

## chapter twenty-one

Whitecloud and Georgette arrived. Tired and hungry, but happy. They ate, rested. The next evening all sat around a little fire, now built under a sort of shelter Oldman and Brown had made.

So that the fire is not visible from up there, Elspeth explained.

Whitecloud spoke first. They had not heard the first three missiles, but they had seen the trail of the last one, going southwest. A falling star, they had thought. Oldman explained missiles. Yes, Whitecloud and Georgette knew what they were. Who, in the old world, would *not* have known?

Whitecloud told a leisurely story of their trip to the coast.

Georgette interrupting, At first, he spent a lot of time teaching me about living on foot. Finding food, making shelter.

Whitecloud, laughing, And you taught me about making love! This old man learned much. You women!

But, Georgette said, you were eager to learn. And we both learned more than making love, we learned to love!

Yes.

A silence nobody dared break. Whitecloud and Georgette sat next to each other, without touching, yet it was as if there was some kind of shine around the two of them.

Whitecloud went on. I wanted to for my family. I have children, and many cousins and nephews on the west coast, north of Vancouver. I thought some of them would have been smart enough to survive. Some did, of course. Many people over there survived. Not too many white people, the Dark got them. The big city was pretty much deserted, what little we saw of it. People told us that nobody wants to live there now. But in the country, in the mountains, there were small groups of people. They were doing pretty well, don't you agree, Georgie?

He calls me Georgie! I guess that's all right. Yes, the people we met seemed to do well enough. A few even had electricity. Solar panels, or something.

And a windmill, remember, Whitecloud said.

And horses, Georgie went on. And goats, they had. But, we did not see any dogs, did we? But we saw wolves.

Brown interrupted lazily, And some of those people are also coming here?

Whitecloud looked at him, fondly, You've seen them, have you?

Not clearly, but yes, I had a feeling there were others, besides you two.

Georgie said very quietly, We are not really two, you know. I am pregnant!

Everyone sat up, congratulated Georgie and Whitecloud, who said, That is one of the reasons we came back; we thought we would want Katherine to be around when the baby comes.

But, don't you remember? Katherine left. With Solomon and Guinée, and Alive. And Max, the tall one. Were you already gone when they left?

Whitecloud and Georgie looked at each other.

Brown, very softly, Rock is pregnant as well, as you probably knew. We're confident that everything will be fine. He smiled almost apologetically.

Rock asked, Are there any reasons why you would worry?

Georgie looked down, No, except that I had two abortions, in my old life, and... two what they called miscarriages. Spontaneous abortions. But that was then, I was on drugs, and living not very healthy. Now I feel ten years younger. I am maybe third month? What do you think White?

You see, she calls me White! Such lazy customs those white people have, shortening names!

He says, I am white, Georgie said indignantly. I'm mostly Indian, or something mixed anyway.

Aren't we all, Rat said?

Rock could not help laughing, I notice that White certainly learned how to speak proper English, not Indian talk any more, eh?

White smiled, and did not answer.

How many moons have I been pregnant with your baby, Georgie asked?

Let's see, you first told me when we were visiting my son, up north. Or, was it that time by the lake? Yes. That was... Oh, Long ago. After that we came steadily in this direction. That woman, looking at Georgie, she was the one who said, we have to go *that* way!

And she was right, wasn't she?

Yes. I know *about* where we were, but that one knew exactly. When did we see the old woman? After; no, before the lake. That's right. Yes, I would say at least two moons, probably three. Whitecloud looked down, counting on the knuckles of his left hand, ... there was a full moon by those birches, and then when we saw wolves. That is two, and then... And we're close to the full moon now. Yes, three months! A few days more. And that is from the time you told me. How many moons before you told me?

No, White, I told you right away. The next morning. Remember, we were having that good tea you make, at the lake, early morning. Then she said, very quietly, "that old woman" is a midwife, She's really not old, but "old woman" is a name of respect, I gather. She told me I would have trouble. But, she did not say what kind. Funny, I did not know all of you so well before we left, but I wanted to come back and tell you about this baby, I guess. Yes, probably we both knew Katherine was gone, or would go. We just felt we wanted to come here. Or, I did.

Whitecloud: I honestly did not remember about Katherine. I think of her when I think of this cabin. The cabin that was here. When we left, I was too full of Georgie, and looking forward to traveling with her, and... I thought about Brown, how he was going to hunt for food. Of course, I knew he would be all right. I remember there were other people here and that they were talking about leaving. That time was confusing to me: a plane, going to Africa? I thought... I did not think. I just pushed all that out of my memories. Like I used to *not* hear what white folks said. I could not understand what they were doing. Why the rush-rush, first make a hundred rules and agreements, and then break them when it suits you? It just made no sense to me. So I just did not hear. Whitecloud ran out of steam, but the meaning was very clear. They had wanted to come" home."

Nobody felt like talking about the time when Katherine left them, until Oldman said in his most reflective tone of voice, Yeah, all that stuff with a plane, and Solomon who wanted to make plans for us, all that reminded me too much of the old world that went up in smoke. Too complicated, too... too artificial, or something. *Making plans for humanity!*

Rat interrupted, but Katherine left because she was in love with Solomon.

In love? She was fascinated by him, Oldman said. I'm not sure she had a romantic heart.

Rock said, She was talking about having Solomon's baby!

And I'm younger than Katherine, Rat said.

Elsbeth, who everyone seemed to have forgotten, she looked asleep, said, You mean, having a baby?

Yes, I would like to, said Rat. But, perhaps I am too old.

Elsbeth said. I'm young, I can have lots of babies.

Some of the others smiled; none said anything. All probably thought the same thoughts: how do we know that we can *have* children after the Chaos, and the Dark and all that...

Oldman said, we're talking old world again. Thinking big thoughts: what if, the future and all that. Why not just be here? Tomorrow is tomorrow. Anyone want more tea? I'm going to bed.

Rat turned to Georgie, What exactly did the old woman, the midwife woman, say?

Oh, you know, Indian talk. “You in trouble, girl,” she said, didn’t she, White?

Whitecloud nodded.

I thought at first that she meant I was pregnant. You know: unmarried, pregnant: trouble. I laughed. The woman had her eyes closed, opened them, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, “Your baby, he impatient. Trouble keep him in, to grow good.” Then she got up and walked out of the little shed she lived in. White, did she say anything else?

No-o-o, I don’t remember. It was then that we decided to come here. Do you think we should have stayed with her? We can easily go back, you know. It isn’t that far. And we take it easy. I carry stuff. Pretty soon it will be Spring, the rains will come, I build you a nice teepee.

All by ourselves, in the wood? I want people around me, White. It doesn’t matter that Katherine isn’t here; these are good people. We need to be with people. I’m not sure that I would want to live close to the old woman.

Brown asked, Have you had trouble so far?

No, not really. Only once did I have what could have become some kind of contractions, like I had before. We were walking, and suddenly... I had this cramp. Remember White, you sat me down on that fallen tree. But by the time I sat down, the cramps had already gone. We waited a little, and then we went on, didn’t we?

She’s a tough one, that one!

Elspeth said, I’m sleepy, Good night everyone. Rat got up, Oldman followed. The evening broke up. Each couple went to their tree, their nest, for the rest of a balmy night.

Many days later a group of three came. Georgette and Whitecloud greeted them as long-lost family, although the biological relationship was vague: Whitecloud’s brother’s ex-wife’s cousins, or second, or third cousins, perhaps. A man and two women. They were obviously well-fed, healthy. They had traveled leisurely, they said, to hunt and stay at pleasant places as long as their food supply lasted.

*Nomads*, Oldman thought. *That was the way humans started. And now, again?*

The three easily fit in with the Family. For many evenings they shared food and stories. The weather was mostly sunny. It rained a few times, but the new shelter was big enough to keep everyone dry. If anyone needed more privacy for a few hours, or even a day, the woods were safe and hospitable.

The three had introduced themselves, the first day, as Mr. and Mrs. and Mrs. Harrison. But when Elspeth snickered, and Brown laughed outright, they too laughed.

I am Horse, the man said, and this is Mary, also known as Brown Woman, and this one is Helen, although she prefers to be known as Squirrel.

Brown Squirrel, the woman added. Then she looked at Brown, and burst out laughing, We must all be related: Brown, and Brown Woman and Brown Squirrel. What is it with all this Brown?

With that, it was as if the Family had opened its heart, admitted three more people, expanded, and closed the unity again.

Brown Woman was a weaver. She made baskets, and wove cloth, “when we settle anywhere long enough to make a loom.”

Brown Squirrel was an adventurous cook, could climb trees (like a squirrel!), was quick and jolly (also like a squirrel)!

Horse was stubborn as a horse, the women said, but immensely capable. He could do anything, and often did. Almost from the first day, Horse joined the men in their explorations. They felt that now they would be able to have two hunting parties. When the animals came up from wherever they had wintered.

A day or so later, another missile screamed over, going northeast. And another, in the same direction. Then two side by side, also in the same direction.

The Family warned the newcomers that they should be prepared for one or more other ones coming back.

Not much was said, as they sat around the, now hidden, little fire. What was there to say? But everyone huddled closer. They drank more tea, waiting...

The return missile(s) did not come.

In the morning, nobody had slept much, and nobody felt like sleeping in. As soon as it was light, people went about their business.

Horse and Whitecloud went off somewhere. The women busied themselves sorting out food and pelts they had brought.

Whether they were aware of it, or not, everyone was waiting for more missiles.

That reminder of the old world was deeply disturbing. An invasion of their cozy new world.

In the afternoon Oldman voiced what others only thought, when he said, Maybe there are better places to live. We don't have to stay here, just because there used to be a cabin here that seemed to attract people. But perhaps now is the time when we need to find a more permanent place to...

Squirrel said, We had imagined traveling for quite a while. There is no reason to be settled. Perhaps later, but for now, we found more than enough meat everywhere we went, and more than enough other food, like berries, and fruit, if you know where to look. We've been traveling for a long time already. It gets in the blood, I think. We like it, don't we (turning to Brown Woman)?

Rat and Brown Woman made tea early that afternoon. People gathered well before dark, and exchanged more stories. The latest arrivals told of places they had been, people they had met. The men, who had come back from wherever they explored, in the morning, added stories of good hunting, and fishing.

Even salmon is coming back, Horse said. We all thought salmon had disappeared forever, but apparently some smart salmon waited us out, and came back when it was safe again.

But no dogs, Brown Woman added.

Squirrel said, but we did see birds again. In the beginning, you know, we thought all the birds had died, too. But we saw birds. Little ones. Perhaps the big ones will come back, too. Did you here see any birds, eagles perhaps?

Nobody had seen any birds here, certainly not eagles.

Elsbeth whispered, The birds are scared of those missile-things!

But soon enough, they were talking about what had come back. And people they had met. To hear them talk, the far Northwest was full of small groups of people here and there.

Brown asked whether people were hunting, or growing things?

Well, both probably, Horse said. They grow some herbs, some greens, maybe sweet potatoes. But, we did not see anyone who had cows, for instances.

Squirrel: but we saw one man who had a horse, and at least one place where they had goats!

True, there were goats, and I assume people eat them. But for the most part, meat was from wild animals. Isn't that what you, here, have lived on? Meat from deer, and perhaps a bear? Did you see wolves here?

No, Oldman and Brown said almost simultaneously. They had not seen bear either, although they thought one might have been in the neighborhood. They had really only hunted deer, and an elk occasionally, and some smaller animals, like a badger once, and a fox.

The women took turns going back to boil more water for tea. Rat brought out dried meat to share all around. Very tasty, everyone agreed. Very tasty, indeed!

Thththththththththsssssscccccccccccc..... Another missile, if that was what it was, going north and east. Almost immediately another, and another. And a fourth.

The silence in the group and the surrounding forest was absolute. Nobody moved, they barely breathed.

Until Oldman broke the spell, said, They seem to be coming more often I think. I thought they were lower too. That could mean the target they are aimed at is closer.

Without speaking, everyone was expecting a return salvo; a response from the north and east.

Horse cleared his throat. And again. Are you... em... does this happen often? I do not like it. Reminded me too much of the crazy world we thought was dead. Evidently, it is still going on. After, what, three years? Four?

Brown Woman said, And maybe only two. Who keeps track any more?

Squirrel was crying softly. Elsbeth went over to sit beside her, held her hand. We're all scared, she said.

Brown stood up. His voice clear, straightforward: Do we have to stay here? Couldn't we pick up the few things we cannot do without, and the food, and go where these people came from? Rat, what do you think? Do we have to stay here, because it is a special place that people might find? And sometimes not the right kind of people either, remember?

Rat sat back on her heels, rocking forward and back.

No, she said, after some thought. Of course, we need not stay here for that. It's just... We know these woods now. It's sort of home. But perhaps you're right.

She turned to Horse and the two women, What do you people think? Would we be welcome somewhere else? Are there better places for us to... to stay, to live?

Oldman, who sat by Rat, put his arms around her, to still her rocking. Do we need to settle right away? If I remember correctly, our most ancient forebears were nomads. Humans survived for a long, long time, moving slowly from place to place. Or, perhaps just from winter place to summer place? Who knows. But moving around is nothing new, of course.

Rock looked at Brown: What do you think? Should we move?

Brown, who was still standing, said slowly, I don't know what we *should* do, or could do, or want to do. But in any case we don't have to decide at this very moment. Let's all think about it, and talk again tomorrow. Shall we?

They talked the next evening, and the next. The third night was fireworks night again. Just as they were going to their nests, two missiles streaked over to the northeast. Minutes later three more. And a little while after that, at least five, perhaps six missiles streaked in the other direction.

Oldman, who had remained standing from the first, shook his head. This looks as if they're still at war. What can they possibly fight over?

Ideas, Rat said. Only humans can destroy each other, and perhaps the planet, over ideas. Fictions, illusions.

Brown, ever the practical hunter, said, Can we escape them? Can we escape ourselves?

Elspeth had tears running down her face. The others had been too busy looking up at the sky, lost in their own thoughts, to notice. It was Georgie who sat down next to Elspeth, and, without a word, hugged her. Then they all sat down.

We need more tea; no, *I* need more tea, Rock said, standing up, I'll make more. How many?

They all nodded, yes.

They did not sleep much that night. But without much more discussion it seemed they had decided. They would pack up and move. West, and further north. If nothing else, Whitecloud whispered, there are more of us there. And all the people we met were kindred.

Family, Elspeth asked quietly? I have no family.

No, I don't mean they are related to me. I mean they are kindred souls; they feel as we do.

Rat reached out her hand, Of course, you are family, Elspeth. You are our family; we are all family.

And the people who shoot those things at each other?

They are insane, Oldman said with passion. Definitely not family.

Once they had made up their minds, it did not take long to get ready. All preserved meat was divided, so that each of them carried according to their strength. Georgie and Whitecloud had made themselves backpacks that worked well. Rock and Brown copied the design, with some "improvements," Rock said. They did not decide how they would walk, but it sorted itself out very quickly.

Horse and the two "brown" women left first, they wanted to explore far north while it was summer and warm. Then they would leisurely move west. Eventually, they would all meet by the lake.

The weather had turned: it was almost Spring-like, seeming warmer than it was, and changeable.

Good for hunting, Horse declared. Hibernating animals are coming out, are hungry, and careless. We might get ourselves a bear, he said.

Brown Woman added, we came by a place that looked like it could be a winter sleep place for a black bear. They would check it out.

Squirrel shook her head, I don't like bears! Definitely not in Spring, they are *mean!*

But we are three, Horse said. We spread out a little, and we look pretty formidable to an old bear, groggy after his long sleep.

Yah, and I'm on the side where the bear is charging!  
We won't let anything happen to you! Don't worry.

Whitecloud and Georgie went a day later, leaving very detailed directions for paths, and the rendezvous place by the lake.

Rock and Brown followed a few days after, but came back the next day, to help clean up. They needed to be with "family." After tearing down the shelter, and what was left of the cabin, they briefly discussed leaving a sign, so that people who might find this place could follow. But, they soon decided not to leave a trail. They agreed to travel at an easy pace, so that they could more or less stay together. Certainly at first, spending the nights as a group of five. The core Family, as they thought of themselves. They carried food enough for quite a while, but they would also hunt and gather berries and other plants, as they wandered. When they reached the lake, and caught up with the others, they would see what seemed the best way to go on from there.

It is possible that we would have to spread out, in order to have enough space to provide for ourselves, Oldman said.

The five "core family" scattered leaves, to cover the soil they had spread over last night's fire. Then they put their packs on, made the adjustments of first time use. There was not that much they carried, food, of course, blankets, a few clothes, an extra pair of shoes, or sandals if they had it. A few pots and pans, knives.

They began the walk single file: Oldman, then Rat, Elspeth, Rock and Brown. Brown looked back, smiled—leaving what had been his home for a long time. He could barely remember his life before living here.

They walked due north, as far as they could tell. Late that afternoon they found what first looked like the edge of the forest, but turned out to be the edge of a very large clearing. Under shelter of trees, but with a wide open view, they settled down for the night. At sunset, a quiet time with gold light coming from the west they debated whether they would make an evening fire, but they were too tired. They probably should start walking again early tomorrow.

Oldman said, Let's at least sit in a close circle, and share food and perhaps a little talk before we sleep.

Rat talked about when she first came to the cabin; what was left of it. A place of healing it was, she concluded.

Elspeth looked around, said I worked hard today! (everyone smiled) But I feel great, actually.

Rock said, I'm thinner than I ever was, but I'm in much better shape now. Wonderful to have food again!

Oldman smiled, then laughed—the first open, hearty laugh they had heard from him—, It feels good to be with good people, in a good life! I've wandered all my life and learned long ago that anywhere, away from people, I could always find what I needed: food, shelter, and healing. Now I have all that, and also a good family. I am home.

Elspeth, But we're walking; we have no home!

Brown said softly, we have no house. For the winter we'll build a house perhaps, or a teepee: now our home is the forest, or a protected place by the lake. The earth itself is our home; we are part of it. Now we fit in again with the trees, and the rocks, the animals: "all my relations," as my mother used to say.

Oldman added, equally softly Our earth has always been the only home we ever had.