

The Carmies plopped into the dark springy chairs that reclined deeply, making everybody look slightly upwards. The soft pale ceiling evenly dispersed the quiet light, altering the perception of depth. Ona couldn't tell anymore how big the room was.

"Artin, start the T-clip PA 262."

Gradually, the lights went off. The pale depthless dome surrounding them turned into a gently pulsating display of geometrical shapes that kept changing from one to another. Barely perceptible piano sounds started a simple melody somewhere far away. Colors joined the shapes in a fluid rhythmical dance. Rays of light began crossing the dome's expanse, creating a confluence of surprisingly deep spaces that strangely altered Ona's mind. The endless flow of thinking in her head wound down. She could almost notice gaps between her thoughts. Her focus shifted from rational to sensual, making her experience of space and sounds sharp and fresh. Her breathing slowed down, then changed to unhurried and shallow. The combinations of lines, light, and colors made her attention drift in sync with the quiet melody that kept repeating itself in the background.

She was vaguely aware of a queer softness in her hands

and knees. Her eyes followed the swirl of space around her, watching the rays of light distort it, creating an oscillating tunnel, long and narrow. Looking into it felt uncomfortably like gazing down a deep well, but the far end of the tunnel grasped her attention and held it with an unfamiliar power. The room seemed to swirl in fast rotation. Ona's senses registered the changes of light, colors and narrowness as one complex, transforming trajectory.

Abruptly, the lights and colors disappeared. The music faded away. Something odd happened to Ona's perception. She was still vaguely aware of herself as Ona Bell, yet most of her feelings weren't her own anymore. She was surrounded by soft empty darkness, her ears straining to detect sounds. There was no fear in this foreign consciousness that Ona seemed to inhabit, only expectation and anxious hope. She was waiting for something and hoping it would turn out right.

Slowly the darkness started filling up with forms. She was crouching in a cave, hiding in a shallow hollow, pressing her back to the moist stony wall. The smell of wet clay, mineral dust and organic decay was filling her nostrils, making them itch.

Ona detected a sharp whiff of smoke and the sound of heavy steps on the stone. She squeezed deeper into her niche. A light flickered on the walls of the cave and three figures appeared from a narrow fracture in the wall on the opposite side from Ona's hiding place. Short and stocky, covered in thick hair, two adults and a youth seemed barely human. Long tangled hair hid the backwards sloping foreheads of the large elongated heads. Deeply set, eyes gleamed darkly from under the heavy brow ridges. Wide, meaty nostrils fluttered animal-like with a light sniffing sound. Yet despite the ferocious apish looks they were definitely people. Two held smoking torches in the hands of their long powerful arms, the third, taller and older-looking one, carried several bundles of unrecognizable material wrapped around something heavy. He treated his mysterious cargo with noticeable care.

*Neanderthals*. Ona realized that her other consciousness had expected it, waited for them.

In a peculiar rolling gait the figures walked deeper into the cave and stopped about thirty feet away from Ona's hiding place. The young one lowered his torch and held it there. The fire spread wide. The Neanderthal had lit a pile of dry wood

on the floor. The flames grew, throwing light onto the creviced walls. A gust of cold humid air blew at the flames, causing shadows to dance over the curves, and Ona saw shapes of hands on the wall. The pale hands outlined in red oxide blotches seemed to wave at her in the flickering light.

The old Neanderthal put his bundles on the ground and the light fell on wide pear-shaped breasts. *It's a woman!* Ona realized that her foreign consciousness already knew it, but she still stared in awe at the mighty physique of the formidable female. Then she squinted at the other two. They were definitely males, a boy and a young adult. All three Neanderthals' bodies were hairy and extremely muscular, but the Woman seemed to be the strongest. Both males watched her attentively. The Woman lifted her face, listening to the forceful gusts of the wind outside, and Ona drew a sharp breath. The face of the Neanderthal was a grotesque mask. *She is wearing paint. She had applied yellow ochre all over her face.* On top of this foundation the Woman wore several abstract designs. On her cheekbones concentric circles were painted in red pigment mixed with flecks of a reflective black mineral. The low sloping forehead was crossed by vertical rows of dark shiny dots.

The Woman started unwrapping her bundles, liberating three large objects and placing them carefully by the fire. They appeared to be some kind of vessels, round on the bottoms with jagged edges on the top. *Broken animal skulls. They use them as bowls to carry something of high value to the Woman.*

Folding her short thick legs the Neanderthal slid onto her massive haunches. The males copied her move. The Woman's hand dipped into the smallest of the skull-bowls and quickly pulled out. She put her glistening fingers into her mouth, sucked, and dipped them into the bowl again. *So like the mountain gorilla from the zoo last summer.* The Woman passed the bowl to the males and they too consumed the greenish wet substance. Ona noticed rows of painted dots on their faces as well.

The three Neanderthals sat for awhile, staring into the dancing flames. The wind outside the cave grew calmer. The down-pour of rain created a steady monotonous beat, muffling the noises of cracking wood and wheezy breathing. The Woman sat facing Ona, her body swaying slightly, large eyes fixed on the fire. She made a small whistling sound. The boy reached for an unwrapped bundle and pulled out two narrow animal bones. He gave one to the man and put the other to his lips.

Soft tooting tones joined the wailing of the wind. *Wow, Neanderthal flutes!*

The rain outside kept drumming. The people around the fire swayed wider and stronger, the rhythmical toots of the flutes growing long and plangent. Suddenly, a crashing blow of thunder split the air. The Woman was swiftly energized. The large head jerked up, the meaty lips shook, the muscles of the thick neck tensed. Ona heard a drawling groan that turned into a hoarse howling interrupted by rustling and creaking noises. The Neanderthal was imitating the sounds of the storm outside - the painful laments of the wind, the merciless whip of the rain, the anxious thrashing of the trees.

A new rumble of thunder shook the floor of the cave. The bulky bodies tensed. The Woman jumped up. Her unfocused eyes followed the dance of the shadows on the walls, searching the strangely alive surface, looking for something invisible to Ona. She yelled out: "Ehk," pointing a crooked scarred finger at one of the broken skulls, the elongated one. The young man grabbed the vessel and held it out. The Woman's hand dove into the skull coming out with a thin stick flared at one end. The boy took both torches and moved closer to the wall.

The Woman's eyes were half-closed now. She was breathing

hard. The sounds escaping her throat became more repetitive and rhythmical. She moved her arm in one unit, the thin stick forming an extension of the hand. A strong black line appeared on the wall and then another. Curved back, elongated head, small slender legs... the Woman flicked her wrist and the round eye of a horse looked at Ona from the stone wall. Another horse joined the first one and then two more appeared. In the quivering light of the torches the slender legs moved, the dark eyes glimmered with fear. The horses sprang to life, running away from the pale hands on the bulging curve of the wall, into the shade of the deep crevice.

The Woman turned around, her illuminated gaze probing the darkness. Ona stared into the depth of the black apish eyes. Abruptly an amazing shift happened in her perception. She wasn't watching the Woman anymore. She was her, sharing her awareness and her feelings. Ona's mind filled with sensations so compelling and unfamiliar she felt them as a rush of chills in her body. She was not a single entity anymore. She was bound in inseparable connection with everything around her - the confinement of the cave and the expanse of woods outside... the taste of the air and the flow of the sky... the anger of fire and the perseverance of the rain... and all

the animals... and all the other people...

Ona's olfaction separated into individual smells like colors in a rainbow. Every odor acquired its separate meaning and couldn't be confused with another any longer. Trees and herbs were connected to feelings inside her body, pleasant and painful. The wind was saturated with images of the things it touched on its way. The scent of other people was inseparable from a complicated knot of emotions. A river of half-images was flowing through Ona's head - bodies of people huddling together in the piles of leaves under a shelter of enormous bones of a great beast; a scarred face of an old man plunging a spear into the neck of a wild boar; a furious swirl of flood waters crushing giant tree trunks; the flight of a powerful white bird; a child being born...

One more crash of thunder reverberated through the cave. Ona lifted her head and let the air flow through her. The sounds vibrating in her throat were the same as the noises outside. They contained everything - pain and hunger, cold and heat, joy and anger, desire and fear, struggle and determination. The flow carried her along. It was the river of life and she was a part of it.

The Woman dropped her gaze to the flames and the



connection broke. Ona felt ripped in two. The painful loss of the mysterious power coursing through her fought with the relief of being free from the overwhelming alien sensations.

A new clacking sound joined the drumming of the rain. The older male was tapping together two smooth animal bones. Ona discovered that she knew those once belonged to a cave bear. The other Neanderthals started clapping their leathery palms in rhythm with the clacks. In a deliberate stomping gait, every step accompanied by the clack of the bones and the claps, the man began walking around the fire, his eyes shut. Gradually he widened his circles.

All of a sudden, the shaggy stooping figure stopped, the massive head tilted slightly as if to aid hearing. The man turned towards Ona's hiding place. The pauses between the clacks grew longer and Ona heard a faint suspicion of an echo. The Neanderthal's eyes sprang open. There was a new bright gleam in his transfixed eyes. He stared straight at Ona and her perception shifted again. The engulfing unity with the universe and the sharpening of the senses felt slightly familiar now, but the storm of emotions was completely different. She was tormented by the deep desire of a new

superior ability and an icy suffocating fear. She needed to change, to acquire something that others didn't possess, to become one of the few, one of the Deciders. She knew she had a chance. The spirit of the great bear touched her. He promised to help her transition, but the transformation could only come from the fearsome creatures of stupefying powers that inhabited the darkness. The new images swirling in Ona's mind were nothing she had ever seen by daylight. Half people, half beasts, distorted feline figures with long necks and enormous claws, horned shapes walking on hind legs - those were the spirits of the nether world. Until this moment she had experienced only vague glimpses of these creatures. It had always happened with other people being around her. Now it was different. Now the spirits replied to her from the darkness and she had to enter the Tunnel. Still she was not completely alone on her way. The spirit of the great bear was carrying her, taking her closer and closer to the blackest depth of the cave. She desperately hoped he wouldn't abandon her there. The dread of horrors that were possible in the underworld made Ona shut her eyes.

The connection broke again. Barely breathing Ona watched the Neanderthal moving towards her. The boy crept from behind

and put a torch into the man's hand. Ona pressed deeper into her crevice. She was about to be discovered. At an arm's length in front of her, the man turned slightly and in the dim glow of his flame she saw an opening in the wall. The Neanderthal dropped to his knees and crawled into the darkness of the tunnel. Carefully Ona followed, a small voice deep inside her wondering what happened to her claustrophobia.

The man kept crawling deeper into the long narrow tunnel, Ona behind him. Suddenly, he dropped on his back holding the torch above him. The wide stretched eyes madly searched the walls around him. Ona moved closer. She knew he could sense her presence but now it didn't alarm her. She was just one of the spirits of the Tunnel, a single unit of an infinite host. It wasn't her that the Neanderthal sought to bring into the light.

The man's trembling hand kept moving the torch, slowly and deliberately. His eyes, watery from the smoke, jumped between the shadows the flickering light created on the uneven rock. He froze staring at one spot. Ona saw that the light and an undulation in the surface of the wall combined to create a distinct dorsal line of a bison. The animal was almost there; even the sharp curved horn was already in place.

The Neanderthal moved his torch and the bison disappeared. He returned the torch into the previous position and the animal was back. The man reached out and in a single deft stroke carved the bison's outline into the soft rock.

He moved his head around, staring into the shadows with a changed expression. Ona caught his stare, and for a brief while she felt the powerful surge of triumph and pride consume her soul. She called the Spirit out of the darkness and controlled him. She had his power now. She was not just one of the outer cave dwellers any longer. She was different. She was more. She turned.

For a long moment everything went dark and then slowly the ceiling of the viewing dome became white. Bright light filled the room. Ona felt a rapid pulse beating in her neck. Her lips were dry. She could still smell the smoke and the damp rock. There was a taste of wet dust in her mouth. She wasn't quite sure what had happened. The experience was so vivid, so real. For a moment she wondered if they actually had been there, had traveled to some other universe, but it couldn't have been. All this time she had been aware of the viewing room, vaguely, but definitely aware. Ona looked

around. The rest of the class seemed to feel the same magical grip slowly releasing them back into their familiar world.