

WELLSPRING

by
W. L. Koenig

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Wellspring
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Fiction by Wendy L. Koenig

Under Twin Suns
Jet's Stormy Adventure
One to Lose

Poetry

These Burning Stones
Lions in the Closet

Co-Authored

Breathe I, II, III, and IV

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WELLSPRING

I sighed, squinting at the sun. Sweat soaked through all my clothes, plastering them against me in a soggy outer membrane. The heat was too much. So much for extending my tolerance for today. I shifted my focus to the canyon walls. Most of the overhangs looked to be too precarious, or too small to offer enough shelter, but, high above, there was an overhang with a decent sized ledge beneath it. I made my way to it, stepping slowly across loose gravel and testing each boulder before I gave it my weight.

Sweat slid into my burning eyes just as the hillside beneath me slipped away. I pitched forward, falling sharply to the left. A crisp ripping sound, much like a green tree bough breaking off, filled the air. It was the most terrible sound in the world. I held my breath. The dust billowed around me and not too far below great rocks ricocheted from each other down to the valley. I just hoped the boulders above stayed lodged firmly in place.

Slowly the mountainside settled. The crack of rock against rock subsided into the rolling clink of little stones finding a new place to nest. The dust cleared, first in little swirling air streams and then in waves as a breeze caught it and carried it away. Carefully, I sat up and inspected my body, avoiding the shell on my left leg where I knew the most damage had occurred. On my left hand there was a tiny hole from where I had caught myself from the fall, but that was it.

Taking a deep breath, bracing myself, I looked at the left leg. There, along the side of the calf and curling around to the back, stretched a long jagged tear in my smooth gray shell, exposing the underlying wet-green of muscle. It was a simple tear, thankfully, though it looked gruesome. And also luckily, it was late enough in the season my nerves had withdrawn from the shell in preparation for replication. Of course, the shell would have been much stronger and probably would have held for the fall, if it was, say, mid-season. Then again, if it hadn't been so late in the season, I wouldn't have been here in the first place, trying to get conditioned to the heat.

Still, it was a clean tear and easily repairable. I pulled off my pack and dug for a patch. Putting it in my mouth, I let the cloth saturate with saliva, mixing with the chemical compounds in the material itself. Then I smoothed it over my torn leg.

Glancing up at the ledge again, I measured the distance. I could do that. But I'd have to creep all the way. As fragile as my shell was now, it could cross-tear at any small stress.

I stood and hobbled up the side of the hill, testing each stone with my toes before placing my foot. The short journey seemed to take forever, and the sun's heat swallowed me, squeezing all thought and reason from out of my head. Every step should have brought me closer to the ledge, but none did. I swam here, in the heat, trapped forever in this delicate trudging uphill. I wanted to quit, to lay down and let the heat have me. Almost, I did. Then, all at once, I was there. One more step, and I'd be able to see over the ledge, to find what manner of shelter I'd have. One more step, and I'd be able to stop and rest in deep shade that just had to be there. One more step.

The opening above the ledge was a dark yawning cavern. Oh! If that was half again as deep as the ledge, then I'd be set. I wanted to run, to rush the last few steps up onto the ledge and into the hollow. I caught myself leaning forward, and bit my tongue to bring myself back to the reality of here and now. Already, my patch had worked loose on one corner.

The last step, up onto the ledge was a big one, and I paused to look deep into the cave's shadows. Was I imagining that I couldn't see the back? I licked my lips, and they felt rough and

disconnected to my tongue. I turned my attention to the last step. It was too high for a normal step. Turning around, baby hobble-step by baby hobble-step, I faced my back to the cavern. Then I sat down and used my good leg to push myself across the ledge and into the cave.

Cool dankness wrapped around me and I scooted deeper and deeper. At last, I was satisfied at how deep into the cave I'd gone and stopped to remove and reapply patch to my leg. Still, I could feel no stone behind me. Nor could I feel the return of air that had reached a back wall and, trapped, decided to return to the front of the cave. The air didn't even carry the slightest trace of mustiness either.

Unbidden, tears welled in my eyes. For a minute there, I thought I might not make it. I would just rest here and let my shell solidify in its new armor. Then, I'd explore.

"Calaisn, where have you been?" Derahn didn't even look up from the microscope, but instead reached for the focus knob. Though we'd always grown together and always been best friends, Derahn was in the Health career path, as denoted by the Der prefix whereas I was in the Agronomy class, Cal. I, as an aisn, was also three ranks below an ahn, but Derahn never held it against me like many of the others of our village did.

"I went hiking in the mountains."

"I heard you limping when you came in the door. You hurt yourself." Straightening, Derahn gave me a calculated look-over. The gaze finally traveled down to my leg and the patch. "Mmmm-hmmm." With a deep sigh, the ahn patted a counter top and turned away.

Obediently I hopped onto the counter, banging my feet like a child.

Derahn returned, lifted my leg and wiped the patch with an acrid smelling rag. The solvent loosened the cement, and the patch curled up at the edges. Lifting the patch, Derahn took in a sharp inhalation of breath.

I shrugged. "It's ugly, but simple."

Derahn scowled and moved across the room. "So is a slice across the throat, but no less deadly. And just because there aren't multiple tears, it doesn't mean it's simple. I don't understand what you're doing. Are you trying to kill yourself?" Returning with a new patch and a jar of cement, Derahn dabbed the cement around my wound.

I shook my head. "No. This was an accident. For generations, my line has postulated that conditioning our body to heat might enable us to live long enough to escape this planet."

"I see. Well, it's not going to happen like this. You're lucky your line has survived 'conditioning' this long." Derahn frowned harshly at me and then turned to smooth on the new, thicker patch.

"I am the last already."

"I know. I'd think you'd take more care." The ahn snapped and then smiled to soften the blow.

I sniffed and reached into my pouch and pulled out a vial of water. "I have something for you."

"A gift from your travel?" Derahn reached for the bottle and held it up to the light. Tiny sediment pieces within the liquid glinted and shimmered. "It's very pretty."

"It's from a cave I found."

"A cave? Is that how you did this?" Derahn nodded toward my patched leg, frowning again.

"In a manner of speaking. I hid from the heat there."

Derahn lowered the bottle and carried it to the microscope, setting it beside another

crested slide. "I'll peek at it after the assembly. You ARE going, aren't you?"

"I didn't know about it, but yes, I'm going."

Derahn linked arms with me as I jumped from the counter. "You would have known if you were where you were supposed to be. We'll go together. I'll even prove I can be a rebel, too, by not sitting with my Health class."

"Do you know what this is about?"

"The sun, the heat, the deep and the upcoming squibbing season. What else?"

We entered the bowl-shaped Great Hall and began searching for two seats together in the clamorous, green mob. I pointed out two seats mid-section and shouted for Derahn to follow me.

We had just barely settled into our seats before the High Council ames entered. "Order! Order!" The lead ame pounded a gavel against the block. When the crowd quieted the gavel pointed at someone standing in the center of the room. "Partens, you still have the floor."

"Thank you!" Partens, the head of Astronomy, bowed low and then straightened. "The sun is still on its retrograde path. If you will recall, we barely survived the temperature last season. We will have to go deeper--"

Again the crowd broke out and the lead ame of the High Council slammed the gavel down again and again until silence returned. The gavel was pointed around the room. "If you people don't settle down, this will be a committee issue only." This time the wait was longer before Partens received a nod.

The tens in the center of the room again bowed and continued, "Honored guests, please allow me to finish." Partens hesitated, glancing around the room, continuing when no comment came forth. "We have been working on an early warning device to give us ample time to escape any monsters from the deep, should they attack."

The crowd murmured with concern and appreciation. Partens waited, then said, "I am here today, to request additional power for a new classification. Space Development's resources are not sufficient enough to continue this research, nor is it the proper class for this project. Time is short. We need at least one representative from each of the following classes: Health, Hydraulics, Marine Biology,"

I listened for Partens to say 'Agronomy', but knew it wouldn't happen. Why would they need an agronomist in the ocean? They never had, and this would be no exception. Volunteers filed forward from each section named. Startled, I felt Derahn stand and walk to the center of the room. I gave a thumbs-up sign when Derahn turned to face the crowd. Derahn laughed and waved back.

Seven of the collected people, including the next two highest in rank, came from Space Development. Partens would be left with a skeleton crew. Like me, Partens was the last of that line. The tens's squibblings had lost their cell wall integrity from the heat, whereas mine had been eaten by the deep-living monsters last year. If Partens hadn't survived, it would have been a catastrophe for their people. Almost 300 years worth of research, gone, with no understanding of it passed on. There was only so much knowledge one could gain from notes. The understanding grew in the mind.

They'd been lucky Partens had survived with all brain functions intact. Though, it had been questionable for awhile. Even now, viewing the almost transparent shell, I could see how pale the flesh was beneath. No, if my own line's hypothesis was right, Partens's line wouldn't survive the squibbing this time. Of course, none of them might.

The cave was as I remembered it, cool and deep. Outside the heat blazed down on the

baked earth marking the difference of temperature within the cave as exceptional. I turned and stared out at the bright heat, shaking my head. How much longer? As I turned to the back of the cave, I stifled a sigh, glad to be inside. I picked my way to the sloping back with the opening that led deeper into the mountain. As before, I was astounded at the lack of swallowing darkness. A soft glow lit the rocks from within. Details of stone edges were vaguely highlighted, and I reached to touch the wall. The stone was warm, and it lit a pale blue against my fingertips. I smiled. Such simple joy.

Absent also, was the stench of mold and mildew. A thing I'd also noticed during my first visit. Most caves that ran this deep almost suffocated a person with moisture and the stench of fungus and rot. Instead, a cool, clean fan of air caressed me from the path below.

As I went deeper, the shadows began to shift and move, as if dancing in joy at the arrival of their guest. A light trickle of water flowed down the wall in a sheet, adding musical notes to the light-dance, and falling into the tiny stream along the edge where I'd collected the water sample for Derahn.

I clucked my tongue in admonishment. I must remember to use Derahn's new name: Sahn. It would never do to insult a new career path. Not that I had even seen my friend to give congratulations yet. The new Sa path had been going non-stop night and day. I hardly even caught a glimpse of Sahn at all.

As I walked further under the mountain, the stream began to fall into a deeper and deeper cut, filling as more and more water joined with the first. I supposed I was going downhill, and when I looked behind me, I could see that I was, but I couldn't see it ahead of me. The path in front looked smooth, even, and completely horizontal. The lights and shadows on the wall should have muted from the lack of light the further from the entrance of the cave I went, but instead they maintained their sharp-edged brilliance.

I rounded an outcropping of the wall. A flash of light blinded me and I paused in mid-step, blinking. Slowly, my eyes adjusted and I saw a small cavern that was opened up before me. Tall stalactites and stalagmites reached toward each other, surrounding a small pool in the center of the room. Water dripped from the ceiling, rippling the surface of the pool. Lights, reflected from the walls, shimmered on the water's surface, catching on the metal flakes and sailing back to the wall again. The light cells in the rock picked up the reflected light and glowed brighter, in swirling colors, to match the ripples of the waters.

I sucked in my breath. I'd never seen anything so beautiful.

When I returned, I went directly to the shared labs of Partens and the new Sa path. Sahn was in deep argument with a coworker. I moved away, trying not to eavesdrop, and focused on watching Partens battle with a piece of equipment.

Still, the argument carried across the room. Sahn's voice said, "If you would have listened the first time, we wouldn't be having this discussion again!"

"Your demands are completely unreasonable."

"They may be, but they'll have to be accommodated. Our bodies, at that crucial time, just can't withstand that kind of pressure without modifications to your structure."

"They can."

"There are many weaker ones that can't."

The coworker spoke tightly. "There has to be another option. We just don't have the time to make those kinds of adjustments. Squibbing is what... three months away?"

"Two and a half. Can we call the group together to discuss this?"

The coworker nodded. "We'll have to. I'll tell everyone to meet us in the conference room right away."

Sahn glanced at me and said to the retreating ahn, "I'll be there in just a minute." Then Sahn walked over to me, holding up a hand in common greeting. "It's crazy here!"

I returned the gesture and then bowed low. "Sincerest congratulations on your new career path Sahn."

"Thank you. I like that name. I like the path, too. I really do, but it doesn't leave much time for socializing. Can you wait until this meeting is over? It should be a quick one."

I nodded. "I'll be here."

"Great." And then Sahn was gone. I turned listlessly around. There was time to kill. I doubted the meeting would be short. My gaze lit on Partens again.

Walking over, I picked up a notebook and pen just as Partens reached for it. Holding the pen at ready, I said, "You need help, and I have some free time. I take very good notes."

Partens stared at me a moment and then moved back to study the instruments. "You're Calaisn, aren't you? I'd heard you were also the last of your line. What happened?"

I was impressed Partens knew my name, even more impressed a tens spoke to me other than to give me orders. That level didn't deign to notice mine. I shrugged, though I knew the scientist didn't see it. "Deep-dwellers." I still had nightmares of the thick bodies that had invaded my resting place and swallowed my family.

"I would think, then, that you'd be more interested in helping in the new path."

"Yours is the higher calling and the greatest need."

"And if I die this cycle, there will be no one to witness these last days of my work. Is that what you're thinking?" Partens straightened and watched me.

I found myself averting that honest gaze. "We have both been there. If my line ends, it is of little consequence. Merely an annoyance. But if you die with no complete understanding of your work, methods, or thoughts"

Partens nodded. "We'll be set back hundreds of years."

"Even with good records and a witness. Even if you still had your whole crew. No one knows the things you know, the things your line has accumulated. They can't because no one thinks the same way. And now you're basically alone." I motioned to the only two remaining of the Par path. Both were engrossed in their own projects.

Partens sighed. "I suppose. I've tried video and audio recordings, but they came up curiously lacking. Mostly, I suppose because I forgot to keep talking." Sheepishly, Partens nodded to the pen and paper. "Forcing myself to stop and write makes me think about what I'm saying. Or not saying, as the case may be."

I wrote while Partens worked and talked. Contrary to what Partens had said, I only had to prompt Partens to keep speaking once. Several times the scientist commented on how much quicker work was going.

True to my predictions, Sahn didn't reappear until about a full half day later. I excused myself and met my friend.

"So tell me what you've been doing? Anything?"

I shook my head. "Not much. Tell me about your work. It must be exciting!"

"Oh, it is." We settled into chairs in the lounge. For the next forty minutes, I was regaled with stories of the new path. At last, Sahn stood and said, "I need to get back before they make more drastic mistakes than they already have."

"Have you had a chance to test that water sample I brought you?"

My friend blinked. “Why no, I haven’t. As a matter of fact, I’d forgotten completely about it, in the rush of the new path.” Sahn scrutinized my face. “I see it’s important to you. I’ll make time to do that within the next couple days. Okay?”

I nodded and raised my hand again as the common sending. “It’s been good to see you.” “Indeed. Let’s meet again soon.” Sahn left.

I returned to find Partens engrossed in reading the notepad. The scientist saw me and closed the pad. “You’ve done a nice job with these notes. Who taught you?”

I shrugged. “No one. I just figure if I write it like I’m writing for a lay person, someone is bound to understand.”

Partens stared out the window for a minute. Then the scientist said, still staring out the window, “Your path is just winding down for the cycle, isn’t it?”

“Yes. We finished a month ago. We’re just cleaning up loose ends now.”

“Would you like to transfer here? My two remaining crewmembers could devote themselves entirely to their projects, instead of fussing over me half the time. You’d, of course, get a promotion. I couldn’t have an ains as a tens’s assistant. I’m thinking you should be a sind.”

Parsind. I liked the sound of that name. It would give me an edge up in the social ranks. People who hadn’t noticed me before would perhaps meet my gaze in the hallway. But then, I’d have to give up my current work completely and become nothing more than a note-taker. There would be no more field trips. No more communing with the living things of the planet. No more freedom. I could think of nothing worse. I shook my head. “No. Though I’d like to work for you for the rest of the cycle, I don’t want a permanent transfer. I’m very happy where I am.”

“Calsind it is then.” Partens nodded. “I’ll contact your tens.”

I shifted my pen to my other hand, flexing my free one. Partens glanced at me, straightened, and spoke tiredly. “Keeping up?”

“Yes. You’ve been going quick, but I’ve gotten most of it, I think.” Truthfully, both hands were sore. I was doing double duty, entering my notes into a video every evening before bed. I’d never done so much writing and data entry in my life.

“If your notes are anything like before, you’ve been getting more than ‘most of it’.”

Partens’s took a step and grimaced.

Sahn spoke up from across the vast room. “Looks like you need a day off, Partens.”

The scientist waved a hand as if to ward off the words. “I’m fine.”

“That’s not what my tens, your ex-second, says. It has been a few months since you’ve taken a break. As an acting ahn, I can order you to take a day off, citing health reasons.”

They glared at each other. Finally Partens said, “How about if I take the afternoon off? Does that satisfy?”

Sahn nodded. “If you take another half-day within the next ten days.”

Partens gave a curt nod.

Sahn turned to me. “My turn to congratulate you.”

“And it’s my turn to thank you.”

“Do you like it?”

“How do you think Calsind will answer with me standing here?” Partens asked.

Sahn mock-scowled at the scientist and then turned back to me.

I said, “I do like it. I’m learning quite a bit, actually.”

“Well good. We’ll talk more about it later. I don’t have much time, like usual. But, I just wanted to tell you the results on your cave water.”

“Cave water?” Partens focused intently on my face.

Sahn ignored the scientist. “It seems to be mostly safe. It even is a little bit saline, though I wouldn’t recommend drinking it without straining it first. There is a higher concentration of arsenic than our local water, but a person could get used to it eventually.”

Partens pointed at me. “You cave?”

I shook my head. “Not really. I found it by accident.”

“Literally,” Sahn added dryly.

“I always wanted to go in a cave. Some of my line have, and it’s one of the fondest memories I have. But caves are too precarious for me.” Partens frowned.

“This one actually has a nice wide platform to accommodate a flyer. The floor of the cave is mostly clear of debris, and it’s light enough to see your footing.”

“So it’s not deep?”

I shrugged. “Deep enough. I haven’t been all the way in yet.”

Partens’s eyes filled with longing, staring across the room, unfocused. “I’d like to go in a cave before I end my cycle. Will you take me?”

“Of course.”

Partens focused sharply on Sahn and with a firm voice, said, “As a tens, I’m ordering you to go as well. I may need your medical services.”

Sahn’s jaw dropped open. “Surely there’s another ahn that is less busy than I.”

“Yes, but there’s none that ordering to go would give me such satisfaction in revenge.”

I dropped Sahn and Partens on the ledge and flew the ship down below to park it. By the time I reached the cave, my two friends had moved into the opening of the passage.

Partens was examining the rock light cells, long pale fingers tracing the contours of one. “Remarkable. Is it like this all the way down?”

I smiled secretively. “Come see.” I stepped past them and moved deeper into the passage. We traveled in silence until we came to the stream.

Sahn stopped. “Is this where you took your samples?”

I nodded. “The first one. The last group came from further in.”

Sahn touched a hand to the wet and touched it to the tip of a long, thin tongue. “Salt. I can taste the extra arsenic, too.”

Partens ran hands across the light-rocks again. The tracings of fingers left dark feather-like marks across the rocks where the light had been briefly cut off. “I’ve never seen rock like this before. What is it called?”

“Loripsium Defins. Wait till you see it further down.” I waved my hand to indicate the waiting path before us. Partens raised eyebrows at Sahn and began down the tunnel.

We reached the bend in the rocks and again the two stopped ahead of me.

“Amazing!” said Sahn.

Partens only nodded, looking around and around the tunnel, face filled with wonderment.

“If you two keep stopping, we’ll never get to the main event.” I stepped past them and rounded the corner. Again, the sheer volume of glory and beauty put a full stop to my movements. Even my breath stopped. The only movement I was conscious of was the furious beating of my heart, moving in rhythm with the swirling patterns on the wall, reflected from the pool.

“Beautiful!” came Partens’s breathless whisper beside me. Out of the periphery of my vision, I saw a silent Sahn stumble forward and crouch on a nearby outcropping.

No one said anything for a long time. Slowly I left them for my favored perching place of last time. Partens followed, but stumbled from watching the walls instead of the path. Sahn stayed still.

At long last, I pulled my equipment out of my bag and set it up.

“What is that?” Partens asked.

“Sonar. I want to see if anything is living in there.”

The scientist nodded and picked up a small rock, tossing it into the pool. Cascades of light and color washed across the walls, bathing the three of them in fleeting shadows and brilliances. “I could die right now and feel as if my life was complete.”

Sahn’s attention snapped to watch Partens closely.

I also looked up. “You can’t die. You have to do everything you can to stay alive. Our people need you too much.”

Partens sighed deeply, not answering, nor looking away from the walls.

After a moment, I turned back to my monitor, finalizing my adjustments. Then I flicked it on and watched the lines blip across the screen. “I see nothing at all. No snakes. Nothing.”

Partens’s throat cleared. “I believe I’ll go in.”

Sahn spoke sharply. “You’d be a fool to try anything so risky.”

Partens stared at Sahn and said, “I may die a fool. But I will die a happy fool. I will take this one pleasure, then return to finish my duties before this cycle ends.” The scientist began to undress.

Sahn hesitated and then nodded a sharp crisp nod. Standing, the ahn turned to me and asked, “Are you going in too?”

I nodded and also stood. “I’m a sind. I can easily be replaced. I’m non-essential. Besides, Partens might need help in the water.”

“I would miss you.”

I reached over and squeezed Sahn’s hand. I shucked the last of my clothes and lowered over the drop-off edge into the pool. The water was deliciously cool, lapping against my shell.

Partens dropped in beside them with a huge lopsided grin. “Are we the first, do you suppose?”

“I’ve seen no sign of any other visitations, Lokitri or otherwise. I’m sure the memory of this place would cause anyone to return.”

We swam in silence after that, until a loud splash brought them both to attention. Sahn’s head broke through the surface of the pool. “I’m tired of watching you two have all the fun.”

Satens, Sahn’s boss and Partens’s prior second, stood in the center of the council floor. The members of the community had begun to bloat: bodies were rounder, shorter and grayer. Walking speed had been slowed to a lumber. The seats had been moved farther apart to limit any chance of injury. “We are ready. The repulse unit is in place at the new level. It has been tested and found to be quite effective. At the insistence of our medical staff, we have crafted special containment spheres for the weaker members of our community to protect them from the pressures at that level.”

Several heads turned toward where Partens, Sahn and I sat. Partens pretended no notice, but I saw a hand twitch. I reached over and took it into my own hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

Satens continued. “Additionally, our medical chief of staff... Stand please, Sahn.” As Sahn rose, Satens continued. “Thank you. Our medical chief has created a special gelatin coating that can be spread on the squib as they begin to define, thereby inducing the cell walls to hold their integrity.”

The people within the room erupted into applause. The lead ame of the High Council didn't even try to bring them back into control until several minutes had elapsed. Then a gavel pounded nonstop on the desk. When at last the room volume diminished by half, the ame spoke loudly. “Partens, I understand you also wish to speak today.”

Partens stood with Sahn's support. I also stood and walked to the ame's desk. Though I was now a sind, I was still beneath an ame's notice. Partens spoke. “I am pleased to inform you that I have concluded my research on fuel cells. My assistant, Calsind, has written my every thought, my every move, on these papers. I commit them to the community for safe keeping.”

A hush fell over the room. One by one, the members of the crowd rose to their feet, showing their respect and honoring Partens. By the time I laid the thick stack of videos on the desk with a loud clatter, the entire assembly was on its feet.

Partens stared high at the far wall, jaw working. The green beneath the scientist's shell brightened in color. The room waited, and at long last, Partens looked around the room again with a tremulous smile and damp eyes. “I believe...” The voice came out thick and husky. Partens's throat cleared harshly. “I believe we will be able to launch an unmanned space craft into orbit this next cycle.”

The room exploded into wild applause and cheering. The ames of the High Council joined in.

I stood watching Partens for a long time. The scientist leaned against the entryway. Partens could no longer stand, shell was completely transparent. Still, the tens wasn't ready to enter the sea yet.

Sahn fussed around Partens like insects raising larvae. The medical chief was constantly checking the integrity of Partens's shell, applying patch or gelatin as required. An emergency vat of sea water stood at the ready in the corner of the lab. Anything Partens wanted or needed, Sahn fetched, carried or held.

Now, Partens looked up at me. Sahn's attention followed. The scientist said, “There you are! I was wondering what had happened to you.”

Sahn began a smile and then suddenly gazed sharply at me. Sahn left Partens's side, walking swiftly toward me. “It's your time, isn't it?”

I nodded and shifted off the door frame, moving slowly, feeling the weight and drag of new liquid in my extremities. I reached Sahn's outstretched hand and took hold of it, steadying myself. “I just came to say goodbye to you both.”

“Goodbye?” Sahn frowned. “We'll join you in the sea soon.”

Partens took in a sudden deep breath. “You're not going to the sea, are you? You're going to the cave, instead.”

“I am. I don't believe going deeper is the answer to our survival. My line has long believed there must exist alternatives. And I've perhaps found one that must be tested.”

Partens nodded and Sahn said, “That's what you were doing, that day you came to me injured. You were seeking alternatives. And I had the audacity to scold you. I'm so sorry!”

I shrugged. “How could you know? I, myself, didn’t even see it for that possibility until a later date.” I paused and then said, “I’ve set up monitoring and recording equipment all around the place.”

Partens said. “I envy you. The first step is always the most exciting of them all, I think.” The scientist reached out a hand to shake mine.

“You should be taking your own first step next cycle too.” I winced at the strength of Partens’s grip, knowing it would not hurt so much if I wasn’t so weak. “I believe, Patens, that this is the first time your grip has been stronger than mine.”

Partens glanced at Sahn. “I have specialized equipment and good care. I think I just might make it through.”

I nodded and smiled. I turned my attention to Sahn. For a minute, neither of us spoke. Finally Sahn said, “We’ve been friends for as long as I can remember, cycle after cycle. I don’t want this to be the end.” Tears dropped from brilliant green eyes, wetting Sahn’s shell.

I spoke softly. “Then we won’t say goodbye.” I turned and walked slowly to my waiting flyer.

I set the flyer to hover beside the ledge and climbed out. I turned back and watched it a minute. It would run out of energy eventually and crash. I hated the waste, but it couldn’t be helped. I wouldn’t be able to climb that hill and would likely die if I tried.

I turned back to my task. By the time I picked up my bag and shuffled into the mouth of the cave, I was soaked from sweat. The darkness felt cool against me as I moved further and further from the sun and daylight.

As I passed each of the seven monitoring stations I’d set up in the passageway, I stopped to test my equipment. Over the course of the past few days, I had taken five trips to bring up all the heat gauges, toxic gas gauges, UV gauges, moisture and humidity gauges, movement tracking devices, and bio-heat reading devices. I adjusted the screens so I see them from the pool, then I ran each through a final test, ensuring that all the alarms were off. Even if I did hear them, I wouldn’t be in any condition to do anything. The only alarms I needed were the ones at the pool itself.

At last I reached the pool and I double-checked my equipment there, testing each of the three alarms: bio-heat sensors, sonar, and movement sensor. I might not be able to do anything but hide from a menace, but still I could do that.

Satisfied, I opened my bag and pulled out my copy of Partens’s papers in their protective case. Setting that beside my equipment, I began to prepare for the pool. I hoped my tolerance to the arsenic was enough. Each trip I’d made to the cave with equipment, I’d swum in the pool also, extending the time longer and longer.

Undressed, I slipped into the pool, it’s cool embrace refreshing me and easing the ache on my body. At first, I swam and frolicked, but as the days progressed and my body became more bloated and less streamlined, I took to floating on the bottom of the pool like the shapeless blob I was becoming. Less and less I had to surface for air; my cells began to absorb oxygen from the water. My cell structure seemed to be holding well.

The more shapeless I became, the more space I took in the bottom of the pool, the more the reflected lights back and forth between the pool and the walls took on a green hue.

The last time I could see my monitors, they showed the temperature as fifty degrees less than that of the outside two cycles ago, while the temperature shown of the outside was over a hundred degrees more than that of last cycle.

Not long after I lost my vision, the pains began. A pulling, burning sensation formed down the center of my body, increasing daily. It felt sharper on either end than in the middle, but it also hurt there.

As the pains intensified, I felt the pull stretch the area between into a thin material. Thinner and thinner it pulled and then, when the pain reached the blinding point, it was over. Through moving and bumping around the pool, I discovered I was one of eight squib that my former body had split into. It seemed the cell walls were holding their integrity. When my new body would eventually form eyes, and I could see again, I'd be able to inspect the others better. I'd be able to view my monitors again. I needed to know the temperature. Just from the feel though, it was still just as cool as before. It seemed my experiment had succeeded. This next cycle, I would have something to say at council. And my whole next few cycles would be in search of more of these pools. Until then, I could only sit and float. And plan a new career path.