

...Breaking protocol and continuing my cathartic tirade from the densely packed margin of vol. 12, I will try to mention only this: Stringer Kade is going to be trouble, and I find it datted irresponsible of Patrick to refuse to sanction him for it. I will try to continue to keep my mouth shut about it, but that will not last much longer, and then I shall give that arrogant man a piece of my mind.

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Now, on to volume 13 proper. When I wrote the above, I had nothing planned to write here, I simply ran out of room to cast aspersions at Mr. Kade upon reaching the final page of volume twelve.

I wasn't finished, you see. Some things cannot properly be expressed with too much brevity.

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But we are saved! Boxer has called me with a most novel dilemma. Or rather, he failed to reach Moon's notice, and settled for me, which is almost as good, if the dilemma turns out as interestingly as it may.

It seems he has encountered a stray. Some poor girl, wandering deep in the webs, living in caves, and striking rocks to make fire, &c. Managed to learn the name "Alli" from her but little else, claims she is skittish as a rabbit and hopes modestly that she is merely shy before his irrepressible masculinity. By which I mean of course, she may suspect he will try to deceive then overpower her.

Boxer seems to feel that someone more female might be able to win her trust. It is a kindness, that he did not suggest "motherly" as the quality he seeks; I should be most depressed.

He has given me an adequate link to reach him, which I shall take when I have finished this entry and gathered a few niceties. Goodness, how deep the link is! I do wonder: however did a lost human get that far into the Web? I shall return, with answers.

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I have brought answers, and several more questions. Isn't that always the way of it? Let us begin with our Stray. I arrived on a small tableau of dingy green rock, to find Boxer reclining peacefully on my left. There was a bluish sun high in a grey sky, but the air was thin, cold and hazy, and it was a moment before I spotted the girl. Or woman, rather; she was sitting many metres away but at a glance I could see she was nearer to 30 than 20.

She was watching me steadily. I nudged Boxer with my foot and he objected verbally, then scrambled up to his feet. "Well," I said, "aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

Boxer sketched a bow. "Lenora, I present the mysterious Alli. Alli, meet the luminous Lenora."

"Thank you, Boxer. Very gentlemanly. Now, if you would be so good as to make yourself absent."

He gaped at me for a moment. I smiled sweetly and stared him down. Sorry for that, Boxer; I shall try to remember to apologize for my rudeness. At the time, it seemed prudent; if Alli was uneasy around him, then perhaps it would benefit us to see him sent away.

So I didn't back down, and in a moment Boxer harrumphed, then flipped the motionless Alli a salute. She didn't react as he Recalled, then she was back to watching me. Suddenly I wondered if Moon wouldn't have been a better choice; I really wasn't certain how to approach the situation.

I gave her an appraisal. She was sitting huddled close, and I thought she appeared disheveled, thin, and dirty. Looking closer, though, I thought maybe “dirty” wasn’t the right word; she didn’t actually seem unwashed. But her clothes were hard-worn and stained, and her hair was unkempt in a helpless sort of way. Briefly I wondered what she must think of the contrast of my appearance, then returned to more useful observations. For one, she was wearing good, modern boots, albeit with knotted laces. For another, her worn clothes looked like they had begun life as a tank top and cargo shorts. So she was almost certainly Called, and recently at that.

It seemed the first order of business would be to discover how she had ended up trapped in this colorful but barren world, so far from the Cathedral, with no Chakra or equipment. A dark suspicion occurred to me: had someone with Abilities dragged a newcomer off into the wild, and left her there? For a shameful second, I pictured Boxer in the role, but no, Boxer is not that way. Even Stringer is not that kind of trouble; I knew no one whom I could imagine behaving thus.

But this was unhelpful, and for the record, incorrect, as we’ll see. I spread my empty hands in a gesture of placation. “I am pleased to meet you, Alli. I am Lenora, as you know.” In the culture of my childhood, formal and graceful speech was often accompanied by gestures, and I found myself falling into the long-disused patterns. I swept my hand toward the ground near her.

“May I sit with you?”

She stared silently for a moment, as if sizing me up, then gave a quick nod and a gesture of her own, toward the greenish rock. I nodded and walked, unhurriedly, till I was perhaps two metres away, and sat, as gracefully as I could, which I suspect wasn’t very. She returned her arm to the tight, closed huddle she was making of herself. A chill breeze stirred the rough grasses, and my sluggish, simple brain: this woman was not huddled in fear, or in the shock I

was beginning to suspect. She was freezing! Dressed for a summer hike and trapped under a winter sky.

Now that I was looking for it, I could see the occasional shiver, though it never reached her face. She was looking away from me but jumped a bit when I unwrapped my shawl. "The wind is bitter here," I said. "You must be chilled through. Take this." I held out the shawl toward her.

"No, thank you," she said, frowning. "I'm fine."

Her speech was American and educated, Midwestern perhaps, though with little accent. I knew that mine would sound foreign to her. And now I owe another apology I may pay in the future, in this case to Alli: I played my hint of foreignness to the hilt, and said, "please, it is but a simple wrap, but it is my best, and it would honor me if you would accept it for a time." Which is gibberish, but I am not above using a little guilt to get my way, when my motives are pure.

Slowly, she reached out and took the shawl from me, and spent a moment examining it. It was a local find, not of human make, and so fascinating in principle, but not unusually precious. After a moment, she threw it around her shoulders and managed to get most of herself under it, just her boots poking out the bottom and her head out the top.

"Thank you," she said. Then a moment later, "This is better."

She was a skinny thing; when I was younger, men preferred a more shapely woman, though perhaps she was suited to a more modern mold. Her cheeks were thin, though... I didn't think she'd been eating well.

In fact, I still knew hardly enough to start with. How does one handle a situation like this? The Group is doing well with newcomers now, but there are still only twenty or so of us, and most

newcomers arrive at Base Station One perforce; there's nowhere else they can go. They get their Chakra and meet whoever is there to be met. I still didn't know how she had ended up here, but it occurred to me that I didn't even know if she knew where she was at all... did she even know she had left the Earth? So that seemed the place to start.

"So, Alli. You seem to be living in the wilderness. Do you know where we are?"

"Tahlvukei Kalto," she replied, "though I don't know why anyone would come here often enough to name it."

Well, that was interesting. It never occurred to me for a moment to doubt her, though I speak very little of the Archon language. I couldn't have said what it translated to. But in any event, it was not the answer of a confused newcomer. My shock must have shown on my face because I could see her visibly tensing for something, perhaps to bolt away? Quickly I forced a laugh, and she relaxed a bit, still watching my admittedly strange reaction to her answer. And then my laugh became more natural, as the absurdity struck me.

Alli didn't seem to share my sentiment, though. "I'm glad to be so entertaining." She didn't look glad.

I wiped my eyes. "Your specificity, my friend. As if I asked a tribesman if he knew why the shiny airplane stays in the air and he explained about the horsepower of a Pratt-Whitney jet engine." Alli looked at me like I was mad. I continued, "I did not know what this place was named. I was merely asking if you knew it to be not Earth."

Alli nodded, but said nothing.

"So," I said, "I shall ask backwards, until my questions are wise enough to match your answers, if ever they shall be. How did you get here?"

"I was Called," she replied. "Invited. I haven't trespassed."

I nodded. "I was closer that time, but still not wise enough." I thought a moment. "You are wary, though, of Boxer, and of me. Have you met others? Have you..." I struggled with my phrasing, though I thought she was starting to shake her head. "Have you encountered... violence... since you arrived?"

"No," she said quickly. "No violence." She seemed uneasy. She stood up and began milling around.

"But you have met others," I said. "Someone who brought you here?" Alli looked puzzled.

"How long have you been in... Tahlvukei? It is so barren and cold, how do you live?"

"Oh, I don't live here," she said. "I was... passing through."

Yet again, we weren't quite understanding each other. I could have found it frustrating if I weren't finding it so interesting. "Pardon my directness," I said, "but how?" I held up my wrist so she could see the faint blinking of my Chakra. "I can leave this place, like Boxer did. But you haven't gotten one of these yet. How do you do it?"

Her face showed understanding. "Through the Doors," she said. "Though your way seems better."

"How..." I started, then paused. I wished David or Patrick were here, surely their understanding of the technology would have ended the confusion. If Alli were to be believed, she was using the Doors without a Chakra, which I didn't think was possible. But it would

explain a great deal; how she had gotten here on her own, why she hadn't met anyone, how she was surviving away from a Base Station.

Alli was looking at me warily. "Forgive me," I said. "I am seeking only to understand." I took a deep breath. "We use the Doors as well, but our tools are crucial to the process." Again, I held up my wrist. "This is a Chakra. Without it, the Doors are difficult for us to use. They also let us communicate easily and find each other, which is how I know you don't have one. Without my Chakra, I would be trapped here. But you say you are not, so there is my confusion."

"Well," she answered, "the Doors aren't exactly easy to use. It can take me a long while to get one open. But yes, I can usually get them to go somewhere."

There was a long silence, while we both considered our new information. Alli paced aimlessly. I was starting to get chilly now without my shawl. It seemed clear that Alli wouldn't break the silence, so I did.

"How long have you been wandering? Have you never, till now, seen others? There are nearly twenty of us who call Base Station One 'home', and we explore far and wide."

"I don't know," Alli said quietly. "At least a month, maybe two... My watch stopped when I first arrived, and most of the worlds have different days." She seemed disturbed that she couldn't answer.

And, incidentally, she dodged my second question, so I asked it again. "And others? You must have seen someone by now. You are not lost or alone. Why have you not sought us out?"

She didn't answer for a time. "I'm..." She put on a stern face. "I've studied too much anthropology. Groups of people, living in these conditions... they revert to old tribal patterns.

Alpha males establish vicious dominance, the females huddle together and survive. I'm not fast enough with the Doors to get away from that. And I won't be a part of it. I won't."

I laughed, though by her expression she didn't approve. But I couldn't help myself. "Two months? Two months alone, in fear, because living in primitive conditions brings out the animal in us? But Alli, my dear, the only one living in these conditions is you. We are all very comfortable at B.S. one, with heat, light, running water..." She gaped at me. I wiped a laughter tear from my eye. "You've seen Boxer leave, 'Recalling' is what we name it. Who could keep him captive? And I can do the same. Everyone can... except you."

She sat back down, facing more or less away from me. I believe that I know, now, what was going through her mind: pride and embarrassment, the fear of being laughed at when "they" discussed her foolishness, of being pitied.

But I didn't realize it then (and I still don't know). I do know that people who are alone too long, stop seeing things clearly. "Alli," I said, "come with me, meet your people." She didn't show any sign of hearing. "You have lived too long, alone with your fears." At that, she turned to face me. I continued, not knowing what she needed to hear, "No duty or obligation is placed on you. No one will claim rulership over you. Accept the tools and comforts that are your right."

For a moment I thought she would speak, then she turned away again. An approach occurred to me, and I said, "What we have learned of the science and language of this place is available to you." Then I added, in a carefully casual voice, "And your own discoveries, do you not long to test them against the minds of others?"



That struck home, indeed. Alli spoke like a thinker, a learner, a researcher of some kind. There is only so much such a thinker can do in hermitage; at long last one must ground oneself against the rationality of others to progress. As I know so well, when you study a thing, you must base your knowledge on answers from other fields, and if no one can give you those answers, you must study those fields yourself, though they be of little interest to you. It was a precious and seductive offer I made her, and she was swayed by it, though she was still afraid.

For a long time she said little, watching me from narrowed eyes. Then at last she decided: "I'd like to see this base station. And meet the others, too. But only meeting, I'm not offering to join some tribe."

"It would be my pleasure, Alli," I said. "We can go now, if you like. Are there things you must gather?"

It is possible she answered with shifty eyes, though I can't swear to it; cautious to the end. "My camp is a long way from here." She paused. "How will I get back?"

"It is no great matter," I told her.

She appeared to gather her resolve. "What do I need to do?"

"Come to me," I said, gesturing to myself. "I shall pull us back home."

We stood, and she walked toward me. I held my hand out, and she took it with her own. "Do not fight, do not fear," I said. "It will be strange, but over in only a moment." Mentally I pulled her into the fold of my containment, which takes some focus (and now I see the unexpected fortune that Moon was not available, because she has not mastered it), and I Recalled.

When we arrived, the first thing I noticed was a savage grip on my hand. Alli was breathing hard, looking around in something like a panic. Firmly I patted her hand in mine, drawing her attention, and in a moment she unclenched her deathly grip.

Alas! Audible in the gathering hall was a gathering, Patrick and Stringer disagreeing loudly about the usual. It caught Alli's complete attention. Quietly she walked closer to the door, unseen by anyone within, and listened. I confess I was completely unable to read her expression. Nor her posture. After all my lofty talk of civilized utopia, the poor child arrived to our equivalent of Alpha dog bickering, after all. I really didn't know what to say to her. So, instead, I Whispered for David to join us. He agreed instantly, which suggested he was becoming rather cross himself.

I have no idea why David chose to Recall, rather than walk thirty paces to the doorway, but it drew our attention away from the gathering hall, which was all for the good. David was a good choice; he radiates a combination of quiet confidence and competence, a sure antidote for doubt. I made introductions, and when I spoke of Alli's claim to use the Doors without a Chakra, his eyes lit up. Entertaining things often happen when David's eyes light up, so to speak, so I followed in his wake as he swept Alli up into one of his projects.

I have no idea if it was intentional or not (David is a very effective talker), at some point David mentioned that she'd want to get a Chakra of her own because if she was so capable without one, imagine what she could do "with," and she naturally objected that she had no intention of offhandedly subjecting herself to another alien machine, and he managed to so offhandedly dismiss her dismissal that I almost wonder whether it was actually settled right then, instead of later.

I won't claim to have understood everything that happened next, but I often don't, when David works his wonders. He led us into the boiler room, dazzled Alli with one of his famous displays, and immediately started an argument with her about the intricacies of translating the native inscriptions. The transformation was quite exceptional. She went from taciturn, to engaged, to fiercely argumentative, all in the space of about five minutes. Oh yes, very shy, David Whispered.

And then, I heard Alli speaking in a pedantic, patronizing tone. David was shaking his head, while she was pointing slowly at different sections. At last, she threw up her arms. "Fine. You know everything. Got it all figured out. Have fun with your toy."

David's expression was most priceless. I wish I could do justice to the events that followed, but I didn't really understand it, so I would merely be describing pretty lights. The gist of the experience was this: David patiently made adjustments to the machinery, in accordance with some understanding Alli claimed to have of the written gauges. The room became dimmer and quieter, as the settings got further and further from David's optimal findings. Everything was nearly shut down by the time David got to the last setting, which Alli told him to adjust far past the value he was used to. Everything turned totally off.

And then, the whole chamber lit and powered, and in addition to making a great deal of noise, two doors groaned open at either end of one of the previously "ornamental" gantries overhead. From the expression on David's face, he was perhaps hearing trumpets as well.