

Prologue

::The third planet revolving around the life-giving Sun was alien to the willowy growths struggling to survive in its inhospitable climate. But comfort was not the reason they were here: the plants had a mission. They'd been tasked to convert a cold, soggy world into a magnificent wonderland of clouds and heat--duplicating Mother Venus, from whence they came.

The first stage of the colonization was complete: after the great bombardment of this planet, Venusian flowers had slowly but persistently taken root in one location of the existing habitat. With strength in numbers, they now readied themselves to branch out into new territory. The transformation of this planet called Earth had begun! Soon, increased carbon dioxide emissions would blanket the atmosphere, noticeably altering the temperature. Due to the greenhouse effect, heat--blessed heat--would bake the lands and skies.

Mother Venus would be proud of her offspring. And sister planet Earth would revel in the alteration, now being a truer reflection of the Almighty Sun.::

One

Earth, sometime after the Great Destruction

On this day, twenty years ago, I was conceived. I hasten to add that this wasn't a happy occasion. On the contrary. Nor can I ever rejoice on this particular date since it was this very day, ten years ago, that the Outsiders stormed into the village once again, but this time, they abducted my mother.

My dear, sweet Mamma. I died that day.

Glyneth paused in her writings. She allowed the ink on her words to dry and stared out at the bleak, barren landscape. Whenever she needed a reprieve from the mundane routine of village life, she would escape its confines by hiking a mile or so up into the mountains to a secluded spot. Here she was free to write in her journal or study forbidden books away from the censorious eyes of village elders.

Or remember the past. She picked up her quill pen and dipped it into the bottle of ink.

Ten years ago, warnings of the Outsiders' imminent arrival failed to register alarm in my young mind--for we were always at war, with one group or another. True, I'd heard graphic tales about the hoard of men, north of the Great Beyond, who galloped on the fastest steeds imaginable. After all, it was a known fact that these Outsiders periodically raided our village every ten revolutions of the sun. As far back as time remembered, women in their childbearing prime were the targets. Once they were swept up onto the invaders' swift horses, they were never to be seen again.

To me, that had been just a story told 'round the campfire, to frighten misbehaving children. When one constantly lives with war, a tendency to become inured to the horrors of it is natural, even expected.

But this abduction! Gracious, holy Lord, nothing ever was the same for me after I saw Mamma being carried away, a jumble of screams and thrashing arms and legs. How could it have been otherwise? Mamma was everything: the light, the sky, the silvery moon. She was happiness, joy, and bubbling laughter mired in this backwards village. But even she had a cautious side, and would take care to hush me whenever I would unthinkingly prattle on about how the Earth spoke to me, telling me its secrets.

As the Earth spoke even now. Sensitive to vibrations emanating from the ground, she now felt thunder pounding through the contaminated soil of the Great Beyond toward her position just outside the village's boundaries. The Outsiders would arrive soon. Soon.

She increased her writing speed.

Mamma was the only one who understood me. I think I was vaguely aware, even then, that I was somehow different from the other children who halfheartedly learned their lessons. They never questioned how things came to be, never thirsted for knowledge. In fact, learning and education still is almost as taboo as journeying out into the Great Beyond. Fear of radiation strangles all villagers, even our soldiers. For if you are tainted by radiation, you are a mutant.

Hearing another message from the ground below, Glyneth stopped to interpret it. *Make haste! Make haste, we are coming*, warned heavy rumblings of horses' hooves against hard, dry soil. But just why were these Outsiders compelled to come here? Why did they need females to supplement their population? Were the Outsider women infertile? Did they die young?

Were they mutants?

As Glyneth was, with her strange telepathy and also her skin's chameleon-like color changes. All due to an enlarged pineal gland located in the inner recesses of her brain. On the outside, she was as normal as everyone else. But on the inside...

She hurried to complete her thoughts.

Tush, I digress. Once again, with the dawning of this particular day, like the clockworks of old, the Outsiders are due to swoop down and steal our women. And I am at risk, as are all the young women in the village. Perhaps if I make the package less tempting, they might bypass me for one who pleases the eye more.

Glyneth closed her journal, then carefully removed excess ink from her quill pen. A sudden pain pulsed within her head, causing her to sigh. The Earth was about to speak again. This unusual ability to communicate with nature could be viewed as either a blessing or a curse. She stilled her actions to receive the message. On the ghost of a breeze came another warning. Her solitude would soon be at an end. Someone scaled the arid hillside in her direction.

The intruder couldn't possibly be an Outsider. Which meant a villager, and villagers didn't approve of the art of writing. Glyneth slipped the journal and inkbottle into a pocket in the long, loose fitting robe that covered her body from head to toe. Only her eyes and part of the nose remained unhidden. The ancient ones had a word for the garment she wore: *chador*.

She sighed. Sometimes she was guilty of blasphemy; if only she were a man so she could escape wearing this restrictive garment.

But idle wishes were seldom granted. Besides, it would've been more to the point to desire that both villager men and women had free choice on wearing apparel.

Glancing at the sun as it blazed a path over the mountains to begin a well-worn arch in the sky, she wiped a trickle of perspiration off her forehead. Another hot day in the

making. How unusual to have a scorcher this late in the year. Mid-October should have been a time for cooler temperatures. Perhaps even a bit of frost.

Tush, I digress, again. But who was so bold as to track her movements, outside the village gates?

The answer to that question was simple--it had to be Devon.

The young man soon came into view, climbing a boulder and swatting a tangle of dried shrubs out of his way. "Glyneth! I knew I could find you." His high forehead gleaming with sweat, he waited as if he expected her to congratulate him on his feat.

She purposefully disappointed him. She never needed men, young or otherwise, and never would. Oh, they had their uses, such as fighting battles to protect the village and tilling the soil to produce crops. But how much better it would be if they didn't wage war. All that wasted energy. All those precious resources squandered on petty grievances or clansmen pride.

And what about the burden of pain death left behind for the loved ones to carry?

Despite the warm coverage of her *chador*, she shivered. A revolting village law demanded that all women enter the state of matrimony by age twenty. As she would attain her majority in nine months, Devon Dikeman had taken it into his thick head that Glyneth would be his bride.

He reached her side and curved his arm around her. "Come now. It's dangerous for you to be out here any day, but today of all days! Glyneth, what were you thinking?"

She deftly slipped out of his grasp. "I often take walks alone."

"Your parents are worried about you. Your father asked me to bring you back, and I told I like it would be my pleasure and my duty as your soon-to-be husband." His thin lips lifted in a smile, and he swept his gaze over her as if seeing her without her garments. For once, she was glad to be dressed in this traditional fashion.

"Ike and Vonda Paddock are my guardians, not my parents." Of course Devon knew that, as did the entire village, but he still persisted in calling the Paddocks her parents. But this was one subject on which she was adamant. She had been fatherless since the time of her conception. Despite questions on the subject, her mother had refused to discuss the man who sired Glyneth other than to say he was a hated Outsider.

Her nose wrinkled with loathing. One day, she would avenge herself against the man, whomever he was. How she would enjoy punishing him, as she and her mother had been punished.

As for her mother, well, her mother was dead. Glyneth knew that fact as surely as if she had viewed the body. But she herself was alive to face the consequences of the day, and couldn't afford to indulge in self-pity. Especially not today.

Devon shrugged and took her arm by the elbow. "That doesn't matter, eh? For in a few months time, you will have real parents, as in a mother and father-in-law." He guided her down the hillside's rocky path. "But come now, we must take every precaution against the Outsiders. I vow I won't let them take you!"

Glyneth allowed herself to be led. After all, what was the use of protesting? Through the headpiece covering her head, she pulled up on the long mane of her hair to allow a slight breeze to penetrate the garment and cool her neck. If only she *had* been a man, then she wouldn't be in this predicament. More than anything in the world, she didn't want to suffer the same fate as her dear deceased mother. She would try to make herself as unappealing as possible. Perhaps even go so far as to apply a fake appendage or two! These Outsiders were known to be fastidious in their selection of women. No female with the taint of radiation would be abducted.

Despair weighted Glyneth's shoulders. For if she succeeded in deceiving the Outsiders, what future awaited her then?

Of course she knew the answer to that question. Her future would be yoked in eternal wedlock to the egotistical Devon Dikeman. Faith, the very idea curled her toes.

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