

Chapter Six/Human

It was a surprise when the small, bedraggled, skinny party of six came into the clearing at the base of the pass.

Rugged would be a gentle way to describe the terrain they had crossed. Indeed, though it was astonishingly simple to go back in that direction, it being precipitously vertical, only birds and very small creatures equipped for climbing were expected.

Emerging from the shadows of the lee side of the mountains, into the glaring light of mid-day, for the pass was more or less directly in line with the path of the sun, the family paused, uncertain, waiting for the reassurance of the

tap tap tip tap tap tip tip tip tap tip tap tap tap tapping

but it didn't resume.

Instead, a wizened, crippled figure slowly stood at the other edge of the clearing and watched them carefully for a bit, before shaking its head and sitting back down, still watching.

The male of the family walked forward, inched forward, looking around with hopeful but wary eyes. The mother held the children protectively, even the eldest stayed comfortably close.

In the wizened one's gnarled hands were a short stick and a stone, and around him at his feet were flakes of stone. The male looked more closely. The floor of the clearing, from edge to edge, was paved in small flakes of stone. Gray stone, buff stone, white stone, black stone. They shifted underfoot and produced a tinkling noise.

The male stopped, well short of the work space and scrutinized the figure. There, a small wooden seat, and in front of it a hide, with various shapes and sizes of stone flakes laid neatly out. The stick was a piece of bone, well worn and rounded at the tip, and stone was buff colored with specks of deep brown and black. It had been chipped, and the fresh faces glinted in the unrelenting light.

The wizened figure watched the male just as carefully, noting the grass-stitched cape, the rough feet and hands, the lack of ornamentation. Though thin, the male was muscular, with a sharp, eager expression and clear eyes.

He held out the hand with the bone, palm up, and open, and nodded slowly.

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The male approached, palm up and open, and nodded, accepting the piece of bone. He squatted next to the seat on which the older figure crouched and waited.

The wizened flint knapper picked up a different piece of bone and a small hide. He placed the hide on his thigh and set the stone on top, then carefully pressed with the bone against one of the edges of the stone, which broke off, leaving a clean sharp edge. *tap tap tip tap tap tip*

The male picked up a flake from the ground, and using a corner of his cloak, imitated. *tap tip tip tip tap*

The older figure shook his head, indicated a different spot on the flake, and waited. The male tried again. *tap tap tip*

That was good. They examined the edge and the older figure demonstrated a different shaping technique.

The rest of the family came closer and watched. They sat on boulders that jutted out of the chip-strewn floor of the clearing and watched.

The eldest of the offspring soon picked up a couple flakes and experimented with different hitting strokes, to the delight of the younger ones, who collected and sorted the chips that flew off.

The day wore on, and the youngest ones slept while the older ones worked. As the light began to fade, the wizened one stood up, wrapped his tools and work in the larger hide and moved away. The family waited, then – not knowing what else to do, followed.

Shelter

The wizened male walked a short way further along the pass, then turned off and followed a winding path up to a ledge. The ledge, difficult to see from below, hid a large cleft in the rock, with several small caves that had formed from rock falls.

Out of the caves emerged smells of food, and sounds of work. And then, people.

Well-fed people, wearing light clothing and carrying pots and trenchers. They stared at the family as they walked up, encircled them and reached out carefully to touch them.

An elderly woman brought a clean cloth, and draped it over the infant, then took the infant from the mother and cradled it in her arms, crooning to it in unfamiliar pitches.

The mother, too exhausted to resist, cried.

Another woman came up, with a larger piece of cloth, and draped it over the mother, then offered a gourd filled with water as the rest of the family found themselves treated similarly.

Food was brought out, small amounts of meat, great amounts of vegetables. The food was abundant, and the arrival of the family would not make life harder for the people.

The elder man sat, and waited. When the family had been made comfortable, he began, with great ceremony, to pull out the results of the day's work: a series of scrapers and cutters, a hand axe, points for bird hunting. He gestured toward the man and then to the bird points. It was a new technique, a new style. Rough at the edges, but of obvious functionality.

The other men gathered around, hefting the points, checking the edges. A young man grabbed a shaft and started to bind a point, then compared it to a finished arrow. The balance was right, and he added it to his stock.

The younger members of the family found themselves drawn into small clusters of children and youth, shyly comparing hand sizes or ability to race.

The baby was passed from woman to woman, admired and petted, handed back to the mother for feeding and then rocked to sleep gently by the young mothers-to-be.

It was a quiet evening, cool and refreshing after the long journey. A small cave that had been used for storage was quickly swept clean, and pallets of grasses were made for sleeping. It wasn't elegant, it wasn't big. But it was comfortable and safe.

The family had found a new home.

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