

# Escape to the Billows

by

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### [Prologue](#)

#### **In the Beginning was Spidy, Recluse's Revenge**

Born in a penal colony, denied my birthright in a land gone dead from the nuclear, from a clypsocaust, I came of age in the Void, a prisoner of no count, no worth. Our gentors sacrificed me, and my two best friends, Charly and Keb, to be made wah-collectin' drones for the city-brights.

For a long while, I felt betrayed the colony hadn't taken us with them in their escape from PC-249 into the Void. But their betrayal was for a purpose. And the purpose was no less than a race for survival and freedom for all from the tyranny of the Assembly and the city-brights, though it took me some time to cal'c that out.

Shipped off to the city-brights for processin', Charly and I bare escaped bein' fodder for the mutant wolf spidys used to control excess population. I survived a wolfer's bite by frettin' out the spidy poison durin' a forced dance afore the whole Assembly of citizens by order of the Widow, the Assembly's chosen female leader of chile-bearers.

Jealous of the acclaim I received and scared the Assembly was out to replace her, the Widow banished Charly, Keb and me to an outland drone-dwellin'. We became wah-

drones under Commander Mika and the drone-trainin' tutelage of Stokes, a gentle giant, Mika's second in command, and my assigned team-mate.

Dwellin' drones made sorties out into the Void in teams to gather wah for the city brights, from the seasonal wah-mists that crossed the Void. I keened to it and drone life quick-on, buildin' a reputation as a wah-vet to be reckoned with, but yearned to join my gentors in findin' the promised great billows of salty wah and freedom.

Drones were also granted periodic leave in the city-brights, and our gentors had left Charly, Keb and me the mission to access the Great Library, gatherin' a last clue left by the ancients. A clue that would show the way to freedom to all who had the courage and the blessings, to a new land full of falling-wah and green-growin' things.

But a traitor in our ranks forced us to ally ourselves with Commander Mika, Stokes and an outlander, Healer Sam, trustin' them to hand us out in a raid on the Great Library for the skinny we needed.

Together, we foiled an Assembly death plot to destroy all the wah-drone dwellin's and left the Assembly frantic to 'splain to citizens about the uncontaminated deep source of wah they'd known of for centuries but had hidden in a skewed and cruel effort to maintain absolute control over the brights.

With the Assembly threatenin' to attack and destroy us all to protect their secrets, most of the other drone dwellin's chose to abandon the bright altogether and escape with us 'cross the Void, to the edge of the great billows of salty wah and the outlander's hidden Enclave.

But we also left a trail of fat for the citizens to uncover the Assembly's lies: to learn for themselves that there was a deep-source of clean and plentiful wah, that the wolf spidys were not numerous or even threatenin' mutations left from the nuclear, but monsters the Assembly had bred and raised at considerable cost, to keep citizens and the drone-dwellin's in line, and that the centuries of killin' their own had been total unnecessary and the biggest lie.

Meantime, all prisoners of the penal colony I'd been raised in, PC-249, had escaped into the Void with the help of the colony's Executioner, a mistreated master harmon called Player. While I learned about bein' a wah-drone, the colony trekked on foot 'cross the Void to a hidden cavern seekin' after a myth pulled from the Great Library, lookin' for stowaway clues from a tale-spin called the Storydown Tree that claimed a way 'cross the great billows of wah to freedom.

As the drone-dwellin's moved to the outlander's Enclave on the billows, a small group of us split off to follow after my gentors and the colonists, to rescue any survivors and bring back the fat about the new land. We found the remains of the master harmon, Jon Player at the penal colony, poisoned slow by contaminated food sent by the Assembly. But he'd left me a light cube filled with his illegal harmons from the afore-times as a final-on gift, along with his harmon-box and a map to track our gentors to the hidey the ancients had left.

Fendin' off attacks by strange four-legged beasts, we found the caverns and the survivors, though they were near-starvin' and beat down, and learned that the beasts had killed many colonists 'long the journey, includin' my Da. But we were special-favored to find my Mims and Charly's Da and Mims alive. We used their knowin' and the last clues we brought with us to gather the skinny left by the ancients on some strange box-on-box

sun-powered machines, transferrin' it all onto our own light cubes. We hoped it was enough to see us 'cross the billows and on to the promised land of freedom.

As earth-changes swirled and picked up their pace of tearin' the land apart, Keb teamed with the drone-dwellin' healer, McGee, switchin' from drone to the healin' arts. Charly teamed with our new-found friend, Mik the tracker. I was teamed, but not yet bonded as mate with the gentle blonde giant, Stokes

Stokes and I'd ready-on faced fierce trials together, bein' trapped in a Void storm with enormous series of quakes, near-losin' our lives, the transport and the wah we'd collected durin' the last sortie. But there were things 'bout me that were hard for Stokes to take, like my constant need for knowin', 'long with a capacity for findin' trouble, and of late he'd been pullin' away.

To twist things more, Commander Mika allowed he should have made known his interest my first day in the dwellin's. He and Stokes had lost their mates, String and Serta, a year and a half past to a spidy attack on a wah sortie, and I was beginnin' to touch that Stokes would never get over losin' String.

But puttin' our personal frets on hold, we turned to survivin'. Not knowin' if the Assembly and the city-brights were out trackin' for us yet, but certain that our time was short, we quick-loaded the survivin' colonists into the transports and Mik's tracker-machine and raced like the wind for the outlander's Enclave.

\* \* \*

## **The End of Spidy**

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## **The Beginnin' of The Billows**

### **Chapter 1**

It was the second day out, late mid-day and we'd stopped to rest and push wah on the colonists. Most of them were turnin' some stronger, but I could see my Mims was fadin'.

"Mims, you have to eat," I pleaded, bracin' her to sit up. A faint smile flicked 'cross thin grey lips as she shook her head slight.

"No, Skoshi," her voice rasped out weak. "I've done what needed to be. We found the Storydown Tree and got the skinny from it. And you brought the final clue from the Great Library. You've come a grow-up in these months apart like I knew you would. You've made a home with Stokes and Commander Mika and it's for you to voyage to the new land, not me. Truth-tell, I simple hung on after your Da and Player died 'cause I knew you'd come. Now I've seen you safe, I've no wish to go on-." Her voice trailed to nothin' and her bot laxed limp.

I wanted to make her stay, tell her she'd touch better soon, but I could see the light goin' out in her eyes.

"Mims, I brought you somethin'," I said quiet, my chest squeezin' down with the hurt of losin' her. I pulled out the light cube containin' Player's harmons and started

them out soft and sweet, readin' aloud Player's last message he'd left on the light pad in PC249, just afore he died.

*Skoshi,*

*I've not got but a few more days. Pain spreads each hour. Have known peace these past weeks, but also torment with your absence--not knowin' if you're well or in danger. I dreamed you were buried in a quake. Fretted over it for three days. Foolish, yes? If you're readin' this, you've done all I could hope for and more. Find your Mims. Find the new land. And Forgive. Don't carry the Assembly's hate or sickness with you. You're all the family I'll ever have, like my own chile. Take my violin. Give it to your firstborn.*

*'Member me. S'long to you and your Mims.*

*Jon Player, Master of Harmon*

\* \* \*

Gratitude and s'prise welled from Mims' eyes and trickled down her face, but she bare-squeezed my hand once afore turnin' her head toward the pure clear sounds of Player's magic harmons.

I watched, helpless, as her eyes closed a final time. Her breathin' slowed, till it stopped altogether on the last note of the first harmon.

The Commander and Stokes had been watchin' and moved up aside of me. Stokes reached down and cradled my Mims, liftin' her gentle-easy from me in his massive wooly-blond arms. Commander Mika put an arm round me for comfort and we slow-walked a ways into the Void. We dug a hollow for her on the lee side of a dune, knowin' the afternoon winds would cover her deep with shiftin' sands.

"Thanks, Stokes, Commander. For bein' here," was all I could say. They stood apart, respectin' my need for silence, then as by some unspoken word, we turned as one back to camp. The others had gone quiet and still with my Mims' death. Or maybe it was the bittersweet notes of Player's harmons comin' from the light cube that tweaked their heartstrings. As the last of a harmon died in the hot empty air, we all turned in for a rest until the final night's journey, one that would bring us to the billows and the outlander's Enclave.

\* \* \*

I rode with Stokes that night, but my thoughts were far away from the moment, sortin' through the rocks that life had strewn in my path. Teamin' three months ago with the wooly blonde wah-drone drivin' next to me had been the best even-on thing I'd ever done. He'd fair-taught me everythin' I knew of import, about survivin', collectin' wah, and most-all, about thinkin' my way through things, of lookin' at a problem from all directions till the answer appeared. We'd made a good team and I'd thought it would come eventual to bondin', be forever, but Da and Mims' deaths had me seein' nothin' lasts forever.

Plus, I was touchin' more each day that Stokes liked bein' teamed with me, but didn't want to bond and simple didn't no how to say it. Mika had made it plain that as long as Stokes and I were teamed, he'd make no move, even if he'd made a mistake not claimin' me the day I came to the dwellin', as was his right. They both tugged hard at my heart, each for different reasons, and I didn't want to choose. Did I even have the choice of choosin'? It seemed that if someone wanted me, they'd have made it known by now. I was surrounded by bein's I cared deep about, yet had never felt more alone. Falling-wah! It was coo-awful hard to be a grow-up.

“Best catch some sleep, Skoshi,” Stokes spoke soft into my wanderin’s. “We’ve a short night ahead of us, then a long day on the morrow. There’ll be chaos at the outlander’s site with everyone wantin’ to know what we’ve found. I’m thinkin’ we won’t be gettin’ much down time from here out.”

“Yeah, Stokes, you’re right. I’ve been tryin’ to lax, but my head’s full of too many changes in too short a time and it’s all spinnin’ round like a vortex in the Void,” I admitted to part of what was botherin’ me, sighin’.

He reached a burly paw ‘cross to pat my arm. “You’re doin’ fine, lil’ bit, just fine. You flex at change better than any bein’ I know, and that lil’ head of yours just keeps poppin’ with new ideas. Most times too fast for me to keep up.”

His blue eyes held mine. “A bit of comfort and sleep is all you need, lil’ bit, to bring you back to center. And if I could, I would. But tellin’ you is all I can give for now. I-- I’m sorry.”

Gratitude at bein’ accepted, for bein’ an equal and part of a team was as good as it gets, but the pleasin’ thoughts were soon overshadowed by wishin’ I was true-on wanted. The wah spilled unbidden out my eyes and down my face, makin’ me mad. I’d leaked more wah in the past month than my life entire and it was time for it to stop “Thanks, Stokes. For everythin’,” I croaked, swipin’ the tears rough away. “I’ll be right now. I’m just tired.”

“Certain you are, lil’ bit. Now you rest. I’ll wake you in three to spell me.” He swallowed hard a couple times and turned his face quick-back to watch the track, but I could tell from the mist in his eyes, he was touchin’ on somethin’ hard he wanted to say.

Then and there, I determined I’d make myself good enough for someone to want me. There had to be somethin’ I simple hadn’t hit on to make things right. I put the lean-back in full recline, turnin’ on my side away from him. Noise from the transport’s engines filled the silence for the longest time, but just as I was driftin’ off, I heard him whisper, “I’m tryin’, lil’ bit.” I frowned, wonderin’ what that meant, or why it was so hard to be round me, then curled up into a ball and fell into a no-dream sleep.

## Chapter 2

“We’re most there, Stokes,” I spoke soft, reachin’ ‘cross to light-shake his shoulder. I kept one hand on the controls, but my eyes were on my team-mate. He’d restless-groaned and fretted through his sleep-time.

Stokes blinked and stretched. The four hours hadn’t been near-enough ‘cause I could still see tired dark shadows under his eyes, and new creases in the laugh lines. He pulled the lean-back upright and rotated his neck, poppin’ the bones so loud it made me wince, then he sat up straighter, comin’ ‘lert.

“What’s that smell?” he asked, rubbin’ his arms with a frown.

“It’s the billows, Stokes. The salty-wah. It’s in the air, everywhere. We came up on it over an hour past and it’s comin’ through the filters even-on. And look, Stokes, it’s turned the sky blue! I don’t know how, but we passed from hazy yellow to clear in the space of an hour, and the sky is blue! And the wah, Stokes! You can smell it, feel it on the skin. Isn’t it full-wonder!”

“It’s full-different,” he growled, the puzzled frown still in place. “Makes it hard to breathe.” He stared out the screen at the comin’ dawn, watchin’ the deep blue line that separated sand from sky come closer and bigger, then shook his head in amaze as it grew to fill our vision.

The colonists stirred at the back of the transport, rollin’ off their bunks and makeshift pallets. They crowded up toward the front with us, eager to spy a view of what had been just a tale-spin till now. I heard gasps and murmurs as the vastness of it sunk in. The risin’ red-orbed sun stained sky and wah alike with an on-fire crimson till it popped free of the wah and chased away dark shadows from the land. And three was wah, far as the eye could see. First-on glitter-red from the sun, then it turned black, then deep blue, then a clear blue-green as the sun climbed quick above. And the sky stayed blue. It was the most 'mazing gift I'd ever-on had.

We came up closer on it and I could see great movin’ waves of it. Not hard like driftin’ sand dunes, more like it was alive, with slow swellin’ tumbles that climbed high and higher to undulatin’ curls, then crashed down in froths of white, with blue and green under-sparkles like jewels on a holo, then formin’ again till they swept in and were swallowed mysterious by crystal white sand. One by one, the transports rolled to a stop. Everyone on board quick-spilled out onto high dunes damp-brown with wah to stare at the full-miracle of it. Some of the colonists fell to their knees and wept, silent tears streakin’ down care-worn faces.

No one spoke for the longest time.

Commander Mika was the first and even he had to clear his throat a couple times afore the words tumbled out. “We made it,” he said, simple. “We’re but ten kilometers from the outlander’s Enclave, and we could go on in, but I’m of a mind we all need the rest and the quiet. I propose to stay put, even-on for just half the day. Scanners have shown no activity behind us, so we’re safe from the brights. There’s plenty of work waitin’ for us on the other end and no need to rush to it.”

Unable to tear my eyes away from the marvel of so much wah, so much color and wonder, I nodded, then looked round at the all-stops quiet. The entire mob was of the same bent, and grateful too, simple-on able to nod their heads.

Forcin’ myself to responsible, I turned away from the temptation of color, jewel-sparkles and light, and quick-climbed back aboard the transport, checkin’ the sniffer again, then the scanners. When everythin’ still showed clear, I hauled out the shelters and supplies, quick settin’ up a comfort nest and tent-cover ranged round the transport so the colonists could retreat from the sun as it climbed. I looked up and saw Stokes, Mik and the Commander doin’ the same with the other machines, like we were on the same track, no words needed.

But to a one, the others were movin’ slow-down to the billows, touchin’, tastin’ it, draggin’ their feet through the ebb and flow of it, and laughin’ out loud, like chiles without a care. It had passed so long since I’d heard any of them laugh, I most cried. A hand came gentle-down on my shoulder. I turned to look up at the Commander and saw he touched the same.

“We’ve done our duty, lil’ bit. I’ll stand first watch with Mik. He’s not as taken with the wah as the rest of us. We’ve ready-on double-run the sniffers to check for spidys and our sensors show no other life-forms in the area and nothin’ from the Void. You and Stokes go on down. You can relieve us in an hour.”

I flashed a grin of thanks, stripped down to my under-tunic, then sprinted down the sandy incline, Stokes catchin' up and keepin' easy pace with me. We hit the wah at the same time just as a swell half my height crashed into the sand and took our feet out from under us. I came up laughin' and saw Stokes' scrabblin' for purchase, his face full of s'prise.

"It's cold, like the wah-hollow, but it tastes like salt!" he sputtered.

I grinned back, "Yes. Full wonder, isn't it?"

He pushed the wet strands of hair away from my eyes. "You're full-wonder as this wah, lil' bit," he said, a strange look passin' over his face. He pressed me to his chest so fierce and sudden it fair took my breath. When he final let go, my smile traded for concern at the torment I saw in his face

"I'm afraid I'm goin' to lose you, Skoshi," he said, chokin' on the words. "I've dreamed it three days on now, just like I did with String afore she disappeared. I can't go through it again. I won't." His voice grew harsh, his blue eyes anger-filled, even-on desperate. "You're not leavin' my side even-on for a moment from here out. We'll beat this new threat, whatever it is, and come out still teamed."

Afore I could reply, a bigger swell crashed over us, pullin' our feet out from under us once more and out a bit farther, in 'tween a crashin' of swells, where the sand grew higher. The movement of the wah was stronger on either side of us, most like an eddy of wind in the dunes, but you could see it pullin' and swirlin' every which way, stirrin' the sand up in circles round our feet, which sudden-looked bigger in the clear-as-air wah.

I tore my mind from the full-wonder sight and turned focus back on my team-mate. "Stokes," I growled, thumpin' his chest light with a fist, "I'm not leavin' you and I didn't make it this far to bow out or disappear. And if you think you're goin' to trade me in for someone with a more shocking bot, you'd better think again. We're a team till I say we're not."

I don't know whether it was the thumpin' of his chest, or the threat of bot-harm should he think of another mate, but it broke the serious. He roared with laughter, then without warnin', caught me up, and tossed me high in the air like I was light as a dust mote, catchin' me easy on the way down. He let his hands stray down my bot, his eyes followin'.

"Stokes, not in front of everyone," though I could see that most were caught up in their own wonders. "Somethin' that special should be left for private," I pleaded.

He nodded, not quite shamed, and let me go, but there was a coo-strong hunger in his eyes I wasn't sure would wait till private time and it somehow pleased me, eased some of the fret over not bein' wanted.

We spent the next half-hour explorin' the ways of wah, not goin' out any deeper than I could stand. Then Stokes, full-weary, stretched out on the sand to soak up sun and warmth. Within minutes, he was deep-sleepin', his face laxed like I hadn't seen since we'd met. Maybe the Commander was right. Lookin' after me was a hard job. Even-on, I was glad to see him rest.

I looked down the strip of sand, takin' a head count out of habit. Full-tired from ridin' the wah-swells, the vets and most of the colonists had stretched out like Stokes to soak up the warm wah-laden air, their first fret-free time in--maybe ever. I caught sight of the last three of our group walkin' down the way, pickin' up things from the sand from time to time. It was hard to see them clear, though the distance wasn't that great, and I

wondered if the air was so filled with wah, that it created a natural wah-mist curtain. I wondered if wah worked like sand, fillin' the air with mist 'stead of dust, and made a mind-note to ask Sam about it, and how it worked.

Satisfied, I trotted up the dunes to relieve the Commander.

"All safe and accounted for, Sir," I reported, leapin' atop the transport. I brushed sand off and struggled into my lunge suit, the wah-laden air makin' it tough to pull on over the tunic. Final-on, I turned to Mika. "It's full-wonder, Commander. Better than a wah-mist and never-endin'. You have to try it."

He'd been watchin' me shinny into the lunge suit, a coo-strange look on his face. But then he jumped down light from the transport and smiled, handin' me up his webber.

"I intend to do just that, lil' bit. Thanks for cuttin' your time short for me."

I lowered my head and could feel the red creepin' up my neck at the praise. "It's my duty, Commander. You're the one needs thankin', for lettin' us all go sample the billows first while you stood watch." I waited while he struggled with somethin' goin' on inside him he needed to say. Then he seemed to shrug it off.

"Thanks," he said again. He stripped out of his lunge suit and I had to turn my head away. Maybe it was just the tired, but it was all I could do not to fight the decision I'd come to about stayin' with Stokes.

"Steady-on then, vet, and keep a sharp eye out," he mumbled, obvious touchin' to some of my fret'.

Resolute, I retrieved some wah packets and settled in atop the tracker's dome with Mik. We watched the Commander sprint down to sample the swells with first s'prise, then relish, findin' he could actual-on float on top of the wah and ride it in to meet the dunes like he was light as a wah-drop himself.

"You should try it Mik," I 'sclaimed. "It's better than a wah-mist, or even the wah-hollow, ten times over. Asides, aren't you hot under all those clothes," touchin' in dismay at the layers of tunic over lunge-suit over tunic.

He shook his shaggy head, dark face wrinkl'n into a wary smile and crossed his legs, the sand-boots and leggin's rubbin' soft 'cross the metalloy of the tracker.

"Charly's been up twice ready-on to talk me down, now that her gentors are settled in easy. But it's just not natural, all that wah, like it could suck you under and no one would know the better."

I looked out over the forever blue, seein' it through his eyes. "Yes, I s'pect you're right, Mik, and I s'pect too, that we'll have full-on enough of it afore we see the new land. But havin' lived in a PC all my life, with nothin' but grit and sand and grey, the full-beauty sight of it is pure too much to resist. Asides, if there is somethin' to fret over, how can we fight it or make it work for us unless we first know or understand it?"

Mik swiveled his head to stare at me full-on, s'prise in his face. "Don't you pop out with the thoughts right on track. I knew you were somethin' special the first I laid eyes on you hidin' in that storage bin at the PC. You're right, lil' bit. And I need the knowin' of what's out there if I'm goin' to team up with Charly and do her any good in the crossin'."

He looked once more out over the horizon of wah, his face fierce-gear'd for the kinda fight I'd seen on the wah-drones' when they'd hit the spidy nests. With no other word, he stepped down off the tracker, stripped of all three layers, leggin's and boots, and

sprinted easy-on down the dunes to find Charly, his muscles ripplin' shiny and dark in the sun. She was right. He did have a shocking bot.

What in falling-wah was skewed with me, I wondered. All I could think about was shocking bots and mates.

\* \* \*

I checked the sniffers and scanners each ten minutes, enjoyin' bein' responsible most as much as the quiet and alone. Stokes and the Commander rested on the sand for another hour, then joined me as the colonists slow-returned for food and wah packets.

As the other vets took care of the colonists, the three of us moved into the Commander's transport and set about a plan of how to split up the knowin' from the Storydown Tree when we reached the outlander's Enclave.

The Commander allowed he'd work with outlander Sam on navigation. He'd been studyin' it some and was better at the numbers than either of us, and less liable even-on to vex the Healer, him showin' a bit of temper from time to time. Stokes and I would gather a team to seek after the wah-vessel hidey described by the ancients, check them for worthiness when we found them and split up the out-fittin' of them for the crossin'. We were in agree we needed to 'stablish a common meetin' place at night for sharin' the day's skinny with the entire mob, so no single vet would hold a secret that might mean survival or death for the others.

"Common knowin' is what will see this through," the Commander said one final time. "No more secrets or hidin' things away. That's what gave The Assembly power over us. Skoshi, I'm countin' on you to bring the knowin' together for everyone to see. Even-on if they learn just the principles of what we're doin' and why, it'll give each one a hand in it and they're more apt to be of help when help's needed."

"If you say so, Sir," I gulped, but I could feel my eyes go big with the burden.

Mika threw back his head and laughed straight-out, his teeth showin' full and white, the blue-black swath of lengthenin' hair shimmerin' in the sun shinin' hard-down through the dome. It was the first time I'd seen him full-laxed, ever.

"Don't fret, so, lil' bit," he grinned final-on, clampin' me on the shoulder. "I wouldn't hand it to you if I wasn't certain-on you could do it. You've a way," he said, his head cocked and sudden-serious, so the grey eyes covered me at a slant, "of roundin' things up simple and bringin' even-on hidden truths to the light, puttin' them in simple speech so others can grasp. It's a rare gift, and I intend to use it, for the good of all. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir," I mumbled, feelin' the color come hot and red to my face from the un'spected praise. "I'll work hard not to let you down."

"You listen and believe, lil' bit. He's hit it true-on," Stokes agreed with Mika, smilin' at me with the pride of both teammate and mentor. "You'll fit to it like sand to a dune."

I tried to take the burden on as part of growin' into a team, but it fretted me through the after-day while we loaded up the transports and headed out. What if I missed somethin' important? What if somethin' I didn't 'splain well caught someone out and they died? What if someone challenged my teachin's? What did I know, in truth? I was just a PC throw-away, bare even three months out from bein' a know-nothin' newt. The doubt ate at my insides till it made me mad and I took in a big breath to re-think.

On the track to the Enclave, it came to me. I simple didn't much take to the idea of command over others. Then it hit me sudden-hard, like a blow from a spidy claw. Not command over them, I thought, but bein' responsible for their lives, their well-bein'.

This is what the Commanders and Stokes lived with even-on all the time. No wonder they looked bone-weary half the time and stayed separate from the others. If they let their guard down for more than a flash, someone could die from the lax of it. I groaned a little too loud with the knowin' and the burden.

Stokes looked over at me with a sad knowin' smile in his blue eyes. "Command is heavy, lil' bit. But you're goin' to do yourself proud. I'm sorry you have to grow into it this quick, but I believe you were born to it. And if there's one thing I trust full-on more than you, it's the Commander's pick of the best. I've never known him to be wrong."

He reached a hand 'cross 'tween the lean-backs, took mine in his big paw and squeezed. I clung on like a chile to a Mims, glad of the comfort.

We topped a dune a few minutes later and rolled to a stop in dismay as the scanner started beepin' insistent that there were life-forms out there. We were at the right coordinates, at the top edge of what I estimated was a one hundred fifty maybe two hundred meter-high line of cliffs, made of what looked like was hard rock, but there were no bein's in sight. Stokes commed the Commander.

"Do you get any readin's off the scanner for the drone dwellin's?" he asked.

"That I do," the Commander said, "But I think you'd better take a look behind us first."

We quick-whirled to look out the back of the dome and were 'stonished to see drones by the dozens pourin' from trap-doors in the sand, webbers in hand.

"Mother-of-wah", Stokes 'sclaimed, as they continued to flush out, formin' ranks behind us. "A full two thirds of the drones must have joined from the dwellin's. How are we ever goin' to take this many?"

### Chapter 3

Commander Jacks from Drone-Dwellin' 4 hailed Mika and showed him how to enter the Enclave through a hidey at the base of the cliff down by the billows. Our transports and the tracker followed Mika's machine down the directed route, 'long a narrow hidden ledge down the steep cliff-side to the billows-sand, final-on rollin' into the Enclave. It was an enormous cavern, close to three hundred meters round and at least twenty meters high, smooth worn by wind, wah, or bein', I wasn't certain, the rock a dark shiny black. Failin' light from a sinkin' sun scattered faint into the space. Lookin' round, I saw separate light sources recessed 'long the walls that were just beginnin' to glow.

"Look, Stokes," I pointed, "the outlander's got an isolated power grid from somewhere. I wonder how he fuels it?"

Stokes eyebrows went up, lookin' amused as he pulled the transport up aside of our group, noses headed out. He kept at a distance from the other groups of transports, a matter of standard safety against attack or a quick exit, though with the narrow openin', I thought, we'd still be trapped by any frontal attack.

“You just keep askin’ those questions, lil’ bit,” Stokes said. “We need to know. You ‘maze me though, that lil’ head forever askin’, turnin’ every single thing over till it fits, when by rights, all ya’ should be thinkin’ about is food and a warm bed.”

I shrugged, frownin’ “S’just me, Stokes. I can’t help for it.”

He grinned wide, tweakin’ my cheek. “No fret, lil’ bit. It’s one of the things everyone even-on likes you for. I just fret you’ll be wearin’ yourself out with over-do,” and he held up a hand to stop my protest about bein’ coddled, “and that’s just me, lil’ bit,” he said, turnin’ it round on me, “so get used to it.”

I nodded and thumped him hard on the shoulder with my fist, grinnin’, knowin’ I couldn’t make a dent in that solid giant’s frame if I’d wanted to. He raised the dome, then turned toward the colonists.

“We’re here, final-on,” he said simple. “You’ll be sleepin’ on your own cots tonight, safe.” A murmur of gratitude rippled from them as I clambered topside to hand them up and out.

Handin’ the last colonist up to off-load, I turned at a gatherin’ noise, s’prised to see a mob of drones descendin’ quick down hand-hewn stone steps ‘long one wall of the giant cavern. They were hailin’ us and once they reached floor level, headed our way at a quick-step. They surrounded and embraced the Commander, poundin’ him with questions and glad-handin’ all at once. He held up a hand for silence and asked for space, motionin’ Stokes and me to join him.

A noise in the back of the mob sounded off like a sweet trill of Player’s harmon, partin’ the vets like an unseen hand. Outlander-Healer Sam strode up, lookin’ fit, fine and younger than he had in the burden of the city-brights, layers of a long brown robe flowin’ round him of some soft-touch material, a short metal tube hangin’ round his neck by a string, which is where the noise must have come from, as I ‘membered seein’ the Assembly guards wearin’ them---called a---whistle.

“Well-done, Mika, Stokes, lil-bit,” the outlander said, glad-handin’ us, his voice full of unstrained joy. “I take it from viewin’ the colonists that your mission was successful? They’re safe and you’ve found the final clues to the wah-vessels?”

“That we did and have, Sam,” Mika said loud so all could hear.

A roar of approval went up and it was some time afore Mika and Sam could quiet them for the next skinny.

Mika jumped back up on he deck of the closest transport and spoke direct and clear, the growin’ mob goin’ to quick-quiet to hang on each word.

“We’ve all risked much and come a ways ready-on and you deserve to hear your future. But we owe the rescued colonists our gratitude as well as our future. They’ve seen it rough these past months--no--years, and we need to get them settled first. We’ve many things and wonders to tell you, even-on a way ‘cross the billows. But if you’ll hand us just the morrow with Healer Sam, and after, another day or two with your chosen Commanders to get things bent and headed proper, then we’ll have a general meetin’ with a plan to unfold to you. No secrets, common knowin’ for one and all who want the knowin’. There are weeks, even-on months maybe, of hard work ahead and you’ll be needin’ all the understandin’ you can glean afore we strike out for the new land.”

I saw the mob go dead-still for a beat of the heart, then two, to the point of frettin’ they hadn’t heard the Commander right. Then a roar went up, followed by a clamor that wouldn’t be stopped, so glad-on were they to have the winnin’ in sight. Midst a constant

mid-sized roar of voices talkin' all as one, drones took to the duty at hand and began pluckin' the colonists up one by one, some I grinned inward, against their will, the vets not even-on lettin' them walk to their new settles. Others picked up the belongin's and supplies and walked us up the steep stone steps into the bowels of the Enclave, glad-handin' and rough-housin' all round.

I stared at the steps as we mounted. There was no way Sam had done all this, even on if he'd been here a lifetime and had a squad of outlanders to help. This had to be a leave-over from the ancients. At top of the landing we entered another big cavern, what looked and smelled like had been made the rec room, but I heard the vets callin' it somethin' new, a "dinin' hall", with tables and sitters lined out in rows, and my stomach grumbled in hunger at the after-odor of food. The chamber was some fifteen meters high and thirty 'cross each way, with a floor uneven but worn smooth, all of the same black rock. Portals branched off it in all directions and I calc'd there must be dozens of rooms, all lit dull by the recessed lightin'.

I hailed Charly, Mik, Keb and McGee deep in the mob, vowin' we'd meet up again on the morrow if we got separated durin' evenin' meal. Catchin' back up with the Commander, Stokes and Sam, I was just in time to hear them plannin' a late-evenin' session to take the edge off the skinny. Sam said he was sorrowed he couldn't allow us rest first, but he was that filled with excite he couldn't wait for the morrow. I pulled Sam aside a moment, handin' him the cube of Player's harmons, 'splainin' what they were and askin' if he could have someone dupe it for each of the dwellin's, not wantin' to risk losin' the harmons to damage afore everyone had the chance to hear.

Sam hugged me close and hard, chokin' up some. "Lil' bit," he rasped, "I thank you. It is a gift beyond measure, and I know all will be glad for it."

Commander Niko, now in charge of our old drone-dwellin', DD-7, showed us to another chamber deeper inside the rock. Stokes and I stowed our gear in a tent prepared for us next to Mika's, then answered his call to attend him in checkin' out the Enclave.

"Where did all the doin's come from, Mika?" Stokes wondered aloud. "There's more here than just what could be gleaned from the dwellins' or a few sorties into the brights. And lil' bit's ready-on questionin' his source of power and the steps. Could this have been a hidey from the afore times?"

"Good questions, even-on, Stokes," Mika puzzled. "Just one of many to pose to our friend Sam."

"And where are we goin' to get food to feed everyone?" I asked. "Are his green-farms big enough to support this many?"

"More good questions, lil' bit," Mika frowned.

The drones had settled themselves well inside the series of caverns, whether hand-hewn or eroded natural, I still couldn't tell true-on. But they'd turned the space into a dwellin' and home. Rows and aisles of tents were laid out in order, personal dwellins' on one side of each row, supplies and equipment on the other, everythin' close to hand for a quick break-down and sortie if need be, and organized with the discipline of a good wah-team.

"Our Niko's done well," Mika approved, eyein' the group of tents with our old insignia on them, the aisles clear, tent flaps closed against the ever-present wah in the air.

It took even-on an hour for the inspection, what with all the glad-handin' and praise from each group of wah-drones we encountered. We learned Sam had told them the

caverns had been worn out over eons of time by underground flows called wah-rivers that eventual spilled out to the billows. The caverns had later been hewn larger, more regular, and fitted by the ancients to make them livable. The idea of so much wah as a wah-river runnin' strong, hard and long enough to wear away solid rock fair took my mind, but I set it to the side for ponderin' later.

Bone-weary, we headed toward where Commander Niko told us was the outlander's space, and I was thinkin' I'd missed seein' my first sunset on the billows, hopin' there'd be others.

Sam welcomed us just outside his oversized tent, bigger than fifteen or twenty of the vet's tents put together. "I've been helpin' McGee, Keb, Charly and Mik get the colonist's settled," he said, and shown them the greenfarms. "They've eaten and I sent them and your other vets to turn in for a hard-earned rest. And I've shown the other dwellin' healers how to start everyone on a strengthenin' treatment of kelp-soup."

My brows went up in question at the new word and Sam's face lit at the interest, seemin' to take delight in my wonderin'.

"Kelp is a most-on free-floatin', green-growin' plant from the billows, Skoshi, that tosses up on the sand after a storm. When made into a broth, it has healin' properties that restores the sick to health in short time."

"That's full-wonder, Sam, thanks! Does it taste good? And how does anythin' grow in salty wah? I thought salt was certain death, even-on for plants. And if there's billows plants, are there billows beasties, too, like what the machines said? And how often do the storms come through," thinkin' sudden on my nightmare about bein' lost in a storm of salty-billows.

Mika and Stokes laughed full-out as Sam held up a hand in protest. "I can see we'd better move inside and settle. We may need more than a day or two to fill up that mind of yours, lil' bit. And we will, all in good time, my wonder-why friend," he laughed, ruffin' my hair. "You ask excellent questions. But hold them if you will, till we catch up with the past week, afore we move on to the now and future."

I ducked my head in shame, wonderin' why I couldn't keep my wonderin' to home till the right time.

"Lil-bit." I heard Sam's deep voice commandin' me to look at him. I raised my eyes, holdin' back wah-leaks, the tired catchin' up with me.

"Don't ever be shamed of your yearnin' to know. You've more right than anyone here to ask questions, what with bein' denied even-on a birthright. And you've been the key that all this," he motioned his hand to take in everythin' round us, "has turned round and on. I don't know why the fates have chosen such a bit of a thing to lead us all to the new land, but you seem up to the task and we're ready-on to listen to what you've gleaned from the machines and to your thoughts. But I must ask somethin' of you first." He paused, givin' me time to consider.

"Yes, Healer," I answered firm, standin' straighter. "Anythin' I can do, I will."

He smiled, reachin' out to stroke my cheek. "I don't know why you catch the heart so easy, lil' bit. I think it's 'cause you listen to and respect each one with your own heart, 'stead of your head. And you have more than your share of carin' for others. But I also know you're quick of wit and limb, faster than most, maybe all of us. And there's the rub. You've calc'd out a problem and are movin' on constant to the next thing afore most of us have got our minds round the first. It'll stand you in good stead as a leader, in

plannin' and carin' for those under you, but I need to ask for your patience these few days while the rest of us catch up."

He'd said it so kind and full-up with praise, I didn't know what to say. It was like findin' a Da again, but easy-on as a friend and equal too. Too many changes, and me right in the middle of them this time. Leadin'? What did I know about leadin' anyone? I frowned. "I'm not certain I'm all you say, Healer, but I'll do my best to keep my tongue to home and learn the right times to ask."

He shook his head, as if I'd missed the gist. "I know you will, Skoshi," he said gentle, smilin'. "Now, let's move inside, out of the damp. My bones and mind will work better with a warm fire and a bit of food."

I was still thinkin' on his words as we entered the oversized tent, most big enough for a dinin' hall in a drone dwellin', so Mika bumped up against me when I sudden-stopped, full-shocked at the sight, my mouth fallin' slack-open. There was color everywhere. Material hung in great draped swaths from the center peg, strung out to the edges and separatin' the tent into a half-dozen semi-private compartments. I couldn't help but want to touch everythin', takin' in the full-wonder of it like air.

There was a table and sitters, seven, I counted, in one portion, and seven bright-colored comforts and padded's in another, and I was glad to see Sam had kept to the blessings of numbers. There was a room stacked with light cubes in another--and--too much more to take in at once. Sam gentle-pushed me over to the table and had us all sit as he pulled out food and wah packets that looked as fresh as from the city-bright vendors. We dug in as he walked over to the center peg afore he started the heater.

\* \* \*

"Oh, me," I groaned at the tastes teasin' my tongue into doin' flip-flops for more as we helped ourselves. "I'll never get over the flavors. And none of it tastes like grit!"

Mika and Stokes chuckled, agreein', though I doubted they'd ever tasted grit. Full to poppin', I pushed away and s'cused myself, askin' if I could look round.

"Certain, lil' bit," the Healer smiled, a softness in his eyes that was rare there.

I walked through the tent, marvelin' at the collection of full-beauty things from the city-bright marts. Hand carved wonders, bright splashes of color on hard-surface that made scenes of chiles laughin' and playin'. And the tent was chock-full of things I didn't recognize, that Keb had never got round to 'splainin' on my one short day free in the brights. And the light-cubes. I couldn't grasp the havin' of so many, of so much learnin' free for access anytime you wanted.

Shamed, I found wah streamin' down my eyes that I couldn't stop as the others moved into the center open space of the tent and took comfort in the bright-colored and invitin' over-stuffed padded's on the floor.

"Skoshi," the outlander called me to join them, to start relayin' the gist of the skinny we'd found on the ancient's machines. I turned, not able to hide the wah leakin' from my eyes.

Sam beat Stokes and the Commander to it.

"What is it? What's skewed, chile?"

I shrugged my shoulders in misery, movin' quick-over and sinkin' to a blue padded 'tween Stokes and Mika.

"All my life," I fretted, "I've thirsted for knowin', choosin' it over grit or wah or even my gentors, and had so little of it. I fair-memorized the two cubes we had in the

colony. You've all these cubes in here, Sam, free for the askin', anythin' I want to know, past or present. Just thinkin' of it is overwhelmin'. I touch like I can't take it all in, like I won't live long enough to absorb it. There's so much learnin' to be done, and not enough hours in a day to do it. I'm afraid if I sleep too long, or spend too long on any one thing, somethin' full-wonder will pass me by and I'll never catch up to it." I ducked my head, embarrassed for lettin' them see inside me and where my fears lay.

Stokes couldn't seem to help himself. He reached 'cross and plucked me into his lap, wrappin' big arms round me in a protect, strokin' my hair. "Tarn sarn, lil'bit," he said, rockin' me easy, "Tarn sarn. You're just over-tired and worn out, that's all. You've been doin' plus-time on the work and doin' without sleep while the rest of us took it. By the morrow you'll be right, and strong as those billows of salty wah out there. You listen to Mika and Sam, here. They've been right about you from the outset."

Afore I could push away to ask what Stokes meant, the string of bells I'd seen at the tent entrance jingled, a sweet-on tinkle sound pure as a wah-mist.

"Enter," Sam said, the mask of flat, no-thought fallin' back 'cross his face.

A tall female walked in, so grace-filled she seemed to float without movin' her feet. Shy, she kept her face turned to the floor. A drape of blue material the color of the deep billows full-covered her head and part of her face, fallin' in folds over a white tunic down to the floor. She had a light cube and a recorder in her hand, and long grace-filled fingers lifted to hand the stuff off to Sam. But the cube and recorder dropped with a crash onto the bright splash of floor coverin's as she stood shock-still, her eyes havin' traveled up to the paddeds, starin' at Stokes and the Commander.

"String," I heard Stokes rasp.

"Stokes," she answered, then her head snapped back as if someone had hit her, her long thin bot shudderin' 'neath the tunic.

Her eyes glazed, growin' sudden big with terror and she disappeared out the tent, on a full-out run.

I was sudden-tumped and rolled to the floor as Stokes scrambled to follow after her, bellowin' her name, his big feet loud-poundin' hard down through the caverns. As one, Mika and I leapt to race after them with Sam followin' close behind.

Vets popped their heads from tents at Stokes' yellin'. As we passed they grabbed at lunge suits and fightin' gear, loud-poundin' on the run behind us, sensin' danger. Mika and I stayed even-on with each other in a dead-run, till we reached the lower entry cavern, Sam pressin' close behind. Stokes disappeared out the front and round the corner into the light of a full-bright moon, past 'stonished guards not knowin' who, what or if to shoot.

Roundin' the entry and spillin' out onto the strip of sand separatin' billows from cliff, I picked up better footin' and put on a sprint of speed, flyin' past first Mika, then Stokes, even his strong legs not keepin' up with the female's long thin ones.

Or her terror, I thought. I knew that look. I'd seen it in the PC. She needed to be stopped, was all I could think, afore she hurt herself. She was some twenty paces ahead, and still runnin' dead-on, the blue drape streamin' back behind her in undulatin' flutters, like a thing alive. I bent my mind to it and thought simple-on of pullin' even with her. When I final-on did, I matched my pace to hers, breathin' hard, but keepin' stride as if we were out for a walk. I looked over and up, thinkin', fallin'-wah, she's tall, and half-again

bigger than me. Just then, she came aware and flashed a glance over at me, so scared that the whites showed huge, but with a bit of puzzle in her eyes as she took me in.

How do I stop her without hurtin' her, I fretted? I grinned my biggest ever-on friend-grin and panted out, "Good on ya', String. You're a quick runner. I'm lookin' for Wah-dwellin' DD-7 and Stokes. Could you hand me out?" grinnin' wider, tryin' to look hopeful. It worked. She pulled up stiff-straight to a halt that was so sudden-quick I feared she'd tump over. Her hands went limp to her sides, and she stared at me, breathin' hard as I braked ahead of her and quick-turned back. Her eyes raked me up and down, as if not knowin' what kind of wah-crazy I was.

Stokes bellowed her name just then and she spun to see what I saw. Bearin' down on her like a sand-storm from the Void were Mika and Stokes in the lead of half the dwellin's wah drones, all aimin' straight for her and armed to the teeth. She did the simple-on sensible thing, and crumpled, even-on slow and grace-filled, like a string floatin' down to wah, her eyes flutterin' shut against the night.