempy was right. We are so different, and yet so similar."

"What's that?" Tempy cupped her ears.

Rayel laughed, while Iris playfully punched her.

"To make ceramic from clay, we need to put it in an oven. Is it similar for metals? Is that why it is so hot here?" Iris wondered.

Rayel explained that the metal was isolated by heating ore with coal to very high temperatures. Both ore and coal were found in different parts of the underground caverns. That process was carried out in another room called the foundry. "Then we need another smaller oil fire, which we call a forge." Rayel pointed to some people working around a fire in one corner. "The forge is used to shape clumps of metal into useful tools. The hot metal needs to be repeatedly beaten till it is the right shape and thickness."

"Oil? We use peanut oil for cooking and wood for fuel. Where do you get so much oil?" Iris was baffled.

"Their oil is different," Tempy intervened. "They have found pools of oil underground. It burns better than peanut oil and is a better fuel than wood. Without access to so much oil and coal, their metal workshops would not flourish."

"Peanut oil?" It was Rayel's turn to be confused.

"Peanuts are one of the varieties of crops grown in the village farms. They are pressed to produce cooking oil or simply roasted and eaten as a snack."

"Oil snack, so weird" Rayel frowned. "But speaking of snacks, I'm really hungry," he declared. "I have some food stashed near my work table. Would you two like to join me for a snack?"

With so many new fascinating discoveries competing for her attention, Iris had completely forgotten about food. But now that Rayel mentioned it, she realized just how hungry she was. Her stomach rumbled, for it had been a few hours since her long forgotten breakfast followed by a lot more exercise than she was accustomed to.

"Yes," Iris nodded, enthusiastically. "What do you have?"

"Salted mushrooms and dried berries."

Iris looked at Tempy, who nodded. "Yes you can eat that," she said.

Rayel walked up to a work table and slid through what looked like a crack in the cave wall. He returned with a bulging snake skin pouch and handed a fistful of its contents to Tempy and then Iris. He began to munch hungrily on the rest.

Iris examined the stretchy flat flakes with a strange smell and hesitated. "It's okay, Iris. I promise." Tempy assured her.

Gingerly, Iris bit into one of the flakes and to her own surprise, it tasted delightfully salty and tangy. Seeing her smile, Rayel suggested, "Try it with the berries. It's even better."

Iris picked up a red dried shriveled up fruit and bit into it. "Wow!" she exclaimed. The sweetness was enhanced by the salty tangy taste of the mushroom she had just eaten. She alternated between the mushrooms and the berries until she had finished them all, and then licked her fingers to savor the last of the flavor. Rayel fetched some water in a shiny metal container to wash down the salty meal.

"Where do you get water from?" Iris asked.

"I'll show you," Rayel replied.

He guided them through another maze of tunnels. After a while, Iris could hear a gushing sound. "We're close," Tempy told her. "That's the sound of the water. It sounds a lot like our river, doesn't it?"

Iris nodded, expecting to soon see an underground river, but what she actually saw fascinated her.

The water seemed to be gushing upwards from a hole in the ground. "We call it a fountain," Rayel explained.

"How does it do that?" Iris asked, but Rayel shrugged. "It's just the way it has always been. We have a stream too like you, but I thought you'd like to see this. Soola was just as surprised, when she first saw it. So I thought I'd bring you here."

"It's lovely. Thanks." Iris smiled.

After a few minutes of sitting by the fountain side and drinking in its beauty, Tempy tapped Iris on her shoulder. "It's best you go back now. It will take you a while to get home, and it's best you get there before Mom and Dad return, or they'll get worried."

"Right." Iris nodded and scrambled back to her feet.

"I will be leaving you here," Rayel said. "Soola will be able to guide you back. I look forward to seeing you soon." He smiled and extended his hand.

Iris was surprised by the warmth in his pale hand as she shook it.

As Tempy dropped Iris off at the forest boundary, she said. "I'll send Toto again, next Saturday. Can you make it home from here, or should I send Toto with you again?"

Iris looked around and gauged from the light that there were still a couple of hours to sunset. "I made a note of the way this time, so I can manage, and you don't need to send Toto next Saturday. I'll be here, I promise," she smiled, patted Toto on the head and dashed off.

# The Friend Who Is Not Just a Friend

That night Iris thought about her day in the caverns. Impossible as it had sounded to her when Tempy first mentioned it, Iris now knew the underground civilization to be real and surprisingly cosy. Not at all what she had expected from a community of Devils.

But if they lived underground and couldn't withstand sunlight, and her village knew nothing about them and had no interest in living in dark caverns, then what could possibly be the problem? Why would they know about each other, and even if they did, why would either one of them care?

With no answers, and no idea where to even begin looking for them, Iris shifted her focus elsewhere. Her eyes were drawn to the glowberry bracelet Rayel had given her. He had called it a friendship band, but the thought of it made Iris blush. Rayel had said that the bracelet worked by absorbing light. She had been in the sunlight on her way back, but was that enough for it to work? In the light, it was impossible to know. She decided to test it out in the dark, after everyone had gone to bed.

Just then, she heard footsteps. Goodness, was it that late? Iris looked out of her window. It was dark. The footsteps must be Mom and Dad coming to tuck her in. She quickly hid the bracelet under her mattress, just as the door creaked from Mom pushing against it.

"Hi Baby, you were usually quiet at dinner today. How was your Saturday ramble?" Mom asked.

"It was fine. But it's not the same without Tempy, you know." Iris sighed.

"Yes," Dad nodded. "We were wondering if you'd like to join a group of kids who like to ramble together."

"No," Iris shouted. "Tempy and I always went together. If she's not coming back, I'll go alone. Don't you try to replace her with some strangers."

"Okay, Baby," Mom retreated a little taken aback by the forcefulness in her daughter's refusal. "No one is trying to replace Tempy. We just thought you may be feeling lonely and would like some company."

"Well, I am lonely, but I don't want company." Iris was vehement.

Her parents were puzzled. They looked at each other and shrugged. Iris pretended not to notice. "Mom," she added in a milder tone. "Please don't be angry. I really

need an answer to one question. I don't mean to upset you. But I must know, so I too can move on. Where did the red seeds in Tempy's pendant come from?"

"What?" Mom asked.

"I mean which tree did you get those seeds from? You made the pendant for her, right?" Iris asked.

Mom sighed. "No, I did not make it myself," Mom cleared her throat.

"Well, will you show me the tree that the seeds are from? I've looked everywhere since Tempy disappeared, but I haven't been able to find it. That's why I wanted to look in the forest. I thought, maybe, you used a tree from there."

"I can't show you the tree," Mom bit her lip.

"Why not?" Iris asked, feeling suspicious. "I just want to see the tree. Please Mom."

Mom hesitated. "Baby, I'd love to show it to you, but as far as I know, the tree doesn't exist anymore."

"What do you mean?" Iris raised her eyebrows.

"That pendant is a family heirloom. It has been in my family for many generations, possibly hundreds of

years, I don't know. It has been passed down along the female line, from a mother to her oldest daughter. I can't believe I lost Tempy and that heirloom. You can't imagine how upsetting that is for me." Mom burst into tears. "It's like my past and my future were taken away from me all at once." Mom sobbed.

"Don't cry, Mommy," Iris petted her head. "Please, don't cry. I'm so sorry I made you sad. It's just a pendant, Mama."

Dad and Iris comforted and hugged Mom until she calmed down. Then Mom and Dad left her room.

Now Iris was more confused than ever. Iris had believed Sooti based on the evidence of the pendant, but if this pendant was an old family heirloom, then it might have been in her family from before the devastating fire, and before her people had crossed the border. Was Sooti lying about Tempy being her biological sister?

But in that case, why had Mom never before mentioned the heirloom, doubt crept into Iris's mind. Did Mom just make up the story about the heirloom, because of the village taboo against admitting that divine children were adopted, as Sooti had said? Iris balled her fists in frustration. Life had never been so confusing.

After the day's adventures in the caves, for the first time since Tempy had disappeared, Iris decided to sleep in the dark, but not in total darkness. She retrieved the bracelet Rayel had given her from under her mattress and placed it on the little table next to her bed, before blowing out the candles in her room. Like magic, the glowberry seeds started glowing again, and Iris felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the fuzzy dim light emanating from the seeds.

Her mind was buzzing with everything she had learned through the day. Could she trust anyone at all? Tempy, her mother, Rayel?

Rayel? Why was she thinking of him? Why should she trust Rayel at all? She had only just met him. But there was something about him. In spite of his pale complexion, he exuded a certain warmth. She couldn't help liking and even perhaps trusting him. But what would Mom think of her friendship with Rayel? Her thoughts drifted back to her mom and the pendant.

Sooti had said that Mala was one of them. Perhaps, she had told Sooti about the pendant, and they created a replica to convince Tempy and Iris, that Sooti and Latim were Tempy's real parents. But why? What could be the point of this elaborate ruse? The underground civilization Tempy had mentioned was real enough, but so what? The two civilizations

existed in isolation and need never find out about each other. So what could the crisis be? It must have something to do with the *Boundary People*, Iris thought. But what, she couldn't imagine.

And then there was Mom. Was she telling the truth? Why had she never mentioned the heirloom before? If it really was an heirloom and Tempy wasn't a divine baby, as Sooti had put it, then what possible reason could Mom have had not to mention that Tempy's pendant was a family heirloom.

Iris wanted to ask Mom about it, but Mom did not like being reminded of Tempy, and she had tested her patience enough for the moment. Any further questions on the subject would have to wait.

Once again, Iris was plagued by strange dreams, but this time along with Devils there were seeds, mushrooms and fountains. Nothing made sense, and she kept waking up in cold sweat, only to doze off from exhaustion.

§§§

"It looks like the night sky." Iris marveled at the thousands of white dots shinning on the black sooty dome shaped ceiling of the dimly lit cave. "Is this really a mushroom farm?" she asked skeptically. It felt

like her world had turned upside down, and perhaps it had, she mused. "Why would anyone grow stuff on the ceiling?"

"Actually, the first time, it happened by accident." Rayel laughed.

"What?" Iris blinked.

"Do you remember the iron foundry I told you about earlier? The one where we get pure metal after heating ore with coal?"

"Yes," Iris squinted, "I remember you told me the room becomes very hot."

"Exactly Rayel smiled. "And burning coal produces this black stuff called soot, that collects mostly on the ceiling." He rubbed some sticky black deposit off the cave wall to show Iris. Then he used it to draw a back dot on Iris's nose and laughed.

"Mean!" Iris complained, rubbing the black stuff off her nose. "But what has this to do with the mushrooms?"

"After producing iron for the first time, we realized we had enough to last us a year. So we closed this place up. When we returned a few months later, to check on something, we found the ceiling dotted with

these mushrooms, that are a part of our diet. But they were larger and more plentiful than we had ever seen before. The soot, heat and water seepage through the ceiling seems to help them thrive."

"Why is there water seepage?" Iris interrupted.

For the foundry, we chose a cave with a high ceiling and water seepage to help with cooling since the ore making process generates so much heat."

"Oh, so is this place a foundry or a farm?" Iris asked, confused.

"Both," Tempy blurted out in excitement, "and that's the beauty of it." She smiled. "Since they need to produce metal only about a few times a year, they do it after a good mushroom harvest, thus recreating the ideal conditions for a new mushroom crop. Isn't that genius?"

"I must admit it is." Iris nodded, "But doesn't it get tiresome having the same food day after day, with no variety?" she wondered out loud.

"No. This is only one type of mushroom. We grow at least eight different types. This is just the most common one, because it has a high calorific value."

Iris raised a skeptical eyebrow as she stared at the tiny white dots. "These are not mature yet," Rayel clarified. "In a few weeks each of these dots will be approximately the size of your fist."

"Oh, I see. Do the eight varieties of mushrooms taste different from each other?"

"Absolutely. These are mildly sweet, but among the rest, some are salty and some are bitter. A couple of varieties have their own unique taste, I can't really describe. They are used for making sauces."

"I never imagined so much food could be produced underground," Tempy piped in. "Their population has grown so much since they first settled here, and it's all thanks to these mushrooms."

"Perhaps too much and too fast," Rayel lamented. "And now the food is not going to be enough." He sighed.

"What do you mean?" Iris asked.

Rayel and Tempy exchanged significant glances. Rayel took a deep breath and looked around. His eyes widened as he looked at some strange writing on a wall. "Oh no! I'm late," he gasped. He turned back to Iris. "Girls, I am really sorry, but I am going to have to leave you for about an hour. I completely lost track of

time, but I have a metal working lesson I cannot miss. Please wait for me at the dining hall. When I'm back, Soola and I can explain the problem. Would that be okay, Iris?"

"Sure," Iris nodded, puzzled by Rayel's sudden departure, but she was not sorry to have Tempy to herself. "Wait, how do people keep time here?" Iris asked. "I mean there is no sunlight, so how do they know day from night?" she asked, as they made their way to the dining table Iris had seen on her previous visit to the caverns.

"Actually, people here are keenly aware of night time, because that's when they have always hunted and gathered food from the forest. In addition to home grown mushrooms and domesticated cave creatures like bats and some underground snakes and slugs, their food supply has always been augmented by a small team of people who venture above ground at night to hunt mice, rabbits, foxes and collect berries from the area near The Entrance. But now, some trained volunteers venture even farther," Tempy explained as they seated themselves at one corner of the large stone table.

"Trained? Trained by whom?" Iris asked.

"By the *Boundary People*. Earlier, they traded with the *Boundary People* for small amounts of food, and it added variety to both our diets. But when their population grew, our numbers were far fewer than theirs, and it was becoming difficult for us to supply them even if they were willing to pay a lot. With our small population, we did not need much from them. So, our people offered to equip their youngsters with the knowledge they needed to expand their night hunting operation. As you know the *Boundary People* are knowledge seekers, so over the years we have carefully mapped out large parts of the forest in terms of available resources."

"So your people showed them where to hunt?" Iris asked.

"Yes, with our knowledge of the forest and their keen sight in darkness, they were able to profitably hunt and forage at night. We directed them to resource rich sections of the forest that we do not use because it is quite far from our settlement."

"I see." Iris nodded. This was all very interesting, but Iris had Tempy alone for a little while, and she wanted to make the most of it. So without delay, she related Mom's explanation about the pendant being a family heirloom. "I was thinking that one of Mom's ancestors, who you say were the *Tree People*, may

have taken a pendant along and that's how Mom got ..." Iris stopped suddenly frightened by Tempy's rigid countenance.

"Hi, girls. Sorry I had to leave so abruptly," Rayel called out, as he whistled on his way to the table. He stopped in his tracks when he saw Tempy's greenish, contorted face. He rushed over and placed his arm behind her back just in time, so she collapsed into his arms, instead of hitting the floor.

"Goodness, Tempy, are you alright?" Iris was aghast.  
"What happened to her?" she blurted out in fright.

"No time to explain. Just give me a moment." Rayel handed Tempy over to Iris and then rushed over to one of the niches near the table and returned with a powder and a small container of water. He mixed the powder in the water and the liquid began to bubble. "Help me," he told Iris, pointing at Tempy's mouth. Iris nodded, bent over Tempy, and gently parted her lips, so Rayel could slowly dribble the liquid into Tempy's mouth. In a few minutes, Tempy had revived. Iris heaved a sigh of relief.

"What happened?" Tempy asked, feeling disoriented.  
"Last thing I remember was a major headache. Iris, you were talking about something. But I can't remember what it was."

"Never mind that now." Iris waved her hand.  
"Perhaps, I should take you home. You don't look well." Iris was alarmed by the greenish tinge in Tempy's complexion, even though it was rapidly fading.

"No, I think I'm okay," Tempy protested. "I don't understand what happened. I was fine, and suddenly ..." She shrugged helplessly. "Ouch my head hurts," Tempy grimaced. "Maybe, I should go home and lie down. I'm so sorry, Iris. I'll take you back to the forest boundary. We can continue this next week."

"No, don't worry Soola. I'll take Iris back on time," Rayel offered. "Your friend Tarel was at class with me. I'll tell her to take you home. It's better you don't go alone, in case you have another episode."

Iris was confused. Why wasn't Rayel escorting them both back to Tempy's home? Something about the urgency and concern in Rayel's voice rang true, so she nodded, hoping she had made the right judgment call in trusting him.

"Iris, are you sure you are okay with this?" Tempy asked, dazed and a little puzzled.

Iris looked around and noted the pleading look in Rayel's eyes. "Yes, I am sure. I know the way from

The Entrance, now." She smiled.

"Okay, if you're sure, then I will go with Tarel. She knows all the shortcuts, and I really could do with some rest." Tempy groaned. She shut her eyes and rested her head on the table, as she waited for Rayel to return with Tarel.

Iris too waited, wondering what was going on. But soon Rayel arrived with a pale faced yellow haired girl with sparkly mischievous green eyes.

"Oh Soola! Poor you," she massaged Tempy's neck. Feeling better, Tempy looked up. "Tarel, can you take me home?" she asked.

"Of course, Sweetie. Come on. Let's go." Tarel lent Tempy a supporting arm, and the two slowly walked off together.

As soon as they left, Rayel sat down next to Iris and began to fidget.

"Aren't you going to tell me about the food shortage?" Iris asked Rayel.

"Sure, sure," Rayel mumbled absentmindedly, his eyes following the progress of Tempy and Tarel.

"Rayel," Iris was indignant. "Tell me what's going on right now."

"Keep your voice down," Rayel chided, nervously looking back at Tempy and Tarel, who seemed to be quite far away now. "You almost ruined it, Silly" Rayel glared at Iris.

"I will not be spoken to this way," Iris snarled, standing up with her hands on her hips and narrowing her eyes.

"Aren't you feisty," Rayel laughed. "Relax, I'm sorry, I did not mean to be rude, but I have to ask you something."

"What?" Iris grudgingly responded, her curiosity trumping her disdain.

"What were Soola and you talking about when she got the headache?"

"What?" Iris thundered. "That's absolutely none of your business. Stop being so nosy and rude."

"Iris, you don't understand. Whatever it was, you said to her, she won't believe you," Rayel gritted his teeth in frustration.

"What?" Iris asked stumbling backward into a seat. Rayel's response had been so unexpected, that Iris was stunned into silence. She gaped at him blankly waiting for an explanation.

"That headache, we know it well here. It happens when a person hears something that contradicts what they were told under the influence of High Tea."

"High tea?" Iris goggled.

"Yes, it's a drink made by steeping certain mushrooms in hot water. Most teas are just soothing and relaxing. But High Tea is different."

"Your tea is made from mushroom extract?" Iris was appalled, and glad she had rejected the tea Sooti had offered her. "Isn't tea made from leaves?"

"No." Rayel blinked. "Is that how you people make it?"

"Yeah," Iris nodded and shrugged. She took a deep breath bracing herself for strange revelations. "Okay, tell me."

"As I was saying, High Tea is different. At very low concentration, it has health benefits, at slightly higher concentrations, it has medicinal uses, but it can also be

misused. Above a certain concentration, it has mind-bending effects."

"Mind-bending! What do you mean?" Iris demanded.

"If a person is told anything while consuming concentrated High Tea, they believe it without question. Any later attempt to change that belief, results in intense headaches and nausea or fainting."

"You're kidding!" Iris blurted out, trying to fathom the ramifications of such a substance.

But she didn't have to try much, for Rayel spelled it out for her. "Every once in a while, someone here is stupid enough to indulge themselves because of the temporary sensation of euphoria it causes. But even the stupid ones learn quickly to avoid it. My friend tried it in spite of being warned, so when he was drinking it, we told him he was an idiot. Now if anyone calls him an idiot, he cannot contradict them without enduring severe pain. Believe me, everyone here can recognize that particular variety of headache."

"Wow. Ouch!" Iris nodded. "That must be effective."

"It is." Rayel shrugged. "Almost no one makes a second attempt. In the rare case one does, the insults

are far more embarrassing. A third attempt is unheard of."

"Yeah, I would imagine." Iris mumbled trying to wrap her mind around the idea. "But you cured Tempy, right? With that medicine?" Iris asked hopefully.

"No. That medicine just reduces the headache. But there is no known cure." He sighed. "Anyway, that's why I asked, what were Soola and you talking about."

"Wait, do you expect me to believe that Tempy had that tea to experience euphoria, even though she knew it was dangerous? She is too sensible for that." Iris fumed. "You don't know her like I do. She'd never take such a stupid risk. Never!"

"Not knowingly, anyway." Rayel nodded. "Look, I have got to know Soola quite well. I agree with you. But she may not have known what she was drinking. Someone here may have thought it was funny to play a trick on her, because she is new to this world."

"What? That's horrible." Iris felt nauseated.

"Yes, such behavior is despicable and must be punished. That's why I need to know what you were talking about. It might help me figure out who tricked her."

"Oh, um um ..." Iris was rattled. "I don't remember." She stood up feeling disconcerted. "Rayel, please take me home. I can't bear to be here. Please." Iris begged, fighting the urge to throw up.

"Yes, of course, I will," Rayel nodded, as he too stood up to take her home. Then he stopped. "But when you calm down, please try to remember. And don't tell Soola anything. She won't believe you, and will suffer needless pain. It's a horrible trick to play." Rayel furrowed his brows and fell silent for a moment. "But I guess someone was tempted because Soola was an easy target. Most of us are keenly aware of the tea's smell, which is difficult to disguise," he explained, as he led Iris out of the dining area. "So next time you come here, just tell me, and we can figure this out together."

"Thanks," Iris nodded trying to calm her mind. She still found it hard to believe that such a substance could exist. If one could not trust their own mind, then what could they trust? A shiver ran down her spine, as she contemplated the idea of her own mind being tampered with, and she wobbled.

Rayel steadied her, and escorted her to The Entrance in silence, but when he reached there, he realized Iris was more disturbed by the incident than she was letting on. He looked around to assess the light level.

"Thankfully, it seems to be cloudy today. I'll take you to the forest edge," he offered. "But I really cannot go beyond that. The light is too intense for me."

"Thanks," Iris nodded. But then she burst into tears. "I feel like I am going crazy. Everything keeps changing. Everybody keeps lying. I don't know whom to trust. And now I am babbling to a complete stranger." She buried her face in Rayel's chest and sobbed.

"I can't imagine what you're going through. You're world keeps changing every time you think you're starting to make sense of it." He held her tight, while she wept.

"Thank you," she whispered once she had cried herself out. She disengaged herself from his warm embrace and sighed. She looked him in the eye and said, "I hope I can trust you. Please don't disappoint me."

Rayel nodded, and they walked towards the edge of the forest. As they approached the boundary, Iris caught Rayel's hand and gave it a tight squeeze.

"Thanks for telling me. I will try to remember, and I will let you know once I do. Also, please look after Tempy. She would never drink that tea, if she knew what it was."

"I will. I promise. I will look after Tempy for you."

Rayel assured her.

"You called her Tempy," Iris smiled.

Rayel simply looked into her eyes and nodded.

Iris felt an intense fuzzy warmth spread through her insides, making her fingers tingle. It was so nice to see Rayel again. She had been thinking of him all week and had even made him a present. "Ooops!" With all the revelations the day had brought, she had completely forgotten. She plunged her hand into a pocket of her dress and fished out a bracelet made of painted pebbles. "I made this friendship band for you." She offered it to Rayel. "Look it has seven pebbles, each a color of the rainbow."

"What is a rainbow?" Rayel asked.

"Um..." Iris hesitated, at a loss to explain the idea of a rainbow to someone who lived underground in caves. "It's this band of seven colors," she gestured a semicircular arc with her hand, "that appears in the sky when the sunlight passes through raindrops."

"I only see three colors here, red, green and blue."

Rayel peered at the bracelet. "The first three pebbles are blue, the next two are green and the last two are red." Then his eyes lit up. "These are the colors we see

when the light from our lamps pass through oil floating on water! They form a band like you are describing." He sounded excited.

"You really only see three colors?" Iris was baffled.  
"See this one is violet, this is indigo and this is blue," she said pointing at the first three pebbles, one at a time.

"They all look blue to me," Rayel shrugged.

"I guess you can see much better than me in the dark, but it's hard for you to tell colors apart." Iris sighed.

"I can see some, and enough to find this friendship band beautiful. I find the colors made by the oil fascinating, and this will remind me of that. Thank you. I will keep looking at it, and maybe one day, I'll learn to see all the colors you see." Rayel was happy to see Iris cheering up. He hesitated. "Will you tie it onto my wrist?" he asked.

"Of course," Iris blushed. She couldn't stop smiling. *Who needs High Tea to feel euphoria*, she mused, as she left the forest boundary.

# The Solution That Is a Problem

As Iris walked home, her euphoria began to fade and doubt crept in. Should she trust Rayel? Some part of her really wanted to. Her instincts told her she should.

But his story about the mushroom tea sounded so insane. Could such a mind-bending substance really exist? If it did, could anyone ever be trusted? At least, if everything Rayel had said was true, the manipulation betrayed itself through the headaches. But what good was that, if Tempy could never learn the truth?

And what truth? Rayel had told her to tell him what she was telling Tempy. Was this just a ploy to get Iris to reveal some information? Maybe, he had spotted an opportunity and decided to use it. How convenient for him that she could not talk to Tempy first, because it would make her head ache again.

Either way, Iris realized she had to remember what Tempy and she were talking about. Once she remembered what it was, she would decide if she should trust Rayel with the information. If only she

could remember what they were talking about, all of this might make some sense.

Iris tried to concentrate on recalling the events before Tempy's headache. They were talking about the food shortage when Rayel suddenly left. That was weird and abrupt, Iris noted. And then Tempy was explaining something about a group of underground people foraging and hunting at night. She had mentioned something about the *Boundary People* supplying the *Cave People* with maps.

But what was special about any of this? Wasn't it all common knowledge for both the *Boundary People* and the *Cave People*? Iris thought some more. No they had finished talking about this stuff. They were discussing something else, when it happened. But what? She just couldn't remember. The fright and the horror of the whole thing had driven it right out of her mind.

*Never mind,* she mused, trying to calm down. *I will remember soon.*

§§§

A few days later, Iris learned something strange in school. "Mom," she hesitated at the dining table during the evening meal.

"What?" Mom asked, tearing off a piece of flat bread made from wheat flour and wrapping it around some pieces of pickled carrots.

"The teacher showed us a plant in school, today. She said it was dangerous, and we should never go near it. She said it was the Devil's Lure. What did she mean? What does the plant do?" It was the name of the plant that had piqued her interest. Did this have something to do with the *Cave People*, she wondered. She was curious to see how her parents would respond.

"What do you mean, what does it do?" Dad furrowed his brows.

"I mean, why is it dangerous? Does it spray poison or something?" Iris asked.

"Oh, no Honey." Mom shook her head. "It's far worse than that. It confuses your mind."

Iris pricked her ears. "What do you mean confuses your mind? How does it do that? And why is it called Devil's Lure?" Now her heart was racing. Was this something like the mind-bending tea Rayel had mentioned? She waited with baited breath for Mom's answer.

Mom sighed. "I guess you're old enough to learn about it. A long time ago, the plant used to grow in a patch

on the other side of the river."

"The other side of the river?" Iris was surprised. Then it could have nothing to do with the *Cave People*. The village was situated between the forest and the river.

Still curious, she listened as Mom continued, "Yes, some fisher folk found it while exploring the opposite bank, when the river was narrow one particularly hot summer. It seemed it might be useful as food, so the fisher folk added it to fish stews. The leaves turned out to be delicious, so the fisher folk collected some more leaves and shared the stew with all the villagers. Delighted by the mouthwatering flavor, some farmers, escorted by the fisher folk, ventured to the other side of the river and brought a few of the plants along with the roots to grow in their farms. But half a year after being planted, the plants began to flower. The flowers had a strong scent, and anyone who inhaled the scent up close to the flowers would lose their senses and wander around in a stupor dancing and singing. After some time, the effect of the scent would wear off, and the person would have false memories of that lost time."

"False memories? What do you mean?" Iris demanded.

"From what they reported," Dad sighed, "it seemed like they were waking from a dream, a dream in which they had everything they could ever have wanted. So they could only feel sad when they awoke, longing for another whiff of the flower to return to their dream world." Dad looked down and shook his head. "Their everyday lives became meaningless to them, and within a year they would simply wither away and die. Alarmed by the effects, the villagers burnt all the new plants."

"Good riddance. It sounds nasty." Iris wrinkled her nose.

"Actually it wasn't the brightest idea," Mom remarked. "Within a couple of months, there were many more of the plants. Apparently, the fire destroyed the plants, but the seeds survived and thrived in the ashes. That's how we learned that ashes make good fertilizer. But now that the villagers know about the dangers of the plants, each one is weeded out by hand and destroyed long before they can flower."

"And to answer your question," Mom added, "it's called Devil's Lure because it makes you forget to live, and delivers you straight to the Devil's abode, or at least that's what people who believe in the Devil say."

"And what do you think, Mom?" Iris asked.

"I think the Devil is a symbol of evil, and the scent of the flower ruins lives, so it is an appropriate metaphor."

"So there are plants that can affect people's minds and confuse their senses and memories?" Iris wanted to clarify.

"Yes Baby, it's true, and even though over the years the villagers have made every effort to eradicate this plant, every once in a while, some seeds blow over from across the river and a new patch is discovered. Teachers show the children what these plants look like, so you kids know to steer clear of them." Mom sighed.

"I hope teacher has also told you, that you should report these plants, if you ever see them, so they can be removed before they cause any damage," Dad added.

Iris nodded, but her thoughts were diverted elsewhere. Ever since she had returned from the forest, the previous Saturday, Iris had been pondering about what Rayel had told her. She still couldn't remember what Tempy and she had been talking about. But the more she had thought about it all, the more bizarre the

whole thing had seemed. Rayel could be very convincing, but away from the influence of his charm, in the bright sunlight, the existence of a mind-bending tea had seemed utterly ridiculous. *That is until now,* Iris thought.

"Hmm, the stuff sounds nasty. You can count on me to report it," Iris mumbled, and her parents breathed a sigh of relief.

§§§

On Friday morning, when Iris was getting ready for school, her mom walked into her room looking unusually ebullient.

"What's it Mom?" Iris smiled infected by her mother's excitement.

"I have a gift for you," Mom said, holding out something wrapped in a soft embroidered handkerchief.

Bursting with curiosity, Iris unfolded the handkerchief. A small object rolled out onto her palm. Recognizing it right away, Iris gasped. "Wow, Mom," she hugged her mother. "But wait, what does this mean? It couldn't be ..." Iris shook the object.

"No, of course, it isn't. But Dad carved it for you. It looks remarkably like the original, doesn't it? I hope you like it. It's the best we can do, now that ..." Mom's voice began to crack.

Iris held her hand. "Don't worry Mom. I love it. And please don't cry. Thanks so much." Iris stared at the wooden carved replica of the pendant complete with tiny hinges, that Mom had given Tempy. She opened it and was delighted to see that it contained painted red wooden bits shaped just like the seeds in the original pendant.

A question occurred to her, but she hesitated. "Mom, please don't get upset, but I want to ask you something."

"Anything, my Love. I have been thinking a lot about it all since you brought it up, and I am ready now. So what do you want to know?"

"Why didn't you ever tell us about it being an heirloom before, Mom?" Iris asked.

Mom nodded, as if she was expecting the question. "I remember how jealous my little sister was, because she couldn't have the family heirloom. It soured relations between us. You know, even now, we rarely talk to each other." Iris nodded. It was common

knowledge in the village that Mom and Aunt Karisma couldn't stand each other. "So, I thought it might be better to wait till you were both older and more mature, before telling you. I hoped you two might handle it better than we did." Mom sighed.

"A gift from your mother, my mom always said. I feel like I let her down. Perhaps Karisma should have had it after all." Mom gulped.

"Why did she say that?" Iris asked. "Why did she not just say, a gift from me?" Iris demanded, excited that she might be on to something.

"Oh, that's because it was an heirloom to be passed on. It was not her gift to give as an individual, but her gift as my mother, who had got it from her mother and so on. Our family has always used that phrase when handing over the heirloom, and even when referring to it." Mom wiped her tears. "And now it is lost, and so is Tempy."

"Don't lose hope, Mom. Maybe, they'll both show up someday," Iris said, her brain racing as she deciphered the significance of her mother's words.

Tempy had argued that Mom always used the phrase, *a gift from your mother*, and never *a gift from me*, meaning, it was a gift from her biological mother. But

Mom had just explained that, that was the traditional phrase used by generations of women in her family to present the pendant. She was so thrilled she had found this out before her Saturday visit. She could tell Tempy all about it. And then, she suddenly remembered something. Something Rayel had asked her to remember. She remembered that she had been telling Tempy about the pendant when she had that terrible headache.

Iris's head began to buzz. If what Rayel had said was true, she couldn't tell Tempy about the pendant. Tempy wouldn't be able to believe her, and would pointlessly suffer excruciating pain. So what should she do? She couldn't tell her parents about the *Boundary People* and the underground civilization. They would never believe her, and they would only scold her, if she ever admitted to crossing the boundary.

Sooti was no longer an option either. Iris strongly suspected, that she was the one who had given Tempy the High Tea. Mala, their teacher, was one of the *Boundary People*, so she could not be trusted either. That left just one person she could talk to; Rayel.

But was he really an option? She barely knew him. He seemed incensed that someone had played a prank on Tempy. But Iris imagined Sooti's motives to be far

more sinister. Iris now felt certain that Tempy was her biological sister.

Mala had perhaps noticed the pendant on Tempy, and she and Sooti had cooked up this ruse to convince Tempy that she was a child of the *Boundary People*, she figured. Presumably Tempy was shrewder than they had hoped, so Sooti had used the tea in desperation to ensure that Tempy never doubted her ancestry.

But the question remained, why. What was this whole ruse about? What was the crisis they kept alluding to? Iris realized, she would have to find that out, before deciding what to do with the information she had. But should she take Rayel into her confidence, she wondered. She desperately needed an ally in the strange worlds she faced, and Tempy had been compromised. All night she brooded over the conundrum, to trust or not to trust Rayel.

In the morning, as she stepped out of bed, she made a decision. Was it the right one? Only time would tell.

§§§

On Saturday morning, back in the passage way to the underground caverns, Iris was restless. "What is it

with you, today, Iris?" Tempy complained. "Why are you so fidgety?"

Iris hadn't noticed that she had been clasping and unclasping her hands over and over. She hated keeping a secret, especially from Tempy, but what choice did she have. As much as she wanted to tell Tempy everything she had learned about the pendant, she couldn't, or Tempy might be ill again.

"Sorry Tempy," Iris mumbled. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Of course, I am. Will you just stop worrying? I'm fine. It was just a headache."

"Did you get any more of them during the week?"

"No. I'm fine. I guess I was just tired or something. Anyway, today you're going to finally see what the problem is."

"So do you remember what we were talking about just before you became ill?"

"Yes, the food shortage in the underground caverns, and that's what we need to discuss."

"Iris, Soola, I have been waiting for you." Rayel rushed towards them as they emerged from the

underground passage way into the entrance hall.  
"Soola you're looking well." He gave her a gentle hug.

"Yes Rayel, you don't have to look so surprised,"  
Tempy rolled her eyes. "You saw me just yesterday  
evening."

"I know, but Iris made me promise that I would watch  
out for you," Rayel explained, before turning his gaze  
to Iris. "Soola hasn't had any more headaches since  
that day," he added.

"Soola, over here," Tarel called out from a distance.

"Just give me a moment. I should thank Tarel for all  
her help that day." Tempy excused herself.

"Did you remember?" Rayel whispered, as Tempy ran  
towards Tarel.

"Yes, I was talking to her about a pendant. It's a long  
story, and I need to talk to you about it. I think Sooti is  
the one who drugged her." Iris thought it best to get to  
the point, as they had very little time.

"What? No way! I need to know the whole story. I'll  
try and get us some time together later in the day, but  
Soola's coming back now, so try to act normal."

"Sure," Iris nodded. "Where are we going today?"

§§§

Iris looked this way and that, but it just didn't make any sense. It looked just like the night sky, only instead of being dome-shaped, it was strangely flat and the light from the stars seemed to form slightly larger spots of light on the ground. So strange!

"This is just an experiment, you understand, right?" Rayel asked.

Tempy and Rayel had been explaining some stuff about farms, but Iris was too mesmerized by the pretty sight above and below to listen.

"Yeah, in the real thing the holes will be much bigger," Tempy added. Then she snapped her fingers. "Iris, Iris!" she shook Iris by her shoulders.

"What? What?" Iris jumped, startled out of her reverie.

"Have you been listening to a word we have said?" Rayel asked annoyed.

Iris shrugged sheepishly. "Ummm,,, no," she ventured. "It's just that this looks so beautiful, just like the night sky."

"The night sky!" Tempy sighed. "Iris where have you been? This is the ceiling for their proposed farms."

"Farms? In here? In the darkness? Are you crazy? Plants need sunlight to grow."

"Oh, for goodness sake. We know farms need sunlight," Rayel muttered, exasperated. "That's why we came up with this solution. In some places, the barrier between our two worlds is softer because the rock is unusually porous. For example, here." Rayel pointed upwards. "So we figured if we drilled holes, we could get enough sunlight to grow crops."

"This isn't nearly enough sunlight," Iris objected.

"Yes, I know. Like I said, the holes would have to be bigger," Tempy reiterated.

"But if the holes were bigger, and there was a lot more sunlight, then wouldn't your people fall sick?" Iris interrupted looking at Rayel.

"Yes, so the plan is to do this in a large isolated closed rooms, so we are not exposed."

"But whoever is doing the farming will be exposed." Iris objected. "Farming is time consuming work, you know. It's not magic."

"But there is absolutely no reason that the farm has to be tended to in the day time, right?" Tempy asked.

"What?" Iris was stunned. Farm at night! No one had ever considered this, and why would they? It was easier to see and work in the daytime. Besides, nights were for resting. Still, there was no reason the farming work couldn't be done at night, was there? She stared at Rayel and Tempy. They watched her in silence, while she imagined various hurdles and dismissed them. "I guess it could be done," she finally admitted.

"Phew, I'm so glad to hear that. Because we really need this." Rayel jumped for joy.

"Where is this overground though?" Iris had not the slightest idea. "I mean, doesn't the drilling damage tree roots? And there isn't much sunlight in the forest anyway, so how will you get enough to penetrate your holy ceiling to be able to grow crops?"

"This isn't under the forest, Iris," Tempy clarified. "All of this," Tempy waved her arms to indicate the expanse of the underground settlement, "is under the village and its farms."

"What??" Iris was shocked. "Then won't someone notice those holes?" She gestured frantically at the

imitation night sky that had so delighted her a few moments ago.

"Actually, that is on Mala's farm, where she grows all her herbs. She knows we are testing here, and we promised to keep the holes small. But this patch is not nearly enough for a long term solution to the food shortage." Tempy explained.

"Oh, but then where are you planning to do the actual farming?"

"And that is the problem." Rayel sighed. "We will have to do this directly under your farms."

"Our farms!! You can't do that. Why would you? Can't you do it somewhere else?"

"No." Rayel shook his head. "Your farms are the only place known to us, where the cave ceiling rock is soft and porous enough for us to drill through. We can tell from an analysis of the rock components and sounds made by hammering upwards."

"Do you know why it's like that?"

"It's not a coincidence," Tempy replied. "My people believe that the villagers chose those lands for farming because the soil obtained from the porous rock is soft, fertile, and therefore suitable for large yields."

"But why would you plan this knowing that our farms are there?" Iris directed her question to Rayel.

He sighed. "The thing is we did not know your farms are up there. In fact, we did not even know your people existed. When we first considered the possibility of farming a very long time ago, the *Boundary People* told us that farming would be impossible without sunlight. Given our inability to tolerate sunlight, our people started exploring other options. We domesticated some species of snakes and bats, and experimented with hybridization of mushrooms. We sent out larger hunting parties to the forest at night, but a decade ago we realized that wasn't going to be enough."

"So then what happened?" Iris asked caught up in the story.

"Nothing much. Most people believed there wasn't much they could do about it, so they just avoided the issue. A couple of years ago, my dad had an idea, and he experimented with it. Over the years he had learned a little about farming from the *Boundary People* through conversations. He had shown an interest, so they had indulged him. Beyond the iron ore deposits is a small cavern ..."

"What's iron ore?" Iris interrupted.

"Iron is the metal they use to make knives," Tempy explained. "You know, the knife that Rayel showed you." Iris nodded. "The rock from which they extract the iron, they call it iron ore."

"Oh, I see, ore! Iron is made in the fou... foundry, right? And later you use it to grow mushrooms?" Iris asked.

"Right," Rayel pressed his temples and blinked as he tried to retrieve his train of thought. "So anyway, the ceiling of that cavern beyond the iron ore deposits has several large holes. In fact, that was the reason it is not used for anything. It gets too much sunlight."

"Where is this?" Iris was intrigued. She wondered why her villagers had not noticed these holes and explored them.

"I can take you to it, but it's quite a walk." Rayel offered.

"No I mean, where is this overground? How come my people haven't noticed these holes?" Iris frowned.

"That's because it's on the other side of the river." Tempy clarified. "No one goes there much."

"Right," Iris nodded, remembering her mother's cautionary tale about the shrub with the flowers whose

scent confuses the mind.

"So anyway," Rayel cleared his throat. "My dad was working with the ore at that time, so he selected a couple of potatoes, seeds of a gourd and some grains we had acquired from the *Boundary People* via trade, planted them in pots of soil and left them in the cavern. During the day, he left them alone to soak sunlight, and every night, after his shift at the ore deposits, he would go tend to the plants."

"And did it work?" Iris raised her eyebrows.

Rayel's eyes shone as he nodded. "Yeah. He grew some potatoes and a bitter tasting gourd. It was amazing. He even managed to cultivate a few wheat seeds, but those were too little to be useful." Then his face fell. "Dad was really excited. But he needed to figure out where we could drill enough holes in the ceiling to scale up his operation and secure our food supply. So he asked the mine mappers."

"I see." Iris nodded, recalling Tempy's detailed explanation of mine mappers.

"Once he had figured out the best locations for the farms in terms of minimum drilling effort and structural damage to the caverns, my dad sought the advice of some of the *Boundary People* regarding

what crops would work best in our conditions. They were intrigued by his idea, and some of them came to take a look at his plans. That's when they realized the problem."

"You mean about drilling through our farms?" Iris asked.

"Yes," Rayel nodded.

"So now what do your people plan to do?"

"Most of them don't know yet, that there is a problem. On the request of the *Boundary People* Rayel's dad has kept this information secret. The *Boundary People* suggested that I teach Rayel about the above ground world and then introduce him to you." Tempy intervened.

"Yes, my dad had informed his people about his idea, and they were excited. But then he told them he needed some input from the *Boundary People* to work out a few kinks. The problem is we don't know how most people will react to knowing there is another human world up there." Rayel responded to Iris's puzzled expression.

"Why you, and not your dad?" Iris demanded. "I mean, why are you up here to learn about the

overground civilizations, and not your dad?" she clarified.

"My dad has far less tolerance for sunlight than me. He has tried to acclimate me to as much sunlight as could be safely done from a young age, because he hoped that when I was older, I would learn more about the *Boundary People* by spending time among them. Besides, the *Boundary People* believe that youngsters are relatively open minded, and better suited to accept the bizarre and work with it. Their hope is that we work together to find a way around this, and inform our villages in a slow and steady way to minimize carnage and destruction."

"Carnage! Destruction! Come now, isn't that a tad dramatic?" Iris scoffed.

"Iris, I told you the story of the first war between the two tribes, right?" Iris nodded. "And all that misunderstanding happened when the two tribes were friends. Can you imagine how it will be, when they discover each other suddenly? Rayel's people look like the Devil in your mythology. How do you think the villagers will react when they learn that the *Cave People* want to drill holes through your farms? How do you think these *Cave People* will feel about your villagers, when they object the only solution these people have to fend off starvation?"

Iris stared at Tempy in dismay.

"Last time, the only destructive tool was fire. Now both tribes have developed several more dangerous weapons. What if neither of them stops before both are completely destroyed? Now, do you see what the crisis is?" Tempy was breathless.

"So why tell Rayel and me? What can we do?" Iris was angered by the burden being placed on her tender shoulders. "I'm just a kid, Tempy, and so is he." Hot tears welled up in her eyes. This just wasn't fair. Her life had been idyllic, until Tempy had disappeared. Since then, everything seemed to be going wrong, and now there might be a war. She had finally found Tempy and should have been happy, but instead everything was unraveling. Iris sat down on the ground, put her head between her knees and sobbed.

A warm comforting hand on her shoulder prompted her to look up. "We are supposed to be the future, Iris, so what happens today will affect us most. At least, that's what Soola tells me." Something about Rayel's steady, calm tone gave her strength, and she pulled herself together.

# The Beginning That Could Be the End

"So what now?" Iris asked. "What are we going to do?"

"First, I am going to get us some lunch. I'm hungry." Rayel patted his abdomen.

"Rayel, please be serious. All you ever think about is food." Tempy grumbled. "Now where were we? Oh, right, we need to figure out what to do. Rayel, your dad already knows of the situation, but you need to convince him of the importance of the farms in the village and the trouble those holes will create. Iris, you need to explain the situation here, to Mom and Dad. Then your parents need to meet each other and search for a peaceful solution to the problem."

"You think this meeting will go well?" Iris asked, looking from Rayel to Tempy and back.

Rayel shuffled his feet. Tempy shrugged. "We have to start somewhere, don't we?"

"Who do Tarel and others think I am?" Iris demanded.

"They have been told that you're Tempy's sister. So they assume you are one of the *Boundary People*. They know nothing of your village." Rayel bit his lips.

"How did you react when Tempy first told you about us?" Iris was curious. After all, she had thought he was the Devil, so what might he have thought of her people.

"I didn't believe her. I assumed she was amusing herself by testing my naivete, because I knew so little of the world above. She had already spent sometime in our underground world, but I had never been above for any extended period, then."

"Rayel," Tempy gasped, "I'd never do that." She stared at Rayel in bewilderment.

"I know that now, but what did you suppose was more credible to me then, that people could survive in bright sunlight, or that some girl from the *Boundary People* was trying to have fun at my expense?" Rayel quipped.

Tempy narrowed her eyes and gritted her teeth.

"I'm just telling Iris the truth," Rayel muttered, not looking at her. "I think, Iris and I are going to have to discuss somethings that are going to be hurtful to you.

If we are to have any hope of resolving this crisis, Iris and I must have an honest conversation. We can only do that, if you leave us alone. Neither of us want to hurt you, but we must be brutally honest with each other about what we think of this life changing revelation, and that will be difficult with you around." Rayel looked furtively at Iris.

Tempy looked at Iris, who nodded without meeting her eyes.

"Fine!" Tempy hissed. "I will leave you alone to talk. Just drop Iris off at my home when you're done. Sooti wants to meet her, today."

"Tempy," Iris called out. "Please don't be mad. But if I am to understand his world, I must talk to him alone. Please."

Mollified, Tempy nodded. With a few deep breaths, she composed herself and even managed a tiny smile. "I'm sorry, Rayel," she added. "I understand how you must have felt, and why you need to talk to Iris alone. Please drop her at my home when you're done."

"Sure, Soola. Thanks. Rayel waved, as Tempy left. Then he turned to Iris and whispered. "Did I hear you correctly, earlier? Did you say Sooti had drugged Soola?"

"Yes, I think so." Iris brooded. "And I thought I could trust her." She shook her head and sighed. "She even tried to drug me, I think." She furrowed her brows. "She offered me tea, you know?"

"Come now, Iris," Rayel laughed. "Not all tea is mind-bending. Most teas are soothing and healthy."

"Perhaps, but I remembered what I was telling Tempy when she got the headache." Iris told Rayel all about the pendant. She babbled on about Sooti's evidence proving Tempy was her daughter, and her own mom's sadness at losing both her daughter and a priceless family heirloom, and Tempy's uncharacteristic gullibility. "I'm so confused, Rayel. I don't know what to do, but from everything I have heard, I think Sooti is lying to Tempy, and she has probably used the tea to silence her skepticism."

Rayel had listened carefully to all Iris had said. As she finished her rant, he steepled his fingers and brooded in silence. Impatient for a response, Iris prodded him. "What do you think of the *Boundary People*?"

Rayel clicked his tongue. "As much as I like Soola, I have to admit that my people have always been skeptical about the *Boundary People*. I guess we don't like the idea of being dependent on them for some of our essential supplies. That is why we must make this

move towards self-sufficiency. We have always known our relationship to be unequal. You can never tell Soola this, but we need the trade relationship much more than they do. They have the whole wide world open to them, and we have only these caverns. But what about you? What do you think of them?"

"I grew up with Tempy in my village, so knowing her doesn't tell me much about the *Boundary People*. I have met Latim but I have barely talked to him. I thought I could trust Sooti, but now I have no idea. They say our teacher Mala is one of them. Mala knows a lot about herbs, plants and medicines, and everyone in my village goes to her for advice. She teaches us songs to help us remember useful properties of various types of plants and stones. She seems kind, and my mother is very fond of her. I used to think they were best friends, but who knows? Maybe, Mala is just pretending."

"Exactly!" Rayel exclaimed. "I have always thought that the *Boundary People* must have some agenda of their own. I mean, why go through all of this trouble, if they don't get anything out of it. But I still don't understand how this whole drama is helping them."

"Drama?"

"You know, this whole crisis thing. I mean would your people really care, if we pushed some holes through your farms?"

Iris stared at Rayel in disbelief. "Of course, we would care, if you destroyed our farms."

"Why? Couldn't you just move them elsewhere? Soola said the world above has lots of open space just beyond your village."

"These farms have belonged to the village families for generations. And farming is not magic. It's a lot of hard work, as your people are about to discover. But it's not just that." Iris clicked her tongue.

"What do you mean? Once the land is cleared, and the seeds are laid, what else is there to do? Don't crops just grow of their own like the trees in the forest above?"

"Not at all. Crops are not natural like grass or trees. They are cultivated, and it takes generations to get good yield."

"Cultivated?"

"Yes, it takes around a century of effort to make farming productive. Seeds need to be selected over generations of crops to get a high calorie yield. Seed

selection is a slow and painful process, but at least your people will be spared that."

"How so?"

"You will use seeds we have already optimized for calorie content, right? And I am guessing, you will be using the soil generated from digging the porous rock under our farms, so your soil will have properties similar to ours?"

"Oh right. So it will be much easier for us?" Rayel asked hopefully.

"Straightforward, yes, quicker, definitely, but easy, no. Its not enough that the crops chosen are suitable for the soil in which they are planted. The same crop cannot be repeatedly planted in the same place, or it will leech out the nutrient it needs most, making the soil deficient in that nutrient."

"Oh, that makes sense. So what do you do?"

"Our farmers have experimented over generations on the land and found what sequence of crops work best to maximize yield while preserving and replenishing the fertility of the land. But that's not all. Farmers have also experimented with herbs and plants to figure out which ones keep insects, pests and crop diseases at

bay. Additionally, our people have developed fertilizer mixtures best suited to each crop we grow."

"Wow, how do you know these things?"

"We are taught these things in school. Our farms are our life source. They mean everything to us. They have been developed over years of hard work and study. Everyone in our village must know about them."

"So if your farms are so precious to you, then what good do the *Boundary People* think will come from us meeting?"

"I don't know." Iris looked around. "Our two cultures couldn't be more different. You can't tolerate light and we fear the dark forest. You live underground, and our diets are completely different. Even when we do the same things, we do them in different ways, like you use metal we've never heard of and we use ceramic you've never conceived of. You use texture and shading to decorate, while we use color. How can we expect our people to understand each other?"

Rayel frowned. "You know! That's true! How is it then that we do understand each other?"

"What do you mean? We don't. You don't even get why my people would be upset if you drilled giant

holes in their farms, and I find it bizarre that your people would make mind-bending tea."

"No, I mean it literally. How is it that we do understand each other?"

"Eh? Can't you hear me? I just told you we don't." Iris spluttered.

"Iris, listen to me. We understand each others words. That shouldn't be the case, given that we have not known of each other's existence for centuries. With such different cultures, how is it that the same sounds have the same meanings for us?"

"Oh, you mean why do we speak the same language, use the same phrases, idioms, etc?" Iris asked chewing her lips as she looked into a distance.

"Yes, that's what I mean. It doesn't make any sense."

"Hmm," Iris nodded, "Yeah, that is weird." She chewed on her hair. "I mean, I suppose it makes sense that the *Boundary People* speak the same language as us, because they send their people to be our teachers."

Rayel's eyes lit up. "Of course!" he banged his right fist against his left palm. "It's because the *Boundary People* want it to be that way. They interact with both

our cultures and keep the language flowing between them."

"They send teachers and divine babies to spy on your people too?" Iris asked, wide-eyed with surprise.

"No." Rayel laughed. "Our interactions are not secret. We trade, and our representatives often meet to resolve any trading conflicts that arise. Twice a year, we have week long carnivals. Their children come and stay in a designated cavern and work with children from here to perform plays, music, and dances. The *Boundary People* have cultivated a reputation for being knowledgeable, and my people try to mimic their way of speaking."

"Well that explains why we speak the same language." Iris shrugged. "The *Boundary People* have been working hard to be a continuous link between our worlds, but I wonder why." She frowned.

Rayel shrugged. "The point is, at least we can communicate. Neither of us had to learn anything special to do that." He paused, looked at her for a moment, bit his lips and scrunched up his mouth.

"What?" Iris demanded.

"Well, you and I got along fine. So why shouldn't the people from our settlements?"

Iris rolled her eyes. "Do you even remember what happened when I first saw you?"

"Oh yeah, right." He guffawed. "Soola explained it to me. You thought I was some demon. You're so silly. Did you think I was going to eat you?" He laughed.

Iris snorted. "Do you know why I thought you were the Devil?"

"Some silly legend in your village based on some conflict from eons ago."

"Your people set the trees on fire. That's not something silly. Lots of people died from both tribes," Iris hissed.

Rayel's eyes flashed. "Oh yeah! And whose fault was that? Your people started it all. They were destroying the tree cover and making my people sick. Were my ancestors just supposed to meekly tolerate the abuse?"

Iris shook her head. She took a deep breath to calm herself. "Rayel, I don't want to fight about this. Both sides made mistakes. But after the war, your people won and assumed my people had perished, so they forgot about us. Even though the *Boundary People*

knew we had settled nearby, they decided to keep your tribe in the dark." Her lips twitched.

Rayel glared at her. "You think that's funny, do you?"

"Just a little," Iris suppressed a smile.

Rayel rolled his eyes. "And how was it at your end?"

"I don't know. I thought about it a lot the first day I met you. That evening I read my stories again. I think our villagers hated having to leave their home, and were scared of what might happen, if we ever encountered each other again. So they spoke of your people as Devils, and each generation warned the next through stories. Over time, those stories became more dramatic, exaggerating the powers and wickedness of the Devil."

"So you think there will be trouble?"

"Yes, and from a lot of people." Iris groaned.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, most of our people don't really believe in the Devil. They think the Devil is a myth, or a metaphor for evil. But when they see your people, looking just like the Devil of their myths, it'll be different. A lot of people will be scared, just like I was. Then if they

learn that you want to destroy their farms, they will be convinced your people are evil."

"So what changed your mind? I mean why did you decide to trust me after all?"

"I don't know. You look just like the Devil in those stories, but you sound totally normal. Besides, once Tempy explained about the war, it all made sense, you know, like why my people would imagine the Devil to look like your people."

"So perhaps the *Boundary People* could explain the situation along with the historical context to your villagers. Then maybe, some representatives from both our villages could work out some sort of compromise." Rayel looked at Iris hopefully.

"So you really think you're people won't be suspicious or angry at all?"

"They won't be suspicious, but I am worried they may be thoughtless, like the *Tree People* were in the past war. They may not care your farms are up there."

"So what are we supposed to do?"

"The *Boundary People* want your parents to meet my dad, so together they can come up with a plan. It's important that the reasonable and thoughtful people of

both cultures meet and figure out a balanced solution that both cultures can live with. Then they can sell it to their respective tribes, and hopefully minimize violence."

"Hopefully," Iris whispered crossing her fingers. But she could already see a major problem with the plan. It all depended on the truth of Tempy's parentage.

"Before we proceed with anything, I need to talk to Sooti. Everything depends on the truth."

With that cryptic comment, Iris stood up. "Rayel, can you take me to Sooti?" she asked.

"Sure," Rayel nodded, a little flustered by her abruptness.

# The Teacher Who Made a Mistake

When Rayel and Iris arrived at Tempy's dwelling, she was away. Iris heaved a sigh of relief. She was not looking forward to excluding Tempy from yet another conversation.

"I'm sorry, Dear. Tempy is out with Latim on an important surveying expedition, but I think you and I need to talk." Sooti gestured for Iris to sit.

That's when Iris realized that it wasn't luck, but by Sooti's design that Tempy was away. She stiffened. Did Sooti saying Latim, as opposed to her father, mean she was admitting something?

"Rayel, would you mind leaving us to talk?" Sooti added, when Rayel seated himself next to Iris. "I can take Iris to the boundary."

"No." Iris was relieved to hear Rayel say.

"Excuse me?" Sooti raised her eyebrows.

"I said, no. If this crisis is to be averted, we need to all be able to trust each other. So no more secrets. I

understand why Soola can't be a part of this, but I too must know why you fed Soola High Tea."

"Oh, so you know." Sooti nodded. "Fine, then it is best that you stay too."

"Iris, may I ask what you told Soola about the pendant?" Sooti asked.

"The pendant?" Iris raised one eyebrow.

"Don't be coy." She turned to look at Rayel. "I have no doubt you recognized her symptoms immediately."

She sighed when Rayel nodded. "That's why you want to be here, right?" Rayel nodded again. Sooti returned her gaze to Iris. "So he has probably told you what caused Tempy's headache, and by now you must know." Iris nodded. "So I ask once again, what did you tell Soola about the pendant?"

Iris took a deep breath and then blurted out everything she knew about the pendant.

Sooti shook her head. "All that careful work, all those sacrifices, all for nothing." She sighed.

"What do you mean?" Iris was bewildered.

"I mean our teachers are a valuable resource, but they are human. Sometimes they mess up. Mala loved your

mother too much, and to spare her pain, she jeopardized all our carefully planned futures." A tear trickled down Sooti's cheek. "I know you are not inclined to believe me, so I am going to call Mala. Then together we can explain everything."

Sooti left the dwelling for a few minutes. Iris and Rayel exchanged puzzled looks, before Sooti returned with Mala.

"Hello, Iris." Mala waved, and Iris smiled awkwardly as Mala sat down cross legged on the floor facing Rayel and Iris. "And hello young man. I have been told your name is Rayel." Mala raised her eyebrows.

Rayel smiled. "And I have been told that your name is Mala. I believe you have been kind enough to allow my people to make holes in your farm. Thank you, and it's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Likewise," Mala mumbled, "and you're welcome."

Sooti pulled down a cloth rain shade to darken the tent. "Rayel, I hope you're comfortable now?" she asked. When he nodded his thanks, she sat down next to Mala. "Since everyone is settled, we should begin," she urged..

"Iris," Mala began, "as you know, I have known your mother, Twinkle, since she was a little girl, and that

we are very fond of each other. But what you don't know, is why your mother was always special to me. We are not supposed to have favorites as teachers, but I am only human. How could I not feel a natural affinity for my distant cousin?" Mala paused, waiting for the implication of her statement to sink in.

"What?" Iris stared in disbelief.

"What indeed?" Rayel spluttered. "I thought the *Boundary People* were supposed to be neutral! How can we trust you to be impartial, if you have kin among them?" Rayel asked, banging his fist on the floor.

"Yes, the *Boundary People* are, but as I have learned, the life of a teacher is very lonely and heartbreaking. It's nearly impossible to remain an impartial observer, while spending a lifetime serving a close knit community. That is the flaw in the plan, Sooti. You are asking for the impossible. So we make mistakes. And as it turns out, some of them could be fatal to years of carefully crafted planning."

"Teacher, what has this to do with Tempy being drugged? You told us the leaves across the river were so bad because our mind is our identity. Yet, Sooti gave Tempy mind-bending tea. She did not respect Tempy's mind. She is horrible."

"Iris, I know what I have told you, but what is the first thing we remind ourselves in class everyday?"

"Do not judge anyone harshly, until you have walked in their shoes," Iris chanted in a bored monotone.

"Will you allow me to tell you a story that might clarify everything?"

"Everything?" Iris looked Mala in the eye. Mala nodded. "Even how my mother could possibly be your cousin?"

"Very distant cousin, but yes," Mala nodded.

"This should be good." Rayel snorted. "I can't wait to tell my father." He rolled his eyes. "I knew *Boundary People* could not be trusted," he mumbled in a whisper.

"I sincerely hope I can change your mind, Rayel," Mala responded, before starting her story.

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"Like me, Iraasi, the sister of one of my ancestors from many generations ago, was also a teacher among your people. She loved her job, and she was considered a true asset by the *Boundary People*. She was one of those rare individuals, who could truly

empathize with others. Her deep connection with your people brought us a wealth of information. It was in her time that we learned about the exact nature of your superstitions regarding the Devil, and how seriously various families believe in it."

"No way!" Iris gasped. "She got people to talk to her about it?"

"What, why is that such a big deal?" Rayel was confused. "If it's a superstition, don't people talk about it?"

Iris shook her head. "My people almost never talk about the Devil, other than to repeat the legend, not even among each other. Many fear that merely mentioning him could summon him. So for a traveler teacher to get them to open up about their beliefs is remarkable."

"I guess this is going to be a bigger problem than I imagined." Rayel bit his lips.

"But Iraasi's greatest strength as a double agent, was also her greatest weakness. She grew too fond of your people, especially one particular person."

"She fell in love?" Rayel was incensed.

Mala nodded. "Yes," she sighed. "Iraasi and Don fell in love with each other. At the time Don was the leader of the village. No one in the village had ever married a traveling teacher. Traveling teachers too were supposed to devote their lives to knowledge and never marry. For the community leader to marry a traveling teacher was unthinkable. But Iraasi was much too loved by everyone in the village. So when Don offered to step down as leader, and his protege Robin took over, the villagers gave their blessing to the union between Don and Iraasi, provided they adhered to two conditions. The first was that, for at least two generations, their descendants could not seek administrative roles in the community. The second was that Iraasi would change her name to something more local. She chose the name Iris."

"Iris!" Iris goggled. "Like me, my name." Eyebrows raised, she pointed her thumbs back at her own chest.

"Yes," Mala nodded. "Iraasi, later known as Iris, gave her pendant to her oldest daughter, and she was to pass it on to her oldest daughter and so on. So, many years ago, when I saw your mother wearing that pendant, I recognized it right away. That was why, I took a special interest in her, but over time, I grew to love her for who she was." Mala paused as she teared up. "Anyway, coming back to Iraasi," she cleared her throat, "She became a valuable member of the village

community with many remarkable achievements. She was revered by her family, who considered her name to be lucky, so" she pointed at Iris, "Iris is a common name along the maternal line of your family."

Rayel tapped Iris. "Oh, so that's how your mother got the pendant, she gave Soola."

Iris frowned. "Is it? I mean, is Tempy really my sister, or is she Sooti's daughter?"

"Are they mutually exclusive, Iris?" Mala asked.

"I want a straight answer," Iris demanded. "Besides, if this is true, why did my mom not tell me this, when I asked her about the pendant?"

"Then I will give you a straight answer. Tempy is, and always will be, your sister. You grew up together, and that's what it means to be sisters. But if you are asking if Tempy was born from your mother's womb, then I am afraid, the answer is no."

Iris stared at Mala blankly. "No," she repeated in disbelief.

"I am sorry, but I don't understand." Rayel furrowed his brows. "What about the mind-bending tea and your mistake? If Soola is Sooti's daughter, then everything did go according to plan, did it not?"

"Almost everything went according to plan. Everything except my stupid mistake." Mala gritted her teeth and clenched her fist. "Iris, Twinkle does not know that Tempy is not born of her womb," she finally blurted out.

"What? Um... What?" Iris sputtered unable to fathom what she was hearing.

Rayel gaped in astonishment. He opened and closed his mouth a few times making futile attempts at speech. Then he took a deep breath. "Do they reproduce differently than us?" he finally managed to ask.

Mala looked at Rayel in confusion. "No, of course not. What do you mean?"

"I mean, how is it possible for her not to know? She must know if she birthed a baby, right?" Rayel demanded, and Iris nodded along.

"Yes, of course, only she did not know that she had birthed a stillborn." Mala bit her lips.

"A stillborn," Iris repeated, groping for a memory. "Sooti said something about my mother being heartbroken from having a stillborn. But wouldn't that mean she knew about it?" Iris shook her head trying to make sense of all the startling revelations.

Mala took a deep breath. "I told you that we teachers are only human, and even though I meant well, I ended up doing something terrible, that has and will hurt some of the people I care most about."

"Please Mala, get to the point," Rayel begged, feeling impatient.

"You see, when Twinkle came to me in the third month of her pregnancy, I knew that the baby she was carrying would likely die in her womb. We have some techniques of interpreting the sounds and feel of a baby in the womb. I knew Twinkle had been devastated by her past miscarriages. When this pregnancy lasted more than three months, Twinkle had became very hopeful, but I knew it would be difficult. I gave her some herbs that might have fixed the problem, but a month later it became evident to me that the baby would be a stillborn. At the same time, I had to place the next baby born to the *Boundary People* in the care of your villagers. Your parents seemed like the ideal match, and I told Sooti about it."

Mala paused to take a breath and brace herself for what was to come. "Then it all happened so fast, and I wasn't thinking straight. I was too emotional and the timing seemed perfect. I took it as a sign. I struggled so hard through the night to make it work just right. At that time, it seemed to me that I was doing something

wonderful for your mother, only to realize next morning how stupid I had been. But by then, it was too late. I could only hope for the best."

Iris's heart began to race. "Teacher," her eyes widened. "What did you do?" she demanded.

"It was your mother's eighth month. Somehow, with medication, massages and exercises, I had managed to get her that far. At the same time, Sooti was almost a week overdue. Then one day, I received a message that Sooti was in labor. An hour after that, your dad sent for me. Your mom was suffering intense pain. When I got there, I listened to her womb. Even though I knew right then, I couldn't bring myself to tell your parents that the baby was dead. Then I had a sudden inspiration. I asked for Sooti's baby to be brought over to me as soon as possible. I gave your mom a drug to delay the inevitable, and then I went home and waited for Sooti's baby to arrive."

"Oh no!" Iris gasped.

"Yes." Mala sighed. "When Tempy was fast asleep, I sneaked her into your mother's room. There I delivered her dead baby, and when I was supposed to be cleaning up the baby, I switched her with Tempy. Then I switched Tempy's clothes to the ones your mom had chosen for the baby and handed her to your

mother. I pocketed the pendant Sooti had left in Tempy's basket."

"Does my dad know?"

Mala shook her head. "No. Cedar does not know."

"When did you tell Sooti?" Rayel asked.

"Not until after Toto had brought Tempy here. Sooti had told Tempy she was a divine baby and that your Mom had adopted her." She looked pleadingly at Iris. "I just could not bear to tell your mother she had lost another baby. Her previous miscarriage had plunged her into a depression for months, I did not know if she would survive another disappointment like it. I thought I was sparing her pain. With Sooti, I was just being a coward. I couldn't summon the courage to tell her that her sacrifice had been for nothing." Mala hung her head in shame.

"How? Telling my mom now, is so much worse. She trusted you. You're the reason my parents are fighting. They could have been better prepared for this. How can you expect my parents to trust you or the other *Boundary People* after this?"

"I don't know, I messed up. Tempy was supposed to be the link between the two worlds, birthed by one and nurtured by the other. Now ..." Mala shook her head

as her voice broke, "I've messed it all up." She bit her lips struggling to hold back tears.

"But I still don't understand why Sooti gave Soola the tea?" Rayel persisted.

"I can answer that," Sooti intervened. "When Mala told me what she had done, I panicked. Usually, we tell the child about the pendant, and they check with their parents and that's that. Besides, the children are usually independent by then. This situation was unprecedented. I knew the tea would make Soola believe me unquestioningly and prevent her from asking your mother to confirm the story. I convinced myself that I was not doing anything wrong, because I was telling her the truth."

"But didn't Tempy ask to at least see my parents?" Iris was hurt. "Did the drug prevent her from doing that?"

"No," Sooti admitted. "It didn't, I did." She flushed. "Soola begged to go back just once, but I couldn't chance it. So I told her all about the crisis. I reassured her that she would be seeing you soon, because after what Mala had revealed, we realized we would need you to complete what was originally Soola's mission. I also assured her that she would be seeing your parents in less than a year. I explained all the work the *Boundary People* had done to avert the crisis and

implored her to not go back to your parents right away. She grudgingly agreed."

"Arrrgh!" Iris exploded. "Now, Tempy won't even be able to talk to my parents about the situation. This is a disaster!"

"Iris, is right. Your meddling has made everything worse." Rayel's eyes flashed.

# The Mistake That Made the Girl

"Well, not all is lost." Mala ventured, while Iris and Rayel glared at her. "It seems like the two of you have become friends. Also, what Tempy knows is the truth, and she can deal with the truth."

"Oh yeah, then why can't I even talk to her about the pendant, without her getting a migraine?" Iris demanded.

"Well, yes," Mala cleared her throat, "there is the issue of the pendant. We will have to be careful to work around that. So Iris, I propose that you and I go meet your parents first."

"Me?" Iris was alarmed. "My parents will be so angry, if they know I have ventured into the forest. Tempy must talk to them first."

"No, that's not possible, now. You and I will go together. I will explain everything to your parents. But before they meet Tempy, we have to convince them not to mention the pendant."

"How will you do that without telling Mom that Sooti drugged Tempy? And how do you think my parents are going to feel about the *Boundary People* after that?" Iris barked.

Rayel stood up and started pacing. "Yes, this is hopeless," he thundered.

"Rayel, you don't know me, so I understand your frustration, but Iris, you do. You know how much I love Twinkle. Do you think she loves me any less? I made a mistake, a big one. So, of course, she will be angry. But I must face her and hope that she will forgive me."

"Why, what good have you ever done for her?" Iris snapped.

"Well, after all those difficult pregnancies, haven't you wondered how you came to be born?"

Stunned, Iris stared at Mala, the blood draining from her face. "Are you saying I am one of you too?"

"No, of course, not!" Sooti laughed. "You are exactly who you think you are, but if it weren't for Mala, you wouldn't exist."

"Stop talking in riddles and explain," Rayel demanded. Iris was grateful for his intervention.

"When Soola was about a month old, Mala asked me about the urgency involved in Soola's adoption. I told her about the expected crisis, and that Soola might be extricated before she reached her teens. Mala was distraught. I knew Mala was very fond of Twinkle, but I never realized how strong their bond was." Sooti shook her head and sighed. "I wish I had asked you more about it then."

Mala nodded as she remembered. "I thought I had done all of that to help Twinkle, and now that I knew she might lose Tempy while she was still a child, I had to do something to ease her sorrow. Many of the *Boundary People* find it difficult to conceive. It is a disorder that occurs in tiny populations after many many generations of inbreeding. I guess your mother had that problem, because she is a direct descendant of one of us. Thanks to marrying your tribe, Irassi and many of her descendants perhaps escaped the disorder, but I could tell that Twinkle was definitely affected by it. Our herb doctors here, have after years of experimentation, developed herbal concoctions than can greatly improve the chances of a successful pregnancy in spite of the disorder. I had tried to give your mother this concoction in her third month of pregnancy, but I had too little, and it was too late."

"What do you mean too little?"

"I mean, I had a little of this medicine with me, because I was studying it, but not enough to help your mother."

"Couldn't you get more?" Iris asked.

Mala shook her head. "The herb doctors make it only for the *Boundary People*. Besides, treatment that starts after the second month of pregnancy has a very low chance of success."

"If the medicine is made only for the *Boundary People*, how did you help Iris's mother?" Rayel snorted.

"I knew I had to help Twinkle," she paused, "I wanted her to have another baby, or she would never get over the loss of Tempy. The situation was my fault, and I simply had to do something, so I approached the herb doctors. I made a case for Twinkle being eligible for the medicine, as a descendant of Irassi who was one of us. From all my tests and examinations, I had concluded that Twinkle suffered from the same disorder. I nagged them and begged them, until they finally relented. I learned about optimum dosage and dispensation of the drug. Then I convinced Twinkle to try to have another baby. With the treatment starting even before conception, her next pregnancy was

relatively smooth, and you were born." Mala smiled as she pointed at Iris.

"So are you saying that, I am my mother's first born?" Iris enunciated each word, as she tried to come to terms with the idea, again. She laughed hysterically as she thought of the pendant and its central role in this saga of Tempy's lineage.

"Iris, Iris, calm down." Rayel put his comforting arm on her shoulder, and slowly she regained control.

"So then, the cursed pendant is mine," Iris mumbled.

"Absolutely," Sooti nodded, and unfurled her fist to reveal the pendant. "Please take it."

Iris gasped. "But what about Tempy?"

"I have switched the one on her necklace with the one I had made for her just before she was born. That is how it should be. Tempy doesn't know the difference. With the effect of the tea, she can't." Sooti sighed.

"That's horrible. You can't do that to her." Rayel was appalled.

"It's what is best, given the circumstances. Our herb doctors are working on an antidote for the tea. If and

when they succeed, I will tell her the truth about the pendant. But until then, I must let it rest."

"Are you close to finding an antidote?" Rayel asked.

Sooti bit her lips. "The doctors have made a breakthrough, but there are still some hurdles to overcome, and there is testing to do. It will take time. But someday ..." Sooti crossed her fingers.

"Would you share the recipe of this antidote with my people?" Rayel asked.

"What," Sooti asked, confused by the unexpected question.

"I am asking if you would you share the recipe of this antidote with my people. It would help a lot of them who are suffering." Rayel explained.

"I'm sure our traders could come to some agreement." Sooti shrugged.

"Mala," Iris frowned, as she emerged from a bout of quiet contemplation, "you never explained why my mother did not mention Iraasi, when I asked her about the pendant."

"Iraasi did not want to be remembered as an outsider. It was her dying wish that the story of her origin not

be repeated. But she couldn't bear for her identity to be erased completely, so she passed on the pendant as an heirloom. With the story deliberately suppressed, the legend was forgotten by your people in a few generations, but her adopted name lives on among her descendants, to honor all the work she did for your community," Mala explained.

# The Nameless Girl's Name

Twinkle and her husband, Cedar, were stupefied. Sitting around their dining table, they had stared at Mala and Iris in disbelief, as Mala had told them about the *Boundary People*, the real source of the divine babies, and the story of Tempy.

They had been patient. In spite of anger, betrayal and a host of other emotions welling up and tearing apart their insides, they had done what they had promised; listen to Mala's story without interruption.

And now that she had finished, they didn't know what to say. They gaped at her. Twinkle made several attempts to speak, but words failed her. Finally, she broke into silent tears. Cedar too stared at them in bewilderment.

Minutes that seemed to last days stretched on in complete silence. Iris wished they would say something, anything. She flinched when her dad stood up, but Cedar showed remarkable restraint when he finally spoke. "Is Tempy safe?" he asked.

"Yes, she is." Iris nodded eagerly. "She is well." Then she turned to look at her mother. She couldn't bear the

suspense. Would Mom be okay?

"What about my daughter? Where is she?" Twinkle demanded.

"What do you mean?" Mala was puzzled.

"I mean the one you hid away from us all. The one who was never mourned. The one whose parents joyfully celebrated, soon after she was lost to this world. The one who never had a name. Where is my nameless daughter, Mala?"

Mala blushed. She had never felt so stupid in her life. How could she not have anticipated this reaction.

"Come with me. I will take you to her," Mala offered. Twinkle her hand, but Twinkle ignored it. "I am so sorry. I am so sorry. I should have told you," Mala kept blubbering.

Twinkle's expression was unreadable, as she waited for Mala to lead the way. Iris thought she might just have turned to stone from grief.

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At the sight of lilacs, Twinkle blinked. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "What did you do with her?" she demanded, clenching her fists to fight her anger.

"I followed all the rules of your last rites. I did," Mala assured Twinkle.

"How is that possible? She wasn't mourned by her family," Twinkle raged.

"But she was. I mourned her, and I am her family." Mala explained her connection to Twinkle's ancestor Iraasi by citing the pendant. Twinkle goggled at her as she continued. "I bathed her in the river, prayed for her, and then cremated her on the riverside under the starlit sky. Then I brought her ashes here, to my yard." Mala pointed to the patch of lilacs.

Iris cocked her head as she looked at the Lilacs. How little the baby must have been, she mused.

"She was tiny, so the fire was small, and no one noticed, but I promise you she was loved and mourned. Please, believe me, I did not want to hurt you," Mala pleaded.

"What did you name her for her last rites?" Twinkle whispered.

"Lilac, I named her Lilac, because I knew how much you loved the flower," Mala replied.

Twinkle knelt by the lilacs and gently brushed her hand over them. "I love you, Darling," she whispered.

Cedar knelt down and blew a kiss at the flowers. They sat there in silence for a few minutes before standing up. "Now, what about Tempy?" Twinkle asked, facing Mala. "When can we meet her?"

"We can arrange the meeting as soon as you would like," Mala replied nervously.

"Tomorrow?" Twinkle asked.

"Yes, tomorrow," Mala promised. "Twinkle," Mala hesitated. "I am so sorry. I am so sorry. I should have told you."

Twinkle turned to look at the lilacs. She nodded curtly.

"Twinkle, Tempy does not know that you think she was your own baby. Sooti told her you adopted her after your miscarriage, because that's what Sooti thought to be true at the time. You know like the divine babies ..." Mala mumbled too frightened to continue.

Twinkle and Cedar glared at Mala. "Why are you telling us now?" Cedar demanded. "Tempy has been gone a long time, so why now? What do you want?"

"Mom, Dad," Iris intervened. "Please, just see Tempy, first. Sooti, Tempy's birth mother, will explain

everything. She too was wronged by Teacher's mistake."

Twinkle nodded. "Fine. I want to see where Tempy is living, now."

Mala nodded. "I will come tomorrow morning at take you to see Tempy and her parents at their home. But please, I beg you not to tell Tempy that you did not know that she wasn't your own. Please."

"Tempy is, and always will be, my own," Twinkle responded fiercely. "But she has had enough to deal with, and I love her, so I will spare her more confusion and sadness." She glared at Mala.

Mala nodded. "I understand," she mumbled.

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"Iris, you have been keeping secrets and lying," Twinkle was livid. She could barely contain her anger long enough to reach home, after they left Mala's yard.

Cedar placed a calming hand on Twinkles shoulder. "It must have been a confusing and difficult time for Iris, Twinkle," he intervened as they stepped into their house. "Imagine how she felt, when she found Tempy. She's only a child. We must stay calm for Tempy's sake and find out what's happening. Iris, do you know

"what's going on?" he asked, gently escorting her to the dining table. He pulled out a chair and urged her to sit.

"Ye.. yes," she stammered, as tears spilled out of her eyes. She had never seen her mother so angry. "But you won't believe me, even if I tell you," she sobbed. "Please Dad, let them tell you."

"Who is them?" Twinkle frowned, sitting down next to Iris. "Mala did not really say. Who are her people? I thought she was a lone traveler, like most of our teachers."

"No, Mom. Her people live in the forest," Iris corrected. "They are observers and knowledge seekers. They believe that our village is going to face a crisis, and they want to help us through it. At least, that what they told me." Iris blurted out. "I was so confused when they told me Tempy was not really my sister. When you told me about the pendant, I thought they were lying. I wanted to be sure before I told you anything." Iris sobbed. Twinkle softened up.

"I can't imagine what you have been through, Baby." Twinkle pulled Iris into a hug.

"I was scared and confused. I had to find out what was going on. I'm sorry I did not tell you any of it, Mom. But I wanted to find out as much as I could, first,

because everything I learned was so bizarre and kept changing and shifting."

"What do you know, that you think we won't believe?" Twinkle persisted.

"Please, Mom. Just wait and let them tell you. It's too much for me to explain. But there is something I must show you." Iris dashed off to her room. When she returned, she unfurled her fist to place an object in Twinkle's hands.

Twinkle blinked. "The pendant," she gaped. "Doesn't Tempy have it?"

"No, Sooti switched it for the pendant she had originally given Mala to have you give Tempy. When Sooti heard that you considered this a family heirloom, she was distressed and wanted to return it."

Twinkle sighed. "I guess, I have this back at least," she said bitterly. Then she changed her mind and smiled. "I am so sorry, Iris. I never meant to make you feel so bad. It's only natural that Tempy is curious about her real parents."

"You are her real parents," Iris insisted. "You raised her, and she misses you. But she is also confused, and when they explain the crisis to you, you'll understand why she did what she did."

Twinkle nodded and pulled Iris into a hug. As they broke apart, she smiled. "This is yours now," she said, handing the pendant back to Iris. "I want you to have it."

"Really?" Iris glowed. "Thank you so much."

"Mom, would you do something for me?" Iris asked.

"Anything, Dear" Twinkle promised.

"Will you promise me that no matter how shocking what you learn is, you will try to see things from their perspective?"

"Otherwise, I would be no better than the fundamentalists here ..." Twinkle whispered with a sigh. "Iris, you're growing up, my darling. I will try. By their perspective, you mean the *Boundary People*, right?"

"Well, no, not just them." Iris squirmed. "You've always told me, that when judging people, it's important to keep an open mind." Iris looked from her mom to her dad and back. "You're going to learn a lot of startling things in the next few weeks, and some of it might seem scary at first. So it will be difficult to stay calm and open minded, but you must. Mom, Dad, I am counting on you. More people than you can

imagine, are counting on you. That's all I can say for now."

Mystified, Twinkle and Cedar stared at each other. Whatever could they possibly learn, Twinkle wondered. She turned pale as she imagined what Iris must have learned to make her speak that way. A shiver ran down her spine. She ran up to Cedar, who embraced her. "It will be fine, Darling," Cedar promised. "We just need to be calm and open-minded," he said. He shrugged and burst out laughing.

Twinkle stared at him. "What's so funny?"

"We're being lectured by our pre-teen daughter. Could the world get any more topsy-turvy?"

"Weird and wobbly." Twinkle too burst out laughing, and holding hands, they laughed nervously for a few minutes before sinking into a distracted silence.

Iris shrugged. She had done all she could. Now she would have to just wait and see how things would shape up the next day.

# The Unbelievers Begin to Believe

Twinkle stared blankly at the apparition in front of her. Cedar blinked. It simply couldn't be true.

Twinkle and Cedar considered themselves enlightened. They did not believe the mythical tales of the Devil. They did not need to fear hell to do the right thing. They did it anyway, because they considered it to be the duty of all good people. They believed the Devil to be an antiquated symbol for evil.

"Good morning, Twinkle. Hello Cedar. I am Rayel, and I am so pleased to finally meet you." He had emerged from behind a thick cloth curtain, when he heard Mala call out to him.

In spite of their beliefs, Twinkle and Cedar could not help but flinch. "Real, you're real," Cedar gasped, reaching out to touch Rayel's face.

"I'm Rayel." Rayel squirmed, as he took a step back.

Following Mala's instructions, Iris had taken her parents to a large tent set up next to the partially underground shelter, where she had first met Rayel.

The tent was made of a thick material that obscured a lot of the day light.

There, Sooti, Latim and Mala had started by informing Twinkle and Cedar about the ancient tribes of the *Tree People* and *Ground People* coexisting in harmony for centuries, until the carnage of the Great War, after which their paths had diverged. They had proceeded to update them about the growth and development of the underground civilization of the *Cave People*. In spite of the detailed descriptions they had shared of the appearance, lifestyle and technological advancements of the *Cave People*, Twinkle and Cedar were completely unprepared to encounter a living breathing human, who was the spitting image of the Devil of their mythology.

Sooti put her hand on Rayel's shoulder to comfort him. "Give them some time," she whispered. "This is a huge shock for them. Let them process what they have just seen. We need to be patient."

Rayel nodded and withdrew. A few minutes passed by in silence before Twinkle finally spoke. "Hello, Rayel. Please excuse our rudeness." She gingerly extended her hand. When Rayel shook it, she was pleasantly surprised by the warmth of his flesh. She had expected his pale skin to be icy.

"Yes," Cedar nodded, his heart rate finally under control, "I apologize for my behavior. I was ... I just did not expect you people to look so ..." He faltered, shook his head and sighed. "I'm sorry."

*I wonder if the Boundary People picked me as our liaison for that reason,* Rayel mused. "Not all of us look exactly like me," Rayel mumbled out loud.

"Of course, I didn't mean ... I mean, that must be so." Cedar took a deep breath. "Please forgive my silliness."

"The *Boundary People* have told us that our two communities are hurtling towards another violent confrontation," Twinkle interrupted, eager to get to the crux of the matter. "Rayel, can you explain the situation to us."

When Rayel explained about the food shortages and their plans for developing farms, Twinkle and Cedar tried to keep an open mind. Although they felt sympathy for the *Cave People* and their situation, the idea of these people hacking through their lovingly cultivated farmland, thus destroying generations of hard work, made them defensive.

"So you destroyed us once, and you wish to do it again?" Cedar demanded. "Once again you plan to use

your destructive tools to drive us from our homes." He snorted.

"No, Dad. That's not what Rayel is saying at all." Cedar and Twinkle spun around, eager to look at the person whose voice was so dearly familiar to them.

"Baby! Tempy!" Twinkle dashed over to her and clasped her in a tight embrace. She couldn't believe that she hadn't noticed Tempy entering the tent, but Tempy had always been very quiet and graceful.

Cedar, put his arms around them both and wept. "We missed you so much, Tempy."

"Me too," Tempy sobbed, "I'm sorry I left so early, but Mala has explained everything, right?"

Twinkle nodded, feeling too emotional to speak.

"Then Rayel was only telling you what has been happening. Most of his people do not know about our village. They don't want to hurt you. They don't even know there is anyone to hurt. They're just looking for a way out of their own problems."

Cedar nodded, and he looked at Mala, "Your people have known of both communities for a long time. You have studied our ways and our needs. Do you have a solution?"

"We might," Latim hesitated. "But before we suggest it, we need you to meet Rayel's father, Darino. He was the one who came up with the idea for the farms. We have made him aware of the existence of your village. He wants to discuss the issue with you, so you can both understand each other and figure out the best way to inform your respective communities of the situation and minimize panic and resentment."

"It would be a lot easier if we could offer a reasonable compromise to our communities. Is there something you have thought of?"

"Yes, we have a vague idea, but you need to meet with Darino first. Once we know exactly what the difficulties are on both sides, we can fill in the gaps, improve our basic idea and hopefully make it feasible."

Twinkle and Cedar nodded, but they bombarded Sooti, and Rayel, with questions while Latim went to fetch Darino. Mala and Tempy sometimes had to explain unfamiliar objects or concepts to bridge the minor gaps in language between the two communities.

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When Darino arrived, Twinkle and Cedar gasped. In spite of his pale skin and yellow hair, he was chubby

and stout and looked nothing like the lean, muscular image of the Devil they were so familiar with. But Twinkle and Cedar were surprised by the strip of black cloth that was tightly tied around his head to cover his eyes.

"My father has an even lower tolerance for light than I do. Even the brief journey from the dark shelter next door to here would cause him discomfort. And here too the light is too bright for him to endure for an extended period," Rayel explained.

Darino lowered his blindfold. "Hello," he blinked. I'm Darino, Chief Miner. It is good to meet you. I wanted you to be able to make eye contact once at least, but I'm afraid, I can't keep this up for long." He squinted as he put the blindfold back in place. When Twinkle looked concerned, he added, "You need not worry . I can see you quite well through this cloth."

"Why is it that Rayel has a higher tolerance for light than you?" Twinkle asked unable to suppress her curiosity.

"Although my people are loathed to venture into the world above ground, I have always wondered if our inability to do so is a weakness. So I gradually exposed Rayel from a very young age to increasing intensities of light, to help build his tolerance.

Overtime, my interactions with the *Boundary People* and our dependence on them, convinced me that I was right. So I pushed Rayel even more to expose himself to light, but we realized that he too is limited by his intrinsic nature. My work in agriculture over the last few years, has made me realize just how unfortunate our affliction is, and how much it limits the growth of our tribe," Darino lamented.

"We were told that your tribe has found ingenious ways to adapt to underground life and made itself prosperous. I have been led to believe that your people are equally, or perhaps more technologically advanced than us," Cedar remarked to cheer him up, and simultaneously open the discussion on pressing matters.

Rayel, Iris and Tempy used the opportunity to delve into a short prepared presentation about the knife, explaining how although both cultures invented it independently, the materials used to make them were very different, and yet both were equally sharp. While metal knives rusted, ceramic ones were more brittle. Each material had its strengths and weaknesses.

The adults then continued to exchange information about various forms of tools and machinery used by the two tribes. The discussion of cultural differences

wandered into, similarities and differences in energy sources, scripts, fabrics, attire and art.

Fascinated, Iris had listened to the entire exchange with rapt attention, but now with the conversation centered on arts and decorative items, she couldn't help interrupting. "Mom, Dad, look," she blurted out in excitement. "See this doll Rayel gave me." She presented the metal figurine to her parents. "See how intricate the carving is, but there is no color. That's because their eyes are very sensitive to changes in texture and shading or lighting, but they can see very few colors." She pulled out another similar doll from her pocket. "Look, our ceramic doll on the other hand, is smooth but colorful."

"Iris, that's a very interesting observation," Darino remarked, stretching out his hand for the dolls.

Twinkle and Cedar nodded in agreement, while Darino examined the two dolls.

Finally the conversation edged towards cuisine, the subject that was most likely to be controversial given the circumstances of the meeting.

The atmosphere in the tent became tense, as Darino explained the details of his agricultural experiments beyond the iron ore mines. Twinkle and Cedar bit their

lips as he went on to explain about the rock structures in the caves ,and their expressions turned grim when he sated his conclusions from studying the maps made by the mine mappers.

Cedar then explained about centuries of efforts the villagers had put into making the farmlands productive and their village prosperous.

"Our situation is getting dire, and we must have more access to food. I do not wish for your people to be harmed. But we are running out of time, and I will have to inform my people why we cannot build our farms. Hunger and desperation will make my people violent." Darino sighed.

"But you must understand our situation. We too will starve, if you go on with your plans. Besides, our farms are sacred to us. An attack on them by your people will strengthen the fundamentalists among us, who believe your kind to be the Devil. And your appearance, especially his," too ashamed to look at Rayel, Twinkle merely pointed in his direction. "will frighten many of our people, even the more reasonable ones."

"What is your solution?" Cedar asked Mala. He resented her for everything she had done to them, but anything would be better than a war between two

evenly matched thriving civilizations. If these *Boundary People*, who he was finding very difficult to trust, had a workable idea, he must at least hear them out. Darino too turned to face Mala. His eyes being covered made it difficult to read his expression, but Cedar could see the distrust in Rayel's eyes, as he faced Sooti, Mala and Latim. Tempy and Iris bit their lips wondering what was coming next, and Twinkle, like them, looked tense.

# The Obvious is Ingenious

"Our idea is based on our cultural outlook." Latim began. "Our tribe is very small and vulnerable, seeing as it is located between two thriving civilizations. We don't have farms or machinery. Yet we have managed to survive. Our secret is knowledge. Over the last few centuries, we have collected vast amounts of knowledge from both your cultures, as well as from the forest. The medicines, herbs and spices we trade with your two cultures, along with our detailed knowledge of trees, bushes, insects and animals in the forest has sustained us."

"What has any of this to do with our situation?" Cedar began feeling impatient.

"Not much," Latim continued, "Except that, I think instead of trying to destroy each other, you could both help each other. We have survived through your unwitting help. But now, you can both save yourselves by actively choosing to help each other."

"Help each other?" Twinkle was intrigued. "How?" she demanded.

"Twinkle, you are a weaver, and you make clothes. Your friend Sparkly is a cobbler. She makes shoes. So how do you get shoes, and how does Sparkly get clothes?"

"Each of us in the village specializes in something that we provide for everyone in the village. We help each other." Twinkle eyes lit up. "Wait!" she exclaimed. She had a glimmer of an idea where this was going, but couldn't quite figure it out. "No, I don't see how the two such different civilizations could help each other out in the same way."

But Darino, whose forehead had wrinkled from thinking hard, interrupted, "Are you suggesting we do some version of trade with them that we do with your people?"

"Trade? What's that?" Cedar asked.

"Trade is a word we coined to describe an exchange of items or services of equivalent value. Like we give the underground folks a certain amount of berries or fruit in exchange for some medicinal truffles." Sooti explained.

When Twinkle and Cedar still looked puzzled, Rayel and Tempy brought two containers. Rayel was carrying a small box, the size of a mouse, while

Tempy was carrying a huge basket that could hold two new born human babies.

First Rayel opened the box he was carrying. It contained some dried up flakes, that had a strong pungent odor. "These," he explained "are dehydrated micean truffle flakes obtained from fifteen micean truffle heads. Miceans are a rare variety of mushrooms, and these have been collected over a period of a month from various crevices in the caves. This is one of the crucial ingredients used by the *Boundary People* to make a valuable medicine that can be used to cure some common but severe fevers, and this amount of flakes," Rayel pointed to the box again, "will heal about ten people. The contents of the box can be used for a year before it starts to become less effective."

Then Tempy opened her basket. It contained about four dozen apple like fruits. "These are peaches. They grow on various trees in the forest. All these were collected from five trees in a single day. Peaches are available for three months a year and last about a week after they have been plucked. They can provide breakfast for two dozen children and will last for three days."

"The *Boundary People* and the *Cave People* have agreed that this is a fair exchange. They call this

trading peaches for mushrooms. Many similar trades are conducted by their two tribes. Venom of certain species of underground snakes is highly valued by the *Boundary People* and obtained in exchange for significant amounts material for clothing." Iris explained.

"So, are you suggesting that we do similar tr .. trade," Twinkle hesitated at the word, but continued more confidently when Sooti nodded, "with the *Cave People*, where we give them grains, gourds and vegetables, and they give us metal tools in return?"

"Something like that, but the *Cave People* have a lot more than tools to offer and would like to obtain not just food, but also fabric from you."

"What do you use for fabric, now?" Cedar asked, curious about the strange netted material of thick fiber, that Rayel and Darino wore. The material their short pants were made of, was very different from the dark cloth Darino used for a blindfold. Clearly, the blindfold had been provided by the *Boundary People*, Cedar concluded.

"We use a fibrous moss that coats a lot of the damp cave walls," Darino replied, "but the quantity and variety of fabric we can produce is limited."

"I see." Cedar was intrigued. "So what else do you have to offer?" he asked.

"Oil, mushrooms, meat, jewels." Darino replied.

"We already have enough cooking oil." Twinkle objected.

"This is not cooking oil," Darino explained. "It is fuel that burns a lot hotter than wood and produces much less smoke."

Rayel looked at Tempy, and she rushed out of the tent and returned with an oil lamp that she used in the night, when she wanted to read or sketch. He lit it to demonstrate.

Twinkle's eyes widened when she saw the sturdy flame, brighter and stronger than those from their beeswax candles or peanut oil soaked wooden sticks.

"This lamp will last for six hours without replenishing the oil," Darino claimed and Cedar gasped.

"We have already tasted your wares through the *Boundary People*, and we know what we want from you. But here are sample of some food items we have to offer," Rayel chimed in, as Iris brought in a shiny tray with an assortment of items. Although Darino

seemed puzzled by where the tray had suddenly come from, he urged Cedar and Twinkle to taste the items.

When Cedar and Twinkle hesitated, Mala spoke, "I and the other *Boundary People* enjoy these items, and Tempy and Iris too have tasted and liked most of them."

When Iris nodded enthusiastically at her parents, Twinkle shrugged and popped a black sticky blob into her mouth. She was pleasantly surprised by the tangy but sweet taste. She nodded encouragingly, and Cedar tried a soft cube, crisp on the outside and with a smoky smell. He found it delightful. Barring a few items which they found too astringent or smelly, the tasting experience was quite pleasant. Twinkle and Cedar looked at each other. Suddenly, trading seemed like a realistic possibility.

"The tray," Cedar asked, once it was empty, "Is it made of metal? It's nothing like anything I have ever seen before."

"Yes indeed, it is made of iron!" Darino smiled.  
"Would you like to take it back with you to show your people?"

Cedar beamed, but Twinkle frowned. "I don't understand how this trade would work, though. I

mean, you cannot come out into the sunlight, and we are not comfortable venturing into the forest. So how would we do it?"

Darino scratched his chin and turned to look at Sooti, Latim and Mala. Rayel's eyes widened, as he finally understood the motivation of the *Boundary People*. He had been right to distrust their altruism. As he looked around the room, he realized that Cedar too was thinking the same thing.

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After Twinkle and Darino shook hands, agreeing to try their best to convince their communities to engage in trade conducted through the *Boundary People*, Cedar demanded to see where Tempy was living.

Sooti, Latim and Tempy, accompanied by Mala, walked Cedar, Twinkle and Iris and over to their dwelling, while Rayel and Darino walked to The Entrance. Tears clouded Twinkle's eyes when she saw the pencil sketches Tempy had made. "Are you happy here, Baby?" she asked.

"I am, Mom, but I really miss you all. Once the trade begins, and the villagers become aware of the *Boundary People*, I can visit you regularly." Tempy looked hopefully at Twinkle and Cedar.

"You will always be welcome in your own home, Sweetheart." Cedar squeezed her shoulder.

"I can't wait," Twinkle gushed before giving Tempy a rib-cracking hug. "This alone makes trading with the *Cave People* a worthwhile cause for me." She smiled.

# The Separator That Became a Link

A year had passed since the meeting in the large tent. A very stressful year, it had been, for everyone in that tent, as well as for so many others.

The discovery of another civilization so strange, and yet so close at hand, had been a dreadful shock to both communities.

## The Cave People

"Why should we care if their farms are destroyed? What is it to us? We must do what's in our best interest." Many complained.

"This trade is in our best interest," Darino and a few of his closest allies tried to reason with them. "We get all we want without the difficulty of building farms. We play to our strengths and continue to hunt, mine, engineer, extract oil and grow truffles. In exchange, we get a wide variety of nutritious foods that will be enough to satisfy several generations to come."

"But we won't be self sufficient. We will be depending on strangers who can choose to starve us. Why not just look out for our own long term interests and build our farms anyway? What can they really do about it?" Their opponents argued.

Darino looked helplessly at Sooti, who had come along to assist him in convincing his people.

"Well, you can make the holes to build your farms, but they can just as easily use the holes to flood your farms with poison from above. How else do you think they will react when you destroy their food source? You may then try to fight them with your weapons during the night, but they will fight back. I don't know who will win such a war, but people on both sides will die. Through trade, you can avoid a war, help each other out, discover new things, learn new crafts, and gain new perspectives."

It had taken a year of unrest, minor scuffles, small outbreaks of violence, several conferences at various levels and many more popular rallies to convince the *Cave People* to compromise. Darino was exhausted, but also exhilarated. His efforts had helped avoid needless war and bloodshed.

## At the Village

"Why should we help them, if they want to destroy our farms? We have seen their leader. He is as pale as the devil. They must be the Devil's race. We cannot deal with the Devil. This is their punishment from God. They must perish through starvation. If we help them, God will punish us too," an angry mob complained.

"They are not evil. They need our help. And even if we choose not to give it to them, they will take matters into their own hands. If we help them, we get something in return, but otherwise we lose our farms. Our farms are sacred. We must protect them." Twinkle argued.

"Only the Devil would try to take that which is sacred. We must stay strong and fight his people. We should not be tempted by their shiny trinkets," the mob objected.

"The *Cave People* have developed tools that will make your farms more productive. Their machines will help you to rapidly expand and improve your farms. They will also provide you with materials for rare medicines that can cure the blight, that plagues some of your crops and animals. Can this be the work of the Devil? No! The Devil would not want your farms to thrive. If you really love your farms, you will allow them to grow and prosper, even if you have to

adapt to new ways of doing so!" Mala's oratory skills left them doubting themselves.

Noticing a chink in their armor, she pressed her advantage. "The tools these people will give you are a tribute to your God. They have realized the importance of your sacred farms. By helping them, you will be serving God. What do you say?"

There was a murmur of assent among the people, and many who were set against the idea seemed to be reconsidering.

Twinkle took the opportunity to open a sack containing a log and an ax she had obtained from the *Cave People*. She used the ax to chop the log precisely with ease. Her audience gasped. They had never seen such a clean cut made through such a thick log. "Their tools will not just help us with farming, but also in pottery and other aspects of our lives." Twinkle persisted. "But if we don't help them, they will turn these tools into deadly weapons against us. We must help them, because it is the right thing to do, because it is in service to God, and because if we don't, there will be pointless death and bloodshed."

## **The Boundary People**

"We will facilitate the trade between the *Cave People* and the village," Sooti declared at a meeting of the council of the *Boundary People*. "We will help them set fair values for the exchange of goods. Mala and I have prepared a chart for a fair exchange rate between various pairs of items." She presented the chart before the council members, who examined it before giving their approval.

"Have you factored in a service charges for our time and efforts?" The Head Councilor Rameth asked.

"Yes, we have," Mala pointed to column in the document. "These numbers list our charges for facilitating various transactions based on their weight, volume and value. Transportation charges from the village to the caves and vice-versa, and service charges for interactions with traders from both communities are factored in," she clarified.

The Head Councilor nodded his assent. He then turned to Latim. "What about projections?"

"The rates, of course, need to be tweaked and amended based on consumption and availability every week for the first three months. We have explained this to both parties and secured their agreement on the matter." Latim concluded.

The Head Councilor smiled. "You have all done well. We were in a precarious position as a boundary wall between two rival cultures that might have chosen tear each other down, and us with them, the moment they learned of each other's existence. Years of effort on our part has not only averted a deadly war and needless bloodshed, but we have also succeeded in establishing ourselves as a vital link between the two flourishing cultures. Centuries of knowledge gathering has served us well." He paused to take a deep breath. "But our work is only beginning. Mala, Sooti, as our ambassadors to the two civilizations, what are your primary jobs?"

"We need to make sure the two cultures have minimum contact, so they remain dependent on us." Sooti replied, and Rameth nodded. He then turned to Mala.

"As a teacher, I can shape and influence the thinking of future generations. I will find a delicate balance between getting the villagers to cooperate and trade with the *Cave People*, and yet be sufficiently repulsed by the idea of direct contact with them," Mala proposed.

"Excellent!" Rameth agreed. "Sooti, do you know of any leverage we have over the *Cave People*?"

"Yes, Head Councilor." Sooti smiled. "The *Cave People* are desperate to secure a permanent cure for High Tea. Like always, we should trade the product, but keep the recipe secret. As we have learned over the years, knowledge is power."

"Knowledge is power. To knowledge!" The Head Councilor raised a peach.

"To knowledge!" all the other councilors chanted, raising their peaches.

## **The Weak Link in the Plan**

Over the year, Rayel and Cedar had grown fond of each other. While the others who had met at that tent, optimistically, enthusiastically and relentlessly worked with the *Boundary People* towards a trade agreement between the two communities, they alone remained skeptical.

While they both realized that the trade agreement was necessary to prevent war, and favored it, their enthusiasm was marred by the increasing dependence of both communities on the *Boundary People*.

"I don't trust them," Cedar said for the thirty-fifth time, as he sat next to Rayel on a rock in a thicket

inside the forest, close to the boundary.

"I agree," Rayel nodded. "We've talked about this, so many times, Cedar. But I don't see what we can do about it."

"For the moment, nothing, but we must prepare ourselves."

"What do you mean?" Rayel asked. "What can we do?"

"We must increase interactions between the people of our two communities. Perhaps our children can visit your people on a regular basis and vice-versa."

"But our people cannot be out in the sunlight," Rayel objected.

"We would be happy to construct a dark tent or even a dark room to accommodate you. We could supply you with suitable heavy dark clothing including face veils to facilitate the journey."

"And what would we have to do to make your children feel safe in the darkness with the Devil?"

"The glowberry bracelet, you gave Iris would be nice for starters." Cedar smiled. "She also mentioned some glowing mushrooms. Perhaps you could grow some in

the long entrance passage to your caverns. And it might help, if the people they meet look less like you, and more like your father."

Rayel nodded. "Yes, I know, I look exactly like the Devil in the children's stories. Iris showed me the book. I too wondered if the *Boundary People* deliberately chose me, to make it harder for your people to accept us, so we would have to work through them."

"Perhaps they did. Perhaps they want to keep us apart, but that's not what we want. We should mingle, and get to know each other as much as we can to stabilize and secure our future. Who knows, perhaps one day, there will be intermarriage between our tribes." Cedar joked.

*Intermarriage*, Rayel mused. Was that even possible between two such different tribes? But it would be nice, he thought, fingering the rainbow bracelet Iris had given him. *Maybe, someday*, he wondered, imagining the possibilities, as he smiled to himself.

~ **The End** ~

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