

The Plateau

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The Plateau

voices of the earth

MAUREEN DUDLEY

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Word Keepers, Inc
Published by Hawk's Cry Publications



Word Keepers, Inc.

Bibliocast/Sat Nam Imprints/Imagine Books/Hawk's Cry Publications

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As both a children's book and scientific illustrator, Erin E. Hunter specializes in entomological and botanical illustrations. She has taught botanical illustration and field sketching at UC Santa Cruz and teaches workshops at local venues. Her portfolio includes print and online design projects for clients ranging from marketing firms to culinary groups to educational organizations—and she's drawn insects under a microscope for the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History. Erin lives with her husband on California's Monterey Peninsula. When she is not sketching and painting, she tends to flowers, fruit trees, and vegetables in her backyard garden. www.eehunter.com

The Plateau (acrylic, 2012)

Animals:

Grizzly bear, *Ursus arctos horribilis*
White-rumped vulture, *Gyps bengalensis*
Gray wolf, *Canis lupus*
Sage grouse, *Centrocercus urophasianus*
Black-footed ferret, *Mustela nigripes*
Bull trout, *Salvelinus confluentus*

Long-billed curlew, *Numenius americanus*
Wyoming toad, *Bufo baxteri*
Honey bee, *Apis mellifera*

Plants (in foreground):

Desert yellowhead, *Yermo xanthocephalus*
Slender moonwort, *Botrychium lineare*

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is entirely coincidental.

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

ISBN-13: 978-0-97853939-9

ISBN-10: 0-9785393-9-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

First Edition

dedication

To Dave
for believing and so much more

and

in memory of Kilty

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the teachers I have had in my life.

I have been privileged to have had some remarkable people stand in front of me in a classroom. Each of them generously shared their knowledge, without hesitation, asking only that their students listen and learn, ask questions and search for the answers. I am especially grateful to my seventh grade science teacher, Sister Lois; my freshman high school English teacher, Miss Haag; and my Environmental Engineering professor and friend, Rod James.

Not all teachers are found in a classroom. There is always something more to learn. Thanks to Toni Holm, Publisher of Word Keepers, Inc., who for the last several years has imparted a great deal of her knowledge to me.

Not all teachers are obvious. I have had too many to list here but I appreciate all that I have learned and will endeavor to continue listening, questioning and searching.

I would also like to thank the Reader Reviewers that took the time and effort to read the manuscript and provide feedback. I appreciated the considered critiques. Thank you: Christine Andrew, George Edward, Kristen Fairgrieve, Teresa Espaniola, Barbra Espey, Esther M. Good, Melissa Lincoln, Danny Long, Kim Luyckx, Joshua McDaniel, Patricia Mutch, Kathleen O'Toole, Bob Schneider, and Teresa Untiedt.



Modern people interpret spirals in a lot of different ways, but in ancient Ireland it is believed that the spiral represented the Sun. One interpretation of the clockwise spiral is the Sun and harmony with the Earth.

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“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.”

—Rachael Carson, *Silent Spring*

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CHAPTER I

Catherine looked out at the vast expanse of prairie and the highway that stretched before her, which severed the land in two. Above the fluttering, wheat-colored grass, the sky was a gleaming, unbroken blue. A quick movement caught Catherine's attention, and she was just able to catch a glimpse of an antelope as it sprang behind a small ridge. Catherine smiled.

"What a gorgeous day," she said, before she heard the deep breathing coming from the passenger seat.

Catherine peered over at Henry, just for confirmation, and saw that his eyes were closed and his mouth slightly ajar. She stifled a laugh and tilted the rearview mirror to check on the backseat passenger. Connor had stretched himself out across the entire length of the backseat, obscuring his head and tail from her view, but she could see the dog's brindle chest rising and falling in the steady rhythm of sleep.

Catherine focused her attention back on the road and was startled to see that the sky was teeming with ominous storm clouds. In the rearview mirror, she could no longer see Connor. Catherine craned her neck around; the backseat was empty. She turned back around and reached for Henry, but there was no one in the passenger seat, and outside, the day had turned into night.

Catherine jerked awake. She'd been dreaming. It took her a minute to realize she had fallen asleep in her living room reading a pile of documents about global warming that she had not been able to get to at work, including

the one on her chest about the melting Arctic sea ice. She glanced at the date—March 5, 2004—and shook her head; she was over a month behind and the volume of information was increasing. She sat up. Her neck was stiff, and when she reached back to rub it, she felt the tieback she had used to pull her hair into a ponytail. She tugged it out, leaned forward, and massaged her neck and head. The phone, located on the divider between the kitchen and the dining room, started ringing. She jumped up off the couch, threw her long black hair back from her face and caught the edge of the coffee table with her little toe.

“Son-of-a!” she yelled, biting her lower lip as the phone continued to ring. It had to be Henry. He was the only one who would let the phone ring so long without getting frustrated that there was no voice-messaging system and hanging up. She grimaced and hobbled over and snatched up the receiver as she looked at the clock in the kitchen. Two-thirty in the afternoon.

“Hello,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Catherine?” a female voice asked.

“Brigit,” Catherine recognized her sister’s voice immediately. “What’s wrong?”



“OH MY GOD, CATHERINE!” Henry exclaimed, just as shocked as Catherine was by the news about her father.

“Brigit said he just collapsed. After everything he’s been through, how can it be his heart?”

The anguish in her voice made Henry feel helpless. “I’ll be on the first plane back,” he croaked.

“Henry,” she shook her head as though he could see her, “listen to me, it would take you too long to get here. Brigit said it’s pretty dicey. I need to leave now.”

The last thing he wanted was for her to be alone, but he also knew that the odds of getting a flight out before the morning was not good. “What flight are you taking?” he asked.

When she hesitated, he barked, “You’re not driving! Not on your own.” He waited, and when she still did not answer him, he exploded in alarm. “You *can’t* be serious! You can’t drive by yourself, not in your current frame

of mind. It's too far. You'll be driving at night. You could fall asleep. Please," he implored, "get a flight in the morning."

"Best-case scenario," Catherine responded in a controlled but soft tone, "a flight won't get me there until five in the afternoon. Best-case, Henry. If I drive, worst-case, I'll get there late morning."

"That isn't the worst-case, Catherine. The last thing your dad needs is you in a ditch somewhere."

"That is not helpful."

"I'm not trying to be helpful. I'm trying to be rational."

"My father is in the Intensive Care Unit; he's had a massive heart attack. There is nothing rational about this."

Henry sighed. "I know, Catherine, I know, but he needs you to get there safe and sound. I need you to get there safe and sound." When she didn't respond, he added, "Besides, you know how much you hate that road at night."

"I don't need *you* to remind me of that," Catherine snapped, thinking of the strange dream.

"The animals can be right next to the road and they're almost impossible to see until you're practically on top of them. And what about the other things that have cropped up out there at night?"

"*Things*, Henry?" she asked ominously.

"How would you like me to describe it, Catherine?"

"I don't want you to describe it at all, Henry."

"I'm just trying to get you to look at this reasonably, Catherine, please. There are a lot of long, lonely stretches, and there have been times when you've woken me up to say that you thought you saw . . . something."

"Well, you know it can be a lot of nothing out there and a person's imagination can get the better of them when there is no one to talk to," Catherine stated.

"Exactly, I won't be there to talk to you if you drive up to Montana by yourself." Henry wanted to add that she was not the type of person that let her imagination run amok, but he knew Catherine would not find that helpful.

"Henry, you haven't been there to talk to me in the past; you've been asleep."

"Hey, a prone body is better than none at all."

"True."

“So you’ll think about waiting?” he asked hopefully.

A long silence.

“Catherine?”

She was thinking about the dream. She couldn’t tell Henry about it; that would just make him worry more. After all, it was just one of her weird dreams. So? Connor was in the back seat. Connor had been in other dreams in the years since he died. It didn’t mean anything except that she missed him. And so what if it ended with her driving alone at night, in Wyoming? Her skin started to tingle.

“Catherine?”

His voice startled her. “What, Henry?”

“Will you wait?” he repeated.

“I’m sorry, Henry, I need to do this,” she said with resolve. “If I don’t—,” her voice broke.

Henry could hear her sobbing softly, so he reluctantly finished for her. “You might not get there in time.”

Catherine sniffed and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “Yes.”

Henry absentmindedly scratched his beard as he tried to think of something he could say that would change her mind, but he knew it was a lost cause. “At least promise me you will stop if you get sleepy,” he insisted.

“I promise.”

“Take the thermos and make sure you have plenty of coffee.”

“I will.”

“Call me when you stop. No, call me even if you don’t stop. No, call me at—.

“Henry, how old am I?”

“What?”

“How old am I?”

Henry’s bushy red eyebrows almost touched as he furrowed his brow in bewilderment. “Thirty-nine. What does that have to do with anything?”

“I think I’ve done this a time or two.”

“Yeah, well,” he replied, undeterred, “just make sure you call me.”

Catherine drove on autopilot, noting the traffic on the highway heading north out of Denver but barely noticing any of the familiar landmarks along

her route. As she approached the state line between northern Colorado and southern Wyoming, she saw a highway patrol car flash its lights to pull over another vehicle. She reflexively eased up on the gas pedal, looked at the clock on the dash, and couldn't believe how much time had passed without her being aware of her surroundings. She turned the radio up and forced herself to keep her mind on the road and not on her father.

She stopped to gas up before hitting the first long stretch of highway. As she filled the gas tank, she looked at the warning sign: "Do not use cell phones around gas pumps." Static. Something must have happened, somewhere. Warnings usually cropped up after an incident, no matter what the likelihood of it happening again. Catherine had called Henry before pulling into the gas station, but when she glanced at the car opposite hers, she noticed that the man in the passenger seat was having a heated exchange—on his cell phone. No one paid attention to signs. The pump handle clicked, she took her receipt and exited the station quickly.

She merged back onto the highway, and found a radio station with a mix of more or less familiar music so she could sing along and keep her brain engaged. So what if she made up some of the words? Who would she bother? Catherine felt a twinge of unease and glanced to her left, where the sun was sinking ever lower in the sky. She pulled the visor up and over to her side window to help shield the glare on her flank and was thankful that she was still travelling north so that the sun was not going down directly in front of her. From years of experience, she knew that the visor would do nothing to shield a direct onslaught of the brilliant, blinding light. As the car crested a slight incline, she heard a voice on the radio say that overnight thunderstorms were likely in the northern part of the state. Crap. In April, she would be lucky if they only held rain. The image of the ominous clouds from her dream popped into her head, and she pushed it away. She needed to keep going. When the radio station began to break-up, she reached down to grab a CD out of the side pocket next to her, but all she could feel was the plastic well. She reached up, flicking on the overhead light, and glanced down. Empty. She stretched her neck and quickly glanced over at the passenger door. It looked empty too. "Damn it!" Catherine yelled, hitting the steering wheel with the heel of her hand. She had no choice but to turn her

attention back to the radio, painstakingly advancing through each position on the FM and AM bands. She listened intently to the beep, beep, beep and was rewarded each time with nothing but static.

“It should be easier to find a station at night,” she protested. A drop of rain hit the windshield and danced across the glass. “Oh give me a break!” Driving through the dark, she had spaced out the threatening storm. She had grown up travelling on highways where the dark closed in around her as the lights from human habitation disappeared entirely and the lights from other vehicles were spotty or non-existent for many miles. Yet the darkness she now found herself in felt merciless because the clouds had so completely blanketed the night sky that the comforting shine from the moon and stars could not penetrate them.

Catherine suddenly felt entirely alone, cut off from everything and everyone. She shuddered just as the rain began to pick up. She turned on the wipers and the heat.

The rain danced in the beam of her headlights, mesmerizing her. The downpour grew more and more frenzied; the tympani on the car roof, louder and louder. Catherine squirmed uneasily as the tires fought through standing water on the road. She reduced her speed, imagining the car hydroplaning right off the glistening blacktop.

“Please, please let up,” she whispered, “please.”

It had to, otherwise she would have to pull over and wait out the storm on the shoulder of the highway. The skin on her arms tingled. No! She would not sit alone on the side of the highway in the middle of a deluge in the middle of the night. If another car came along, the driver might not see her in time, and no matter what, she was not about to sit gazing off into the vast emptiness that really wasn't quite so empty. The prickling sensation spread down her spine. She stomped on the gas pedal, but the resistance of the water against the tires made her slow down again. Suddenly, headlights flooded the rear view mirror, almost blinding her. In a feeble attempt to stay out in front of the approaching car, she increased her speed. As the other car tore past, creating a tidal wave of water in its wake, she frantically pulled on the windshield wiper lever to make the blades move faster, just as the water smashed onto her windshield, completely blinding her view of the road.

“Son of a bitch!” she screamed, reflexively lifting her foot off the gas pedal.

Every nerve in her body was on high alert as the car slowed. As she tried to reorient herself, she frantically checked the rear view mirror to make sure no other jerk was speeding up behind her. She pulled over to the side of the road, killing the engine in the process.

“Son of a bitch!” Catherine screamed again, gripping the steering wheel with a determination to quell her rattled nerves. A flash of motion to her right caught her attention, just as she was able to release the steering wheel. She froze.

“Please, please, please be an animal,” Catherine whispered, her eyes locked on her trembling hands. She closed her eyes but flashed on all the things she did not want approaching her in the dead of the night on a deserted stretch of highway. Her eyes shot open, and she stared into the darkness. Nothing was there. She laughed uneasily as she reached for the ignition and turned the key; the instrument lights came on, but the engine did not turn over. She gaped at the panel, fighting off the resurging panic.

“Damn it,” she said through clenched teeth before realizing the car was in gear instead of in neutral. She tried again and the engine caught. As she put in the clutch and shifted the car into first gear, she checked the rearview mirror: no approaching headlights, so she could carefully accelerate back onto the highway. She glanced into her side mirror—no sign of another car. Instinctively she turned her head to glance out the passenger side mirror, and the air in her lungs expelled in one huge gasp as she stared into gleaming eyes looking at her through the window. What should have been a bloodcurdling scream came out as a tiny squeak as Catherine forced the gas pedal down in a desperate attempt to get away from the side of the road. The tires spit up wet gravel until the front driver’s-side tire hit the asphalt, jerking the car to the left, causing the front passenger-side tire to jump onto the road. She almost lost control as the rear end whipped, but she let up on the gas, and hit the highway at an oblique angle. When all four tires finally connected with the pavement, she straightened the car and depressed the gas pedal to the floor.

Catherine propelled the car down the highway, struggling to keep her emotions from overwhelming her. She looked at the clock on the dash, but her mind was so jumbled, the glowing numbers meant nothing to her. She concentrated all of her energy on the white stripe in the middle of the road,

not even registering that the rain had eased to a steady drizzle. As she came over a small crest she could see the twinkle of lights in the distance, or at least she thought she did. She really wasn't sure if she could trust her own eyes . . . but wait, there, there, a road sign. She sat up very straight, feeling the strain in her muscles, as she approached the first exit. The pain almost made her cry out, but she refused to let herself succumb. She needed to make it to a motel. Only then could she release the tight control she was maintaining on herself. As she pulled into the parking area of the first motel she found, she felt a wave of relief, but she still had to make it to a room before she could allow the tension in her body to ease.

Catherine gripped the motel room key with both of her trembling hands to steady her aim. After several failed attempts, she finally succeeded in unlocking the door. In a numb stupor, she dropped her bag on the floor, locked the deadbolt, and set the security bolt in place. She stood in the middle of the room staring blankly until her knees buckled and she collapsed. She struggled over to the foot of the bed, propping herself up against it, and began to cry without uttering a sound.

She didn't know how long she stayed that way before she forced herself up off the floor and into the bathroom. When she saw her reflection in the mirror, she recoiled. The whites of her eyes were gone, her blue irises consumed by rings of fiery red, the dark circles beneath them drooping toward her unnaturally pale cheeks. No wonder the night clerk wouldn't look at her directly. She looked haunted. She splashed cold water onto her face repeatedly until her hands began to ache from the chill. She stared into the mirror so long that the eyes staring back became the very same eyes that had stared at her through the car window. She spun away from the mirror. The eyes weren't real, of course. Her rattled nerves had just caused her imagination to go completely wild.

But why, then, had the anguish in those eyes seemed so palpable?

Suddenly, she heard ringing. "Get a grip," she instructed herself, thinking it was in her head, until she realized it was coming from the other room . . . from her cell phone . . . from Henry.



CHAPTER 2

Keitha bolted upright, the ringing still echoing in her ears. She looked at Murphy, hoping that she had not woken him up this time. But no, even in the restricted light that crept into the room, she could see his beautiful chestnut eyes watching her, waiting to see what she would do next. As her eyes adjusted, she could distinguish the rest of his body from the rock wall he was leaning against. He had such a gentle, loving face, but it currently held the worried look she had seen so many times before, when something from the other woman's life had jarred her awake.

She leaned over and in a soothing voice said, "It's okay, Murphy," and for added reassurance, "Everything is all right." At the sound of her steady, calm voice, the dog's ears, which had been standing straight up, relaxed.

Keitha swung her legs over the edge of the cot, which immediately caused the dog to get up and come over to her side. She patted Murphy's neck as she rose and stretched her long, muscular legs. After she worked a few kinks out of her neck, she stepped over to the wall opposite her cot where several shirts were hanging on a steel peg protruding from the rock. She threw one over her head, extracted a pair of pants from a short stack on the floor, and pulled them on. She felt Murphy tense and whipped around; a shadowy form stood in the entry, but before she could say or do anything, the figure spoke.

"It's just me." There was no mistaking the low, steady timbre.

“How long have you been standing there, Terran?” Keitha confronted the man. “About half a second,” he replied.

Keitha raised an eyebrow. “You should have announced yourself.”

“I did,” he asserted, taking a step into the room, abruptly halting as Murphy moved to block him. Terran moved his gaze from the dog to Keitha. “Could you please ask him to let me come in?”

Keitha looked at Terran impassively. He was five-foot-ten, a couple of inches taller than she was, and, even though his neck and shoulders were indicative of a stockier frame, his clothes hung loosely on him. The gray hair on top of his head, according to some people, gave him an older, distinguished appearance, which was completely ridiculous as far as Keitha was concerned, since he was thirty-five, only six years older than she was.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

Terran sighed heavily.

“What do you want, Terran?” Keitha asked impatiently.

“I’d like to come in.”

Keitha nodded at Murphy and the dog stepped aside. Terran walked into the room and took a seat on a piece of old wood that Keitha had found years ago and fashioned into a small bench.

“Make yourself comfortable.”

“I was just coming to let you know that Clara would like to have a word with you,” Terran stated, ignoring her sarcasm and standing back up.

“And she sent you as her messenger. I’m honored,” Keitha said through clenched teeth. “What could she possibly want to see me about?”

“Seriously, Keitha,” he said in a tone that conveyed his displeasure at her feigned ignorance.

“I don’t have anything new to report,” she said, dismissively.

“Nothing,” he said in disbelief. “You haven’t heard or seen anything?”

“I didn’t say that,” she replied, “I said there was nothing *new*.”

“You need to talk to Clara if you’ve seen or heard anything, anything at all,” he said firmly.

Keitha straightened her back. “Run on back and tell Clara that if anything critical happens, she’ll be one of the first to know.”

“You might not recognize something as critical.”

“I think it’s time for you to go,” Keitha said sharply.

Murphy moved over and stood directly in front of Terran.

“Could you ask him not to stand so close?” Terran requested as calmly as he could. Although Terran knew the dog would not harm him, the proximity of the dog’s teeth to his crotch made him instinctively shift his hands in a protective move.

Keitha grinned.

“It isn’t funny,” Terran said.

“Just leave, Terran,” Keitha said, stepping forward to touch Murphy on the shoulder. The dog backed away so Terran could depart.

She made sure Terran was nowhere near the entrance and then looked at Murphy. “Who the hell does Clara think she is sending him down here like that? So the woman is traveling, so what? She’s traveled before. I know, I know, she’s on her own. That is a little unusual, and something did unnerve her.” Murphy tilted his head as he listened. “The problem is, I couldn’t see what it was. It could have been anything. You know how jumpy she can be.” Murphy tilted his head in the other direction.

“Well she can,” Keitha stated definitively, running her hand over her close-cropped, dark brown hair. Most of the adults in the colony, those that weren’t naturally or in some cases unnaturally bald, kept their hair cut very short. “So, like I said, nothing critical,” she continued, brightening her tone. “Do you want to see if there is enough time to go visit the kids?”

Murphy’s tail started wagging in delight. Keitha grabbed a pair of goggles off another peg as they exited the room, side-by-side, and made their way down the side tunnels to the only clock in the colony.

Most of the side tunnels allowed three people, or two people and one dog, to walk abreast of each other without any problem. During a shift change, or after a meal, if people came upon other people walking in the opposite direction, they would immediately form single file lines in order to pass without stopping. Keitha and Murphy’s room was at the farthest end of the longest side tunnel, which narrowed to the point where two people could not walk abreast of each other comfortably, but they rarely ran into anyone this deep in. She had specifically asked the council for approval to move to the secluded location, which had never been used as a sleeping area, because she wanted—needed—the isolation. She found it interesting that even though the colony was established generations ago, a lot of people

still hesitated at the idea of being too deep within the tunnels or too deep underground. Keitha, however, was unfazed by either.

The tunnel began to widen as they passed a smattering of other rooms, but it wasn't until they came to an intersection with another side tunnel and took a right turn that they hit one of the more densely occupied area of rooms. Keitha and Murphy moved forward quietly so that they would not disturb anyone who was sleeping. Finally, the side tunnel converged with one of the main tunnels, which were large enough to allow groups and machinery to move unhindered in both directions.

The walls of the side tunnels had a gray concrete covering over the raw earth, a throwback to the time when their habitat had been a working mine. But the main tunnels were ablaze with colorful murals. The artwork, unlike the clock, was not something that the founders of their colony planned. Although the founders knew that people would need a sense of the passage of time underground, they had erroneously believed that short periods on the surface would be enough to stave off the oppressive bleakness. Just as an increasing number of the people began to show signs of mental fatigue, a girl began creating the exquisite images on the rock. The paintings gave people a sense of being in the art itself, and while others tried to replicate what the girl was able to achieve, none possessed the ability to make their art pulse with life. When the girl died at the age of fifteen, the people of the colony chose to leave the remaining walls gray, as a sign of respect and gratitude.

The main tunnel opened into a large circular space where several other tunnels converged. The clock floated above the room, suspended from the ceiling with Teflon cabling that also allowed someone to lower the clock every month to be hand wound.

Keitha and Murphy exited into one of the other main tunnels and from there into another side tunnel until they made their way to a shaft. Other people were already congregating in front of a metal gate. After everyone exchanged greetings, the person closest to the gate opened it revealing the conveyance within. Four people stepped onto a platform comprised of steel mesh grids, the same as the four-man cages from the mining era. One of the people still waiting hit a button on a panel outside the cage, and the bottom platform sank below the floor level, revealing the top platform. When

Keitha was little her father told her that cages were similar to conveyances called elevators, used to move people vertically within structures. Except elevators did not have multiple tiers, and were enclosed where cages did not have walls, only a steel exoskeleton.

Keitha picked up a mat that was propped against the wall and placed it over the exposed metal to provide Murphy with a comfortable place to stand. She and the remaining two people stepped onto the top platform after the dog. A button on the inside of the cage was pushed several times, to signal the hoist operator that they were ready for the cage to begin the ascent.

Keitha and Murphy entered the cage on the twenty-five-hundred-foot level, each level designated according to how many feet it was below the surface entrance to the mine. Everyone else exited the cage at the two thousand foot level, and before Keitha could press the button to continue the ascent, a hand appeared on the gate and an older woman glared in at her.

"I understand you saw or heard something," the woman demanded without the prelude of a greeting.

Keitha's eyes narrowed. "Who told you that?"

"I don't have time for your normal evasions, Keitha."

"Really, Clara? Well I don't have time for this. We're heading to the classroom." Keitha pressed the button three times.

"I'm not done talking to you, Keitha." Clara's voice was sharp.

Keitha made no comment as the cage began to rise. She and Murphy exited on the fifteen hundred foot level and made their way down to the classroom, which was located immediately off the main tunnel.

One of the youngest children spotted Keitha and Murphy at the entry to the room and squealed with delight, alerting everyone else to their presence. The children ran to Murphy and surrounded him, touching his sleek gray-black coat as he gently waved his bushy tail in the delighted faces of the smaller children standing by his rear end.

"We thought we would stop by before I started my shift," Keitha said to the two adults in the room.

"The children have missed you both," Eddy noted.

"I know it's been a while."

"It's been over a month."

“Eddy, really, don’t admonish Keitha like that; she comes when she can,” Brina, the other teacher, said. “We were just about to take the children up. Can you join us?”

“We have some time,” Keitha replied.

“Excellent,” Eddy said. As he moved towards the cubbyholes that contained protective outerwear of various sizes, plus goggles and hats.

Keitha followed him and began helping the younger children to get dressed.

“And perhaps you can tell the children a story?” Brina asked graciously as she handed the older children their goggles.

“Perhaps,” Keitha responded, but she knew she would.

The children lined up at the entrance to the room when they were completely outfitted and then paraded out into the main tunnel and over to the largest cage in the colony. When the cage reached the top of the shaft, everyone exited and walked out into a domed area submerged in darkness.

The dome, designed by the founders, was made up of hundreds of thermoplastic panels that were lightweight yet strong and resistant to both hot and cold temperature changes. The panels interlocked without the use of adhesives, nails, screws, or other hardware.

The original purpose of the dome was to protect a large outdoor area from ultraviolet radiation and allow visible light penetration for agronomic production. Vegetative plots were also established outside of the dome to track the effects of ultraviolet intensity on various plants species; however, those plants no longer existed. Only a handful of plant species inside the dome had survived as a viable food source. The rest had either died out or mutated. The founders anticipated the need for a second source of sustainable food for the colony. While the surface plants were still healthy, development and testing of the ‘next generation’ of red and blue grow lights, to support the plants in the underground agronomic environment, proceeded. The founders also knew that they had to negate what would in essence be a continuous situation of the “winter blues” and developed a viable “visible light” source at the same time.

The one thing the scientists could not negate was the sensation of being confined underground. Although the creation of the living art proved

invaluable in counteracting the reaction, people still craved being on the actual surface. As surface conditions deteriorated, even under the dome with protective gear, the amount of time people could safely spend above ground decreased until finally people were only allowed to surface for short periods at sunrise or at sunset.

Brina and Eddy led the children to a location where the land sloped slightly downhill, allowing the best view to the east. The area was a mix of rock, dirt, and surviving vegetative remnants, which had spread unchecked by human hands. The children took up their favorite perches on the rocks, worn smooth in places by the continuous use, while the adults, and Murphy, sat upon the ground.

“Keitha, a story please,” Eddy said.

She stared at Eddy for a moment but knew she couldn’t say no.

“What story do you want to hear?” Keitha asked the children.

“Tell us about how the archivists started,” one child asked.

“Yes, please.” All of the younger children immediately joined in.

“But the older children have heard that story many times,” Keitha noted, not at all in the mood to tell that particular tale. “Pick another one, Skyler,” she said to the child.

“We don’t mind if you tell it again, Keitha,” an older boy assured her.

Keitha tried to keep the irritation out of her voice. “That’s nice of you, Phelan, but why don’t I tell everyone . . .” The cry of ‘please’ by the children drowned out the rest of what she was trying to say.

Keitha held up her hand, her facial muscles hardening. Just as she was about to yell over the din, Murphy’s big paw landed in her lap. She looked into the dog’s eyes and let her hand drop. “Fine,” she acquiesced, “I’ll tell you how the archivists began.” The children applauded wildly, and when everyone calmed down, Keitha began the story.

“The founders of our colony believed that societies collapsed, in part, because people never seemed to learn from history. The same pattern would repeat in different times, in somewhat different manifestations, but the same obsessions tended to drive people, power, and greed. When the founders established our colony, they brought thousands upon thousands of documents with them that recorded what had happened to their country and to

other countries throughout the world, throughout time. They wanted their descendants to understand human history and to understand what caused them, some said forced them, to establish this place.”

Keitha paused for effect. “A place that many people of their time said was an experiment in futility destined to fail.”

“Keitha?” Brina asked in a concerned voice.

“Sorry,” Keitha apologized. “That is a different story.”

Brina nodded and Keitha continued.

“Unfortunately it didn’t take long before all of the combined efforts of the people had to be spent developing and honing skills and expertise necessary to ensure the colony’s continued existence. Documents contained in the computer memory systems that dealt with crops, water, power, sanitation, and the prevention and treatment of illnesses for both the people and the animals, as well as many more issues, became the focus of document research. As a result, over the course of many decades, the historical records were left largely untouched, but in honor of the founders, they were preserved and maintained on one of the protein-based memory storage devices. Most of the historical documents would probably still be lying idle, with the original intent of the founders unfulfilled, except for one particular girl who dreamt amazing dreams.

“The girl had vivid dreams that she would try to tell her parents about when she woke, but she didn’t always remember everything or understand what she saw. Many times her stories sounded jumbled. One day she overheard her parents talking about what a strange imagination she had, so she stopped telling them about her dreams. It wasn’t until she dreamt about the founders, conducting one of their early experiments, that she first began to wonder if there was something more to her dreams. Yet she had to admit that it could just as easily have been the lesson they had in class about the experiment that fueled her imagination. Then, right before she turned thirteen, she dreamt about a teeming mass of people roaming around each other in the open air. The girl could look up, as if she were really standing amongst them, and see the sky. It was so breathtaking she started to cry, waking herself up. The same dream kept recurring, and each time she saw more and more. Because there were so many things in her dream that she couldn’t identify or understand, she knew her parents were wrong; her

dreams were not coming from her imagination, and they were more than just dreams. She decided to find out if there was any evidence in the old historical records that the event she had been witnessing actually occurred.

“The girl submitted an off-task request to the council to allow her access to a data retrieval computer so she could review the historical records of the mid-twentieth century. At that time, a retrieval computer could only be used if it had not been assigned to a primary data retrieval effort, and only if it was not during the daily conservation cycle. Because of the restrictions, very few off-task requests were ever made, which caused some members of the council to ask the young girl for the reason for her request, and she told them she wanted to access an obscure plant research project that she thought might assist in the gardens.”

The younger children, who had never heard the story before, gasped.

“She lied?” Skyler asked.

“She was afraid that the adults would just dismiss her request as the imaginings of a child, and then she would never be able to find out the truth for herself,” Keitha replied.

Skyler and many of the other children nodded.

Keitha continued.

“The girl’s research proved very arduous. The retrieval computer was capable of searching through large volumes of information with great efficiency, but she only had a general idea, based on announcements that she glimpsed, when the event in her dream occurred. An inordinate amount of data met her broad search parameters, and because only the history of the colony was taught in the classroom, she had no sense of what might distinguish one decade from another so that she could narrow the queries.

“After months of reading, she finally happened across a document that appeared to match elements of the dream, which helped her fix the exact time period. From there she was able to retrieve a great deal that documented the event. The more she found the more frustrated she became. She found publications and news stories that varied slightly, leaving out, skewing, or completely contradicting parts of what she had observed in the dream. She became obsessed with determining what had really happened. When she finally exhausted every lead and found every bit of information available to her, she knew she had to talk to someone.

“She decided to confide in a young man. He was seventeen and the only person that had ever been allowed to forgo the final years of classroom training to apprentice in the gardens. Even though he worked with adults, he was not an adult in her eyes, and she was sure he would believe her.

“The young man had come to speak to her class about the horticultural work a couple of months before she began her investigation into her dream. His talk had been very precise, scientific, emotionless. It was obvious that he was uncomfortable in the classroom. When he was hurriedly leaving, he abruptly stopped and picked up a small kitten. She watched as his eyes changed, widening in delight as he gently stroked the kitten’s fur and spoke to it in a melodic, soothing tone. She silently inched forward, hoping to hear a little of what he was saying, when he turned suddenly and almost fell over her. He quickly recovered, handed her the kitten, ordered her teacher to change the feeding schedule and the formula, stated that the kitten was male, and left. He was correct about everything, and the kitten thrived.

“The girl didn’t see the young man again until after she had begun her research and she asked him how he knew about the kitten. He shrugged but didn’t answer. She pressed, telling him that she saw him talking to the kitten. He narrowed his eyes and told her she was mistaken. She asked him why he would want to lie about being able to understand animals the way he could. She wished she could do something so special. The young man stared at her for a long time before simply saying that he had no idea what she was talking about and walked away.

“The girl made her way down to the gardens and found the young man sitting at a bench littered with pots of fledgling vegetation. She asked if she could talk to him about something urgent, and he turned an appraising eye on her, motioning for her to sit on a stool.

“She began slowly, suddenly afraid that she had been wrong about his communication with the kitten. What if he would think she was just being silly about her dreams. But she couldn’t keep it all to herself any longer and her words started to come out faster and faster, until they spilled out of her in a torrent. He listened to every word without showing any emotion and without interrupting her or telling her to slow down. After the girl finished, she took a deep breath and waited anxiously. The young man remained silent, lost in thought until he finally said, ‘You need to go to the council

and ask them for continued access to the historic records, and you have to tell them the real reason this time.’

“The girl protested vehemently, stating that the adults on the council would never believe her. He offered to go with her, to speak for her, but she refused and started to leave.

“‘You have a unique ability,’ the young man stated.

“The girl turned to him, her eyes wide, terrified globes. He immediately regretted being so direct, especially when her fear turned into anger.

“‘Ability? You don’t know what you’re talking about.’

“‘I have some idea,’ the young man replied evenly.

“‘If you’re talking about what you can do with animals, that’s different. That’s special. My dreams are just annoying.’

“‘They’re more than that.’

“The young man continued to talk to her and was able to convince her that there was a reason that she was seeing the past, just as there was a reason why the founders brought the historical records with them and insisted that the colonists learn about what happened.

“‘That’s something I don’t understand,’ the girl said. ‘Why would the founders bring erroneous records with them?’

“‘Maybe they wanted to teach us how easy it can be to skew facts. The observer always sees things unfold through their own eyes, and that means they introduce a bias, even if they don’t mean to.’

“‘Are you saying that my version is no more valid than any of the ones I read?’ the girl asked him angrily.

“The young man smiled, and she felt mesmerized. She had never seen him smile before and almost didn’t hear him when he replied. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I think you have the advantage of being an impartial witness.’”

Keitha paused. A pearly light, which foretold the coming of dawn, was beginning to break the shadowy blackness. She quickly finished the story.

“The young man persuaded the girl to go to the council, where he spoke for her. He was extremely persuasive when he told them about her dreams and requested that they allow the girl continued access to the records that the founders had taken such care to bring with them. Several of the council stated that there was no reason to waste time and energy on historical records that meant nothing to them based solely on the dreams of a child.

The young man persisted, pointing out that the colony had failed to uphold one of the edicts of the founders: to learn from the past. He argued that there had to be a reason that the founders had been so adamant and that, without the girl's dreams, they would no longer know what records were accurate. The majority of the council agreed that it wouldn't do any harm if the girl continued her research, and if nothing came from it, they could always have her stop. When the rest of the colony was told what the girl was doing, two other young people came forward and said that they too had been having dreams. The council unanimously decided to appoint an adult to assist the children, and that is how the archivists were established."

Keitha ended the story and looked over at two people who were standing by the portal to the mine, listening discretely. She first saw the smile on the man's face, warm and reassuring; then she looked into the sharp, penetrating eyes of the woman.

"Well," Keitha inquired, "was that a satisfactory rendition?"

Clara looked at her and said, "I was not that emotional, and I was not mesmerized by his smile."

"Nonsense, I definitely mesmerized you," the man interjected, still smiling.

"That's what you always say, Greer," Clara noted as Greer broke into laughter, the children joining in, applauding wildly. Eddy and Brina smiled but looked ill at ease.

"I need to speak to Keitha," Clara stated brusquely. "We'll wait for you down on fifteen." It was a command.

Keitha shifted her gaze back to the students who were all watching in anticipation. "The sun is rising," she said. And as everyone else turned their attention to the shimmering sky, Keitha and Murphy made their way over to the shaft. When the cage returned, they quietly got on.

When the cage stopped on level fifteen hundred, Keitha flung the metal gate open and snarled, "Don't ever order me like that again, Clara."

"I wouldn't have to if you were forthcoming with information," Clara countered.

"I don't have any new information," Keitha snapped as she got off the cage and glared at Clara, who was a good four inches shorter than Keitha and

had large brown eyes, which, even at fifty, made her look remarkably cute. Not that anyone was insane enough to call her cute, at least not to her face.

"I think you do," Clara stated unemotionally.

"Why? Did you see something?" Keitha asked sardonically.

"Keitha, don't disrespect your mother like that," Greer admonished.

Keitha turned to him. "Don't scold me like I'm a child, Father."

"Don't act like one."

Keitha looked into Greer's eyes, hazel with flashing golden flecks, and she backed off, because even though her father looked imposing, he was really a very gentle man and rarely let his anger get the better of him. "I swear, Greer, there isn't anything new."

"Just tell us what you did see."

"All I saw was the woman traveling on one of those highways . . . at night . . . by herself."

Greer raised a hand when he saw Clara's face contort. "Do you know why she was on the highway? Where she was going?"

"No. She was really anxious, so it was difficult to—"

"She was anxious? You don't think that's important?" Clara snapped.

"So the woman was anxious. *That isn't anything new!*"

"You make it sound as if Catherine is perpetually anxious, which she is not." Clara threw her hands up in the air and stared at Greer. "She's never going to be able to get through to Catherine."

"Well, that will mean that I'm just following in your footsteps, Mother," Keitha said icily and walked away with Murphy at her side. Clara started to follow, but Greer held her back.

"She needs to understand how important this is," Clara said.

"How do you expect her to know when you haven't told her everything?"

Clara looked at his hand on her arm and then brought her head up and stared at him rigidly. "Leave go of me, Greer."

"Promise me you will tell her," he said, releasing his grip.

"No, and you promised me you wouldn't." Clara turned and began walking away from him.

"Some promises shouldn't be kept," he said resolutely, causing her to hesitate for a moment before continuing to walk away from him.