

Purple Rain Sprinkles

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Notes to adults:

This is an original writing, and is offered for free by the author at www.mommatown.com

Developed for an on-line story system which begins with short chapters to encourage younger readers.

This story is for ages 12 and up. This story starts as "cute" for a reason, stick with it.

It is much like E.T./gremlins in content, though a bit darker, hence the 12+ age rate.

-contains some strong emotion, some violence, death or near death

-does not contain foul language, romance, gore

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Chapter 1 Purple Rain

Once a furious rain shower produced a small egg which fell out of the clouds and bounced in the springy grass, landing in a little girl's front yard. She saw it from her living room window while watching the storm. Forgetting her rain jacket and her shoes, she ran out the front door and found it in the grass, unbroken. She spirited it inside and into the secrecy of her room. There, it awaited its destiny

in her soft, dry sock drawer.

Her eyes fixed upon it as she reached in and pulled out some dry socks for herself, for those she was wearing had gotten soaked. The little egg had a slight sheen and was purple with tiny dark purple spots. Slowly closing the sock drawer, she opened another drawer and got out a new play dress. After changing into her dry clothes, her daddy called to her. They had lunch and then went off in the car to do errands, for the rain had eased up.

After a busy day with daddy, the girl, whose name is Liddy, finally had a chance to check her sock drawer. She found a little critter inside, a broken eggshell, and a smallish pile of poo, which per chance she almost mistook for a handful of M-n-M's. Luckily their pungent odor told her they were not M-n-M's before she tasted them. For indeed, like M-n-M's they are hard on the outside and melt in your mouth soft on the inside, but they do not taste nearly as nice (please do not ask how I know this). Because the egg was purple and had come out of a pretty nasty storm, she decided to call the tiny being "Purple Rain".

It was furry, almost fuzzy, with large ears, little hands and feet much like her own, and huge, kind eyes. It looked up at her with a soft, shy smile. Liddy carefully picked the critter up out of her sock drawer. Cuddling her new friend, Purple Rain, made her very happy. "You are my favorite, favorite." She whispered, even though they had only just met.

Every chance she got, the girl played with her little baby critter and decided that her new best friend MUST be a girl, for it was so cute and cuddly and lovely and all those butterfly wings kinds of things that little girls adore. For example, it snuggled close, and it was very soft, gentle, and sweet. It even kissed her cheek before she had ever kissed it! Liddy felt the name "Purple Rain" was not girly enough. Therefore, she appended it with "Sprinkles", making its full name "Purple Rain Sprinkles", forever. We can not fault her for this, she was only six. The baby did not care, "he" was too busy being a baby and playing peek-a-boo and look-at-my-tiny-toesies and oops-I-got-your-nosies and quite frankly did not know any better.

The girl's Dad, Nate, began to worry that his little girl was spending too much time alone. All day long she seemed to only want to be by herself in her room. At his wit's end, he began tempting her to stay out of her room using all of the most fun activities he could think of, "Let's bake cookies!" or "Let's play in the living room with your legos!" or "Let's color coloring books in the yard on a picnic blanket!" These became his every-day-parenting-strategy ideas to help keep Liddy out of her bedroom. However, each time she said "yes" to one of these fun play dates, she seemed a little more unhappy. He did not know why. So, he was unhappy too.

Finally, all was resolved when Nate happened into her room one day to find her playing with a creature he had never before seen! His relief at finally understanding WHY she stayed in her room so much, made him warm to the creature immediately, and now the three became inseparable. From cooking dinner, to TV movie night, to teeth brushing and tucking-in, all was done with the three.

The creatchi, for that is what he is, found he now had two parents, a small playful one, and a very much larger and wiser one.

Chapter 2 Getting to Know You

Many experimentations now came into play:

What can it eat?

Does it like wearing clothes?

Can it climb?

Why is it staring unblinkingly at the light on the microwave?

What will it think of music?

And many times came the concern "Where did it GO?" as the small mysterious being loved to fit himself into small spaces and await discovery in his hiding spot: a shoe, a play purse, a laundry pile, or a dirty bowl in the kitchen sink.

Usually they found him by following the teeny giggles that sprung up out of his throat uncontrollably.

Every day a discovery of pure delight. The three became the very best buddies.

After much internet research, Nate came to the conclusion that he had no idea what to call the baby, as a living being. Because he could find no evidence that there were more like it in the world, he laid a ground rule, "No one else can see it or know about it." This rule was soon tested as the neighbor boy, "Mitt" came over to borrow salt for his mother who needed it for cooking. Instead of knocking and waiting, he knocked and walked right in. Purple Rain Sprinkles was just then in the middle of scurrying up the kitchen curtains that hung over the sink, in order to sit on the curtain rod and ride it like a horsey. Even so young, the baby noticed the change in the father and daughter's mood, and sensed something was wrong. He froze like a statue until the new human left. Nate and Liddy sighed heavily, relieved that Mitt had not noticed their new friend, and Purple Rain Sprinkles copied their sigh. They all started giggling and, once they made sure the boy was far enough away, they laughed heartily.

To maintain secrecy, the creature was then "trained" to hide when a knock on the door happened. This was VERY easy training because 1) the baby loved hiding anyway and 2) each time he did it well, he was given a slice of carrot, which made him concentrate very hard on the task, for carrot was supremely regarded as his favorite food.

By using the hiding theme, the two humans had also tried to teach the critter to "hide" his poo poo in the toilet. This had mixed results. Once, he dove in afterwards and almost drowned himself, so this training was abandoned. They would have to deal with the "baby M-n-M's" some other way. Home made diapers were not tolerated. They settled on making sure he was in the bathroom tub at certain times of the day, and like clockwork, Purple Rain Sprinkles delivered. This, at least, made cleanup much easier.

In the few weeks they'd had him, the creatchi had already noticeably grown a bit, and chatting in the kitchen, Nate provided some unwelcome insight, "Liddy, I think he must be a boy, after all."

Liddy's face fell as she complained, "But I named her Purple Rain Sprinkles!"

"Let's call him PRS, for short." Nate said. PRS noticed that for some reason, Liddy got suddenly sad, which made PRS stop playing with Nate's pant leg and pay attention. Looking back and forth at his two humans, he was worrisome and nervous. Liddy walked to the living room and sat, pouting, on the couch. PRS crawled into her lap, laid on his back, and looked into her face. "Eem very happy." he said

suddenly, in a wee wiry voice, after which she squealed, grabbed him up, ran back to Nate in the kitchen and told him what had just happened. PRS could speak! Sadness over, joy and wonder commenced.

Chapter 3 Keeping Secrets

They kept the little one successfully secret for many days, as young PRS now faithfully hid when various people came to the door, and he knew to be quiet whenever someone called on the phone. In fact, when the phone rang, he helped KEEP himself quiet by grabbing a pillow, a blanket, or someone's clothing, and wrapping it over his own face, a technique he created all by himself. He also obeyed directions and followed cautiously when all three played and explored in the woods-deep back yard, so that if someone said "duck" PRS dove into a bush or tall grass and waited until told to come out. To him, hiding was all a very fun game.

There were two further close calls. The first was when the UPS man, Sam, had a package to deliver and was standing at the kitchen door just at the same time that Nate had opened it, for all three were on their way out to play in the back yard. PRS was already perched on the girl's hand. Seeing a stranger at the door, and knowing he was supposed to be hidden, PRS struck a full legs-out arms-out pose and FROZE, pretending to be a stuffed animal toy. His eyes were perfectly glassy, staring straight ahead, a first class actor. Liddy giggled the entire time that Nate signed for the package. After Nate received it into his hands, and placed it on the table, his eyes wide with suspense, he thanked Sam as calmly as he could, and closed the kitchen door. Liddy's giggles became more and more urgent. As the door closed, Sam looked back at the giggling girl quizzically, as if he just wasn't sure about certain things.

The next close call, was with a boy named Lou who came by selling candy for his baseball team. The creatchi at first hid, but then leapt out from his hiding place in a waste basket behind the kitchen door. PRS scrambled quickly up the full length of the door's curtains to the top, peering down at the boy. The rich aroma of chocolate bars had lured PRS out of hiding. Liddy gasped, and Nate, attempting to distract the boy from looking up, started clapping his hands, making weird noises, shoved money at him, and grabbed two candy bars. The boy's eyes grew big as he stared at this bizarre encounter with this crazy adult. Singing at last "row row row your boat", Nate shut the door, grabbing PRS before it slammed closed.

But one day, it was hiders end game.

Chapter 4 Surprises

PRS was 'discovered' on a Wednesday, four and a half weeks after his hatch date. How it happened was this: Mitt, the kid from next door, had come over to 'pay back' the salt that his mother had borrowed.

Mitt and his mom had moved in next door to Nate just after Mitt was born. Mitt, five years older than Liddy, did not really hang out at his home much, always on his bike going somewhere. He was a great

kid, though. From neighborly lawn mowing, to doing odd errands, Mitt was a dependable friend. Standing at the kitchen door, he hummed and held a salt container in one hand. His dimples were showing, as though although not really fully smiling, he felt an inner happiness or was thinking of a joke. Mitt was always happy, he knew almost everyone in town, and everyone liked him.

Nate opened the kitchen door to the knock, chatted a few moments with Mitt, but not asking him in. PRS was hiding in a big crayon bucket that Liddy had by her side, at the kitchen table. But then, wildly, PRS leapt out of his hiding spot, bounded over the table in full view of everyone, and jumped straight on to Mitt's face, little fingers and finger-like toes locked in Mitt's hair, belly fully flattened on Mitt's nose, and paused there.

Then PRS turned 180 degrees by working hard to grab face and ears and hair and chin, like a backwards ticking clock, grunting as he went. Mitt's hands spastically jittered with every move PRS made. Then, the critter went scurrying downward like a squirrel, down to Mitt's chest and right into the inside of his jacket!

Nate's eyes popped wide open, his jaw dropped, and the salt container he had just taken from Mitt hit the floor. Liddy stood up in shock from the kitchen table where she had been coloring, and her hands flew to her mouth to help conceal her gasp. She wasn't sure why she felt the need to conceal her gasp, when PRS had just made his existence quite obvious. Everyone just stood there for a full 5 chilling seconds, breathing hard with hearts beating hard and eyes darting around.

Finally, the spell was broken, when out from the jacket popped TWO heads. Mitt looked up at Nate with a huge grin. And then two things happened very quickly --Mitt was whisked inside, and the door was abruptly shut.

Chapter 5

Introduction

Grabbed by the collar, was Mitt, and roughly lurched inside, the door slamming loud. Mitt stumbled a bit and righted himself, grabbing his jacket front, lest the two furry occupants be dislodged and fall. Nate said "How..?!" Liddy started "What do you..?!" and the creatchies began to giggle. They giggled, looking at each other, starting and stopping in little giggle spurts, then giggled for a whole minute straight. Each giggle ending and then a pause for a deep breath, and then a new giggle sequence, until the humans began to giggle as well. It was a minute of Pure Delight.

"Sorry! Sit down." Nate said, hand extended toward a chair, trying to be polite after having rough-handled the boy into the house. Mitt sat and opened his jacket. Two creatchies crawled onto the table and stood in front of him, looking at one another. PRS was absolutely amazed and Mitt's creatchi "Suzy" kept holding her own mouth as if she was too happy to speak. The amazement of PRS began to turn to wonder. He very gently began poking at her face and arms and asked "Purple Rain Sprinkles?"

Nate and Liddy laughed, both saying, "No."

But then Mitt said "Yes!" and looking up at Liddy, asked "Purple Rain Sprinkles is his name, right?"

The girl nodded, shyly. PRS's look of wonder now degraded further to a look of sincere worry, almost fear. He looked to Mitt and back at Suzy several times, and touched Mitt's arm as a child would his mother as if he knew Mitt could help him, and PRS so wanted Mitt's help.

Liddy's brow furrowed as she noted both that her creatchi friend was looking very dour, even beginning to tremble, and also that in this time of apparent great need, he was turning to "someone else".

Mitt said to PRS, "This is a Purple Rain Sprinkle. But a different one. She has the same head, see?" And PRS took Suzy's head in both hands and patted the wiry and wavy hair-like fur on either side, still looking concerned. "She has the same arms and legs, see?" And PRS poked at her arms and legs, Suzy giggling in response as if tickled. "She even has the same fingers too. But you are a boy and she is a girl, and her name is Suzy. Suzy lives at my house."

Then Liddy, still concerned about PRS, but following along and entranced with Mitt's introduction said, "Suzy" aloud. For out of pure disbelief over seeing another creatchi, she must say the name to make this moment real.

Chapter 6

Figures

Mitt knew exactly what should be done next. In order to help PRS understand fully this brand new idea --understand that Suzy was the same kind of being, and not a reflection or ghost or something weird or unreal, he asked if he could take them to the bathroom. "It will help him really get what is happening, because at this point, he needs it to sink in that she is real and his same kind, like a sister. Otherwise, they can end up getting spooked. Once he figures it out, he'll be ok."

Looking at PRS, you could still see concern on his face, he was struggling somehow with this newfound concept. Up until now, he was an only child, the only being of his kind.

"Oh, uhm, sure OK, in here." replied Nate.

Mitt picked up both creatchi. They all went to the hall bathroom, and Mitt placed both of them side by side on the counter, where their full reflections showed in the bathroom mirror. For the next ten or fifteen minutes, the two creatchi spoke and repeated many phrases back and forth, Suzy leading. Suzy would say, "hand" and PRS repeat, "hand", then "head", and "belly", touching hands, touching the mirror, touching their own reflection, touching each other's faces, and looking at their own reflection and the other's and then at one another again over and over.

Liddy did not realize PRS knew some of these words, and also, Suzy seemed to be teaching him new words on the spot as well. The more they played this "game", the more "at ease" PRS looked. This exercise seemed to soothe his tension, and so both Nate and Liddy felt relieved. Mitt noticed their faces, and felt relieved too.

Once they had gotten into a repetitive groove, Mitt began explaining the secrets which had been whispered and hidden among many, for the last four and a half weeks. His words came faster and faster as the looks on the others' faces fed his excitement, increasing his desire to reveal the things they didn't

know.

There were in fact many creatchi scattered throughout the area, living with other families. All of the critters having, as far as they could tell, appeared the same day, so all were the same age. All hatched in secret. The human owners and creatchi finding one another in various ways. Then, discovery among "human/creatchi families" began to happen.

As these creatchi family-to-family discoveries grew, there began to be secret meetings and "creatchi play dates" around town, and discussions among the adults on topics such as food and care. Fast friendships were created between fellow human "owners".

Nate and Liddy listened, enraptured. Mitt was telling them things so quickly that they could barely soak it all in. So much had happened all around them and they had been completely unaware of it, so absorbed themselves with their own little miracle.

In this small town, adults often got to know one another by constantly meeting at the school, post office, a sporting event, church, or store. Running into one another repeatedly meant that everyone pretty much knew everyone else, to some degree. Most adults knew one another by name, at the very least. So now, every "creatchi owner" kept an eye out for any town acquaintances who might be "acting odd" in case it indicated a hidden creatchi. Those people "in the know" were ever keeping watch as they went on with their lives about the neighborhood and town, in order to uncover other "creatchi families". The family in question would be gently approached, and if a creatchi was discovered, invited to join the secret club.

Much joy and celebration was had by all, creatchi and humans alike, whenever a new creatchi family was introduced at one of these "secret meetings". As Mitt spoke, Nate and Liddy's hearts pounded. It finally began to really sink in. They were not alone in this. There were MORE.

Nate began to wonder, "How many creatchi owners have I bumped into, in town, and been completely unaware."

Liddy thought, "I am going to ask daddy to let us visit every creatchi family. PRS has been missing out on so much fun!"

PRS and Suzy began poking at each other and giggling again. Their matching game was now over. A new friendship had begun, a sweet, special kinship. PRS's face glowed with pleasure, and Suzy looked just as happy. "eem Suzy friend." PRS said, summing the introduction up nicely.

Chapter 7

Creatchi Scout

Mitt was as happy as anyone could be, to have found another creatchi family. It gave him a special kind of satisfaction, more than any sports trophies or school achievements had ever given him. He had found the most creatchi families himself, as well.

Mitt had become the best creatchi hunter of the "club" due partly to his active habit of moving all about town all week for various reasons, including scouting, his softball team, seeing friends, helping older

folk, running errands for his mom, and just being an adventuresome, outdoorsy kind of kid. His success at finding other creatchi was also due to both his own keen observations and the bubbly social nature of his creatchi, Suzy. He had recently grown to suspect that his own neighbors just might be harboring a creatchi based on three things.

FIRST, when he happened to spot them at the market one day, he noticed they had in their cart a lot of fruit and vegetables and less canned soups and other "easy" food that the single dad typically purchased. It was a casual business and Mitt remembered saying "Getting healthy, eh?" as he greeted them on his way to check out at the front of the store.

They had chatted for a bit, and Mitt moved on. This didn't cause suspicion at the time, but he recalled it to mind later when the SECOND oddity was noticed.

Mitt's neighbors had never seemingly cared about whether all of their window blinds and curtains were shut at night, until recently. For all of the time that he had known them, as he came home from a sporting practice, or as he gazed out his own bedroom window at night, he might catch movement in his neighbor's window, and notice them eating, or playing, or washing dishes inside their home lit up with warm glowing lamps for night-time life.

He realized distinctly that this had changed, when, gazing out his window one night he had seen a fantastic bright and big shooting star. He instinctively looked around to see if anyone else had noticed it too. Mitt realized that his neighbors could not possibly have noticed it, for even though it was right outside their living room window, their house was sealed tight as a drum. This fact alone helped him begin to consider them as "potentials", to cause him to reflect on the grocery store encounter, and to specifically look for a third clue.

The THIRD clue came, via binocular surveillance, and again through Mitt's second floor bedroom window. He had camped out in his room for a few days, waiting and watching to see what kinds of things he could notice about his neighbors. He just so happened to have watched them on a few days stretch when they had not taken PRS out into the back yard, otherwise, their cover would have been clearly blown. But as it was over a few days of sprinkling rain, and since they had been careful to only take PRS out when the neighbors were gone, it was something else that tipped Mitt off.

Nate always invited people in, gave a cookie, shared a story, spent time, whenever folks came by. They were friendly, happy neighbors, and easy to socialize with. But Mitt had watched them closely from his window where he had a clear view of their kitchen door. With every package delivery, magazine salesman, or other visitor, they didn't invite anyone in, not anymore.

Once Mitt seriously suspected someone of hiding a creatchi, he had a set game plan. So with this third clue solidifying his suspicions, Mitt had finally decided they needed "The Test". And "The Test" was simply, Suzy.

Chapter 8 Mitt and Suzy

Immediately after Mitt found Suzy, which happened between a fern and a fir tree in the "Windy

Woods" on the west side of town, he began figuring out how to incorporate her presence into his adventurous lifestyle. He had loved Suzy the moment they met. She was a gorgeous red little girl with adoring sparkling blue eyes and he felt all the Protector in him surge through his veins when he looked at her. He would fight a dragon for Suzy's sake.

Once he had gotten her home, and they had become friends, he set to work to keep her with him, always. At first, Mitt had merely trained Suzy to hide in his jacket so that he could walk or bike around town with her as he moved about doing the errands and tasks that his sport and scouting involvements required of him. He could do all of these things, yet still always keep her near, and it made him very glad.

Suzy would snuggle down and stay happily quiet and hidden in his jacket until he whistled, then she knew she could peek out to see the world. After a few days of explorations of this kind, he had tested her around people. He could casually glance down into his jacket and see her staring up at him, wide eyed and hushed, her eyebrows twitching curiously, listening, as he spoke with friends and townspeople. Being around people became easy, and she would notice a person nearby before Mitt even could, and tuck herself inside his jacket immediately.

She had eventually toured the entire town, and he had also shown her the lake, parts of the petting zoo, and a few hiking trails as well.

Because he had immediately introduced Suzy to his mom, Katy, she helped care for Suzy as well. When Mitt had a sporting event that required him to participate, or if he was just popping next door to visit or help someone, he'd leave Suzy with mom, and they would play. His mom loved Suzy dearly too.

One day on an errand for his mother, he had gone to buy farm butter at "the butter lady's house", for that was what everyone called her, on the east side of town at the dairy farm. Fishing in his pocket for the money to buy the butter, Suzy just shot up straight and fully looked right out of his jacket, and "chittered". Her entire head and shoulders exposed to the butter lady's gaze. Then, another creatchi peeked right out from under the butter lady's straw flowered hat. A wonderful friendship was begun between the first two creatchi "sisters".

Once he realized that there was more than one, Mitt helped find others. The town creatchi club was formed naturally, by people wanting to talk about their experiences. Once Mitt discovered Suzy could instantly sense other creatchi and expose them, Suzy became the official Creatchi Detector. Due partly to their diligence, and other similar and sometimes funny encounters among other folks, 18 creatchi were now known to live in and around the town, including PRS.

Chapter 9 End of Discovery Day

It was evident now that PRS was perfectly comfortable and happy having learned what a "sister" was. They all moved to the living room. It was approaching dinner time, and so almost time for Mitt to leave them. There had been much excitement, and the humans were beginning to feel a little tired. Liddy slumped down onto the couch with a loud satisfied sigh. Even more excitement promised to

follow, according to Mitt's next instructions.

He asked if they had a radio. As Nate went to get one, Mitt and Liddy placed the creatchies on the couch next to her. Now that PRS had no more worry on his happy face, he could get down to the business of learning creatchi play. For PRS had not learned to play with his own kind, and it was different than human interaction. It was like patty cake with very intricate and quick finger moves. Suzy started right up teaching the little game to PRS. Mitt knew PRS and Suzy would be happily distracted with each other, so he could focus on the humans again.

Nate came back with the radio from the basement.

Mitt explained some more about how various play dates and meetings went, and who some of the members were, to which Nate would interject, "Oh Mike, ok wow..", and "Oh Bonnie Smithers too, you say?.." Finally, Mitt ended their conversation with a key piece of information, "Remember Bob, over on Alabama Street? Well he has a shortwave radio...and a nornchi like you. He broadcasts on a really low a.m. station every night at 9:45pm, remember that." And he held his finger up as a teacher might to her students when making a particular point.

Mitt continued, "He gives a short sentence or two. If it's about a meeting, it's coded, so that we can know what the schedule is for activities. We call it 'station KBOB'. That's sort of a joke. Here's the station."

Mitt tuned the radio dial and static played. "So, to keep it all a secret, Bob will announce something like 'we are on at 8 on 10 and 5'. So, you get out your town phone book." Mitt looked around and saw a phone book by the telephone and grabbed it, plopping it open on the coffee table. "The first part is the time - the meeting would be at 8pm the following night. Go to page 10 of the phone book, and look at line 5, 'at 8 on 10 and 5' get it? If he said that, then you'd know we're all meeting at 8pm at..." he looked at the 10th page, "the Samson Street church. It's always kept a secret so it's always in a basement or the back of a place or somewhere more hidden."

"Also, remember, park your car somewhere out of sight, if you have to drive to the location." And with that he closed the phone book, and smiled.

Nate said, waving his hands in front of himself, "OK...wait back up...you said, 'nornchi'?"

"Oh! that's what they're called! Suzy and Purple Rain Sprinkles are nornchi, that's like their species. You know, like how there are tiger cats and lion cats and cheetah cats. These guys are nornchi creatchies." Mitt explained.

"Oh, OK!" said Liddy, understanding him perfectly.

Mitt paused, then got to his feet with a chuckle, "You guys are such newbies, it's great! I'm not even gonna spoil it! Be sure to come to the very next meeting! But, we have three meetings per week, and you don't always have to come to all of them, if you don't want."

He then looked at Suzy, and said, "We did it Suzy, we got another one!" Suzy bounced off the couch and into his arms. PRS began bouncing in circles on the couch, hands raised, happy to have been found by one such as Suzy.

It took at least 20 minutes of gently helping PRS say goodnight to Suzy, before he could let her leave.

To say that PRS would sleep deeply that night, would be the understatement of the year. But first, there was dinner to make, and then there would be a radio program to catch.

After cleaning up from dinner, everyone got into their pajamas, and the two younger ones went to their room to take a nap. Nate drowsed on the couch. Liddy had expected PRS to still be sleeping when Nate woke her up for the 9:45 radio broadcast, but PRS sprang out of bed and went with them into the living room.

He seemed to know exactly what was happening. How much he had understood of Mitt's explanations was anyone's guess, but he was obviously keyed up and waiting for tonight's special program.

Chapter 10

KBOB

Still slightly drowsy from a long day and a short nap, all three circled around the radio which was perched on the coffee table, and listened intently. Promptly at 9:45pm, a voice crackled through the radio static, competing with the fuzzy background noise, sounding as if far off, saying, "Hello boys and girls! We have a new day to play! We are on tomorrow at 8 on 12 and 3, see you there, and guess what? We have a new member!" And then it was gone. Dead static resumed.

The phone book still lay on the table. Liddy turned it to page 12. PRS sprawled out on it as if to "help", smoothing the page with his little hands. But mainly, he laid on top of the section she needed to look at and she had to lift his arm to find line 3. She said, "I've got it! It's going to be at the Old Town History Museum on 9th street."

After putting "the kids" to bed directly afterwards, Nate lay down on his own bed, head firmly lodged in his pillow. But unlike PRS, solidly snoring away in the next room, Nate could not sleep.

So much information was rolling around in his head, "Nornchi, he called them... Bob, Mike... and Bonnie too. I just saw Mike, where was it..over at the gas station, he was just gassing up the truck, I'd no idea. How many? 18 did he say, 18 little critters around town and everyone keeping a tight lid on it. And everyone meeting together and I'd no clue. 18 families, that could easily be 40 people who all know."

"How did they all find each other? How can it be kept secret?"

Mitt had changed their comfortable little world. It would be different now, it would feel odd at first, bringing PRS somewhere to be SEEN. All the effort they had taken to keep PRS hidden, from everyone, was effectively over. Now PRS would be known, he would be befriended by humans and other "nornchis" alike. It was going to be a different world for them. They had kept their cherished little secret safe, their "private" joy, diligently, 24/7. Now they would have to share PRS with others. How would that go? Would it be all positive? How will this effect Liddy...

And a hundred other thoughts flooded and bubbled and circled like rain, rivulets and swirls of water, until his worries all poured into sleepiness, and he finally dove deep into restful oblivion.

Chapter 11

Questions

Mitt came over just before noon the next day to make sure they had heard the schedule. He hadn't brought Suzy over because he said the meetings were tiring on the nornchis and they should both rest up for the evening's event. PRS looked very sad when he realized Suzy was not with Mitt, but Mitt was ready. Mitt knelt down and said to PRS, "You will see Suzy later today, ok?" and handed PRS a photo of her.

PRS looked at the paper Mitt had placed in his hand and broke into a huge grin and RAN to Liddy's bedroom. Curious, they followed and all three peeked around the doorway. PRS was just sitting there on the bed, smiling ear to ear, looking at the photo, staring at it, not speaking, but wiggling his feet. Then flipped over on his belly and crammed the precious photo under the pillow and popped down off of the bed. He walked right past everyone into the kitchen saying, "eem miss Suzy." They chuckled.

Nate started making sandwiches and the others sat in the chairs at the kitchen table, including PRS, whose eyes barely peered over the edge.

Liddy, younger and therefore awed by Mitt, finally got her courage up, saying. "Uhm... Mitt? Could we ask some things?"

"Oh right!" added Nate, "We put together a list of questions this morning at breakfast that we thought we should ask before we go tonight."

"Of course!" Mitt said.

The girl looked at a paper in her hands, and asked, "Do others ever dress their nornchis?"

Mitt replied, "If the nornchis like it. Some like it and some don't, but you don't have to."

Going down the list, they learned that nornchis ate a variety of foods, so they didn't have to worry about feeding PRS all fruits and vegetables, though they should never make him eat something he did not like the taste of, it actually damaged them mentally somehow to be forced to do something they did not like.

PRS' favorite things to do on his own were to climb, and to close doors. But now they learned that many nornchis preferred very different activities. Most however, liked a common thing: to sweep with brooms. Some had to have brooms hidden from them, or they would sweep all day long. Not that they did it "well" and handheld whisk brooms were the best size, of course, for the little guys and gals. They would sweep the floor, the bed, the table and the walls. That plates, pictures and knickknacks would come crashing to the floor didn't matter to them, it just gave them something more to sweep up.

Most were afraid of vacuum cleaners. Most got along with cats and dogs, and all of them loved human babies. In fact, if you were around a baby, you had to be careful that your nornchi stay hidden, for it might be tempted to come out to look and fondly interact with any human baby.

The very last question on the list made the girl pause, almost too embarrassed to ask, as it had to do with potty training. The two newest members of the nornchi "foster association" were afraid they may have missed the boat on what to do in that area with their nornchi. Mitt calmed their fears, as every nornchi seemed to be different in their preferences and ability to learn in this area, but that once nornchis got together, they tended to learn the best bathroom habits from the nornchis who had the best habits, so these things equaled out over time. Liddy was relieved.

So, it looked like PRS was ok with no clothes, which was his typical attire these days. They could experiment with a broom to see if he liked it, and he would eventually learn better potty skills. She felt better about her job thus far as his caretaker. It was odd, she realized, she had always done her best anyway, and always felt like she had been very good to PRS, but now that she would meet other nornchi owners, she was nervous about how well or how badly others might judge her treatment of him.

Mitt bade goodbye, and said he and his mom would see them at the meeting. They were leaving much earlier to help set up.

Then, the two humans busied themselves with little tasks to pass the time, ever looking at the clock, though after Nate's troubled night, and considering Liddy's newfound nerves, not all thoughts were pleasant.

Chapter 12 Old Town Old Museum

At the appropriate time, Nate and Liddy donned their coats and headed for the kitchen door. PRS wore a very wee tie, as he was no longer "game" for dressing in the full set of doll clothing that Liddy had subjected him to very early on, when she had thought PRS a girl, and dressed him for tea parties. The last time she had tried to dress him was a full two weeks ago, when she had put a small flower-printed t-shirt on him. He had grunted and pulled at it, twirling around and clawing at his neck as if he were in a straitjacket. She had immediately taken it back off and sat stunned, hoping she had not hurt his feelings or made him unduly stressed. He was such a happy and gentle critter that it felt just terrible if he ever became upset. He had noticed her concerned expression and patted her leg sadly. Then, he had picked up a stray ribbon and tied it very loosely, best he could, around his own neck, made a most professional photo model pose, and smiled tentatively at her as if to cheer her up.

She had been amazed that, rather than resenting her for doing something he obviously hadn't liked, he still cared about her feelings and had tried to please HER. He really was the best of friends. She hadn't tried to dress him at all since that day, and he was happily naked and as comfortable being naked as any furry critter could be.

Seeing Liddy "dress up" a little for tonight, in her favorite flower leggings and pink play dress, PRS seemed in the mood to look special, as well. So, for tonight, his special debut meeting, PRS happily donned a blue tie he had taken off a teddy bear.

It was a smart little tie with a happy shark right in the middle and swirly water waves all over the rest of it. Nate called it a "power tie" though Liddy did not know what that meant.

They paused, standing on the deck outside the kitchen as Nate locked the door behind them. Looking down at PRS, who was excited and looking back up at her, twittering in his own nonsensical private language and fidgeting with his hands and feet, she realized suddenly that PRS had gotten bigger, not a baby, more of a "child" now. She wondered what age he really was, since he was certainly growing faster than a human would. Very soon it seemed he might, in his mind at least, be older than she. It seemed a good time for PRS to meet more of his own kind. She felt very motherly, and knelt down and kissed his head. He put his arms up just as a human toddler might, wanting to be picked up, she gladly did and turned to the car.

The location of the "meeting" was not too far away, however it was not walking distance. Furthermore, even if it had been closer, clouds were moving in and rain was predicted for later that evening, so the car was a must. For now, it was pleasantly warm and breezy and there were no worries about the rain, for even heavy rains posed no threat to the area. The thick carpet of trees, moss and forest greenery that surrounded the hilly town would simply soak it up and drink it in. The worst one could look forward to was getting wet.

Finding the Old Town History Museum would be no difficulty at all. In fact, they had been there a few times in summers past to while away an afternoon, ice cream cones in-hand, as many of the families did. It was one of an assortment of amusing interests in the small town. The Museum had been appointed in a largish old brick school building built near the middle of the "business blocks" as they called it.

The Museum housed the proof that the town had sprung up from industrious beginnings.

Back in the town's heyday in the 1800's, when lumberjacks, mill men, miners, hunters, farmers, and their families moved in and inflated the population, they also created a history rich in heritage and myth.

The town had so exploded in size back in those days, due to life giving rivers, good timber, rich soil, and promising mines, that within 20 years it had become a major settlement. Wealthy investors, lumberjacks, farm owners and mine workers, and every sort of supporting business required to feed and clothe them and tend to their livestock inflated the town to a buzzing hive of about ten thousand.

As is common throughout history, towns that boom often fizzle. The mines dried up, the rich lost their wealth in the 1920's depression, and promises of fortune bloomed elsewhere. The people drifted away. The town dwindled to a handful and then built gradually to its present population of about one thousand and two hundred permanent residents.

It was too far away from major highways to be considered home by commuters. Even those who might want to work from home found it too far away from modern conveniences. Now, it was home to the retired, to artists and craftsman and anyone who could make a living within the town itself, or had enough savings to not need to worry about income. That it was away from the hustle of society, turned away many potential residents and businesses. But, its remote location was the main draw for those who lived there now. There were a few goat, cow, and alpaca farms, a few berry and vegetable farms, a summer camp, several Bed-and-Breakfasts and one still "working" mine - but working only as a tourist attraction for those visitors to the area who wanted a taste of the old mining life for an afternoon's distraction.

Tourism was a steady source of income for the town. The area providing a charming forested getaway for wearied city dwellers.

The old grand houses, now converted to Inns and B&B's, the mine with its gold panning stream and one pretty cavern with stalactites and stalagmites, the woodsy rolling hills with trails throughout, the farms with their country charm, and the shops in the "Business Blocks" comprised most of the town's tourist attractions. Its various quaint historical buildings, housing both lowly arts and crafts and official government stations, brought a flavor of old timey tourist-pleasing charm.

No breathtaking scenery drew thousands, but a stroll through an artist shop or a hike or woodland drive could smooth away the cares of everyday modern life. The tourists stayed, shopped, strolled and drove around, and pretty much kept the town budget afloat.

In fact, the town brought in enough income each year to fund an annual home town Independence Day Parade, complete with home grown floats. Tourism also brought in enough to fund all its schools well, and enough to preserve its oldest and most cherished historical buildings, including the site the three now drove themselves to.

The large multi-roomed schoolhouse kept safe many artifacts from those old glory days, many framed and faded photos, old mementos, hand written letters from vice president so-and-so to mayors gone by, and yellowed newspaper clippings filled with old news and old lore.

Into they assumed, the basement of this venerable storage locker, was to be the much anticipated meeting of new and strange friends.

Chapter 13 Arrival

They parked a few streets away from the Museum, as directed, noticing many cars dotted here and there within about a four block area around the schoolhouse. Walking down the streets toward the meeting place, all was quiet. A very light rain fell, making a quiet misty hush that surrounded and cloaked them. Where light poles existed here and there, they could see around them to an extent. The scant placement of the poles meant that there were black areas where nothing could be seen at all.

They seemed to be the last to arrive, for there were no others moving along the streets. It was easy for Liddy to conceal PRS, as he was not yet too big to fit inside her rain jacket. In fact, he was still slim enough to slip out, if she didn't support him properly with her hands, or if he had desired to wriggle free, for some reason.

In fact, Liddy couldn't recall ever having looked for PRS in the pitch dark. It made her shiver thinking about losing him out of her coat, if he happened to slip out of it somehow. His fur was a multi-level array of browns, from very light warm to very dark cool brown, but mostly from a distance he would be considered dark brown. And with the misty rain coloring his coat even darker, he would be the perfect color to disappear in the night! She had never before thought about PRS leaving her, for at night his favorite place was sleeping right beside her, as close as he could squeeze.

Usually, he slept solidly during these summer nights, falling asleep around dusk, like clockwork. If he was awake at night, it was in a lit room of the house. As soon as lights went out, usually, so did PRS. Daddy usually read a bedtime story too, with the lamp turned on, which is when she herself would fall asleep. Then daddy would turn off the lights. She now realized she had never seen PRS in the pitch dark at all, until tonight.

As they walked, old wrought iron street lamps shone down on them. Being spaced farther apart than in a more modern city, between each one, they walked in relative darkness. Because the girl had a firm grasp on PRS with both hands, Nate touched her shoulder the entire time, to help steer her and to give her courage in the dark.

Once, peeking down into her jacket, there tucked away from all outside light, PRS looked up to her with trusting eyes from his hiding place. This time though, his gaze covered her arms in goosebumps and sent shivers through her rib cage, for his eyes glowed a bright pale blue! Blue was not even his eye color in daylight! His eyes were brown. The cool crystalline blue was so beautiful, it caught her breath.

Nate noticed and asked while his eyes scanned around them, "You ok?"

She said, "Yep." and looked back up, clutching her treasure firmly to herself. On they strode, seeing the object of their journey, a square brick building, dark and silent under the thickening clouds and dimly lit streets.

"Is anyone really here?" she whispered.

"Let's go to the back door." he whispered back. And around the side of the building they went, on a small paved pathway, between the building's east wall and a hedge.

At the back, just as they rounded the corner, a tiny outdoor light near the peak of the roof revealed a small lone door which simply opened, noiseless and black, no light streaming out of it at all. They paused, but it was no use to be afraid, they knew who was here, they knew this was for them. They were being invited, silently, and carefully. They had been watched, waited for, it was known they had arrived, and now they were being admitted in. It was merely friends using secrecy and darkness to provide safety for all. Their inclusion into the secret society was happening right now, and a chill of excitement bolted through the pair as they quietly hurried up the steps and the dark swallowed them.

Chapter 14

Orientation

Once inside, the dark door closed without so much as a creak, the pitch black surrounded them and a faceless voice quietly said, "down this way." They sensed movement on their right as the unknown doorman passed by them and opened an inner door that offered some small amount of light, and a view of stairs going down. They silently obeyed and headed down the stairs which curved on a landing and brought them into a better lit area just at the bottom.

To their right was a brick outer wall of the building, painted white, and two chairs sitting along it. In front of them was a door that was closed and must lead to the basement proper, and just to the left of this door was a smiling man at a very small table with something like a guest book and pen. To the absolute left, another door to possibly an office, considering it would be a room positioned along the

opposite wall of the museum.

The smiling man immediately stood up and extended his arm, chuckling, and Nate exclaimed, "Jim!" to which the men shook hands heartily and exchanged delighted greetings. Jim was a townie, born and raised, who got a college degree in speech pathology in the closest mid size city several hours away. He rented an office there, working with the young and old alike in the realm of speech therapy. He knew Nate well, they had attended the same local high school together, though they had not been close friends back then. Nate had not seen Jim in years. How he had been inducted into this new secret society so far away from his "normal life" was a mystery at the moment.

The two men exchanged a few words and "nice to see you after so long" type banter, and then Jim finally began what sounded like his "spiel".

Jim began giving a welcome speech of sorts that sounded more business-like than Nate was expecting, ending with, "So, what we have here is an agreement that everyone must sign before being granted admittance to the research team or the main room. You sign it just the once, never again. So, I'm gonna need your patience for just a few minutes as we have to have you read this contract through, sign it, then meet with 'Research'. Only then can you freely mingle with the rest of the membership." Jim smiled. Nate looked suddenly doubtful, "What is this about, Jim?" Jim, gestured with his hand in a calming way saying, "Here, you'll understand, just read it and it will make perfect sense, I promise," and handed the document to Nate, motioning toward the chairs by the wall.

"Dad, can we go in..?" Liddy asked softly and shyly, but impatiently. A lot of excitement had been built up this last 24 hours only to be halted right in front of the door that led to the answers to all their curious wondering. The tone seemed business like, and the girl was afraid they were about to be gravely disappointed and turned away. What if dad didn't want to sign this "contract"? Oh how she wanted to just run to that door, rip it open, and see all the mysteries that must be on the other side of it! Jim looked at her and replied, though she hadn't addressed him, "I completely understand, just hang on a sec." and he leaned over to his left and tapped three times on the main door.

Half a minute later it opened revealing nothing behind it but darkness, yet Mitt and Suzy appeared and came out and greeted them all warmly.

Chapter 15

Getting Down to Business

Looking back to Nate, Jim said, "I tell you what, you can complete both the contract and the Research interview in the office, while Mitt and Suzy sit and chat with your lovely daughter and..." he stopped, realizing he hadn't even seen the critter they must have brought with them.

"PRS" Liddy answered back, feeling instantly bolder with Mitt and Suzy near. She opened her jacket, letting PRS see Suzy. They twittered and bounced and hugged all grins and joy. Mitt and Liddy sat in the chairs and chatted away like old friends and giggled as their creatchies lovingly poked and chattered and hugged over and over.

Nate leaned in to Jim, asking "What's with this 'meeting with Research' thing?"

Jim motioned him closer to the office door, so that they could quietly speak together while the kids were busy.

Jim replied, "Look, I usually don't even let you near Research until you sign, but I'm trying to trust you here. Look, Donna Kaye is our primary researcher. You know her, right? I'm not even supposed to tell you that yet, but I've known you a long time, and Mitt has told us all about you guys and we are expecting that everything here tonight is going to turn out ok. Speak with Donna, please, we must have you speak with her before you can meet the others, before you have any experience with the others, before you are 'tainted' by association, by the opinions, ideas, and conclusions drawn by the others. It's for all our good. It's just so that we can accurately record this amazing 'thing' that is happening. It's for research, for our benefit, for THEIR benefit," he said motioning to either the kids or the creatchies, or both, Nate was not sure. Jim smiled, "OK?" and Nate dropped his eyes to the papers and began reading. Opening the door to the office, and keeping it open on purpose, Nate looked one more long time at Jim as if to indicate he wanted that door to remain open, and glancing back at the kids, entered the office.

Inside the office, a desk faced him, with a chair behind it and a chair in front of it. Another door was to his right, and not much else. The other door must also open to the main room of the basement. Nate sat down in the closest chair and spread the four page document in front of him, reading quickly. It was a legal contract stating that he and the members of his household were voluntarily joining a registered-membership club legally incorporated as the "Critter Preservation Club of Windy Woods" whose sole purpose was the care and research of wildlife in and surrounding the town. By signing and joining this club, they were legally bound to not only report any wounded or diseased creature they may be aware of, but work toward the preservation of all life of the animals in and around the township, and furthermore, that any club information or research gained by or through the club was to be kept strictly confidential with serious legal implications if the entirety of the terms of this contract were not met.

Nate could tell that by using generic terms such as "animals" and "life" and "creatures" they were referring to the creatchies but no one outside of the town would know that. It looked legal, and it looked not only safe to sign, but the wording gave Nate an impression that serious consideration had been given to this "club". This contract would help all understand the weight of responsibility they had been given. Using very specific rules but generic language in regards to the creatchies, the contract required every member to not only care properly for the surrounding "wildlife", but keep all information private.

Whatever hoops one must have to jump through to create a legally registered "club" had already been done! Legal papers of this caliber had already been drawn up. Who had organized this so thoroughly in the short time these critters had appeared on the scene? It was impressive. It seemed a little bit of overkill, as he read through all of the guidelines and rules, but perhaps necessary to make sure everyone did their due diligence. Nate could agree that he would not want any one person to spoil this wonderful experience for everyone else. If legal documentation helped ensure that, he was OK with signing it.

As he was signing, the side door opened, and Donna stepped in. She looked in his eyes in her assessing kind of way, shook his hand and reached out silently for the papers, looked at them and made sure they were properly signed and dated. "Good, good.." she said as a doctor might, looking over a patient's chart, which came naturally because she was indeed a nurse. She looked the part tonight too, wearing her office clothes and lab coat. Donna went round the desk, grabbed the back of the other office chair, and dragged it around to the side where Nate sat. Unaware of the silent agreement with Jim, she

stepped to the other door he'd entered and shut it, Nate catching a glimpse of his daughter and Mitt happily chatting away. He supposed after reading the documentation that it should be alright. He felt better about things now. Very soon though, he would feel a bit worse.

Chapter 16

The Interview

Donna sat, put the papers in her long lab coat pocket, folded her hands in her lap, and smiled in that very focused nurse-like manner she had honed from many hours of interaction with patients over her 15 year nursing career. She began, "Well, Nate, it is good to see you." She spoke easily, being in her element.

She continued, "I am happy you and Liddy are both here. Now, it has been my elected job within the 'CP Club' to administrate, organize and record research about this strange phenomenon we are all witnesses to as of late. It is of utmost importance that we figure out all that we can, both for now and the future."

That seemed logical, someone had to examine these happenings and ask more scientific questions.

Donna seemed like as good a candidate as any. She was well known as a matter-of-fact no nonsense woman who did her job well. She could be warm, but more often, she could be clinical, which actually was the ideal characteristic when you wanted a scientist on your side. Her profession had always been her main focus in life, even from high school, where Nate had known her, though she graduated a few years ahead of him. Like Jim, she also had moved to the larger city, completed her degree, and worked there. She came in to town about once a month to be available to the townsfolk as needed. She had a designated "exam room" beside the barber shop, and volunteered her services to the town that raised her. Everyone knew her phone number.

He wondered if she found a creatchi as well, and if not, how she became involved. Someone had to lead this thing, really, to be a central point of information. Donna would put a scientific flavor to that role, at least. She was definitely a "take charge" personality, and respected.

The scientific angle agreed with him so far, he simply didn't like being put on the spot, unexpectedly and with implication of exclusion, if he disagreed to participate according to their very firmly set four-page-pack of rules. He was not sure if his own ego was getting in the way, or if he really did have a valid grievance with all of this, so he didn't openly complain. After all, what would he have done, if he had been one of the first people involved in these meetings? He might have created exactly the same structure that they were using now.

"What do you know so far"? Nate asked.

"A lot, actually, and we'll share with you all we know, especially now," she held up the signed contract and put it right back in her pocket. "But first, you are extremely valuable to me for one reason. You're new." She leaned back in her chair, ready to begin the interview fully.

Donna continued, "You and your daughter have the distinct significance of having raised a nornchi by yourselves thus far and I want all the observations I can get from you. I will not interview HER like

this, of course. I just hope she befriends me and I can get her honest observations as an innocent child shares her excitement when she sees new things, even that can help us too, but you.. I want to really drill into what you know and what you think you have discovered this first time. After this first meeting, you can come and go to the other meetings as you like and share with me whatever and whenever you want. If the research team finds out more information - solves more puzzles, I share our findings with everyone, you'll see that." She paused, letting her eyes rest to the floor, and sighed.

Nate wondered how many times she had done this. Was "Research" a new department in this "club" or was she one of the very first members?

She continued on, "You have been an isolated cell, as most of us were of course, for a period of time with our own creatchies, and we have found that the first meeting with a new family is extremely helpful. So, I am going to ask you some questions, is that ok, are you ok with all of this?"

"Sure." He said, not completely sincere.

"OK" she said, gauging his answer and realizing he was playing along. She decided her course. She brought out a recorder and clicked the record button.

"Describe the setting you found this nornchi, you, yourself." She stated.

"Well," he sighed, anticipating a long interview, "Actually, I just opened my daughter's bedroom door, and there she was playing with him."

Donna paused, letting him revisit the memory, letting him picture the scene. She said very casually as if talking to an old friend over coffee, "Really, you say, in her bedroom, just...playing away, now that's quite an amazing moment to remember, isn't it?" He looked up, his face affirming, nodding slightly, responding well to the warmth in her voice.

Then her voice became very much colder, probing, "Tell me, how did you react when you found your daughter playing with some strange 'animal' on the floor of your home? Were you... frightened for her safety? Were you afraid she might get bit? Did it cross your mind that she might be exposed to disease, to rabies? Did you scoop her up and contain the animal so that you could find out what it was, be sure it was safe for your small, vulnerable child to be around? Did you call animal control, did you call.. anyone?"

Nate looked suddenly dumbfounded, "Well, uh...let me think, I uhm," and now a crumbling realization grew. A sinking feeling weighed down and a bead of perspiration appeared on his forehead. Memories replayed in a different light now. Memory of a supremely foolish single dad, a father who should very well have thought of all of these things when he saw his very young daughter with some strange foreign animal-like creature, a creature he had no personal knowledge or experience with, on the floor of her bedroom of all places, her sanctuary, her safe place. The realization had power, and that power began to take great effect on his conscience. He began to feel like a failure, for having allowed his own daughter to entertain such an unknown danger.

He could see the moment in slow motion. What had he done? Sat down on the carpet and played legos with them in some sort of rapturous amazement?

His eyes were absorbed with scenes from the past. His mind whirled with what-ifs and what-happened-

thens? He began to run through all of the different scenarios that could have led to his daughter being bitten or infected by a creature neither one of them had any foreknowledge of, when his troubled thoughts were interrupted by a hand on his arm.

He looked up, Donna met his eyes, and with warm sincerity she said, "This is the point, none of us did. We don't know what these creatures are. We don't know where they came from. We didn't know anything about them the moment we met them. Yet, every single person here, regardless of age or experience, regardless of whether they were the most crotchety person in town, the most cynical, even non-pet owners, when they met one of these creatures, were at once 'smitten'. That is what happened to all of us. I just want to ask the question no one has been asking, 'Why?'"

Nate looked down at his now sweaty hands folded in his lap, and through his mind now flooded all of the memories of the peaceful, wonderful home-life days that had represented his last four and a half weeks with the creature he loved and knew so little about. He had asked no serious questions, he had carried no concerns, except that his daughter be happy and 'their' creature kept safe and secret. He looked back up and met her steady gaze, asking her with a newly found one hundred percent certainty, "How can I help?"

Chapter 17 Curtain

Twenty minutes later, Nate and Donna came through the door, back to the "lobby" area. Nate looked practically disheveled now that the initial interview was finished. Donna handed the paperwork to Jim and immediately went to the kids and knelt down.

"Well hello, precious little one." She spoke softly to PRS, her eyes then immediately went to the girl. "He's beautiful. You have obviously been a very good mom." Donna smiled warmly. The girl at once looked at her with gleaming eyes and instant gratitude. Little girls 'mother', this is why most have dolls, this is why they have tea parties and play 'house'. They long to care for others from day one. Donna, in her expert understanding of human nature had hit upon the one compliment that would endear her to Liddy immediately.

"Liddy, right? I'm Donna and I guess you could consider me the creatchi doctor here," she continued, still smiling.

Liddy had never met Donna before, never having needed any medical help from Donna's local 'office'. "Hello." Liddy replied, smiling and still giddy at having been called the nornchi's 'mom' by an older woman, a woman who probably knew what a real mom was. After all, Liddy had never had a mother, and never before had made the connection that she was a real bonafide 'little mother' until now. Her heart swelled at the realization.

"Can I ask you three little questions about your little fella here?" Donna continued, "You see, I write all their names down and like to keep a few details on them so that if he ever needs medical help some day, I already kind of know a few things about him."

"OK." The girl responded openly, still glowing.

"Wonderful. Now, what do you call him?" Donna got out a little notebook and pencil from her pocket, and poised her pencil as if waiting to write, her eyebrows raised in keen interest. PRS reached out and touched the pencil, holding it as well, perhaps he thought he was helping.

Liddy giggled, and answered "PRS." Then, in a whisper, "It stands for Purple Rain Sprinkles, but don't tell anyone that because at first I thought he was a girl." She caught herself and glanced at Mitt quickly, hoping he would keep her secret about having mistaken PRS for a girl. What would the other owners think of her, if they knew?

Mitt read her expression accurately, saying solemnly, "It's OK, I won't tell." Mitt was a scout, after all, so Liddy felt he could be trusted.

"Hello, handsome little PRS." Donna took his little hand off of the pencil and shook it as you would at a business meeting. All of his fingers wrapped around one of hers. Suzy giggled, and chattered something unintelligible, and PRS looked over at Suzy, giggled as well, and the nornchis began shaking hands together and giggling in turn. That they shook the wrong hands and then shook their own hands made Mitt crack up in spite of himself and in spite of his serious and solemn demeanor just a few seconds ago. Liddy laughed too. The creatchi always knew how to lighten the mood.

"Well, they are quite the giggle-bots tonight aren't they?" Donna spoke softly, smiling, and writing on her notepad.

"Second question, did you find him, or did he find you?" Donna continued.

"Oh I found his egg in the grass, after a rain storm was over. I went out into the yard and I found it and picked it up." She responded, offering information she had never told anyone else, simply because no one had yet asked, though her story lacked the important detail of having actually seen it fall from the sky herself. She had simply forgotten that momentarily, eager to set forth her own part in the rescue story. Nate's color drained from his face, he thinking once again of unknown dangers, but Liddy didn't notice, her eyes fixed on the friendly gaze of Donna, the nornchi doctor and her newest confidante.

"Ok that's amazing, you found it as an egg still, wow do you know that is actually rare?" Donna said, sounding impressed, again a compliment to Liddy. She had a way of speaking to the young that at once made them feel special and at ease. It worked all its charms on the girl.

"OK, last question. What is the latest, newest, most interesting thing you have noticed your nornchi do?" Donna asked, looking at the girl and poising her pencil as if ready to scratch to the paper whatever answer the girl may give.

It made Liddy feel important, it made her feel that anything she now said would be interesting, would be the most amazing thing in Donna's life. Donna was waiting with a pleased expression, so obviously eager to hear what the girl could offer. This delivery of the last question after such a positive response to the first two questions, set the girl up to really WANT to share with her any deepest secrets she might possess. So, to give her the best thing she had, she told her what she had kept from even her daddy, just minutes ago. She said, leaning in with earnest effect, "Well, I didn't notice this until tonight, but when PRS is in the dark, the total dark, and his eyes are open, they GLOW BLUE." She emphasized these last words, her eyes widening, hoping to knock Donna's socks off.

"You don't say! Well, thank you!" Donna breathed, smiling, scribbling on her notepad, and then immediately turning and standing up, looking long at Nate. As her back was now turned to the child, Liddy did not notice the shared concern on the two adults' faces. She couldn't know that she was strengthening some information that Donna had shared with Nate moments before.

"Well, just one more thing." Donna walked a few steps ahead, "How about we open this door!" And at once she opened the main door wide enough for them to enter, turned, and motioned them to come inside. Her genuine smile was only outperformed by the enthusiastic response from both kids. And they all entered in, even Jim, at the last.

The darkness behind the door was created by a "curtain". The curtain was simply an extra large gray wool blanket, hung closely to the ceiling, a few feet in front of the door. Soon, they would see that the entire room was encircled by rods that hung these curtains, blanketing the entire inner room. This had been done to protect any "audio leaks" from leaving the building, an effective protection from anyone who might be lurking outside. Concealment, always concealment and secrecy.

There weren't any windows to worry about here, nothing but thick brick walls. The blankets were simply the final touch to the club's efforts to keep the newest living valuables shrouded in secret. The Old Museum housed many "ancient" treasures, and now housed brand new ones, as well.

Mitt, now being in front of the pack, walked twelve feet to his left, where one blanket ended and overlapped another, and stuck his arm out, moving it left, opening the secrecy curtain to help those behind him enter the main room. A thin stream of light lit Mitt up, while the others made their way through the blanketed perimeter to the opening.

PRS, seeing the opening getting nearer, looked back at his 'mom', who was next in line, a smile of ecstatic anticipation on his face. Behind her, Nate and Donna caught the unmistakable faint blue glow of his eyes in the relative darkness. It sent a slight chill down both of their spines.

Donna whispered to Nate, "I want the egg shells, if Liddy still has them."

Chapter 18

The Reveal

The room they now entered was one large cavern with a double row of column supports arranged all the way down to the other end. How long ago this place had been prepared for creatchi, they could not guess. One thing was for certain, it had been specifically redecorated for this group. All of the old dusty artifacts it had previously stored, on old dusty bookcases, and old dusty wall shelves, items typically housed here due to being too damaged or too fragile to display upstairs, had been taken out. The entire floor was open and covered with blankets, a colorful patchwork of carpet, to be sure. It must have taken at least a hundred. And movement everywhere on top of them. So much going on, so much action, it was hard to focus on one thing. The lights had been upgraded and were bright white, which helped to make up for the dark gray wool blankets covering all of the walls.

Donna interrupted their first look inside, "Shoes here." She motioned to the left wall. Spread several feet down were tidy rows of shoes of all sizes. "We don't want to step on anyone, so please, watch

where you go, walk slowly at all times, because creatchi surely don't!" she smiled, "And...be very selective of your words." She admonished. And with that she walked away, seeing someone across the room motion to her. Nate and Liddy both wondered what she meant by that last part.

The girl turned to the left "wall", or curtain, which now could be seen to be several dark gray wool blankets stitched together to make wide floor to ceiling panels. Facing it, she set PRS down in front of her. He patiently watched her as she took off her shoes, but his hands were trembling with excitement. As soon as they turned around they took in the whole scene once again. PRS stepped forward a few steps and reached up to hold the Liddy's hand.

The room was oddly hushed. You would think with probably all 18 creatchi present, along with their "families" that it would be noisier, but everyone was playing relatively "quietly" together, or speaking in lower tones to one another. And, after all, the wool blankets surrounding them absorbed more than just light. There was definitely "noise", chitterings, conversations, and some laughter, but everyone, even the creatchi, were aware that there could not be the loud clamor that might cause discovery, for everyone seemed to be controlling their voices with care.

Pillows of all sizes were strewn about and some sat on them, legs folded, or leaned back, chatting. There were a few folding chairs as well, and a couple of older adults, not wanting to brave the floor pillows, sat on those.

The central area of the room had less people and creatchi, than the sides. It was around the loop of the columns, the sides and back of the place, where "stations" were positioned, that most of the playing and talking was going on. Here around these stations, there were sets of creatchi and their "owners" playing or lounging.

Each station throughout the sides of the room had "games" or "toys". Many looked more like intelligence tests: placing round blocks into round holes and square blocks into square holes, or identifying colors, or naming cards with drawings on them. However, there were also "normal" toys such as erector sets, checkers, blocks, and miniature play sets such as dollhouses and the like.

The three stood there for a few moments and just absorbed the whole camp. Then, they began to wander toward their left to perhaps make a circuit around the room.

The first station they came to, not ten feet away, was where a gray nornchi was sitting on a pillow, with her "family" sitting to her left. The gray nornchi's back was turned to the newcomers, but she was playing with an etch-a-sketch and chittering away with a gorgeous striking bright blue nornchi. Nate and Liddy could see their "work" perfectly. As both nornchis turned one knob each on either corner of the toy, working together, they created a series of perfect circles, squares, and triangles. That they could work together so precisely to make these smooth shapes was surprising to the humans sitting next to them.

"How about that!" the man exclaimed. "Wow! at home Ashley only makes squares!" a boy added, turning his head toward the older man. Then he noticed PRS and the newcomers. "Hello!" he said, smiling and putting up a hand in a friendly gesture.

PRS stepped forward, still holding Liddy's hand, and with the other, reached out toward the gray nornchi, Ashley, who was still facing the other direction.

PRS placed his little hand onto Ashley's shoulder.

All activity of all creatchi in the room suddenly stopped. All of the other creatchi stood up where they were, and turned toward the new arrivals.

Chapter 19

Welcomes

PRS took the "Ashley" nornchi by the hand, and with his other hand still holding "his" human, walked toward the center of the room. Every creature in the room walked quietly toward the center. Most of them were smiling.

Nate suddenly realized that they were not all the same. Not all of them looked like PRS. They were not all "nornchi" like PRS, Suzy and Ashley. So, there were other "species", after all. Some body shapes were very different, and some looked downright surly.

PRS stopped in the center of the room, let go of both Liddy and Ashley, and turned around slowly in place, 360 degrees, looking at all of the gathering creatchi.

The approaching creatchi reached out as they drew nearer, and as they came within touching distance, touched with fingertips, either Liddy or PRS, or both. Even Ashley nornchi turned and did the same. Once the entire room of creatchi were huddled together in one round lump, they began to chitter a little sort of song. At least it sort of sounded like a song. It had to be a song. It was soft and lovely, and it was the proper melody for them, and rightly done, and perfect. How else can it be described? It lasted just the right length, and then it ended.

The girl looked up, her cheeks glistening with tears, raising her closed hands up to her mouth and looked up at Nate. Nate and all of the humans in the room were frozen, watching the assembly. If you could have polled each person, and each had been completely honest, you would have found that all of the females had tears in their eyes, and all of the males were choked up (and some might add, hiding it like "real men"). But not one of them could tell you why.

The creatchi put their hands down and began hugging and kissing and normal chattering noises began to break the silence. "Wow." Someone in the room said, and all of the humans breathed an agreement and actually clapped softly, because they didn't know what else to do at such a thing. It was actually awkward in a way, clapping, yet they felt like they could do no less, to this sudden and beautiful display.

Slowly all the creatchies made their way back to their respective stations.

Liddy and PRS walked back over to Nate, who hugged her and asked, "So, what was that like?"

"It was really weird," she wiped her cheeks, "I could feel their song in my spine, like it was going through me and giving me shivers." She smiled through her teary breaths, still getting ahold of herself.

Nate hugged her close. This certainly was turning into a banner event.

Nate suddenly noticed Donna was nearby, audio recorder in hand. He wondered if she had caught the whole "show" or was just getting his daughter's feedback for the record. He heard her whisper to herself, "Incredible," as she moved away to record what others were saying. He now noticed two other people with video recorders, "working" the room. It looked like they all wore matching blue lanyards so that others could identify them. There were a few "blue lanyards" at a few of the stations, as well. So that's the "Research Department" he mused. He had half a mind to ask to join them.

"Uhm, Hello." Ashley nornchi's "boy owner" said once again, facing them. "Hello!" said Nate, shaking the boy's hand and also the older man's. They made introductions, the boy was "Brian" and the other, his uncle "Owen". Brian and Owen began the conversation by welcoming them as the newest members, for ever since KBOB had announced there was a new creatchi, everyone was very curious to see who would be the new inductees into the club.

Brian continued by explaining there had not been any new members for at least a week. People had recently begun to wonder whether there might BE any more creatchi to discover. Ashley and they had joined the club early on, the fourth nornchi to be included, so they were more than happy to help the newbies with any information they might need.

Brian's parents were out of town, Owen added. "We try and keep it to two 'owners' max per creatchi, to help keep the number attending each meeting manageable." Owen explained. "But, since we knew almost everyone would want their creatchi to meet you, most groups tonight only brought one human family member, and most of us carpooled it. Otherwise, the streets would be filled with cars, and the room would have been overrun! Ha!" Owen chuckled.

Liddy asked Brian with surprising boldness, "That," pointing to the center of the room, "Does that happen every time a new one is found?"

"No." Brian said, with a mystified look. "They always all walk over to a newbie, a few at a time, and usually hug and poke and talk in their language, but that huddle and singing thing..? That's a new one!" Then his face as well as his voice warmed up, "That was so cool! Good job cuz!" And he held up his hand to high-five. Liddy high fived him, glowing with the delight of finding a new friend. Brian was just slightly older, maybe a year, and naturally gregarious and socially easy. She certainly felt very at ease with him.

Brian and Owen took it upon themselves to be tour guides and walk the newcomers around the room, introducing them to almost half of the families before time ran out and "Research" finally called everyone together to end the meeting.

A low humming kind of flute sound was used to cue everyone that it was time to gather, and then all members immediately led their critters to the center-back area of the room, sprawled on the floor pillows, and waited for Donna to begin.

Nate and Liddy found a nice spot near the front, and chatted a little with a well-to-do and very aged spinster who was holding a yellow Nornchi in her lap on a folding chair. Her discovery story they were not able to find out, for the room's attention turned to the front, as Donna began speaking.

Chapter 20

The Report

Donna stood at the back wall of the museum basement, and addressed them with a quick introduction, "Thank you all for coming, I know it has been a long night, and newcomers, welcome, we are SO happy that you are part of the fold. We don't want to hold you all up any longer than possible, the night becoming quite late, but we have a few verbals and a small test, and we'll also provide the research write-ups NEXT week for all to take home, read, and burn."

She continued, her mind able to run through her announcements at the pace of a horse race, and everyone seemed to be all attentive, not wanting to miss a hoof beat. How she was able to say so much with so few breaths in between was amazing in itself.

"For the newcomers' sake I'll backtrack a bit. At the end of each meeting, we give an on-site verbal update on some theories we have been testing with the intelligence games, and give observations on what we have found out from the night's activities."

"A deeper analysis is written up and provided at every other meeting so that ALL research summaries are available to you. We DO appreciate you ALL reading these every so often so that any theories that Research has set forth as fact, can be supported or denied by your own interactions with your creatchies in your own homes. Your observations! That's where real science starts, and we thank you ALL for your input."

"Please believe me when I say we take everything you tell us seriously, recording it all, nothing is wasted nor forgotten. If you have a disagreement with our findings, please do tell us so that we can solidify what is truth, what new theories should be considered and tested, and to be clear about what has been disproven among us."

She took a much needed breath.

"OK, for tonight, on health, we have found all healthy, none sick, no injuries, as usual."

There was a whispered cheer, "Yay!" by some smiling teenage girls in the center of the group, who obviously loved this part of the meeting. They had their very girly-dressed nornchis' in their laps, legs of the human and nornchis alike both folded up. The girls' lightly and playfully held their nornchi's wrists, and clapped their tiny hands for them, as you might a toddler. Their nornchis smiling up at them in delight.

Liddy remembered thinking her nornchi was a girl, at first. She realized it really didn't matter at all. Boys and girl nornchis both loved the same kinds of fun. She smiled, happy to see other happy families enjoying their creatchies.

"We have solidified last week's hypothesis. We believe these creatures are NOT telepathic, not with us, and not with one another. The write-ups will explain in detailed manner, but I will just quickly say that if any of you tonight used Brian and Ashley's Etch-A-Sketch, or the Right Family's laptop drawing game, you might have noticed an amazing display of teamwork. We believe this heightened cooperative talent comes from an extremely acute ability to sense movement, even before it happens. They seem to sense even the impulse to move, and this allows them to coordinate their own movements together with extreme precision. We've also noticed that this 'skill' is even more heightened with three,

and even MORE with four! - having recorded some of the group games last week, we replayed them in ultra slow motion to detect reaction times and coordination within a group. They truly are Hyper Observative!

"It's amazing indeed and we are still studying this phenomenon to see how they may USE it to benefit themselves in the world. Meaning, of course, if they were predators, they might use such a skill to hunt prey together, but they are not, so...what do they use it FOR?" She smiled, having made her point, and took another much needed breath.

"Speaking of coordinated effort, the SONG!" and with this she put her hands together rocking them and bent her knees, looking rapturously up at the ceiling, "That beautiful song that we witnessed tonight. As you know, we believe that their chatter is a robust language, we feel we are getting very close to deciphering it, and so hopefully we will be able to TRANSLATE that wonderful song, as well! We're not quite there yet, but we hope to make good progress this week as we have another linguistics expert on our team."

The humans in the crowd reacted to this news, and whispered back and forth, enthusiastic about the prospect of understanding their creatchies actual words.

"Yes, yes, I know, but listen..." she held her hands out slightly to quiet the room, not wanting to lose momentum, "We ARE also still amazed and convinced that they seem to know their own language upon hatching!.. This as well as other factors led us to the theory they they could be telepathic, but we have bust that theory now. We are not sure HOW they knew their language upon hatching, but we all know that they had to help one another to learn ours, and learn it fast they do! I bet every one of you can attest to that!"

"Lastly, to end tonight's verbals, everyone, a reminder to keep every thing we know, say, do and learn SECRET!" and here she stopped, for effect. "Also please do check with KBOB tomorrow night for the next meeting location."

"Now, for tonight's collective test, oh yes - for the newcomers -" and she addressed PRS and family, "We have one 'full group test' that we conduct at each meeting."

She quickly looked back at the crowd, to make sure no one took her lack of focus on them as a cue to cause disruption, but everyone was still absorbing her every word.

"We have to take the opportunity to do this test here because we do not want to have any kind of 'lab environment' involved, right guys? We're trying to keep everything with our creatchies about family, and cooperation, and yet still try and make some real scientific discoveries as well."

A few young children began whispering among themselves. She clapped her hands like a kindergarten teacher. Her expert skills at handling a crowd now took her from a thoroughbred's pace to a snail's in one sentence.

"Please everyone, do as I am about to say, do not ask questions... and tonight.. please during this test.. please remain.. absolutely.. quiet." And with those last words, like a teacher again, she quieted her own voice, almost to a whisper, causing all of the smaller children begin to listen much more attentively.

"If you are very young.." She spoke very softly and slowly, "put your hands on your mouth, so that you

do give a reaction please, not from any of you small children, nor adults... no gasping... Melany, I'm looking at you, child.." She pointed briefly and grinned slightly, as if there was a private joke, and a girl of about 9 years old, over to Liddy's right a few people, smiled sheepishly and placed both of her hands on her own mouth.

Even the teens in the center of the group put their forefingers lightly on their lips as well, looking at one another and grinning in curiosity about what the 'test' might be for tonight. Liddy noticed them too, and put her finger on her own mouth as well, not knowing what would come next. She was afraid she may blurt out an "Ah!" or something, and ruin it, if it were too surprising.

Donna's voice regained a more normal pitch and pace, "OK. Suzy! Where are you?" and a little voice answered "Eem here." Donna put her hand out as if to locate her, looking over to her left, "Oh good you are near the front." Suzy's ears were as perked up as they could be, very interested in why she had been called. Donna glanced around, taking stock of who was where, very quickly, and said, "OK, now, I'm going to ask two questions and the test will be over." She looked past everyone, toward the opposite wall, presumably at one of her research team members, and gave a quick nod. The lights went out. All went black. No light could have even tried slipping in from anywhere because of the brick walls and wool blanket curtains.

Several creatchi gasped, but the humans were perfectly silent. Then, it was completely, eerily quiet. As if everyone held even their breath.

Donna paused and asked very, very gently, "Suzy dear, what do you see?" and a little voice replied, "Eem see dark!" She sounded spooked, her little voice quavered.

Donna then asked, "PRS, what do you see, little one?" and PRS' wee and wiry voice came from Liddy's own lap, "Eem..." she felt him stand up, "..see" he turned slowly around, "..every body." And the entire group saw plainly his steadily glowing light blue eyes.

A few things now happened very quickly, an explosive BOOM ripped through the silence, and almost every creature and human screamed, and then the lights went back on.

Chapter 21

Scurry

The humans recovered in an instant, the light helping them see that the room was still intact. However, the screaming of the critters was high pitched, piercing, painful to human ears, and did not end right away.

Every human attempted to hold, cuddle, or console their creatchies, but the creatchies resisted their humans, and dove, clawed, and crawled to the front center of the group, toward PRS, all of them flattened on their stomachs, crying. PRS was in their midst, crouched in Liddy's lap, hiding his face in his own hands, screaming just as loud. His 'mom' looked up to her own dad, hugged PRS tight, and started to cry as well.

Ten full seconds of ear-searing creatchi screaming filled the room.

It wasn't the volume that hurt, it was the pitch. The noise was so high-pitched that children, whose young ears can hear a wider range of sound, bared the worst of the pain. Then, they quieted down a bit, then stopped crying altogether, seemingly exhausted, and allowed their humans to retrieve them.

Once human hands came off human ears, and the pain subsided, everyone shifted gears. Every human eye in the room was wide and full of care. 'Worried creatchies' were not a good thing. It was a thing to be avoided most. Worry, or any kind of negative emotion, the newcomers would learn, somehow damaged them. What mortal fear could do to them then, everyone now wondered, with dread concern.

All at once, a brick load of pouring rain hit the old museum's metal roof with such force, it was audibly and physically felt in the basement below. Once they realized the new assault was rain, some people looked relieved, realizing the loud noise preceding it must have been thunder.

Yet, if one loud crack of thunder could so panic a creatchi, what would three or four do? Everyone hustled their creatchies to the shoe wall, stuffed themselves and their furry friends into their coats and jackets, donned hats, grabbed umbrellas, threw on shoes, grabbed games brought from home, spoke hurried goodbyes, and filed out in a long stream, huddled and worried, up the back stairs and out through the back door.

One could not blame them, perhaps, for not timing their getaways better. Their protocols for exit-secrecy were completely forgotten. There were no timed exits, no pre-exit scouts to see if the coast was clear. All former rules for disengaging a meeting properly, were ignored in the emergency scramble.

With every business in town having been closed for hours this late at night, and the rain pouring down in buckets, it was unlikely anyone would be watching the dozen or more families scurrying out into the night and starting their cars, heading as quickly as possible for the relative safety and comfort of their homes. The scramble to get away did not hurt the club this evening. If anyone had even thought to look over their shoulder and make sure they were not being watched, they would have only seen sheets of concealing rain. Apparently, the storm determined the meeting was to end, and then shielded their escape, as well.

More than one prayer went up on that drive through the onslaught of pouring rain, beseeching that the night sky would be finished with its fireworks.

Chapter 22

POV

PRS' family, having jogged to their own car, threw themselves into it, and took a few moments to breathe and buckle in. "Is he ok?" Nate asked, his concern obvious in his voice inside the darkened car. The girl looked into her own jacket, and then put her hand down into it to feel him in the darkness. PRS was clutching her side, one of his little arms reaching under her armpit round her, his other up toward her neck, "Wow daddy, I think he might already be sleeping!"

"What a night!" Nate said, breathing out one last sigh as he started the car and headed out of the town center toward home. So much had happened, so much to talk about, yet at the moment, he needed to

focus on driving carefully in the storm. There would not be any dangers of rain water collecting on these roads, but soggy soil can make for a downed tree. Visibility was a problem. Probably, the wind that had pulled this storm overhead was high in the treetops, and they were being insulated from any of it by the forest - another advantage to their wooded setting. It was just a solid downpour, the storm providing its own dark curtain.

It would only be a 20 minute ride to home, and as there were no highways connecting the inner town streets, the roads they traveled were relatively slow - a gentle ride with several turns. As he made his way through the labyrinth of connecting roads, the forest's trees now and then parted, offering a more open view of the sky. He did notice a few flashes of light in the clouds, lightning that arc'd from one side of the sky over to another, however, there was not a repeat of the bolt that must have hit somewhere near to the museum, and only the rain on the car could be heard.

The sound was very soothing after such an abrupt scare in the basement. Within ten minutes he glanced over and noticed his daughter was asleep as well. "Well, Mitt had said the meetings were 'tiring'. What a night!" He said quietly to himself.

Arriving soon to their home, he scooped up his daughter, with PRS enclosed in her protective care, and carried them both inside. He laid them on her bed, carefully peeling away her jacket, and taking off her wet shoes and socks. "Good enough," he decided, and covered them in a blanket and let them continue their sleep.

He himself was too keyed up to sleep. So, he sat at his office desk, took a fresh notebook out of a drawer, and began scratching notes down. He wrote:

- Ashley - Owen - uncle to Brian - Ashley was the gray girl nornchi (purple tipped fur on her back)
- Yawn - bright blue one playing on Etch-a-Sketch, owned by Beth and Tamra Jennings
- incredible dexterity for small hands
- incredible cooperation - understanding of one another's movements, and immediate coordination and response
- made perfect shapes together despite sometimes even looking away across room at other people while doing it, amazing
- Loxy - a green nornchi, owned by "Kim and Jane" - forgot their last name
 - super silky hair, longest hair of the nornchis
 - played with picture cards, was shown all cards once and told what word named the card, "dog, horse, shoe, daisy, butterfly" etc.
 - nornchi could not guess hidden picture, even if both humans and other nornchis concentrated on hidden card
 - but then identified all images perfectly once she was shown it, having only been told once what the word was that went with the picture. Incredible. I wonder if she'll remember them all next time.
 - so maybe that is an evidence of no telepathy, as research said?
- "Truck" is owned by Jim - a creatchi species called a 'grendelchi'
 - deep voiced grumbly words instead of higher pitched nornchi voice
 - heavier, stocky, almost muscly
 - gruff, grumpy, I don't recall any kind of smile or pleasant expression at all
 - still, Jim adores him, like a proud papa!
 - but, I liked him too somehow, it still seemed 'an innocent, vulnerable' being, though a gruff one, like a baby bird with a scowl, you couldn't help but smile at it

--seems to mean no real harm to others, just a sort of macho like personality
--was into drawing, on paper only, not sure if that was his only interest though

-- Grace and Lou - young newlyweds moved here 6 months ago
 --nornchi - forgot its name 'Cyan'? I think it was a color name..
--multi colored hair though mostly light blue, gorgeous
--all it wanted they said was to play with noise makers, like musical instruments, or buzzers, sound makers
--they had to unwire their doorbell, microwave, and hide the tv and radio
--never spoke English tonight, only nornchi-ease, why is that I wonder

-- Karen Loomis, owns greeting card shop in town
 --ANOTHER species of creatchi, they are calling an 'ettinchi', named... 'Soul'
 --smaller, very mechanical minded, played with gears and old computer parts all night.. trying to make something?
 --it rolls everywhere, do all of them somersault constantly, or just Soul?
 --were there more ettinchi, or only this one? I only noticed one tonight. Are they all mechanical minded?

-- Old Mama Mack - farm lady sells flowers and butter at farmers market
 --Nornchi - 'Daisy'
 --found her already hatched, in the garden under a wet flower, using it as an umbrella, muddy with garden soil.
 --never found her egg shell
 --Daisy, PRS and Ashley held hands in a circle and spun round, then let go and spun. Some kind of dance? Not one fell. They don't get dizzy.

* Who made all these names up? 'nornchi', 'grendelchi' etc?

* Are all of the characteristics things our known animals have?

--quickness, yes
--speed of movement, yes
--playful, yes, dogs, cats and such, and intelligence, gorillas identifying cards
--do our animals have such extreme coordination, no? do any normal animals coordinate together this perfectly?
--musical, yes, birds, but not structured music, do nornchi's structure music or song, or just make pretty sound using their super coordination together?
--eyes glowing, cats sort of can see in relative darkness, & their eyes glow but only when a flashlight or some light source hits them, certain sea creatures glow without a light source, deep water things
--mechanical interest, no? no normal animal I know has a natural interest in making complex machines!
--language? don't only humans converse in very organized speech? Donna thinks theirs is highly organized like ours, how does she think this? what have they done to test?
--bonding to humans, yes animals do bond, and humans do read their pet's moods and such, but the way we bonded seems abnormal, no getting to know you phase, we went right to best buddies..

Final Questions:

Do we have them all, did they all find a 'host family'? Or are there some living in the woods by themselves? They in some respects look and seem like children, but are they? Are they faking it? How

did PRS learn our language so fast? They endear themselves to us. We are drawn to care for them, how does that work? Endorphins? are we being drugged by some chemical they give off? what ARE they? animal? or...alien?? why are they here?

Tired now, he let out a big sigh and put down his pencil. They had met too many people and creatures to keep it all straight. Any more notes and he would muddle it all up.

As he put his notepad back into the drawer and locked it, he made a decision. Up to now he had been going with the flow. He had been enjoying and playing with PRS as a new toy, a delightful pet. Now, he had gotten a new point of view, a paradigm shift toward the bizarre nature of this situation. His family would be more purposely observant. Tomorrow, and any day right after a meeting, they would have a family sit-down that would give them an opportunity to have a "debriefing" of sorts. To share, to take notes, and figure some things out on their own. And he would regularly record findings of his own concerning PRS, at the very least at the end of each day.

Whether or not he joined the "research group", he was going to begin a careful examination of developments, and he was going to find some answers. For all their sakes.

Chapter 23

Crayon Date

The next morning, Nate purposely went into his daughter's bedroom to wake up the snoozing pair. "Breakfast is ready, you two!" he cheerily said, watching to see how PRS fared. The two sleepy heads slowly crawled out of bed, Liddy heading to the bathroom to wash up as usual. She seemed to wake up more with each step, "Oh! I smell bacon!" her voice trailed from the bathroom doorway. PRS walked groggily past him, toward the kitchen, "eem eat bacon."

At the kitchen table, Nate and Liddy talked about what they would do that day. Nate suggesting a nice coloring book kind of day, since outside was still very wet. PRS responded as always, repeating the last words, or the subjects, as they spoke, "grass wet.... color books.... eem stay inside." PRS seemed perfectly normal, no ill effects from the emotional drama the night before.

After breakfast, they all helped clean the kitchen, Liddy loading the dishwasher, PRS dutifully crawling onto the table and collecting all of the silverware, placing it all on one plate, nearest the dishwasher. Nate took notice this time of the dexterity PRS used to do his "job". He didn't just pick up the pieces of silverware, and drop them on the plate, he flipped one into his hands by springing it into the air using a toe. A fork or spoon or butter knife made two revolutions in the air and landed perfectly onto the stack in his arms. Every time. Then he collected the juice cups, stacking them also at the end of the table, then the napkins.

Liddy and PRS went off to her bedroom, time to get ready for the day. PRS had his own tooth brush, a baby sized toothbrush of sky blue with little clouds on it. Liddy stood on a stool to reach the pedestal sink and got ready to brush.

PRS climbed onto the side of the bathtub, sprang up to the side of the sink, sat down and picked up his own tooth brush, sticking it out, ready for toothpaste. His little smile always showing that he loved every part of life, he loved every thing he was able to do, he loved everything they had taught him, he was just so positive and happy. As Liddy giggled and gave him a little dab of toothpaste, watching him brush away, the bubbly foam dripping from his mouth to his legs, she wondered what it must be like to own one of those "other" creatchies - the ones that seemed so gruff and grumpy. Would they grump when they woke up and grumble at breakfast, and resist cleaning themselves up? Somehow, that still sounded fun.

PRS went to find Nate as Liddy got dressed in fresh clothes. Nate was collecting all the crayons and coloring books he could find about the house and in the bookcase and toy trunk for their "coloring date". He spread them out on the coffee table and threw a picnic blanket and pillows on the floor.

PRS grabbed a pillow almost too big for him to move, and pushed it as well as he could, getting it closer to the coffee table. Try as he might, he was not able to lift it to the table. Nate reached out to help him and then stopped himself, deciding instead to allow PRS to solve the problem himself and see what exactly he would try. But PRS didn't come up with any grand solutions. He just began to look frustrated and as he continued pulling and grunting, he looked up at Nate and back to pillow, Nate, pillow, tugging and grunting and looked more frustrated. Nate soon couldn't bear it and moved to help him, which caused a bright smile to come back to PRS's face. The pillow now flat on the coffee table, PRS popped up in a little skip-jump way onto the table, plopped down onto the pillow, crossed his little hands into his lap, and waited for Liddy.

"Hmm." Nate looked thoughtful, sat on the couch, and brought round his notepad. "Not the best problem solver, but kicked me into helpful action, despite my resolving not to help him. How does he do that?"

Chapter 24 Note Taking

Nate put his notepad down, and welcomed his daughter in as she smiled and clapped once in delight that the coloring date had already been set up.

The two youngsters began coloring in earnest, PRS coloring a farm pig with purple, Liddy coloring a rainbow.

Nate began with, "So, I was wondering.. You know, we met a lot of people and critters last night. I want to take notes to try and remember all we see and learn at the meetings. I can only remember a few of the names. Maybe the day after a meeting we can have a time, like this, where we can chat about everything to help us both remember it all. We may have even noticed different things that we can share with each other."

"Ooh! like science notes? We take science notes at school when we watch a video." she offered. PRS echoed, "Science oats!"

"Yes! Just like that." he said, relieved she seemed "in to it". He started with his own notes he had jotted down the night before, "Remember Brian's nornchi, Ashley? What do you remember about meeting her or her owners?"

"PRS really liked her, he held her hand almost half the night." Liddy said.

PRS added, "eem Ashley friend."

Nate now recalled PRS first having put his hand on Ashley's shoulder. Taking her by the hand, along with his daughter, to the center. That was quite a "familiar" thing to do with a nornchi he just met..

He scribbled some notes:

- Did he already "know" her somehow?
- Was he "choosing" her for something?
- How had he behaved with Suzy last night? Was anything noticeably different?
- Do they pick "mates"?
- Is he "old enough" to care about such things?

"Did you already know Brian, Ashley's owner?" he asked Liddy, still writing.

"I've seen him at school in the halls, but he is a little older, so I had never talked to him before." She shrugged, still head down, coloring her rainbow. PRS now colored the pig's head orange.

"He's a nice kid, I like him." Nate said, looking up, and then scribbling on his notepad something about the non-artistic ability of nornchi.

"Yeah, you know, we should invite him and Ashley over. We already know PRS likes her." she answered

"Good idea!" Nate answered, head down, still writing:

- Why was PRS singled out in the center of the circle during 'The Song'?
- Was PRS the "leader"?
- Was PRS the "last" one? Were they celebrating that all of the creatchi are now found?

PRS echoed, "Good idea!" imitating the way Nate had said it, and they both looked at him in amusement. You never knew how much he actually understood and how much he was parroting.

Nate continued, "I didn't hear much about 'Yawn' that blue nornchi that was playing with Ashley, I was busy talking with Owen. Did you find anything out about that one?"

"Oh! Beth is one of the teen-age girls. She came and got Yawn from the etch-a-sketch station and took her over to another game for awhile. She told me she had found Yawn sleeping on their compost pile!" She giggled, "Beth went out to throw out some banana peels and things, and there was Yawn just snoring away on top of the stinky compost pile!" She giggled again. PRS echoed, "stinky" and giggled also.

PRS now colored the grass blue. The pig, now a lovely purple and orange, sported a green newly-drawn-on elephant trunk. Nate noticed, thinking to himself, "I wonder if PRS is actually coloring some alien animal from another planet." but then dismissed this since, he came to them as an egg, so he

wouldn't have knowledge of alien creatures. But then, if he knew his own language from his egg, maybe he knew about his planet's history as well? He scribbled more notes. "Is PRS and alien? What other option is there?"

"Beth says Yawn only likes the color red, but I think Beth likes the color red. Everything Beth had was red, her jacket, her purse, her skirt.." the girl added, "and she said that Yawn does NOT like the television. If Yawn comes into a room with a tv on, she climbs up to it and turns it off. Even if she has to bite the cord in the wall and pull it out."

"Oh, that's interesting.." Nate trailed off, ever scribbling on his notepad. PRS never minded the TV. Nate wondered why this other nornchi did. Humans had differing likes and dislikes, maybe that's it.. that made sense.

PRS echoed, "Eem like red." He picked up a red crayon and began coloring the sky on his coloring page.

The girl added, "I really liked Cindy too, she was the one with the ettinchi named 'Moon Star'." She paused, thinking to herself, "I like that name."

Liddy continued, "Moon Star was the first ettinchi that came to the club!" The girl stopped coloring and looked straight at Nate adding, "She said her ettinchi egg was golden colored, and hummed! She said the sound of it made her find it."

"I don't remember Cindy or Moon Star." he responded, looking up.

"I think you were talking with Kim and Jane about their nornchi Loxy, and PRS took me and Brian and Ashley over to see Moon Star. PRS pet Moon Star's head like he was a pet cat or something!" she giggled. Then, looking at PRS, "PRS, you are such a sweetie!"

PRS, coloring his red sky furiously and not looking up said, "eem sweetie!"

"A golden humming egg." Nate murmured as he wrote. "So there IS more than one ettinchi." He had not seen the remains of PRS' shell the day he discovered his daughter playing in her room with him. "How does an egg 'hum'?", he thought.

"By the way," Nate said, "Donna asked if she could see PRS' egg shell, do you have it?"

"Oh!" Liddy looked up, "I don't know. Let me look." She ran off to her bedroom.

PRS was happy to continue coloring, and Nate added more notes.

- Are all ettinchi eggs golden, and do they all 'hum'?
- What color are nornchi and grendelchi eggs?
- Assuming they all came from eggs?

He scratched that last part out.

He thought to himself, "Of course they all came from eggs, otherwise, the parents would have already been discovered..since it seems as though ALL were found as "brand new babies" according to everyone I talked to last night. But if there are three different 'species' laying eggs around town, why did we find them all around this same time? Where are the parents of these species that laid the eggs??"

Liddy came back. "You know, I haven't seen the egg shell since PRS hatched. I just thought only of him, and played with him, and now I think back.. and I think that next time I got socks out of my sock drawer, I never saw the egg shells. They aren't there. I just looked through my drawer. I only ever saw the whole egg." She shrugged, looking like she was baffled.

Nate replied with a heavy, "Huh." His head cocked as he processed what she just said, drawing a blank himself as to what might have happened. He hadn't known PRS had hatched in her sock drawer. He made a mental note to go through her drawers thoroughly after their "debriefing."

Nate asked, "What does it look like?"

Liddy looked up, remembering, "You know those red apples at the store? They have little long lines all over them and tiny dots? PRS' egg was like that, except purple. Like a medium purple, with tiny dark purple spots."

Then she grabbed a violet colored crayon, "Like this purple."

"OK, good to know." Nate scribbled more notes. His hand was cramping, so he rubbed it a bit.

Liddy started coloring again and looking at her work, said, "I was surprised it didn't break."

Nate was scratching notes about the sock drawer, "Hmm? What do you mean?"

Liddy added, "When it fell from the sky."

Nate's writing stopped. He looked up. "What do you mean, 'when it fell from the sky'?"

Liddy looked at her daddy. She realized she had not told anyone yet. "Oh daddy, I forgot, I forgot to tell Donna, PRS's egg fell from the sky. I saw it fall. It came right out of a really bad storm cloud, bounced in our yard, and then I went out and got it."

"Wow!" Nate said. He leaned back in confounded wonderment. "That is something!"

After looking steadily at her for a few moments, he added, "Liddy, I don't want to hurt your feelings, and I know you always tell the truth. That's one of the things I really like about you."

Liddy looked at her dad, perking up because it sounded like he was about to say something really serious, and she couldn't guess what it was, but it was about her 'honesty'.

He continued carefully, "But can I ask you, are you SURE it actually fell from the sky and the storm didn't blow it along, somehow? You know, like, the storm is blowing wind really hard, the egg wasn't just bouncing along the grass, and kind of 'looked like' it fell.. Are sure it actually fell from the sky?"

Liddy smiled, because of this point she was positive, "Oh no! It fell from the sky! I was looking UP because the cloud was really dark, and I was waiting for lightning. And way up high in the cloud I saw 'something' coming. It was lighter colored than the dark cloud, and I couldn't tell what it was, until it bounced in our grass. Then I knew it was an egg, for me." She smiled, happy to continue coloring, now that her record of honesty remained intact.

"Huh." he said again. "For you?" He added, cocking his head again.

"Uhm. Yes. For me." She answered, matter-of-factly. She really hadn't realized it herself before this very moment. But indeed, when the egg landed in "her" yard, somehow she felt it came to her, and her alone. It almost reminded her of her school lunch last year at the zoo field trip. Her lunch bag was stored with all the other dozens of lunch bags, but she found it herself at lunch break.

Her brown bag had her name right on it and she knew it was filled with good things to eat for her alone. That was what PRS' egg was like. He was her baby, her nornchi, meant for her, and no one could ever stop it from coming to her.

Nate began writing notes furiously. Too many thoughts flooding in at once. He was afraid he wouldn't get it all down before they were written properly. "I need to use a laptop," he thought, but he was a slow typist and was afraid of electronic files being hacked. No. He better stick with pencil and paper.

Note taking, focusing on all of these facts, was making everything harder. Every note seemed to spurt three new questions. This newest information causing a waterfall of new ideas. He certainly wasn't solving anything TODAY. This was the beginning of a larger process. Maybe the research notes he would have access to at the next meeting would help resolve some of these questions..

The girl looked back down, and began coloring a unicorn who was flying over the rainbow. It reminded her of another unicorn, horn all sparkly with glitter, that was on a large poster just inside the school's entryway door.

Suddenly she stopped coloring, frozen.

"Dad?" her eyes slowly found their way up to him. Her pause caused him to look up from his note taking. Seeing her grave concern, "What is it?" he asked, softly. As she spoke, her face crumpled up into pain, "What are we gonna do when school starts. I can't leave him!" and she ran over to Nate and tucked herself into his side, crying pitifully "I can't leave him, I can't leave him!" The little mother sobbed.

"It's ok. It's ok.. We'll think of something." Was all he could offer for comfort. He had no idea.

Chapter 25

The Garage

After both Nate and PRS comforted Liddy, and after promising to call Donna right away to get her input, Liddy was able to calm down sufficiently. After beginning to trust that the grownups would come up with a plan about school, her fears had settled down a bit. She admitted, "Crying is exhausting!" to which PRS replied, "cartoon for eem?" and pointed his finger to her. She wholly agreed with a firm, "Yes" and a head nod, and then added, "With a snack" and left to get their favorite home made nut and berry granola mix. Cartoons and laughing with PRS would be just what she needed to lighten her mood and bring the atmosphere of joy back to the house again, and take her mind off of the school problem.

Nate was determined that there must already be a plan in place. They were new to "the club" and hadn't yet heard of all of the details everyone else had discussed about this whole situation. Others had to have already raised the school question.

After all, at least ten of the families who "owned" creatchi had children in them, often multiple children. It wouldn't be good that almost a dozen kids would be bringing their creatchies to school, emotionally unable to leave them at home. That weird bond, that "positive vibed glue" that made everyone wholly devoted to their creatchi, would guarantee that every single child involved would sneak their "pets" to school. Even siblings would desire to check on them throughout the day, too. Just look how even the idea of separation had just made his own daughter distraught. It would be the end of secrecy, that's for sure. It would be chaos.

As soon as Liddy headed to the kitchen, PRS walking close after her imitating her gait, Nate picked up the phone. He dialed Donna, and had to leave a message. He didn't want to say anything revealing, so he just said, "Say, Donna, I have a question, not an emergency, but important." Donna was prompt about returning "creatchi calls", she had previously told him, so he felt their concerns would not have to wait the day.

Just after he hung up the phone, it rang, making him jump. It was Jim. Liddy and PRS came out of the kitchen and toward the couch, each with a bowl of munchies, and a curious look toward dad. Nate asked them, "You up for company? Jim wants to bring his little guy over and tell us about him." "Sure!" Liddy's eyes lit up. "That would be so fun! PRS we get to have a visitor!" PRS' face broke into the largest smile he could possibly make, and he began bouncing up and down, with his bowl of granola still in his hands. The granola, almost every piece of oat, raisin, nut and dried berry, tossed up in the air, out of the bowl, and then came back down into the bowl, on each bounce. Nate noticed not one piece hit the floor. "How does he do that?" he wondered. He finished up the short conversation with Jim and hung up. "OK they'll be here in 20 minutes, let's clean up our coloring date mess!"

Jim arrived, carrying his little "Truck", the "grendlechi" in a covered bird cage. A classic bullet shaped kind of cage that might be used for a canary. It was covered in some light beige canvas type fabric, hiding the occupant completely, but it was still very obvious that it was a bird cage. You could see the impression of the vertical cage bars through the cover.

"Oh!" Liddy asked innocently, "Why is he in a cage?" She couldn't comprehend any of these little ones being harshly treated, and a cage seemed a very cruel sort of prison for any creatchi. She didn't mean to criticize, but the question just popped out because it was the last thing she ever thought she would see, a creatchi locked in a cage!

"Oh, well, I'll tell you, just let me introduce him first." Jim kindly replied, with a pleasant smile.

Jim set the cage on the floor and everyone sat around it, full of happy expectation.

PRS sat the closest to it, his face brimming with excitement, scooting a little forward on his bum, just in case he was not close enough already to see the guest.

Jim slowly took the cover off, revealing a plush array of small pillows and blankets making the inside very comfortable looking, and opened the cage door. The grendlechi, making low guttural noises the entire time, walked out, looking at all of them with a scowl on his face. He looked around quickly, his head always darting about, checking his surroundings. It was as if he didn't know where to look or go,

and was nervous about the new place he now found himself in.

He was slightly taller than PRS, and stockier. His skin was dark green and smooth like a lizard's skin, but here and there it was bumpy. Unlike PRS's furry body, "Truck" only had a few patches of brown fur, on his forearms and the calves of his legs, and one large long patch that ran from the top of his head down the middle of his back.

"Oh" Liddy exclaimed, "He is so different looking." She had not spent time with "Truck" at the last meeting, and had not seen him so close and still. Like a frowning baby, the grendlechi's sour face just made one want to smile. It made you want to attempt to make him happier, and did nothing to push you away or cause fear. "Look at his eyebrows!" she added, giggling with her hand over her mouth, suddenly hoping she hadn't offended anyone. They were indeed bushy eyebrows.

The grendlechi, looked about, and turned his body this way and that, taking in all of the furniture, walls and people. Once he was satisfied that he had examined everything he could see from where he now stood, he turned and walked a few steps, and stood next to Jim's leg, touching it with his hand, making more guttural sounds.

PRS then got up, stepped up to him, stood there for a moment, and then all of a sudden just shoved him right on the chest with both hands.

Truck fell backwards on his bottom and sat down. PRS sat down in front of him and giggled. The gruff and grimacing grendlechi face was very hard for Liddy to "read" and she was afraid her nornchi was turning into a bully!

"I'm sorry PRS pushed him. But, is he ever happy?" she asked.

Jim chuckled, "It is always interesting to see how nornchi handle grendlechi. They never seem to 'fight' really, but they are both always 'pushy' shall we say with each other, as you have just witnessed." Jim was still smiling as if nothing at all was wrong with PRS's treatment of Truck, so everyone relaxed and let the creatchi sit and get to know one another. "Truck is happy right now, just watch his eyebrows. Even though his face always has a rascally scowl, his eyebrows will actually tell you what he is feeling."

As PRS chittered and Truck growly-chittered, you could see Truck's eyebrows were pointed up, like you do when you are surprised or interested in something. Only when PRS might poke him a bit harder, and giggle, did Truck's eyebrows knit down, as if he were angry, but only for a moment, and then they sprang right back up. Now able to read his face properly, Liddy realized he was almost always interested and happy. Never was he rough. If anything, PRS was the rough one. The creatchi both stood up and PRS pushed Truck back hard, however Truck only took a step back this time, being stocky and sure footed. Then, PRS ran around the coffee table corner and peeked back, giggling. Truck followed after him, face scowling but eyebrows raised the entire time.

They ran around the coffee table, Truck chasing PRS. PRS was quicker and more nimble and bouncy, but Truck was sure footed and never fell or gave up. Every once in a while PRS would catch up behind Truck, push him from behind, and then swirl around and they'd run the other direction.

They were playing together, and playing like boys would play, rough and tumble, with no hard feelings, and no one hurt. Sometimes PRS would pick out a crayon from the crayon basket, as they ran by it, and

chuck it backwards, hitting Truck smack dab in the middle of his forehead. Every. Single. Time. Truck would grumble and sometimes even growled.

When he growled, which sounded more like a creaking croak, Jim would just chuckle. "Oh it's on." Jim said, "He is really having fun now!"

Liddy just smiled. This was such a new creature to watch, so different and so fun to try and get to know as they played, apparently happily, according to Jim.

As the critters busied themselves with their game, Jim began to tell the story of how he found Truck.

Chapter 26

Truck

Jim started, "I began visiting town a few months ago, I still have granddad's old house, it's been my home here. I had begun working with Donna, helping some kids and older folk around here with speech therapies about a week out of every month. Anyway, I arrived back home one day, and my garage door was open. It happens sometimes that it opens itself. You know, I click the garage door button as I leave in the morning, and see it descend, think everything's ok, drive off to town, only to find out later that it had bounced right back open. So, I shrugged it off and parked in the garage as usual, and the garage door shut behind me."

"I got out of the car, and heard 'something'. It was this little low gravelly sound, but it stopped quick and I wasn't actually sure what I had just heard." Jim leaned in, getting into the feeling of the moment. The way he leaned in, you felt like he was telling you secrets, and it made you really dial in to every word.

"I shut the car door, and then heard it again. So then I was intrigued, I knew 'something' really was making a sound, but I wasn't sure what exactly. I looked around the front of the car, thinking maybe my car had made the noise, because I had just shut it off, but didn't hear anything coming from the engine or underneath. Then, I heard it a third time, and 'knew' this time it was NOT coming from the car!" He slowly shook his head, his eyes wider as he remembered the sickening feeling that he was not alone, that 'something' was in there with him.

"I froze for a second and just looked around, figuring out what to do next. It's hard to go around the front of the car because of the garage shelves, so I slowly and quietly turned and snuck across the side to the back of the car.' The way he told stories was entrancing, he was sitting in one place, yet practically acting out every scene.

"When I got to the very back, right at the back corner of the car, I heard a scurry sound!" Jim emphasized the word "scurry" in a way that made everyone jump, which made Jim jump, and then he went right back into the memory. "So then, I thought it must be a rat or a cat, or that some critter from the woods out back of the house had come in the open garage door. I don't like rats, or cats much, or weasels, or snakes, or birds, or squirrels, so I grabbed a baseball bat I had hanging at that side of the garage door, just in case it was something that might jump out at me, might try to bite me."

Liddy shuddered as she thought about poor Truck about to be smacked by a bat.

Jim continued, "I slowly tiptoed around the back of the car, listening closely, holding my breath, so I could hear any kind of sound. Then this guttery squealy kind of sound came again, but louder, and I thought 'now just what in the world IS that??' I tell you, I was getting on edge.

I just couldn't place what that sound was, you know? I, actually at that point, I straightened right up as goosebumps crawled their way up my back and I turned right around and went back around to the driver side of the car, to the wall, and hit the garage door button there to open the door, so that 'whatever' I found, could run out and escape and maybe not attack me. I mean, I was hoping for squirrel, but it did not sound like a squirrel!" He shook his head gravely.

"The opening door made noise, but it gave more light too, so I felt a little better. I felt braver because now the thing could escape, if it wanted. So, I snuck back around the back of the car, all the way to the far side of the garage and started carefully looking, not touching anything, both hands holding the bat up in the air, just looking. I had just moved some stuff back here, to granddad's from my city house, so there were still plenty of boxes, packing material, and just 'stuff' on the floor and all over the shelves. So I knew this 'thing' could be hiding anywhere."

He took a breath, and seeing that his audience was enthralled with the suspense, he continued, enjoying the drama he was creating in the room. Even the creatchi were now sitting with the others, quietly listening.

"I thought I heard a really faint skitchery kind of sound to my left near the corner, so I slowly squatted down, bat raised high with one hand, and looked down into a sort of 'tunnel' made between boxes and packing material and just, stuff, right at floor level, right there in the corner of the garage. I noticed the bird cage back there, just saw the bottom edge of it tucked back in there, and saw the bottom of the cage bars, and THEN I saw something MOVE."

Liddy jumped and then smiled at herself. She knew he would find Truck, she wondered why she was so jumpy all of a sudden?

Jim continued. "I just looked for the longest time, trying to see what was moving around back in there, in the shadows. Then I saw a small cleaning rag get dragged into the cage by upright walking legs!" his voice got louder at the end, emphasizing how weird it was to see something walking like a person, instead of a four legged creature. "I couldn't believe it! What animal walks like that! So...dumbfounded by this sight, I slowly put the bat down and just watched very quietly, not moving a muscle. My heart was pounding in my ears. I saw the legs walk out of the cage, to the left behind the boxes, then they came back, and another rag was being drug into the cage. I squinted and looked as hard as I could. Whatever 'it' was, crouched itself down, I could just make out the outline of his head, and all his body was blocked by the rags that had been added to the cage. But I saw these black little eyes looking back at me, the light glinted on them so you could tell round eyes were looking back, piercing me. It gave me the shivers, I tell you. Then, all of a sudden he made a louder sound, like he was talking 'at me' you know, instead of just to himself,

"like he meant to 'say' something, and I fell back on my rump, and just sat there with my mouth hanging open. I didn't know what to do." his voice trailed off, and his eyes glassed over, lost momentarily in the memory of the moment.

"I must have sat there for, Oh I don't know, minutes? We just looked at each other the whole time. And every once in a while he would grumble with that low, low voice of his, and teeny bits of sort of a squeal mixed in. Then, I couldn't stand the curiosity any more, and for some reason, I wasn't really as afraid any more, so I very very slowly started taking a few of the pieces of junk and boxes and material away from that spot, just so I could let more light in and see 'it' better. And finally, I saw him. All the longer hairs on his head and back were standing straight up, like the hackles of a dog, and his face had the biggest scowl. But I didn't feel like he was going to attack me, I felt like 'he' was afraid of 'me'.

So, I started just gently talking to him, 'Hey little guy..', and looking at him, you know, seeing him for the first time, seeing his wrinkled skin, and his little human like hands, and warty bumps and figuring out the shape of him. He finally turned around and took a handkerchief and folded it several times over, making a pillow out of it, and then he laid down on it, facing me, and just kept watching me while he finally fell asleep."

"This little guy had made himself a little bedroom in that open cage, he had taken rags, and anything soft he could find, and made himself a safe little home. And that's what I felt like, he wanted to be safe, that's all, he just wanted a safe place to be. All of a sudden, I felt like I 'wanted' to help him be safe. I ran to my kitchen and grabbed everything from fruit to frozen peas and sat in the garage for a long time, waiting for his nap to end, and then when he was awake, tossing a pea into the cage, seeing if he'd eat it, tossing in a raisin - just trying to see what he might want to eat." he paused.

He added, happily and with a humorous tone, "Which was pretty much everything!" and they all laughed. Even the creatchi giggled, which for Truck, meant his usual guttural growly sounds.

Jim summed up the rest, "Well, basically, for the next few days I canceled all of my appointments and just started gaining his trust and friendship. I have never been so happy in all my life since this little guy came into my garage. We're buddies now, aren't we Truck!"

And with that, Truck jumped up, ran very flat footed over to Jim, and grabbed his leg in a sort of hug embrace.

"Does he still live in your garage?" Liddy asked.

"Oh no, we got him indoors, but I had to bring the cage in. He had made himself a 'home' and I tell you, he was not happy without it." Jim smiled, patting the hairy back of his adorable, grumpy faced friend.

The subject of food reminded Liddy, "Do you think Truck would like to try our home made granola?" she asked. The friends all spent the next half hour munching and getting to know their new surly faced friend and asking Jim all kinds of questions about him.

Nate got round to the question of the day, asking Jim about the subject of school starting in four weeks. Jim, not having kids of his own, replied that he hadn't thought about that issue, and that it had not come up in the general updates given at the 'meetings' he had attended. He agreed the problem must have already been addressed, though, because Nate was right, all of the families involved would be very concerned about discovery within the school. He encouraged them to talk to Donna as soon as possible or even try Mitt, since he was close by. Mitt and his mom were not home today, Nate added, but if they got home before Donna called, he would certainly follow through and ask them.

Chapter 27

Answers

Jim and Truck stayed for a few hours and then left, leaving the family to busy themselves with dinner preparations and to talk about all they had learned about grendelchi.

"Did you see Truck try to use the water cup?" Liddy asked. "He doesn't have the abilities that the nornchi do, he was very clumsy!"

"Oh, you know I didn't notice, but did you notice that he never once pushed PRS, even though PRS must have pushed him a hundred times? He would just grab at PRS as he was falling, take the nornchi down with him, roll around, play, but never pushed him first. I think he's very gentle even though always looking so mad." Nate added.

"Yeah." Liddy said quietly, "I wonder why PRS never pushed anyone else? Not Suzy, or any nornchi at the meeting, not me. It's weird isn't it?" She asked.

"It's all new and weird." Nate said. "It's becoming harder to keep finding out new 'information', but not knowing any 'answers'."

Nate was tempted to take out his notebook and start a new chapter on grendelchi, including nornchi and grendelchi relationships. But it was getting a bit frustrating. Every new day with PRS, and every new encounter, brought with it a hundred new questions. The note taking was getting time consuming and overwhelming. He was more determined than ever to talk to Donna and ask about school, and a whole host of other questions, mostly including all she might know about the beginning of this whole thing. For he was more convinced than ever that how this whole state of affairs began must be the key to everything.

At dinner a call came in. Dad jumped up, grabbed the receiver, and greeted the caller. It was Donna. Liddy stopped eating and watched her dad's face as she suffered through the "ok's" and "uh huh's" without overhearing anything of substance. Finally he asked, "What about how this all began, Donna, we have to know why.." pause. "Yes." pause. "OK" pause. "Uh huh." Finally, he hung up and, and smiling slightly at Liddy, returned to the table.

"You didn't ask about school!" Liddy whined, her stomach in knots.

"Well, no, because Donna started right off with it. She had seen Jim in town an hour ago and he let her know what my message was about."

"Oh! Good!" Liddy said, she stopped kicking her legs under the table and studied his face. It was a very pleasant, wrinkle-free face at present, which immediately untied all her stomach knots. There must be hope.

"Well, for school, we have nothing to worry about, it looks like." He smiled at Liddy. "YOU(!) and PRS(!) are going to a 'special school' building with all of the other 'creatchi kids'." He said it like he was springing a surprise trip to the zoo.

"Really? Wow!" Liddy stood up from her place at the table. Her giddy energy at this sudden happy news making her move. Her fingers wiggled as her hands were raised in preparation for jumping up and down. "How? They can't just make a brand new school can they? Wait, that's a small school!"

"How come we get our own school? Where will it be?" She was jittery in a happy way, knowing the answer to all their recent cares was being revealed, and that if it made her dad this happy, well, she was ready to be exploding with joy. She waited with delight to hear more information.

Nate kept a positive tone, saying, "Well, they have it all worked out." He paused, hoping this would go over well, considering it just might not, he spoke lightly and happily to help sell the next part, "We.. and the other families.. have been 'diagnosed' with a certain 'virus'. We're 'carriers' of it, and Donna and a few other medical folk in the know have already been hard at work making reports about it, and have already petitioned the school board to allow a sort of 'quarantine' school setting for certain families." He raised his eyebrows in a 'we-know-which-families' knowing expression with a wink and a nod, keeping the playful fun tone alive as best he could.

"Ew, a virus?" Liddy asked, her arms dropping to her sides. Her face looked disgusted, "All the kids in town will think I'm gross!"

"No!" He replied, still smiling, trying to convince his little girl with his best positive vibe, "It's only a flu like virus, it gave you a stuffy nose and a stomach ache. It's pretty normal, but," he put his finger up to make a point and hunched down conspiratorially, "We wouldn't want any other kids to catch a cold now, would we?"

Liddy perked up, preferring to think on the great benefits of the plan again, "Well, if it's only like a cold, that's perfect!" she clapped her hands and grabbed PRS up. "PRS, you get to go to SCHOOL!"

PRS also clapped his hands, which were gooey with peanut butter, "eem like schoo! eem like schoo!" PRS then stopped and looked up at Liddy, "eem is schoo?"

Liddy laughed, "It's like a creatchi meeting, but during the day, and almost all our friends will be there! We get to learn, and do crafts and stuff!" She added, taking on his language quirk, "eem happy?" PRS grinned widely, looking at Nate. "eem happy!"

"Whew", Nate thought to himself, "that went better than I expected."

Chapter 28 After Hours

Nate, Liddy and PRS went about their evening rituals, cleaned up after dinner, and started play time, which tonight turned into tv cartoons. Nate remembered that he wanted to look for the egg shell and went into Liddy's room. Peeking his head into her room, he noticed a movement outside her bedroom window, behind the sheer curtains, with an accompanying scuffle noise, and quickly ran to the window. He threw open the curtain and looked, jamming his head too far toward the window pane, causing a thump. His overambitious motion to catch sight of the figure outside, which caused some pain, did not

deter from his seeing a dark shape move off quickly toward his left.

Running out of the room and grabbing the baseball bat that stood with other sports items in the corner of the hall, Nate scrambled out the kitchen door running in his bare feet back toward the corner of the house to confront who might be lurking in the shadows. Looking around in the bushes near the house, and looking toward the back forested area, he could see and hear no one.

Jacked up on adrenaline, he ran back to the door, lest being distracted in the back, some stranger might enter the open kitchen door.

As he came back, Liddy and PRS, eyes wide, met him just inside the door.

He told her he had heard something, so went outside, and saw a deer run off, that was all. He rarely lied to his daughter, but causing her to fear for PRS, and possibly having nightmares that night was not something he wanted happening. He told her to go back to watching TV, all was well. He laughed out loud so that she would hear, "Being so spooked by nothing but a little old deer", and shrugged it off, so that she would think nothing of it.

Once the two "kids" were back being busily happy, Nate went back to his daughter's room. He first made sure that the window was securely locked. It also had a wooden pole that lay in the window channel, preventing it from opening even if left unlocked, and he checked to make sure that was firmly in place.

It was.

He tiptoed to every other room of the house and checked and locked all windows and checked the back door. Everything was secure.

Returning to Liddy's room, he made sure the curtains were closed well, turned on the light and carefully searched Liddy's entire dresser. There was not one piece of egg shell in there. Stumped, he wondered if PRS ate his own shell. Who knows what his "species" did after hatching? Another question for Donna, did anyone else find the shells after a hatching?

He turned the lights back off, and lay down on Liddy's bed. For peace of mind, he just wanted to make sure that if "someone" thought that she had just been put to bed, that "someone" was not going to come snooping around her window again. All was quiet after 30 minutes, so he felt a bit better and returned to the living room.

Nate put the "kids" to bed at 8:30pm and set up the old radio on the coffee table. It was still tuned to KBOB. He set a timer on the digital clock on the side table so that he wouldn't get busy with something and forget to turn the radio on at 9:45. The program was on too late to allow the young ones to listen to it every night, and he promised to tell Liddy in the morning exactly word for word what Bob had said.

Nate sat on the couch, still keyed up after the encounter this evening. He dare not get the bat and keep it on the couch, "ready for anything", but he wanted to. Afraid that Liddy might wake up and see him with it, his deception earlier then would be found out.

He focused on the negatives, more than he ever had before. Prowler: Random burglar? Curious non-creatchi holder who suspects? Government? "Research"? Mitt: said knew at least one creatchi "damaged" somehow by meeting another creatchi.

What about that "Vibe": we are being emotionally controlled by these beings. How? Why? How deep does it go?

That was enough for now. Nate leaned over to his side on the couch, covered his legs with the throw blanket and waited for 9:45, knowing he would not sleep tonight. It would be a long night.

In the woods lining the back of the house, a lone, dark figure crouched just inside the tree line. The cold damp of the forest crept up the back of his legs and he felt it tingle in his spine. He sighed. He missed his opportunity. It would be a long night.

Chapter 29

Meeting place

Liddy woke up extra early and bounced out of bed wide awake, excited to hear what the KBOB message had been. Bounding into the living room, she woke up Nate on the couch, who had finally drifted to sleep once the sun had come up. He groggily responded with unintelligible mumbles, slowly sitting up.

Liddy laughed, "You sound like Truck, Daddy!" she imitated his mumbling.

Nate wandered to the kitchen to make a strong pot of coffee answering her with, "Maybe Truck is always sleepy."

Liddy followed him like an excited puppy, begging to know what Bob had said.

Nate opened a cupboard, "Just.. hang on sweetie. I need a cup of wake up."

Stirring cream into his hot cup five minutes later, Nate let her know the message word for word, which was this: "Hello all! We have a new schedule. We are on tomorrow at 8 on 3 and 20. There's paper to be handed out. No games. All who can, should come."

She ran into the living room to look up the reference in the phone book, while he sipped, making no move to leave the kitchen. "Where's PRS?" he called after her.

"He's still sleeping" her voice trailed back.

"Oh! It will be at the theater!" she said excitedly, referring to an establishment called "Pics-n-Flix", a small movie house, the only one serving the townsfolk. With no games, he could see how a place with nothing but little bucket seats would serve well as a meeting place. There was only one movie screen. The walls were already insulated for sound, the room shielded from outside light. All eyes would be up front, for Donna presumably, to share her important information. It seemed perfect.

Liddy floated, bounced, and skipped down the hall back toward her bedroom, excited to tell PRS about her intel, while Nate meandered back into the living room to use the phone.

He dialed Donna, and left a message, simply saying, "Donna, no shells. Please call me. Thanks. Nate."

He heard Liddy and PRS, now in the kitchen. PRS said, "eem stir spoon?" Liddy giggled. He could hear a chair scrape across the floor and then cupboards opening and closing.

Nate still felt unsettled about the previous night, but he walked into the kitchen and hid it as best he could from the happy duo who were apparently attempting to make breakfast. PRS sat on the kitchen table, empty cereal bowl and spoon in hand, waiting to stir "something" and Liddy was attempting to provide the stirrable material from the cupboards.

"Go ahead and wash up, guys, I'll finish making breakfast." he offered, and bouncing down the hall they went, to wash and brush teeth and hair and fur.

Breakfast, which was fruit slices, oatmeal, and bacon, was happily being munched on 20 minutes later. Nate told Liddy he was going to throw out some fruit peelings onto the compost pile they had out back. Outside, he carefully searched around the house to look for signs. Yes. Adult shoe prints under Liddy's window in the garden soil.

A summer of up-in-the-clouds euphoria, now condensed down into a harsh awareness, a reality of mind that finally unclouded him of PRS's mood enhancing "effects". He resolved to switch gears and become (and remain!) a vigilant, hard nosed investigator.

Thankful for his lack of sleep last night, for it would help him stay "sober", he resolved not to get caught up again in the "happy bubble" that PRS seemed to enclose around everyone near him.

The phone rang, it was Mitt, with an invitation. His mom Katy, had asked Mitt to invite them to a picnic over in Wild Tree Meadow. She had not visited with her neighbors in a while, and she was dying to get to know PRS better. She thought this would be a fun way to celebrate her day off of work, and meet PRS formally.

Getting away from the house would be good, Nate thought, and maybe clear away the creepy feelings he had wrestled with all night. It would be important to tell Katy about the trespasser. He agreed to the picnic and finished the call.

Two clean and very playful looking faces peeked around the doorway into the living room. Liddy asked, "Did I hear the word 'picnic'?" Her eyes were ablaze with pure delight at the thought. Nate nodded, a slight hint of a smile indicating he picked up on her extremely playful mood.

"When!" she commanded, jumping into the living room and clapping her hands. PRS jumped in beside her and clapped his hands at almost the same exact moment, that perfect team work talent coming into play. PRS looked up at Liddy in incredulous rapture as if he knew something grand was happening, and yet had no idea what it was. Nate hunched down, spread out his arms wide, and move forward. Liddy's hands leapt to her mouth, as she often did when her giggles were about to explode.

"The dad lion says 'NOW!'" He roared playfully, chasing them both through the house roaring like a lion, catching them and beginning a tickle fight on the hall rug. Liddy simply kicked her legs and giggled hysterically and PRS crawled all over him, attempting to tickle him back. Nate played with them, thinking to himself, "I can do this. I can be a fun dad and yet still keep my wits about me."

Chapter 30

Katy

Their neighbor and Mitt's mom, Katy, was a fireball of energy, a "corporate exec" who turned to the quiet country life to raise her boy away from the "pollution of the city", referring to machines, corporations, and even people - the corruptions she found everywhere in the Big Grid. She moved to the quieter town with a specific agenda for her son, and it involved boy scouts, camp outs, small town friendships, clean air, and simpler living. She sought the "quiet life" having had her fill of the opposite.

Her goals for her boy, just like her former career, had proved successful, Mitt having grown up so far from the city life that he couldn't tell you the difference between a latte and a half caf.

Only recently had she become involved in the business affairs in the town political body, which required her absence from home on a regular basis. The town governance had finally got wind that a powerhouse exec resided in town, and had begged her for help, her expertise being just what they needed to solve some business retention problems within the town.

Working five days a week was not her preference, but she was home nights and weekends. Mitt was now eleven and very independent, always busy biking around doing friendly errands for others, and enjoying his boyhood adventures, and since the job arrangement was temporary, she had allowed the business distraction to busy her on a six month maximum consulting agreement.

Still a business woman at heart, and extremely organized, her home was always tidy and her home schedule always precise. She did give Mitt a lot of freedom to lead his own summer life, within the respectable bounds that a good mother understands is required by the outgoing nature of her boy.

She was a good neighbor to have, for her disposition was kind and her manners toward others thoughtful, which along with her intelligence, had gotten her far in the corporate world.

Nate and Katy were good neighbors to one another, and although there was no attraction of the marrying kind, the two appreciated the good qualities, and respected the differences, of the other. The chemistry between them consisted of two heavy doses of amicable friendship, and a splash of desire to be trustworthy role models for one another's children, as far as a neighbor could.

Her invitation to a picnic then, was welcomed as an outing of friends who had not spent any time together socially for a few months. He looked forward to the opportunity to hear about her introduction to the "creatchi life" and more importantly, get her thoughts on creatchi origins.

He planned to tell her of the possibility of danger that had entered their lives the previous evening as soon as he could get her alone. For, owning a neighboring home to the dark visitor, she needed to know. He wasn't sure if she would want Mitt to know, so he would leave that to her.

Chapter 31

The Setting

An hour after Mitt's call, all six, Nate, Katy, Mitt, Liddy, PRS, and Suzy were situated in Nate's car, driving toward the Windy Woods. Windy Woods was a large patch of forest on the west side of town riddled with trails that gave the hiker or mountain biker beautiful views of wild flowers, very old trees, very large fallen logs, and sprawling meadows of soft grasses, typically with picturesque grazing deer. Every one of the meadows, streams, and significant sights in and around Windy Woods, Mitt knew by name.

One of these meadows, Wild Tree Meadow, had a long side that bordered the main street that lined the south side of both the forest and meadow. It was far enough out of town that they felt safe to be out in the open. Most picnics, school grassland events and town community gatherings happened in the meadow on the other side of town, nearest the school.

Driving west through the hilly twisty roads that led to the spot, Nate kept watch and was sure they were not being followed by anyone. As the miles straightened and stretched ahead, his troubled mind eased up a bit and he allowed himself to enjoy the atmosphere inside the car.

Mitt was telling everyone that he had found Suzy at the edge of the meadow, and would show them the spot. The group was bubbly and lively and there was hardly any break in the chatter and friendly conversation.

All within the car were happy and excited for the day's outing. Liddy's previous hesitation about Mitt being older and therefore intimidating was completely gone. The weather was sunny and warm, cotton-like clouds sailed high in the blue expanse, promising just the right picnic environment. It felt like they were a happy family, having been together for years in familial bliss. It was a very pleasant drive inside and out. In fact, it was perfection.

Parking just off the road, everyone stepped out of the car and had a hand in helping take out the items they had brought with them. No other cars were parked here, which further strengthened a feeling of seclusion and safety. If hikers or bikers came to these woods, they had to park here to access the trails,

there was nowhere else to park. People typically never came out this far because hiking trails were also plentiful much closer to the town, where the tourists roamed, and many trails also were to be found on the east side of town, nearer the school. He was used to seeing no one around the place, it was almost always deserted.

Mitt, being adventurous, had biked these trails for years. He and his mom had hiked them even before then, studying birds, deer, flowers, and fungi. He knew the sound of the eagle call, where they kept their nests, and the crack of a deer hoof on the forest floor. The only dangerous thing were brown bears, and even they were small and skittish.

He had spent many an afternoon fishing in creek ponds, and watching beaver build dams. The perfect setting for boyhood, these woods had taught Mitt to love the outdoors. He was grateful to have found Suzy in his very favorite place in the world, and now to share it with all of the people he had come to love the most, gave him a boyish glow of high anticipation.

Mitt's mom had made a picnic lunch for everyone. Nate brought a couple of blankets, a frisbee and a beach ball.

The meadow lay nestled in a U-shape of forest, here and there an open gap in the trees broke the border, where a trail head led off in a different direction, offering unique adventures to hikers. The woods to the southwest of the parked car were more properly the "Windy Woods", a name given to it due to several very high conifer trees which topped the rest of the forest by two dozen feet. These taller trees could be seen swaying in higher winds they might catch, swaying much more readily and visibly than the thick forest around them.

The group walked into the grass about a hundred feet, and set up the picnic. Eating and talking commenced, and then later some frisbee, playing tag, and the like. All the joys and ideals of a picnic rolled into one afternoon.

Chapter 32 Grass and Fern

One calm and lazy moment, everyone was resting from scurry and play, gazing at woods and grass and clouds, sitting on blankets or on the grass. Nate suddenly realized he had again gotten caught up in the positivity that surrounded the creatchi, and "came to his senses". He sat up and reprimanded himself for having let "it" happen again. Looking over at PRS and Suzy, he wondered if two creatchi created an even more powerful mood enhancing influence than just one alone. He realized he should use this opportunity of clear thinking to at least ask Mitt some questions, though with Liddy nearby he dare not mention the night visitor.

"Say, Mitt, I have a question for you, " he began. "When you introduced PRS to Suzy, you said that if done wrongly, that PRS might suffer for having met Suzy and not being able to figure out that she wasn't a ghost or reflection or something like that. Did this happen to some other creatchi?"

Mitt's gaze dropped to the grass, and he answered, "I think maybe. Donna told me how to introduce creatchi since I was actively looking for more, and she said something about how a creatchi might get really scared, like permanently scared, if it meets one other and can't figure out that the other one is 'real'. I guess if they meet two or more, it doesn't happen. But she didn't tell me anything specific about a certain creatchi, just that it could happen."

"Oh, ok." Nate left it, determined to have a serious conversation with Donna, even more so now.

He started a new thought, "You also had said, back when we were asking you questions before our first meeting, that 'it damaged creatchi to be forced to do something they didn't like.' Do you know a creatchi that was damaged in this way?"

Mitt looked a little embarrassed, "Well, I guess I was talking too much. A while ago, I was back stage putting away a projector the last time we met at the theater, this was early on, when there weren't that many families involved yet. I overheard Donna telling another researcher about a creatchi that was

'damaged' by being made to do something by a research team member. The other guy apologized a lot and it sounded really sad, so I just remembered to make sure others knew never to make their creatchi do things they didn't like. If one is damaged though, I've never met it. I feel bad if one was damaged. I feel really bad for hearing stuff I wasn't supposed to." He glanced at his mom, who simply patted his hand, concerned that her terrific kid felt bad about something when he was actually pretty innocent in the whole thing, it sounded.

"Oh ok, I see." Nate said simply. "I'm sure it was just them trying to figure out what a creatchi was and trying to give it a medical exam or something that scared it."

"Yeah! That's what I thought!" Mitt sounded relieved that his good impression of the research team seemed bolstered by Nate's point of view.

Research had done so much for everyone, Mitt couldn't conceive of them doing anything really bad to anyone, least of all an innocent creatchi.

Nate knew Mitt's trust in Donna caused him to see these bits of information in an altogether different way than Nate did. Nate's trust in Donna had already begun to crack due to the night visitor. With this new information, the solid foundation of trust Donna had so carefully built at the first meeting began to chip away.

Katy looked thoughtful. Nate wondered how much suspicion might be growing in her, she having been involved in the club much longer than he had. Katy might have more details or inside knowledge along the same lines that Mitt was now revealing. He made a mental note to find a moment alone with her to ask her about this new information, and to ask her to share about anything else she might have held back from Mitt. It looked as if Mitt had held things back from her, certainly.

Chapter 33

The Run

PRS and Suzy sat together among a patch of wild daisies, picking the flowers and tossing them onto Liddy, who was covered in them, and laughing. PRS and Suzy stood up, grabbed one another's hands and began to run, giggling as they went. Liddy, still laughing, ran after them, daisies trailing off her. A few seconds later, Nate and Mitt both realized that the two creatchi were not stopping or turning. The guys got up and jogged after them all, just to be on the safe side. Liddy couldn't seem to catch up to the critters, who continued to giggle and hold hands, and run in a straight line.

Reaching the edge of the woods, PRS and Suzy darted into the mouth of a trail, and Liddy was right behind them, still laughing, disappearing as well. Nate and Mitt ran faster, and began calling after them to come back, but the other three didn't appear back into the meadow. Nate and Mitt dashed into the mouth of the trail and immediately were forced to pop straight up, jump-tumbling over the now sitting girl, not realizing that everyone had stopped cold just a few feet inside the trail.

The nornchies giggled at them, as Nate and Mitt went spinning off and falling along the trail, trying

best they could to keep from falling onto or kicking each other or anyone else. The guys lay in the trail a foot away from one another, completely breathless, groaning a bit, or else they'd have been complaining, loudly.

Then Liddy, breathless as well, said "Look!" and her hand raised up to PRS. The guys, still panting, looked over and saw PRS, who had reached behind a clump of ferns, bringing out a sparkling opalescent object, twinkling with light although they were all in the deep forest shade. Liddy leaned forward and reached her out hand whispering, "please?", and PRS dropped the thing into her palm. She immediately looked up and said to the others, "Egg shell!"

"Eem egg." stated Suzy, cocking her head and looking lovingly at the object.

"Oh!" said Mitt, "Of course! I found Suzy at the mouth of this trail!"

PRS and Suzy clasped hands and ran back out of the trail head, giggling. The girl said quickly, "Dad!" and tossed the eggshell to him, chasing after them. Nate responded, "Not again! Keep after them! We're going to investigate here." And he heard, farther away now, "OK I will!" and three giggles trailing off.

The creatchi were headed, as fast as their little legs could carry them, in the direction of the blanket, toward Mitt's mom who was on her knees peering in their direction. Katy, not wanting to leave all their stuff, but concerned about where everyone disappeared to, was relieved to see the three emerge from the trail head at last. Liddy was not alarmed that the two nornchi stayed so far ahead of her, since they were headed straight to Katy. You would think, having longer legs, she would be able to catch up, but the little duo were very quick.

Liddy, running as fast as she could, looked upward at one point, toward Katy. She thought she saw a strange figure at the farther edge of the woods. But looking down to catch herself from almost tripping over a clump of earth and grass, and looking back up, she saw no one.

Chapter 34

Arrangement

Inside the trail head, Nate and Mitt examined the shell. It was thick, much thicker than a chicken egg. Mitt went to the clump of ferns and walked around between them, carefully stepping only where he could see bare earth, to make sure he did not step on anything of interest. He found three more jagged shaped pieces. Using a nearby log as a base, they put the four pieces together like a puzzle, and discovered that the egg was almost entirely perfect with just the four pieces alone. It sparkled on the dim trail, as if it had a light source all its own. They found nothing else among the ferns.

Nate picked the pieces up from the log, carefully, saying "C'mon let's go," wanting to make sure all were back out at the picnic area. Mitt offered to carry the shells himself. They were Suzy's shells after all, Mitt thought to himself, and he was Suzy's caretaker.

Nate replied, "No, it's ok, I got 'em." His larger hands could probably handle the shells best without damaging them, he felt, adding, "We finally have some shell, the starting point of these creatures. Now

maybe we can begin to get some answers."

Arriving back at the picnic area, the guys found the others standing and waiting for them. Katy looked at Nate with a show of concern toward Liddy, and so he looked down at Liddy. Liddy met his gaze and said, "Daddy, I.." and her voice trailed off as she simply looked over at the woods. Nate looked in the same direction, "Did you see someone, Liddy?"

"Yeah I really think I did." she said.

Nate responded immediately, "Let's go, PRS duck."

And quick as he could, always smiling during a "hiding game", PRS led Suzy to the large picnic basket and got inside. Everyone else gathered everything up and hustled to the car. Once inside and driving, Nate asked, "Do you think it was a hiker, Liddy?"

"It didn't look like, they were dressed in black pants and coat." she said.

Nate made a new decision. He couldn't do this alone, and he couldn't dance around Liddy forever. Plus, she was the one who had seen the new "watcher". Nate kept his attention on the road behind them, the roads around them, and every car they passed the entire way home.

If this new person was related to the trespasser last night, how did the watcher know where they would be? Was the car being tracked? Were they?

While apologizing profusely to his daughter, Nate explained the happenings of the night before to everyone. He ended with, "So, I am thinking that after the meeting tonight, if it's ok with you guys, could PRS and Liddy stay over at your house? I want to stay at mine to be aware and watch the woods. I might even wait inside the woods to see if anyone shows up there and watch our house from outside."

"Oh, of course!" Katy replied, showing genuine concern, but responded with a positive, "I'm sure it is just a coincidence! We'll make a fun night of it!" returning to a positive spin, and smiling at the others, like a true creatchi groupie.

A few days ago, Nate might have agreed with her. But the trespasser arrived at their place the day after the first meeting, the day after Donna heard of the egg shell, the day after Donna had seen PRS' eyes glow. He knew coincidences happen, but this stopped being happenstance for him, by a long shot, about ten minutes ago.

If Mitt did not know specifics about any damaged creatchi, that fact must have been kept out of the reports that Donna gave to everyone, the reports that were supposed to detail "all that is known." Donna knew more than she was telling. Hew knew now she had to be behind this 'being followed' bit, and he knew he would confront her tonight.

Chapter 35

Second Meeting Prep

On arriving home, several preparations were made. First, the picnic items were brought into Mitt and Katy's house and stored away. Second, Katy straightened up their guest bedroom a bit, in preparation for the newcomers. Third, Liddy and Mitt took care of getting Liddy's pillow and other overnight things from her house to Mitt's. It took several trips, since Liddy kept having grand ideas of all the fun things of her own, and things that PRS favored, that they could play with at Mitt's house.

Nate and Katy stood in Katy's living room, where they could see Nate's house from the large corner window, and keep an eye on the kids while they lugged pillows, toys and other sundries over the grass.

Nate showed Katy the egg shell. "Wow," she said breathlessly. "It's gorgeous!"

As she handled it, turning a piece over and feeling the inside, Nate asked her, "Katy, the few things that Mitt told us at the picnic, did you know about any of that, and do you know any more 'secrets' that might be helpful? I mean, anything we overhear that is not knowledge the general group has, is potentially very important."

"I don't think I do know anything more." she replied. "Mitt has been more closely involved in working with Donna to help find all of the creatchi than I have been. I have just been supporting him, watching Suzy from time to time, and attending the meetings. All I know is what is in the reports." she paused, "Do you really think it's that serious?"

"Katy," Nate took the shell from her hands, and carefully laid it down on the coffee table beside them. He took both her hands into his, and gazed into her eyes. "Katy, my dear, you need to realize something." He paused. "You are brainwashed."

Katy stared and blinked. For a moment, she had half expected something else because of the hand holding. She was thankful he didn't get romantic, for she had never been "into him" that way.

Nate continued, "You need to realize how deeply these creatures affect our minds, our thoughts, our emotions. I can barely think straight for half an hour in their presence. With the kids next door right now, with this convenient 'distance'

from their influence, can you really say you believe that the trespasser last night and this 'visitor' in the woods are coincidences?"

Katy paused to think. She met Nate's gaze evenly, saying, "I have been the happiest I have ever been these last couple of months." Her voice got weaker, shakier. "I didn't fully realize it was Suzy." She let go of Nate's hands and sat on the couch, looking outside toward the kids, who were coming across the yard with more blankets and toys and with the nornchis in hand.

She continued, "Look Nate, I have been wholly caught up in this, I think maybe I have been immersed too long. I know you need a pair of eyes and ears and another mind to hash things out with, but I'm not sure I am going to be able to be counted on to think suspiciously, or to distrust the others involved. I should be able to, it seems rational and logical this moment to harbor all kinds of doubt, but I guarantee you ten minutes after Suzy is back, I will be at peace again with it all. You might have to simply use me as a babysitter. If I can help by giving any logical input, I'll try. But I don't trust myself."

"Can I trust you to at least lock doors and be really safe tonight?" He asked, genuinely concerned that her happy mind pollution might make her lax during this crucial time when he needed an adult

teammate to help him the most.

"Oh yes!" she said emphatically, "living in the city has made me always vigilant! Don't you see the bar on the door?"

Nate looked around and for the first time, noticed a door security bar leaning against the wall by the front door, ready to be placed under the doorknob to prevent possible intrusion for the night.

"Fair enough, pal!" he clapped her shoulder. She might be "vibed out" by Suzy's "aura", but she was still a valuable ally in this game.

Chapter 36

Second Meeting

Several hours and a couple of kid and creatchi naps later, all six piled into Nate's auto and carpooled to the theater. They parked far enough away for discretion, and walked their way in via an alley that ran behind the theater, a gravel road bordered by a shallow creek and blackberry bushes.

Entering the theater by the unlocked but manned back door, they played it casual and milled about chatting with people. Liddy surprisingly strayed far to chat with the teenage girls, but Mitt and Suzy stayed close to Nate. Finally, choosing seats on the left side and in front, the six friends sat and waited.

Once Donna appeared on the low, narrow "stage" in front of the movie screen, everyone else also settled down into their seats. Nate made it a point to look around and do a head count this time: 16 of the 18 known creatchi were present - almost everyone. He wished now that he had counted at the last meeting.

Donna started with instructions, there would be half an hour to visit among one another, but then "Research" would take the rest of the time. There would also be a short screen presentation.

Donna exited the stage to Nate's right and was met by a few creatchi owners who had questions and news about their creatchies' behavior. Donna chatted with them, reacted in positive ways and took notes.

Nate considered his next move. He wanted to know what the Research team had to share before he possibly soured his relationship to Donna with a confrontation. He could at least ask a few questions now. He had, in fact, left her a message about PRS's missing egg shell and she had not called back, after all. He could innocently ask why there were two creatchi missing tonight, gauge her reaction. He could ask whether anyone else had ever given her egg shell. He had gotten the impression no one had, from his last meeting and chatting with the other creatchi owners he had met, but he wasn't absolutely sure.

As Nate headed across the front of the theater toward her, Donna looked up and noticed him on the way. She gestured to him, saying, "Oh Nate, I'm so sorry I was not able to call you back."

He waited as she finished up with a teenager who was explaining some new creatchi behavior, and

once the girl left, Nate opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by a voice behind him.

"Are you going to show her Suzy's egg shell?"

Nate turned, and discovered Mitt behind him. He had no idea the boy had followed.

Donna look genuinely shocked, "What?" she breathed.

"Oh.. yes," Nate chimed in, "I, I was. I was coming over here to show you this." He reached into his coat pocket. In fact, he had not intended on giving this to her, not right now. Not until some serious questions had been answered later, and answered to his complete satisfaction! But now that Mitt, who had probably been anxious and excited about sharing their discovery, had spilled the beans, Nate had no choice but to play along.

"Oh my.." Donna breathed out, her eyes popping at the sight of the egg shell pieces Nate now delivered into her open hands. "Thank you." she simply said still staring at them, turned, and marched back stage.

Nate let out a large sigh of frustration. That did not go in any way shape or form the way he had planned.

He turned to Mitt, who was still looking after Donna. "I guess she was happy we found them." Mitt said flatly.

"Yes, let's uh, get back with the others." Nate offered. They went back and sat down, both Mitt and Nate slouching down in their seats.

Nate, chewing on a fingernail and lost in thought, on the verge of going back stage himself to continue his pre-meeting conversation with Donna, was surprised when the low humming flute-like sound announced that everyone should return to their seats. The signal, he recalled from the first meeting, was a sound that "Research" used to indicate that they were ready to commence the report phase of the meeting.

Time had flown. His flustered state and indecisiveness had cost him his chance at his pre-meeting chat.

Donna returned to stage front and center, waved at a little girl, and winked over at Nate, presumably to thank him for his enormously helpful research contribution, the shell. He was sure that the wink had the exact opposite effect on him than she intended.

Chapter 37 Presentation

Donna stood, waiting for silence. "Thank you for settling down so quickly. We have created a short video, which we will now present." she said. She left the stage, again to Nate's right, and walked down the aisle toward the back. The theater lights dimmed down.

Someone must have set up a projector of some kind just behind the group, because a video began,

dwarfed by the large movie screen around it. It was at a level where, close as they were to the screen, no one had to crane their neck back to get a good view.

The footage was an aerial shot taken by a plane or drone that was slowly drifting over the whole county, from east to west. You could see the school passing by, the business block's even street grid, and even Nate and Liddy's house to the south at the edge of the frame.

The panning landscape eventually revealed the heavily forested Windy Woods that completely filled the western border of the county. The forest there so thick that no hint of the trails that bisected it could be seen from the air. There also in view was the meadow that had hosted their picnic.

Then, either the drone headed back the other way, or the video had been edited to pan the opposite direction. This time the land sweeping by went more slowly. There was now added to the view some horizontal magenta colored lines, each with an arrowhead at one end, strewn about the landscape. The arrow heads must have pointed to where each creatchi had been found. Nate could see an arrow pointing to the middle of his own front yard.

A young man's voice in the video stated, "As you can see, we have plotted the discovery points of each creatchi. We have also plotted the trajectory of the storm that everyone remembers the day the creatchi were discovered, as seen here."

The video panned one more time from west to east. Now, in addition to the magenta lines, a dark semi transparent cloudy image became viewable as well, a symbol of the storm added to the overlay, traveling across the screen from left to right, along with the movement of the land.

There was a pause in the voice over, "As you can hopefully tell from this mock up, the storm traveled from roughly west to east.. Now, what do you see?" There was silence as everyone considered the view in front of them.

The panning stopped, the video zoomed out, the whole county now in view. The storm symbol had stopped moving just west of the business blocks. The arrow lines now moved, all still pointing to the same points on the land, but now rotating, and all radiating from the storm's center.

The voice continued, "The creatchi were deposited seemingly from the center of the storm as it reached this point here. We know this, because some of the places the creatchi were found, indicate that they must have dropped not straight out of the sky, but angled, from the very center of the uncommonly low storm." As you see at this point, the storm is at the perfect radial center of all of the angled lines."

There were murmurs as people whispered agreement, the storm had indeed been unusual and very low in the sky. That the eggs actually came out of the storm, few had realized until now.

Nate watched, fascinated. He had not even had a chance to tell Donna about Liddy's admission, that she had seen the egg fall out of the storm. The part of the video showing the storm path replayed, this time showing all of the magenta arrows appear suddenly at one point along the route of the storm. His own house was perfectly situated so that PRS could have fallen in a southeast direction to land in their yard.

He could also see how the angle of the egg coming out of the storm center, could have caused it to land just inside the trail head at the Windy Woods.

"What is not evident in this video is this: the exact discovery point of every creatchi. Every single creatchi, except for two, were discovered within thirty feet of a home."

That was a shock to all. There was a collective, "Oh" as people realized that almost every arrow head was indeed by a house.

A new part of the video began, showing a three dimensional mock up of the land and the storm, exactly the same point of view that the drone video had shown. It rotated, giving everyone a cross section view. As if you were floating in the air between the clouds and the ground, the magenta lines now angled down from the storm center at various angles, still pointing to their landing spots.

Nate's analytical mind understood the implication. If the creatchies were deposited this specifically, the cross section view was revealing that the "launch angle" of each egg had to use different vertical angles in order to land at each very specific landing target.

This wasn't a case of fantastical beings laying and dropping eggs in the sky, or of an explosion where each egg landed in a roughly circular perimeter. It showed angular precision, designed to deposit each egg in a specific location. It was proof of intention, planning, and mathematical genius.

Someone was definitely behind this. Someone with extreme technological power. Maybe the technology did not just encompass the delivery method. Maybe technology was behind their creation as well. Had anyone even taken a heart beat? Were they robots?

Chapter 38

Presentation Two

Then, a new vein of thought struck Nate. Were the homes that received the eggs random? If not, if each person had been "selected", it was evidence of an unsettling insight into the lives of these people. Nate thought of Mitt. Mitt's Suzy was one of the ones not found near a home. How uncanny that Suzy was found in a trail head Mitt just happened to be biking in during a storm. Why was Mitt even biking in a storm, he suddenly wondered, and turned to Mitt to ask.

But Mitt was not watching the video. His head was bowed, and in his hands.

"Mitt," Nate whispered, "are you ok?"

"No." Mitt whispered back.

Katy's head shot over to her left as she suddenly noticed Mitt as well. "Sweetie, what's wrong?" Even Suzy, in Katy's lap seemed surprised to see Mitt bowed down.

"My head hurts." Mitt moaned.

"Oh, Honey!" Katy said louder, getting out of her seat, setting Suzy down on the empty seat cushion and crouching by her son. "How long have you had this pain?" she asked, very concerned.

"A few minutes." he whispered back, rubbing his temples with his whole hands, "It's really bad, mom." he sounded near tears.

"Donna!" Katy said out loud, looking around.

Donna appeared at the end of their row, and motioned and spoke a command to her crew. The film stopped and the lights came up.

The still seated crowd began to talk low among themselves as Donna made her way to Mitt, and began asking him questions. She asked him exactly where it hurt, and how long he had felt the pain. Did he ever have headaches previously? When was the last time he ate, slept, and so forth. Typical questions a nurse would ask her patient. All the while she spoke, she touched his forehead, felt his temples, and held his wrist.

Donna looked up at Katy, and in a reassuring tone explained, "Mitt isn't running a fever and has no other cold symptoms. Why don't you take him home, will you, give him some headache meds and I'll drop around as soon as I'm done here, OK?"

"Yes." Katy said simply, helping her boy up and looking to Nate, "Can you bring the car?"

Nate jumped from spectator into action saying, "Yes. Yes! To the alley though." and gathering Liddy and both creatchi, headed quickly to the back door to get the car.

A few minutes later, Nate jumped out of the idling car and into the theater, finding Katy and Mitt just inside the back door. Mitt was still doubled over in pain.

As he led them out, and spoke a few words to Donna, he had the presence of mind to quickly grab a pack of papers that he now noticed lay on a small black table at the other side of the entrance.

His plans for the evening may have been railroaded by this sudden terrible and unfortunate issue, but at least he would be able to pour through the report later, and take his next steps, whatever they may be.

Chapter 39

Pain

At Katy's house, the boy was laid down on the couch, the closest place to set him down.

Still grasping his head, Mitt was uncommonly quiet. He looked like he was concentrating hard on dealing with what he was feeling, the pain must be great. Suzy, sad looking, crawled onto the couch and lay down along his leg, her arms spread over his belly area as if to comfort him.

"Stay here please." Katy said to Nate and Liddy, not wanting Mitt to be left alone while she ran to get headache tablets.

Mitt began to groan and rock side to side. Nate looked at Liddy, who like Suzy also looked sad, standing there and watching her friend in pain. Liddy's held PRS's on her hip. Nate reached down to

hold her other hand, and looked back sadly to Mitt.

Katy came back and, helping Mitt lean up, gave him the tablet with a glass of water. He lay back down and began and moaned.

Mitt's face was ashen and taugth, his moaning became more and more regular. Another minute later, the moaning sounded more and more like words, and then the word "Why?" was moaned out.

"Why what, honey? Why does it hurt?" his mom whispered, kneeling by his head, near tears herself.

Everyone was filled with distress, as Mitt seemed to get even worse, writhing and moaning, some words unintelligible, and some recognizable.

"Why did you give them." he moaned, grimacing and rocking, his voice unearthly.

Suddenly Nate understood. "It's the egg shell." he whispered.

Katy, Liddy and Nate all looked at one another and then to Mitt.

"Mitt," Nate crouched down, asking, "Do you need the egg shell?"

"Why," Mitt cried, "Why did you give them..!" his hands clutching and grasping his face and head, his gasps and moans louder.

Nate, horrified, looked over to Katy, "I am so sorry!"

Mitt cried out loudly in pain.

Katy, controlled fury rising into her throat, answered, "Get. Them. Back."

Nate's face turned grim, and looking to the ailing boy said firmly and loudly, "Mitt, listen to me! I am going right now to get them. Do you understand, right now! I will have them in your hands within the hour. Do you understand? Mitt?"

Mitt did seem to understand because he stopped writhing, and lay there, with one arm draped over his forehead, head facing the back of the couch, panting, sweaty and exhausted.

Nate looked back to Katy, "I'm going." He rose up, and not taking his eyes off Katy and continued, "You have Liddy." Katy nodded once. "Once I have them, I'll use the old phone booth in front of the theater to call you and tell you I have them. Then, you tell him." He pointed at Mitt.

Nate was taking charge. He was angry. Angry that this happened to such a great kid like Mitt, angry that it was his fault, and angry that they knew so little about all of this, when obviously others knew more.

Liddy and PRS sat down in a side chair, relieved that Mitt was less disturbed, relieved that Nate had a plan to help, and relieved that she was staying with Mitt.

As Nate sped out of the neighborhood, he reflected on the last 10 hours. Mitt wanted to carry the egg

shells out of the forest, Mitt had stayed near Nate during the 30 minute social time at the theater instead of visiting others as Liddy had done, Mitt insisted on sitting next to Nate, Mitt was right behind Nate when he went to talk to Donna, Mitt asked Nate if he wanted to 'show' Donna the shells, the only thing he was concerned about. Show them, not give them. He mentally kicked himself for not picking up on the hints, the way Mitt had spoken, the way he acted around the egg shells, his nervous attention toward Nate, it was all right there, but he had missed all of the clues.

He was sure once he got the shells back, Mitt would feel better. No matter what he had to do to make it happen, he would get those shells.

Nate realized Mitt probably didn't even know that he had been giving clues all day, just as Nate didn't know he had been positively influenced by the creatchi until Donna had begun to open his eyes. Then it further dawned on him, it's Suzy. Just as PRS influenced Nate to be "happy", to hide and protect PRS, Suzy must be influencing Mitt right now to be upset, to get her shell back. Did she know what she was doing? Was Suzy knowingly hurting Mitt right now? It seemed impossible, but how else could the present situation be explained? The creatchi seemed innocent, helpless, and fragile. Maybe that was an illusion. Maybe it was a lie.

Thinking again of Mitt's truly helpless and fragile situation, a few urgent what-ifs now nagged at him. Would Donna have the shells still, or had she handed them off to a subordinate? Would he even make it to the theater in time? And if not, would Donna already be heading to Katy's house, possibly without the shells, and without Nate around to watch her?

Chapter 40 Curtain Call

Nate was tempted to park the car in front of the theater and run in, but urgency gave way to the protocol of secrecy. A meeting place must be kept hidden. He parked a block south and east of the building. He ran to the gravel alley, and turned west on it, careful to keep to the bramble side, where grass cushioned his footfalls. Before he reached the back door, he caught the sound of Donna's voice, trailing down the narrow alley between buildings.

Trotting up the alley toward the front, he reached the corner, stopped and listened. He heard Donna and someone speaking, their words became more clear with his closeness. It was dark. Nate realized the building's lights were off, and the street lamps here offered no help, so he ventured to peek around the corner. Donna was with presumably another Research member, but Nate couldn't tell who it was. Nate's feelings of urgency for Mitt conflicted with his recent suspicions about Donna, and he hesitated. Then he heard, "No, the shells are at the house and I'm going there now."

"But the kid looked bad." a male voice countered.

"I know, but if it's somehow the same, we'll know by the morning, won't we? My taking twenty more minutes to meet with Richard will not change a thing, and if it is just a headache, well, he'll be better when I get there."

"Fine." The other voice sounded perturbed.

Nate was torn. If he showed himself now, they would think he had been eavesdropping, which he was. She did not have the shells on her, they were at "the house" but who's house? She sounded much less concerned with Mitt's health than she should, in his opinion. If she was as untrustworthy as his suspicions now whispered, she might not even tell Nate where the shells were, even if he threatened her. So, he decided to follow her.

He noticed no one else was around. Not another person or car in sight. They must have adjourned the meeting early after Mitt's distress. That at least, would make following Donna easier, as he wouldn't have to worry about the eyes of others.

Whoever she had been talking to went back inside the theater.

Keeping track of which way she turned, he sprinted back to the alley and followed her, seeing her figure walking quickly down the street westward, between each building that separated them. He heard a noise behind him and saw the back door of the theater open. Someone was leaving the theater. They turned and locked the door, and walked slowly east up the gravel road. Donna's team mate. Nate would stay with Donna. She said she was heading to the 'house', she was Nate's best bet.

Looking back toward Donna, he saw her turn to her left, cross the theater's street and then head southward. He couldn't know if she would turn to the left or right at this point, so he followed directly behind her, hiding behind bush, and building, and shop signs as best he could, so as not to be seen if she glanced back.

After two blocks, she turned right. Before he could catch up to her, he heard a car door slam. He froze in place. Realizing she must have gotten in her car just around the corner, Nate ran back to the previous block and took off east, heading for his own car at a dead run. If he lost her now, if he missed which direction she drove, or she drove too far ahead of him, he would lose her. Mitt would be lost.

As he was crossing the next block street, seeing his car parked just another block ahead of him, hers passed the same street to his right, a block south of him. It was mere luck that she didn't glance to her left and see him running full speed across the dimly lit intersection.

Jumping into his own car, which was very near the next street corner, he saw hers a block down still driving east, straight through the intersection. Turning on his car and keeping the headlights off, breathless and afraid he'd still lose her, he decided to turn right, and go a few blocks, keeping watch on his left. He knew that this far north, the business blocks would end due to the meandering creek that bordered this side of town, and she would either have to go south, or zig zag south and east, to continue toward the east side of town where neighborhoods and houses were to be found. Sure enough, his gamble paid off, and he saw her pass an intersection to his left as he drove south. He kept up with her fairly well, watching for the shine of her headlights and keeping just behind her light trail, zig zagging, a few blocks always in between them, toward the south east corner of the business blocks.

Keeping her in his sights while making sure he was not seen was not easy, he thought he had lost her twice. She seemed to be weaving herself to the south eastern corner of the business district. Nate

thought ahead, there was a main road over there that led into the forest and then to a distant freeway. There were some houses along that road. Donna did not live in this direction. He frantically wracked his memory of who lived over that way and whether they owned creatchi.

As he approached the last southern most street at the edge of the city blocks, he stopped and waited for her car to show up at the intersection to that main outgoing road, but it didn't. Frantic that he had lost her, he turned left onto the last eastward street and went forward two blocks slowly. Still not seeing the shine of her headlights. Rounding the outbound street's main intersection at the southeastern tip of the district, he held his breath, taking a large risk of being discovered if she was in fact heading south toward him. Once he turned the corner, he caught the flash of headlights, but they were not on the road. He pulled his car over quick and ducked down.

She had turned into a parking lot that led to the warehouses on the east edge of town. Nate realized "the house" must mean the warehouse they were using to do their research. He hadn't even thought before about where they met, or if they actually did any kind of physical research. He had only thought of "Research" as a group of people taking notes, taking audio and video recordings, huddling together before or after the creatchi meetings, discussing ideas at Donna's house. He simply had not pictured a more formal location for the group. His mind now filled with a flurry of possibilities as to what "Research" actually did in that building. Every alien-comes-to-earth movie he'd ever seen flipped through his mind. He shuddered.

He assessed the spot where he now found himself. His car was blacked out enough to escape detection, if anyone looked out a warehouse door, for here on the edge of the business district there were no streetlights. He was close enough to the warehouses to be able sprint quickly over to them and to get away later, once he had the egg shells. He turned his car off and snuck up the grass that was lining the edge of the road. He ran crouched toward the fencing that surrounded the warehouses.

It was not a gated lot, so he entered the complex easily and ran up the side of the buildings opposite Donna's car. There were lights here outside every building and so he had to rely on the lateness of the evening and blind chance that no one would notice him.

Donna had just closed a door into a nondescript warehouse, no signage on the building at all. A few cars were parked in the parking spots just in front of the warehouse she entered, and also in spots in front of adjacent buildings. Nate stood for ten seconds or so, debating what to do next. If he banged on the door, and confronted whoever was inside, there was the distinct possibility that the encounter would turn ugly, and he would simply be turned away by a group greatly outnumbering him. So far, the goal of maintaining secrecy had been a success, he might want to continue on in its advantages.

He decided to be bold and run for it, so he sprang across the parking lot, and opened the warehouse door as quietly as he could. Closing it, he found himself in a lit entryway.

Boxes, rain coats, boots, and all sorts of stuff were strewn about on racks and shelves and benches. He heard voices coming and ducked into an open closet door to his right. It was Donna and someone else moving off down a hall that crossed in front of the entryway. They were headed away from him to the left. Once their voices trailed away, he took the opportunity to leave his hiding place, and entered the main hallway, turning right. Maybe, if he was lucky, they had the egg shells somewhere in a room they had just vacated, and he could grab them and run.

Chapter 41

The House

This particular warehouse, a one-level square structure, had been outfitted to be an office building. It was carpeted and had finished interior walls. A square hallway rounded its interior and offices apparently lined the outer walls, for Nate could see regular doors in each direction. One large office space must be in the middle, though he could see no door into it from here. Moving down the hall, he could still hear faint voices trailing off behind him.

Coming to the first corner of the hall, a doorway was off to his right. With just a moment of hesitation, realizing he might be entering a room full of people for all he knew, he tried the doorknob. It was unlocked so he opened it quickly. Discerning immediately that the room interior was dark, he craned his ear back toward the hallway, in case perhaps Donna or whomever she was with had heard the sound of the doorknob or a door squeak. He was aware that being full of adrenaline meant he probably could not hear all of the noise he was making, but they would. All seemed quiet in the hall, so he turned his attention to the room's interior, leaving the door ajar to give light

It was a small room being used as a garage of sorts. It had a cement floor and a riding lawn mower in the center. A small garage-type door on his right would allow machinery out. Various tools and equipment were lying around on floor and shelves. "Strike One", he whispered to himself. He grabbed a very long large wrench off a shelf and emerged back out into the hall.

Confidence bolstered by the new weapon, he faced side two of the square hallway. Now he could see four other doors. Two led into offices to his right down the hall, a third door was facing him at the end of the hall, and the fourth door was situated in the middle of the wall to his left, a door leading to the "center office".

Somehow, the center office to him felt like it might be a "main office" and so possibly more apt to have people in it, so he opted to take the next door on his right.

Opening it quickly, wrench raised, he stuck his head inside the room. What he found sent chills down his spine, and his gusto immediately drained out. The wrench he had been holding in the air fell to his side. He almost let it go. He slowly walked into the room, and completely forgot about the door.

From the somewhat low light given off by a side table lamp, Nate could clearly see a small child laying in a hospital type bed. He crept closer, wondering if he knew her. He did. Her small face was pale, and she lay very still, barely breathing, as if close to death. An I.V. drip and a heart monitor further evidenced her grave health. Other medical equipment lay about the room, as if she had undergone various tests. This was "Leaf", the quirky nickname given by the other kids to nature-loving little Ophelia. This was Donna's niece.

Seeing Ophelia in this state, Nate started to shake. This was too much. Donna was a nurse, yes. No, they did not have a hospital in town. But Leaf, whatever was wrong with her, belonged in a city hospital surrounded by qualified doctors, not hidden away in some warehouse! How had this happened? He reached out and touched her cheek. She was warm. Maybe too warm. His mind swirled and he thought he might be sick. It was almost like Liddy lay there. He looked around for some kind of sign, notes, chart, or something to help him understand what might be wrong with her. He found

nothing.

This felt creepy. This had been kept a secret, and this secret was wrong. His fatherly instinct told him to grab her and run, but he knew he couldn't. He might harm her even more if he took her away from a place where she had found some kind of medical stability. So many options coursed through his mind - confronting Donna immediately, rushing out this minute and blowing the whistle on this warehouse, finding a phone and calling police. But then he thought of Mitt. How much time had already been spent? Maybe what had happened to Leaf was happening right now to Mitt, and he could stop it, if he could get the shells.

He resolved to go on. He would not leave Ophelia for long, only long enough to help Mitt, and heaven help anyone who tried to stop him now.

"Leaf." he whispered. "Hold on, Leaf." He stroked her brown hair, and wrested himself away from her side, vowing to himself that she would not be left there for long.

Turning back to the open door, Nate heard voices and closed it. He held its knob, praying they were not coming into Leaf's room, and listened best he could at the door crack. Donna and the other researcher spoke for a few moments near the doorway. Donna ended the conversation with, "Well, good job Richard, this helps. Keep working on the tissue samples. I'm going to check on Mitt now."

Nate heard the central office door close, and waiting a few seconds, cracked his own door open. He saw Donna's back disappear around the corner on his left, and a few breaths later heard the main door leading outside shut. The sound of the deadbolt locking soon after echoed toward him.

Nate gauged his next move. Most probably, Donna would not have taken the precious egg shells with her to Mitt's. "Richard" might have them in the central office, but Nate was still afraid of coming face to face with a group of people, who would surely stop his progress, or do even worse, once they had discovered him in their lab. It seemed better to investigate outer offices first, especially having just found Leaf. Maybe they had put the egg shells on a lab table and he could still grab them and run.

Richard and Donna had been walking the halls when he arrived. They could have left the egg shells in any one of these rooms.

He felt dismayed that he couldn't alert Katy and the others that Donna was on her way, or warn them that she was not the person they had been led to believe. But for Mitt's sake, all he could do was press on.

He left Ophelia's room and crept down the hall, nervous that Richard might come out of the central office door any moment. Arriving at the last door on the right, he opened it quickly, leapt inside, and shut it just as fast. He was at once distracted by the inside of the door and walls. The door was oddly thick, fitting like a puzzle piece into the wall which was also abnormally thick. Behind him, he heard a sound he had never before heard in his life, and so he turned.

Null Room

There was light in this room, and sound. So much sound. A weird, undulating noise, like the fading of a dozen cymbals having been mixed in a synthesizer. But this was not music. It seemed more like ocean waves somehow turned into a tinny sound effect, its rolling tide ready to become tangible and sweep Nate off his feet. It was not so loud that he had to cover his ears, but if exposed to it for long, he would begin to think it was torture. It was unnerving. He suddenly realized he had not heard the sound out in the hall, and that the entire room was lined with the door's same thick material, obviously some kind of sound proofing insulation.

The sound wafted toward Nate, and for a moment he had to concentrate on maintaining his balance.

Then he saw the nornchi. It lay on a small cushion in the center of the room, raised up to a height of about three feet by an odd gray metal box. The box looked like steel, and was a cube. Then it dawned on him, the metal box was making the sound. It wasn't a speaker playing the sound, it was the device making the sound.

At first he couldn't move, still trembling from the encounter with Ophelia, and further affected by the pulsing and not quite rhythmic sound waves of the cube.

The nornchi was a light golden brown, with solid white on its ears, throat, and chest. It lay still, flat on its back, a little coverlet over it which reached up to its belly. Its eyes were closed and from the edge of the room Nate could barely see it breathing.

Nate's left hand involuntarily lifted to his own mouth, as if realizing that he was in some sort of house of horrors where creatchi and children were being tortured in the name of science. He began to move toward it, slowly, as if wading through water.

Without even realizing what he was doing until after he had done it, half way to the cube, Nate dropped the wrench. Part of his mind was flooded with urgency to reach the nornchi, and part became aware that the heavy wrench he had just dropped onto the insulated floor had not made even a thud. He wondered if the cube's sound waves would fill his mind forever so that he never heard anything else.

Closer he waded to the nornchi, who remained motionless in the center of the room. As Nate moved, his right hand reached up and out, as if he was using its reach to help him continue on, not allowing the waves to turn him back. Involuntarily, his body began to arc sideways, as if the waves were easier to cut through if he narrowed his figure.

Finally arriving at the cube, he dropped his reaching hand and just watched. His closeness now to the source of the sound drowned most of his inner thoughts. He could feel its full roll inside him, almost entrancing him. It was a warm sound, somehow. It made him warm. Was that some sort of friction from it? He couldn't formulate theories very well, he couldn't follow them through. They seemed carried off behind him somewhere, out of reach.

The creatchi also was mesmerizing, so alive and yet disconnected. Disconnected, the thought echoed in his mind. It looked alien, and oddly, eerie. So this is what it was like. This is how it felt to discover a creature whom you do not recognize, and not be influenced by its bonding ability. It was a foreign, unearthly animal.

He had no fuzzy feelings about this being. There was no influence here. But there was still the overarching horror aching inside, that an innocent child, and this innocent being, were here, being treated like this.

There was no feeling of danger, for he was familiar with this species. Nate lifted his hand again, slowly, in a sad and sorrowful effort to comfort, touching his fingertips to its shoulder.

The nornchi's crimson eyes popped open. The room's door burst aside revealing Donna and two other people, Donna reaching toward Nate, or the nornchi, or both, in seemingly slow motion. Donna crying out loudly "No!" her voice slicing through the undulating echoes, though it was muffled.

Then Nate screamed.

Nate wailed a horrible sickening cry, stuck in place and still touching the nornchi. He experienced pain, but none of it physical. Pain of separation, pain of loss, pain of rejection and of neglect, pain of war and of death. Nate screamed again, bitterly crying out, and fell away from the creatchi, fell to the floor, sobbing and no longer in this world. His mind filled to overflow with horrible pain. Oh! The pain of loneliness and its aching emptiness! The pain of loss and the hole of sorrow that engulfs the one who has lost everything! He experienced all the trauma of a dozen depths of pain all at once, and screamed out again as soon as he found breath, scrabbling on the floor as if to catch his balance, though he was already fully laid low, barely half sitting up, holding on to the insulated floor with desperate hands.

His face turned up and he shrieked as if tortured, though no one touched him. His eyes opened as if caught by a sudden pang or stab, and through his tear flooded eyes he noticed Donna and the other two researchers also on the floor, still at the door, looking at him, all of them in anguish. All of their attention on him.

Then, he began to hear the sound. The undulating flow of the tinny music box. The pedestal for the nornchi was still emanating its rich and weird wavelike tones. He began to feel them again, feel them entering his flesh, he felt them reaching in and through. He sobbed, hanging his head low. His attention began to be taken from the agony that wracked his mind to the sound, the rolling crashing waves, the pulsation of ever advancing warmth. Somehow, compared to the overwhelming pain, this was now comforting. It made enough entrance into his chaos, settled his torment just enough, so that his mind was able to just barely begin to make room, to make just enough room for something else to fill in the void. The gap, the space between agony and terror, was a void that allowed something else to pour in. It began to be filled with the only other emotion that could balance such agony. The only equal to pain and it's natural counterpart. It began to fill with rage.

Chapter 43

Rage

Nate struggled to stand but his legs had no strength, so at first he was not successful, wheeling around and catching himself, before he could shakily raise himself off of the floor into a low crouch. Placing his palm on the metal box on his right, he steadied himself, took a few breaths and successfully stayed somewhat upright.

Crying out in pain, gasping for air, he lurched a step forward, sloppily, in the general direction of the door.

Barely able to maintain his crouching stand, arms held out wide to steady himself amid the waves of pain, sound, and physical weakness, his face contorted with the surge of emotion pouring out of him. Then, balancing best he could amid the waves, he leaned down slowly and grabbed the wrench from the floor. Less anguish, and more rage filled him every second. All of the tension, the fear, the adrenaline, and the horror of the last 40 minutes was growing inside of him a murderous mountain of rage, and the rage turned onto the three people at the doorway. The three struggling now to raise themselves off of the floor, eyes wide with fear.

Nate tried to head toward them, yelling out a furious cry and swinging the wrench low as he stumbled forward a step, not yet a threat to anyone because of his unstable, shaky movements and distance from the door.

"You did this!" he shrieked out in hatred and terror. Sweat and spit dripping off his face, he looked like a deranged madman.

"This is your fault!" he swung again and toppled to his right, not yet able to attack as he wanted. He stood again and wound up his pitch, getting better at balancing with every step, less crouching, his right arm aiming the weapon higher, his left reaching out for stability.

"Mitt is dying because of you!" the words spat out of his hatred. Bringing the wrench downward, almost falling full down again as its long head hit the floor. Standing up again, taller now, he was becoming within range to hurt someone.

"You knew this would happen! And you took them anyway!" he accused, swinging the wrench backhanded to the right toward them, stumbling to the wall at the right of the door.

They all ducked and cried out, still trying to get a hold of themselves, still struggling to come out of their own emotional prisons, not able to do so as quickly as Nate seemed to be doing. Nate stepped away from the wall and swung again and missed, His right shoulder jammed into the left part of the door jam.

He stepped back shakily and tried to square himself in the doorway to take aim at the cowering figures directly in front of him.

"You're murdering children!" his voice a feverish hysterical pitch, taking one more swing straight over the top of them.

Everyone parted, falling away into the hallway to avoid him. Nate stumbled forward and the wrench fell to the floor as he used both hands in front of himself to catch his own fall.

He screamed, "I'll kill you!" as he attempted to get up on all fours, to continue his attack.

Then someone used the wrench on Nate, and everything went black.

Chapter 44
Binding Bonds

Nate became conscious amid motion and noise. His eyes at first remained closed, unwilling to open, his head pounding as if he had been drunk and was awakening with a horrible hangover. He also heard voices, some nearer and some farther away.

Something heavy seemed to be on his chest, but his arm moved freely up to the back of his head, and his breath caught as he touch the tender spot where the wrench had struck him.

"Nate." He heard Donna's voice. It sounded as if on the other side of a door.

He blinked hard, trying to force his eyes to open, dreary, as if drugged. Finally able to focus better on his surroundings, he found himself laying, legs curled, in the back of an SUV, looking up at two heads who looked down at him. Donna was just above him, and someone else sat in the other seat.

Donna's hand was on the back of her seat as she turned herself to see him more clearly in the dimness of the vehicle.

"Nate." she said again, waiting for him to come to. Her voice clearer, as was his mind.

He knew it was going to hurt to speak, but he tried anyway. "Where are you taking me." he croaked.

"We're going to Mitt's. I'm sorry we're taking you in this condition, but you need observation." She stated flatly.

Nate realized he wasn't tied down, the weight on his body was a pile of heavy wool blankets, another pile below him, cushioning his ride. He recognized them as the same kind from the museum basement.

"The nornchi." he said, pausing to force his mind to remember things. His eyes closed again as his head pounded, both inside and out.

"Yes." was all Donna stated. She turned her head away from him momentarily.

"You left." he stated weakly, all fight inside him gone, each word still causing a throb in his head. He began to have more questions form in his ever clearing mind, than he had ability to demand the answers.

"I saw your car outside the complex, checked it and saw you were not in it, noticed the hood was still warm, and put two and two together." she answered.

"Where are we going?" he asked again.

"We are going to Mitt." Donna stated again, looking at him piercingly, studying him. Her face told him she was also drained, but she didn't seem like a threat any more, which was good, because he dropped again out of consciousness.

He awoke when the back door of the SUV was opened, and the hands of men held him to make sure

that he did not roll out. He was lurched upward and made to walk between them toward a house. His legs were able to walk, though his groggy head was not able to raise. His downcast eyes caught sight of a yard, a walkway, garden and porch. It was Mitt and Katy's house.

The door was opened before anyone knocked, and Nate was sat on an arm chair in the living room. Then everyone's attention was focused on Mitt, still on the couch, across the room from Nate. Nate was simply left alone.

Katy, who had opened the front door, knelt beside Mitt. Donna also squatted down by his head. Three other men, one younger and two older, stood to the left of the couch.

In the presence of Mitt, Nate was able to force his mind to rouse and stay awake. Liddy and PRS arrived from somewhere and stood by Nate's side. Liddy sat on the arm of the chair and tilted her head to lean onto Nate. PRS crawled quietly into Nate's lap, and hugged him. Nate could do nothing but watch, as Donna spoke to Mitt.

"Mitt, can you hear me?" she asked, quietly.

Like a very sick child with a high fever, he turned his head and looked her direction, not really focusing on her, and not saying anything.

"Here." she whispered.

She raised her hands and another researcher, the one Nate had seen in the other back seat of the SUV, stepped forward and handed her a small black bag.

Donna unzipped it and took out the opalescent egg shells, holding them in her hands right by his head, so that he could see them.

Mitt's eyes tried to focus on them, and Suzy rose up from where she still lay along his side, looking as well. Mitt inhaled a large breath, and his focus became more acute, his eyes not leaving the shells. Suzy leaned over and touched them. Mitt became more alert by degrees, more aware of himself. He turned and raised himself up slowly by pushing with his arms. Suzy lowered herself down toward his legs so that he had room to rise. Mitt, turned back to Donna, and looking at the egg shells again and then up to her, as if seeing her for the first time, said weakly, "Hi."

Everyone let out a collective sigh and looked around at one another with relieved, pleased faces. Mitt rubbed his own forehead and hair as if waking up from a very long nap, saying weakly to no one in particular, "Wow. I'm really hungry."

Katy smiled wide, and teared up, "I'll make you anything, what sounds good?" she sniffed, trying to stay happy in his presence, but ready to bawl her eyes out in the great surge of relief she was feeling.

"PBJ?" he asked.

"You got it!" she said and touched his face as she rose. She rushed to the kitchen, eager to oblige her son. Nothing would be more comforting to her mom heart right now than making her hungry boy a sandwich.

Mitt looked around, as if he was just noticing there was a crowd in the house and hadn't realized they had come, and then he saw Nate.

Mitt said, "Wow, you look bad. You sick?"

Nate replied with, "A busy evening," and smiled wearily back at the boy. "How ironic." Nate thought, but didn't say so.

Donna, having looked toward Nate as he spoke, and piercing Nate with her assessing gaze, looked back to Mitt. Her voice lightened up, "Well! We have this nice carrying case for the shells. It will keep them safe, ok?" She put them back into the case, handed the case to Mitt, and stood up.

"Oh cool, thanks!", he said smiling, his voice sounding stronger every time he spoke.

Katy returned with the sandwich, and some water, and as soon as she saw that Mitt was able to eat it, and that every moment he was returning to himself, she herself returned to the kitchen with an invitation to everyone else to come and eat some picnic leftovers.

Donna asked one of the men, a fortyish, bald man named Andrew, to stay with Mitt while the others began to meander to the dining room to sit or stand around the table and partake of the feast of food Katy pulled from the fridge.

Nate went as well, behind the others, rousing himself up off of the chair. Liddy and PRS offered what physical support they could. Every step he took felt like a cloud was lifting from his mind, and yet the bump from the wrench kept him moving at a slow and careful pace. Liddy led him to a dining chair to sit. Liddy seemed oddly silent, and simply helped him unquestioningly. His attention turned to her, realizing that she had been through a lot herself tonight. Seeing her munch very slowly on some left over fried chicken, he realized she was exhausted.

"Liddy sweetie, PRS looks very tired. Do you think you should put him to bed?" Nate asked softly.

"I think so." she said, still looking at her fried chicken.

"eem sleepy." the norncchi affirmed, sitting at an odd angle on the chair next to her and putting an olive in his mouth.

Liddy wiped her mouth with a napkin, rose up from the table and hugged her dad. "Are you ok daddy?" she whispered.

"I'm really fine." he answered.

"OK" she accepted, and turned toward the back of the house and walked toward the guest bedroom. PRS walked with her hand in hand.

He watched her go. He wanted to go tuck her in, thinking again of Leaf, but he was spent. Donna or no Donna, this was Katy's house, so there was a measure of safety here, he hoped.

He looked at Donna, opposite the table. "We need to talk." he said flatly.

"I know." she replied.

Chapter 45

Wrap up

"Look, all of you. I know you have a lot of questions, and I do have a few answers, though probably not what you want to hear." Donna began, her voice and face revealing just how weary she was. "But look, we've all had a traumatic evening, and I think we should get rested and take this up in the morning."

There were unanimous murmurs of agreement among the adults in the kitchen, and although Nate didn't like the idea of letting anyone leave, he had to admit he was in no condition himself to accuse anyone, to force anyone to tell truths, or to make anything happen, really.

He needed to rest, and he needed to heal, both emotionally and physically. He began to form a new idea about the tidal wave of emotion he had been hit with earlier. He began to wonder if it might have tainted all of his thoughts. The fear, the rage, the overwhelming feelings that had formed so clear a picture in his mind of Donna and her cohorts, that picture that screamed that they were Nate's enemies, now seemed suspect. The fear had been so overwhelming, the hatred so driving, and now they began to seem as though they were not "of him". He wondered where his reality lay in the midst of all of that emotion. At least he didn't have the urge to murder them now, which had to mean that whatever had overtaken him had weakened significantly. He flashed back momentarily to the room, to where every fiber of his being was wanting, attempting, had cried out, to kill every member of the research team. It made him shudder.

In the morning, with the distance of time away from that room, and with the health of a better rested mind, he probably would be able to think much more rationally. Willing to be suspicious was not a problem for Nate, willing to be rationally suspicious had become one.

"One question before you go." he stated, eyes not lifting from the kitchen table.

Donna, who had turned to amble out the kitchen door to check on Mitt again, turned back wearily, sighed deeply, and said "ok."

"Is Leaf dying?" It was simple question, but in his foggy mind it served several calculated purposes. One, now, even if he were to die tonight from his encounters with the nornchi and the wrench, Katy now was aware that something had happened to Leaf. Katy was also now aware of something serious that Donna had kept from everyone. Also, finding Leaf in the condition she was in had increased Nate's own worries about PRS' influence over his daughter, so the answer to this question would help him know to some degree, just how worried he needed to be.

Lastly, it alerted Donna that the nornchi room was not the only room he had visited tonight. She would have to think about that, about what Nate might know, and about what he might do about it. He wanted her off balance. He wanted her to know she was accountable.

"I don't know. For now, she is stable. We can start with that subject when I return in the morning.

Deal?" she asked.

"Alright, except that you are not leaving." Nate added.

"Fine." she said, and left the room to check on Mitt.

Chapter 46 Night

The three men who had come with Donna left in the SUV, after their boss had given them a few directives to complete before the night was over. The instructions to them were unrevealing and Nate felt like she was still hiding the reality of what was going on in the warehouse lab by keeping her wording vague.

Mitt stayed on the couch, too tired to care about moving to his own room. Katy covered him with a blanket, making sure also that Suzy was comfortable.

Katy also gave Donna a blanket and pillow, as Donna had asked to sleep on the recliner across from Mitt, so that she could keep watch over him.

Nate crashed onto Mitt's bed, his feet hanging off the end, as he hadn't cared about undressing, or any other conventional action one takes when going to bed.

Katy peeked in on Liddy and checked last on Nate. She threw a blanket over Nate before locking up the front door and going to bed herself. Though she was usually neat, she had no desire this evening whatsoever to clean up the leftovers the group had picked through. It didn't bother her at all then, to skip cleanup and head straight for her own room, exhausted but happy her son was well. That Leaf's name was brought up tonight she couldn't understand nor did she have the energy to ask questions. It would all wait until morning.

The exhausted crew were unaware then, of the man in the shadowed woods who tentatively, carefully, crept up to the windows of the house and peered in each one that allowed an interior view. In one window he found a sleeping lad and a woman tossing on an uncomfortable looking armchair.

In another window he could see an empty kitchen and dining room, and food strewn about a table as if no one had cared to clean it up.

And in the last window he found what he most desired. He found a little girl and a little creature curled up and snoring. He tried the window, but it was locked. He tried a back door, but it also offered no entry. Then, he remembered something - something that bubbled to the surface of his darkened mind. She was not at HER home. He looked across the grass that lay between both houses and watched the dark neighboring house for a long time. It seemed perfectly still, sleeping. He crept across the grass and onto the kitchen deck. The deck that had always kept him away from this door, for he feared it would creak and expose him. But the deck was solid, and silent, and the house felt empty. He found that the kitchen door was surprisingly unlocked, and so he entered.

Chapter 47

The Dawn

Before morning had dawned, Katy, the first one up, cleaned up the dining room and began making breakfast for the sleeping group. By dawn Donna was up. Both women were very pleased to see Mitt awoken looking like his old self, if rather slightly subdued, but only as if he had just played a hard soccer game the day before. His demeanor, his pep, and the color in his face were perfectly normal.

Mitt and Suzy happily visited the two bedrooms that housed their other guests, to announce that breakfast was ready, and before you knew it, everyone was snacking on eggs, toast, fruit and other morning fare. Mitt thought that the adults were abnormally quiet, but Liddy and PRS, and of course, Suzy, were as amiable as ever. Everyone finished eating and took their own dishes in turn to the kitchen. The adults returned to sit at the table, as if waiting for something, not saying much, though everyone remarked how well Mitt looked this morning.

Mitt and Liddy tarried in the dining room, not sure what was to happen next. They played and goofed around with the creatchi, playing hide and seek with a napkin, catch with an orange, and generally goofing off and making the nornchi and one another laugh.

The adults smiled warmly whenever the kids, Suzy, or PRS did anything silly or fun, but somehow, the kids got the impression that today was a sort of a day where the adults meant to talk, and their minds were ever on it.

Just after breakfast, as if on cue, an SUV arrived. Katy took the rest of the dishes to the kitchen sink, and then returned to the dining room to meet the newcomers properly, as Donna brought them in. Nate recognized them, the same three that had come with Donna the night before. The men were invited to sit, and introduced to the group.

"This is Andrew, do you remember him from last night, Mitt?" Donna asked.

"Uhm, no, sorry." Mitt replied, shrugging.

"Oh that's no matter. Andrew brought the egg shells along last night, but you were not feeling well and probably didn't really notice him." she said. "And this is Kevin, and this is Richard, my lab manager," she finished.

Everyone exchanged hellos, the tone among the adult crew more business like than friendly.

"Why don't we adults have a chat, and the kids can be left to play in the living room. Is that ok?" Donna asked.

Mitt said, "OK. Hey Liddy, we can check out those games you brought over."

"Oh yeah!" Liddy responded, happy to leave the grownups to their grownup things.

"Games! Games! Games" PRS and Suzy chanted, jumping up and down while holding hands. They

kept jumping all the way through to the living room, their energy and enthusiasm always charging up the kids' desire for more fun and laughter.

The kids also disappeared around the corner into the living room and immediately there was general friendly and excited noises of the children's voices volleying back and forth, giggling, boxes holding game pieces rattling, and the nornchi jibbering together in excitement.

Nate stepped over to the dining room corner and watched them for a few seconds. It was good to see Mitt back to his old self. It was good to know that Nate's promise last night had found its fulfillment. Nate noticed the black bag still on the couch, just peeking out under the pillow that Mitt had slept on. Mitt was back, but there was unfinished business this morning. Today would be a long day. He returned to the group in the dining room.

The younger man, Kevin, was just bringing up a satchel from his side that he had been holding on to, and opened it onto the dining table.

"I remember you." Nate said, his eyes slimming as if he were trying to place where he had seen Kevin before. A ghostly memory of a screaming man at the door of a room flashed into his mind.

"Oh. Yes. Uhm, Hi." the young man stammered. "Sorry.. about the hit on the head." he added, looking sheepishly back at Nate.

Nate's eyebrow raised, and his finger pointed at Kevin. The disembodied wrench blow now had a face. And that face was Kevin's.

The sudden memory flash then brought along with it an avalanche of other bizarre and disturbing scenes. A night's hard sleep had indeed given Nate a strange detached distance from the odd and severe events of the night before within the warehouse lab. Nate suddenly recalled the particulars more vividly and shuddered as the details played on his inner screen, sorting themselves, re-sequencing into the full drama. With the sudden joining together of the disturbing memories came many questions. Sobering questions. Yes. There was a lot of unfinished business. Today would indeed be a long day.

"Kevin was not himself last night. Really, none of us were." Donna said, interrupting Nate's thoughts. "But we can go over all that in a few minutes."

Kevin turned his attention back to the laying out of the satchel's papers, grateful that the subject had shifted, for he still felt awful for the blow last night. In his almost animalistic fear response to being attacked, his only thought was self protection. He had grabbed up that wrench as if it were a life jacket tossed to him in the ocean. At that horrible moment, in that fierce struggle to survive, Kevin wouldn't have minded if he had killed Nate. Now, he just felt horribly guilty. He was not a violent man by nature. He was not even a physically outgoing sort of man. Donna was right, last night he certainly was not himself.

Kevin was glad Donna had put it so succinctly. It helped him swallow his guilt, for now. He refocused on the papers and began spreading them on the table.

Donna said, "Let's lay everything we know out before you, shall we? As of this moment I am inducting both of you, Nate, Katy, into the Research department. You are now members." The three men, and Donna, attempted to offer Nate and Katy smiles of welcome. They were tight lipped smiles, but at least

they smiled in an effort to be welcoming. Yet Nate and Katy looked long at one another and, unsmiling, returned their gazes to the paperwork.

It was not often that new people were admitted to "Research" Donna mused. But this time it was not by her choice, it was not by careful selection, it was not a choosing of people she could control. Not this time. It was inclusion by nothing other than pure desperation.

Chapter 48

Induction

Donna looked down at the papers before her. Choosing a paper from the pile Kevin had just laid down, she unfolded it, revealing a large map of the area with several notes, figures and lines drawn on it.

"First, let's begin with the 'Landings'." she said. "The creatchi came from the storm. We had decided early on that the storm was a vessel of some kind. An ethereal cloud can not hold, sustain, nor create life, so obviously something was in the center and that something hid itself by creating this fake storm. Oh the rain was real, all right, and normal. By testing the area wells and rainfall measuring stations, here and here," she pointed at the map "we know the rain was normal, nothing was contaminated by it, but the storm was manufactured."

"The eggs themselves are also manufactured. Not natural. Richard's quick look last night we believe has confirmed that, and we will be getting back some data about that later today. To the naked eye, the shells look jagged, but by looking at them with a strong magnifier, you can see that the edges are lipped, almost machined if you will, to fit together. They give an appearance of having broken apart, but we think that is a ruse. We think they released at the proper time. Our investigation of them last night was, after all, interrupted. But we were able to snap some microscopic photography and it is being processed now."

"What about Leaf?" Nate changed the subject. This was all well and good conjecture, and may or may not be true, but it sounded like the start of a long conversation of what-ifs and maybe's and evidential information which was important and interesting, but not the most looming question heavy on his mind. Besides, Donna had promised to start with the topic of Leaf. Leaf was real. Leaf was in real trouble. This start did not sound at all like it was headed that direction.

"Just a minute, give me that, please." Donna paused, drawing out her own patience. Donna kept her head down, her voice business like, and looking down at the map, straight way continued.

"From what we can tell, one creatchi landed here and one here. Then Suzy landed here, and was found by Mitt. Various other creatchi landed throughout the town and PRS landed here. We know that two creatchi landed in places where two children just 'happened' to be. One was Mitt, who just so happened to be at Windy Woods adventuring about, and crossed a meadow headed for the road, to get home because of the rain. When he found Suzy, she had already hatched, was standing there, waiting for him." she paused.

"Leaf was the other child, who just happened to be visiting her aunt for the summer, and just happened to see something along the side of the road as I drove her into town. She insisted I pull over and we get

whatever it was she had seen. She was beside herself. She almost became hysterical. I turned around, we pulled over alongside a row of bushery and there he was." she paused again.

"Only three people can say that they found the actual eggs, and no one has been able to explain where the egg shells went." she added.

Nate took the gap of silence to ask, "Did someone take Leaf's egg shells, is that why she is," he paused searching for the words, "incapacitated?" He was thinking of course, of Mitt, and the horror he went through when his egg shells were 'accidentally' taken away from him.

"No, but listen," Donna looked at him, speaking faster, getting to her point and trying to get there before Nate interrupted again.

"The storm hit the the west-center of town at 10am. Mitt was out in the early morning riding around. When Mitt found Suzy, she was already hatched. If she had been an egg still, he would have ridden his bicycle right on by, hit the road and headed home, but she was hatched." she emphasized the word.

"PRS, also from the same storm, landed an egg, and Liddy ran out to get him, yes? Liddy ran out to get a funny purple egg and she put it in her dresser, right? Then, you said that at some point he hatched, and you found them playing in her room, right?"

Nate nodded, not really gathering where this was leading. "OK, so..." he paused, "Suzy's egg cracked open when she landed, from impact, so she was already 'out', right?"

Donna ignored him and continued, "I can tell you with certainty that when I was there, with Leaf, when she found a creatchi on that stormy road... I was right there the moment she found him. I can tell you how it looked, and that it had white ears and a white chest and was the most adorable thing you could ever see. I can tell you that with certainty because she held it in front of me, held it up like a half drowned wet puppy, entranced by it. I was entranced as well. She asked if she could keep it. I was so taken with it, I answered her 'Of course!'" Donna spoke as if she was disgusted with herself, with the version of herself she now saw in her memory.

Her memory must have come faster for her speaking came faster as well, "We, we, brought it into the car, it got her all wet, she put her seat belt on, buckled in. I turned the car back around. We all looked at each other the entire way home. This is solid, this is fact. I see it all clearly.

"OK," Nate added, waiting for Donna's point to be made.

"Nate, you told me that you were convinced that the beginning of all of this, the beginning of everything was the key. That how this all started and where they all came from was the key, and I think you are right, I know you are right, but." she paused, her head dropped in resignation and the tension in her voice rose, "I don't think we will ever know. I don't think we are supposed to." she stated.

"What do you mean?" Nate asked.

"Look, I get carried away too OK? I get carried away just like all of the rest of you. I get caught up you see. Me. The scientist. The objective observer." she sneered. "I can hardly think straight half the time, and Leaf needs me." her voice began to break. "So, I keep hints all around me, to remind me. Here! Even in my pocket." and she shoved her hand down into a pocket and thrust a photograph toward Nate

and Katy.

Nate reached out and took it and both he and Katy looked at it. It was slightly worn on the edges and folded in half, but what it depicted was clear. It was a happy family photo, of Leaf, all freckles and dimples smiling wide, her adoring eyes looking to her right where her golden brown nornchi baby, the nornchi Nate had seen in the room last night, sat on the coffee table. To the left of it, probably sitting on her knees, was Donna, smiling just as wide and looking right into the camera.

"I don't get it." Nate said, "What am I looking at?"

"Look behind me." Donna said simply.

In the photo, to Donna's left could be seen the couch, and a blanket crumpled there. On the blanket was a collection of ruby red egg shells, sparkling slightly as if a light was shining on them.

"Nate, I can tell you with certainty that I never laid my eyes on those egg shells. We picked up a nornchi on the side of that road that day, and nothing else. But there they are." she paused, letting the facts stand and settle into their minds.

She added, "No one took Leaf's egg shells. Neither of us even remembered them a few days later after this photo, when her troubles began." Donna added. "I will tell you next exactly what happened to Leaf, but Nate, we are being manipulated in ways I don't understand. I am a nurse, and I have friends in other fields of science, but I have been kidding myself too. I have been spinning my wheels and collecting stupid facts when what this problem needs is..is.. physicists and.. rocket scientists and geniuses. But I keep on, I keep on.." her voice trailed away again. She sounded unlike Donna, she sounded at a loss.

She rose from her chair, sounding weak, sounding desperate, "And I keep on.. because I have to find answers, for Leaf, and I have to do my best because I don't dare let others in on this secret. Do you hear me, Nate, are you hearing me here? " she emphasized her next words slowly, "I don't dare let anyone else in on this!"

Nate understood now. Donna, the creatchi doctor, the scientist in charge, was herself admitting to being wholly influenced and subjected to the will of the creatchies. 'Keep the secret!' Of course always secrecy. That Leaf was also 'injured' somehow, was all tied up with this as well, and so even Leaf's illness had to be kept secret. Donna was not able to take Leaf anywhere and explain to others what was wrong with her because it would hinder the efforts to keep the secret. It echoed his own beginnings with PRS. She was attempting to study them, yes, but she was also immersed. If Donna could not escape their grasp, how could he hope to? How could anyone?

"OK." Nate said finally. "Wow."

Katy sighed, adding in a perturbed voice, "So, you are as lost as I am. You are just putting your sciency face on and pretending you aren't?"

Donna answered her flatly, taking the photo back, "I use this photo, and other facts, taped onto walls, stuck to my refrigerator, even under my pillow, to keep certain truths in front of my eyes. So, yes, I am under their 'control', but I have been the most objective of anyone. And for Leaf's sake, I have to be."

Katy paused, thinking, not happy that the one person everyone had trusted was not as objective as Katy had been led to believe. Then Katy asked, "Help me understand the egg hatching with Suzy angle, I wasn't really following you there."

Donna answered, "The few people who remember seeing their creatchi hatch say that it was several hours later, after the egg landed. You would think, looking at them, knowing that they all came out of the same storm, that they were all the same "age", but Suzy was hatched, or rather as we suspect, released, right away. The rest of them were babies, but I don't think Suzy was. Mitt, still within the storm, found a fully hatched, fully able bodied creatchi, waiting for him on a trail head. And best yet.." here Donna looked at them both, and nodded her head, realizing she had not told them the final detail, the nail that when hit, would seal up the neat and solid package, solidifying all of the theories that she had formed about everything.

"Mitt might have ridden even right by Suzy. He, steering his bike eastward, toward the road, and Suzy standing there, young as she was, short in the tall grass of the trail head. He might have easily missed her in the dark rain storm he was riding through, except for one thing. She called his name."

Chapter 49 Secrecy Layers

"He's never said that!" Katy interjected in an angry, whispered tone, not wanting to alert the kids in the next room that an adult was getting heated. Donna was flat out making things up now.

"Oh yes." Donna countered. "He did. To me."

Nate was angry now, "You know a heap of a lot more than you have been telling everyone!" he stabbed, also as hushed as he could. He turned away, rubbing his head to think. This new piece of news was more Twilight Zone than anything they had known so far, and it had left him stunned. He felt that things had just sped wholly out of control. Again.

Just then, Mitt, holding Suzy, peered around the dining room corner. "Mom, can we go outside and play?"

Katy glanced out the window, and seeing sunshine nodded to him, glad he would be out of ear reach. The "adult talks" were now getting more serious, after all.

Liddy appeared next, "We're going to go get blankets and have a reading party outside." she added in her typical happy tone, heading back toward the bedrooms, PRS following her and comically imitating her every step, smiling up at them all, adorably.

Suzy, still in Mitt's arms, giggled at the sight.

"Cool!" Mitt said to Liddy, turning the opposite direction and heading for the front door.

Once he left, Donna looked over at Kevin, "Psst." she said.

Kevin went to a spot just where the entryway turned into the living room, to where he could see Mitt walking outside. He turned back to Donna with a, "Mm Hmm."

"Watch." Donna said to everyone, nodding toward Kevin.

The group went to where Kevin was, and quietly watched Mitt through the window.

Mitt, outside the window, with Suzy still in hand, sauntered calmly over to the tiny garden shed at the side of the house, stepped into it, and immediately came back out again.

Nate glanced toward the couch and noticed the black bag that had been peeking out from under the pillow was now gone. He pointed absently at it saying, "Hey where did the.." but then placed his attention back to the window, realizing what was happening.

Liddy came out of the bedroom with a handful of blankets and books and saw everyone staring out the window. Their rapt attention drew her in, and she faced the window and watched as well.

Mitt could be seen on his knees, the upper half of his body hidden as he was bent over behind a rose bush that stuck out of the right side of a small garden plot that fell on the property line between Katy and Nate's back yards. He seemed busy about something. Then, he stood up, returned a small trowel to the shed and sat in the grass, playing with Suzy.

Mitt seemed to remember something, and looked toward the house. He swept Suzy up into his arms and headed to the front door. Everyone stood where they were, too engaged in the moment to disperse, or to look casual. They simply turned toward the front door.

Mitt came through the front door, stopped short and said, "Oh!" because it was odd to find everyone in the middle of the entryway, looking at him.

"Liddy you ready? Do you need help?" he asked.

"Here!" she said, normally, not really aware of what she had just witnessed. She handed him one blanket as she jostled the rest of her load to keep the other blanket from dragging on the grass.

As they left out the door again, and just before it shut, Nate could hear Liddy ask, "Where are the egg shells?"

He also heard Mitt answer, "What egg shells?"

Chapter 50 Paradigm Shift

Katy, addressing no one in particular, said, "I need to sit down." She sat on the couch and held her head in her hands. She was beginning to see her Mitt just a little differently. She was beginning to see him not as a happy, healthy little boy, but as a happy, controlled little victim. And it was waking her up to new realities and a new sober outlook on the creatchi situation.

"So, Mitt told you that Suzy called out to him?" Katy's voice asked shakily, still with her head in her hands.

Donna answered, "I bet he doesn't even remember now. He and Leaf found each other first, you know. I bet he doesn't remember that either."

Kevin said, "We have it on tape. It's why we tape things, because we don't trust ourselves to remember things. It's also why we interview people right away when they join the club. Because they'll forget things once they've been involved."

"Wait," Nate chimed in. "Back up. Why go to the trouble of burying and forgetting about the egg shell, if others remember their creatchies hatched from eggs. I mean, why not just have everyone forget about the eggs altogether? This doesn't make any sense! Besides, it was PRS who handed us the shells in the trail head! Why would Suzy influence Mitt to bury these shells, shells that PRS could have just let stay hidden in the forest?"

"I don't know." was Donna's frank reply. "We take as many notes from as many people as we can. We gather them, we go over them, we hypothesize. But this one, we just don't know. Maybe now that we have you two, and you two having now 'awakened' to the dangers and to the realities of this 'phenomenon', you can help us figure it out."

Donna added, "We have been doing our best, but we all feel like we have made little progress." She looked around at the three men who made up her inner circle. "Kevin became involved early on because his younger brother found an ettinchi in unusual circumstances and although Kevin was about to leave town for his higher education, he was simply intrigued to help find out more about.. everything. I took him on first, at the first meeting, just to help me gather information and to help with Leaf, for she was ill by then. I was determined to collect as much information as I could.

Andrew is involved because he has a photo as well, very much like mine, that called his own sanity into question concerning the events surrounding his two sisters and their nornchi. He showed the photo to me at our second meeting, and asked me what I thought, was he going crazy? By then, I already had my photo of course and saw in him a kindred spirit, so, really, he joined us to help himself stay sane and keep me sane as well, and Richard.."

Richard grinned. "I'm a regular city lab rat. I came to town to find out why my favorite nurse refused to come back into the city, to come back to work. I came to find out what was wrong and to take her back to the 'real world'. But, after seeing what was going on here, an opportunity of a lifetime to study something so unusual... Well, I quit my job and stayed. Everyone back there thinks we fell in love and ran off together." he chuckled.

"We have other researchers, Mike is at the lab now, keeping a constant watch on things. There are a few others also who only gather data at the meetings. They don't even know about the lab."

Nate said, "Wait, you just said Mitt and Suzy found Leaf? They found each other first? I thought he had found..." he snapped his fingers, trying to remember

his written notes. "Daisy! Old Lady Mack's nornchi out on her dairy farm."

"No." Donna tightened her mouth and lifted her eyebrows, stating the facts as if she had memorized them herself for her own recall, "He doesn't even remember now, but he and Leaf were the first two."

"OK. It's time to tell us about Leaf." Katy said, looking up, leaning back into the couch, folding her arms, and sighing deeply. She felt resigned now to her new position in "Research" and her new job of apparently hearing nothing but troubling news.

Chapter 51 Terrible Days

Donna motioned the other men to sit down, and they did, on the couch, on the arm chair, and the window sill. Donna sat as well, on a smaller chair near the dining room entrance. "It's hard to tell this story." Donna's voice cracked. Her head turned toward the eastern window, as she heard the children outside suddenly laughing, playing with their nornchis. Their laughter echoed the laughter of another little one. Her little niece, Leaf.

"Mitt found Suzy, or rather she found Mitt." Donna began, her thoughts taking her back to the events that had changed her life so drastically over these last several weeks.

"That same day, in the same storm, Leaf and I found 'Smitty' by the side of the road. We brought him to my house, and dried him. Within two days, we had named him, made him a little bed, and bonded so deeply. An instant member of the family. However, my natural disposition has never been emotionalism. I still looked at him with a keen eye for science. Oh, I could never hurt him, dissect him, or do things that you think a scientist would do to an alien, but I still had a great desire to know more." she emphasized the last two words as if they had held a keen unquenchable thirst within her at the time.

"Mitt began taking Suzy around on his bike, at that time, apparently. And I cleaned out the guest bedroom of my home and made it into a lab room of sorts." Donna's voice became wistful, as if she was reliving her excitement. Reliving how clever she had been, how thorough, how scientific. "I would say to Leaf, 'here we go Leafy Lady, let's see what Smitty thinks of the thermometer. It just goes in his little ear like this. Let's see what Smitty does with this test strip, see if he can lick it. You lick one first. Now I'll lick one. Awe, he doesn't seem to want to. Here, I'll just put it in his mouth quick.'" Donna paused. "It's one o'clock, time for our lab fun time. Let's knock his little knee like I do yours and see if it makes his leg jump. Smitty began to look sad every day close to one o'clock. Let's see if Smitty is ok giving a blood sample." Donna stopped. Her face became grim and she swallowed. She looked back at the others. "By the eighth day, Smitty did not like one o'clock at all any more. But like the good doctor I was, like the good doctor that knows what is better for the patient, who knows what is best, I felt that the tests had to be performed. So, I carried on."

"I didn't notice that Leaf was also beginning to be sad in the afternoons. I chalked it up to her small child romanticism that thought that her baby should always be giggling and that life was always to be rainbows and candy hearts. But Leaf did begin to change, and so did Smitty."

Donna's face turned away from the window. The laughter outside continued and it began to haunt her, to mock her.

"Then Mitt came by." she said, shakily. "Mitt came by to tell me about something, I forget what now." she suddenly chuckled, and added sourly, "I've forgotten. Gee, I wonder why."

"Mitt came and Suzy jumped right out of his jacket and met Smitty. Smitty was already stressed, for it was one o'clock you see." Donna looked at them all knowingly. "It was one o'clock and Smitty was ready for whatever unpleasantness I would bring down upon him."

"Smitty became agitated at the sight of Suzy.. scared, he, he began to wail, and to cry. It was as if Suzy horrified him. It was as if Suzy was a nightmare, a ghoul. He crawled up Leaf and Leaf was bawling, inconsolable." Donna visibly shuddered, and dropped her head for a moment to breathe. She regained her composure and continued.

"Suzy leapt onto Mitt's back, hiding, whimpering. Mitt looked up at me, amazed to see Smitty, but also hurt, as if this first meeting physically hurt him."

Katy rose up and bristled at learning that her son had been hurt, and yet she had never known. She watched the children outside, more for her own comfort than anything else, as Donna continued.

Donna's voice quickened, reliving the terrible events, "Smitty was out of his mind, he was clawing at Leaf. I felt she was in danger. I begged, ordered, Mitt to help me. We peeled Smitty off of her and I took him to the "lab room". I had a table in there, a makeshift exam table. I found cord and we strapped Smitty down on it. He became absolutely hysterical. I couldn't do anything for him. I ran back to Leaf who was also hysterical. It was like they were one mind, both experiencing some kind of horror that I couldn't break." Donna was breathing harder, "I remembered that I had my medical kit, and that I had sedatives. I went first to Smitty, and gave him the dose of a child. I thought in my rush that if they were mentally connected, sedating him might help her without having to sedate her. When the needle pierced his arm he screamed as if I was murdering him. My home had become a house of horrors and I was in the middle of it, I was in the middle of it." Donna broke down crying.

She rallied herself a few sobs later, determined to tell the story to the end faithfully, saying through her tears, "I told Mitt, 'go home and take care of yourself and your girl. I need to tend to Leaf.' and he did. He went riding off on that bike of his toward home. I was afraid Smitty's mental hold on Leaf might affect Mitt too, so I made him go."

Katy spoke, still gazing out the window, "That was that day you called out of the blue, to chat you said. At dinner time. You were checking up on him."

"Yes." Donna sniffed. "But I didn't know if you knew about Suzy, and the secret must be kept!" she exaggerated mockingly.

"He was ok. He was ok," Katy said, comforting herself, still gazing out the window. "But it had been a weird day. He had come home and landed his bike quickly, not putting it away as usual. He went up to his room and a little later when I checked on him, I found he and Suzy on his bedroom chair. She was on his knees and he was holding her hands. They were just gazing into each others eyes. I thought at the time that it was charming. Now, I think they were healing, or something. Once they had come down to dinner, they seemed ok. Quieter than normal, but happy."

"I'm glad," Donna croaked, and cleared her throat. Crying, and all of the talking this morning had begun to take her voice away. Kevin noticed a box of tissues nearby and handed them toward her.

Donna thankfully took a few and began wiping her face. "I'll get you some water." Kevin offered, and headed to the kitchen. He returned and she sipped some water and collected herself.

"Leaf and Smitty were not ok, however. For the next two days, two days that felt like a nightmare, I tried my best to make sure they stayed comfortable. I tried putting them in the same room, in the same bed, tried keeping Smitty as heavily sedated as I could, letting him come out of sedation, nothing helped. They never regained consciousness, and yet were not fully asleep. They whimpered, both of them, hour after hour. If it hadn't been for Crayton, I don't know what would have happened."

"Who's Crayton?" Nate asked.

Donna looked at him. "Ah!" she said, drawing her attention away from past pain back to the here and now, "Crayton was my savior, and Leaf and Smitty's. At least for now. Crayton is a creatchi 'sage'.. of sorts?" she questioned the term herself, glancing over at Kevin, "Crayton is in the Lab. I perceive now that you did not visit all of the lab offices."

Chapter 52 Crayton

Donna asked Kevin to tell them of Crayton. She herself was worn out from her own story and needed someone else to take over.

Kevin looked up and addressed them.

"My young brother, Weston, is almost eight years old. So, seven days after the storm, he was riding his bicycle on the Bernam Trail. You know that place, right?" he asked them. "Kids call it 'Burning Trail'."

Nate and Katy nodded. It was a well worn and very wide trail bordered with high birch trees that ran right beside the school grounds. The common name always seemed fitting in the fall, when all of the leaves of the birch turned bright yellow.

Kids were always playing there. With the school fields on one side and a row of homes on the other, the trail allowed smaller children to feel like they were playing "in the woods" but still be within the safety of every mother's eye that looked out their back window or who sat on their patios or in their back yards, keeping watch.

The houses, simply two rows with one street between, were filled with families who regarded that area as perfect for their school aged children, for it afforded them the ability to simply walk down the trail to school. They were a tight knit neighborhood who watched out for each other. The town bus system was limited, so most parents drove their children to school every morning, but not the Bernam Trail families.

Years ago, the neighborhood home owners had petitioned the town council to erect a gate at the end of the widest and lowest part of the trail, so that the younger kids could be taught not to venture past the gate. Beyond the gate was a narrower more natural trail that eventually wound up some easy hills, to the High Hill. High Hill was indeed the highest hill in the northeast area, but being a bare brown scar,

and not very tall, it really did not afford pleasing views or pose much attraction to anyone. The hill was where some of the town's oldest caverns lay, caverns that had been turned into mines for a short while. These mines did not pose a threat to children, having been sealed well with iron doors many decades before. The school lay in the northeast part of town. The tourist caves, the ones that allowed gold panning and offered the prettiest views, were situated well southeast of town.

There was an understood hierarchy on the Bernam Trail. The smallest children played catch, rode their bikes, and played with their dogs and frisbees nearest the school, within the end gate. Middle school aged kids could be found hiking the trail past the gate, attempting to ride their bikes on the uneven trail, or spending the day doing all sorts of things that kids come up with, from making makeshift forts in tree clearings, to making flower crowns on a grassy hillside. The middle school aged kids also played watchman, making sure that the younger ones did not stray onto their "turf". The area posed no real attraction for high schoolers, who generally preferred the heavier forested adventures in the southeast, and preferred to stay away from their perceived "natural playground" crawling with "small children".

Kevin continued, "Weston was riding his bike on Bernam. He says he heard a cry - 'something' crying out. He asked the other kids around him if they heard it too, and they didn't know what he was talking about. Kids were playing all around him, talking, laughing. No one could hear anything else. Weston put his bike down and apparently hiked up the hills by himself to the caverns without any other kids seeing him. That in itself is a feat. You know those trails are always loaded with kids. So apparently, he gets up to High Hill, near the farthest cavern, and hears the cry again.

The last iron door there that seals the largest cave is still shut, but some erosion on the far side has made a little gap."

"He heard it again, more clearly, at that point. Just sort of a cry out, not sobbing really - like a toddler seeing if someone is there, you know?"

"So Weston pokes his head in the gap and sees some light streaming in from the very top, from a crack in the hill. He sees an old mining track and a decrepit mining car sitting on it. Inside the car he sees eyes peering out at him. He couldn't get in through the crack, so he just shoved his shoulder in, and reached out his hand. A little ettinchi crawls out of the car, and comes and holds his hand."

"This is seven days after the storm, mind you. He 'heard' this cry all the way down the trail, when this creature was up inside a cave, where only a gap could allow sound to escape. So, this creature comes to Weston's arm and holds it, like hugging it. It looks up at him and Weston tells me that the ettinchi wanted him to take him out of the cave. Weston felt he should take him down the trail. Oh and he was wearing pants."

"Wait, what? The ettinchi?" Nate interrupted.

"Yes. Pants." Kevin said seriously, nodding once.

"Weston is able to squeeze the ettinchi out the gap, jams him in his jacket and runs all the way back down the trail. He runs into the house and there I am, making lunch. I notice him, breathing hard, looking sort of, well unlike Weston. My brother has always been cerebral, you know, methodical, not the bouncy type of kid, not athletic. But there he is, looking 'wired' and completely sweaty and out of breath. So I investigate and make him open his coat, and I find the creature. This creature looks at me, as if he is looking right through me, and says one word."

Kevin, who had leaned forward more and more as his story went on, said. "Ophelia."

He sat back and let the name sink in to his audience.

Chapter 53

Twins of Science

Katy piped up, perturbed again, "You all have been saying that they can not read minds. How did Weston hear this ettinchi? Why have you been saying that they can not read minds, if they so obviously can. Well," she corrected herself, "if not read, then project a message? But no, 'it' projected a message to a particular boy who was outside, who was available to hear the message! It has to be something of mind reading, doesn't it?"

Kevin answered, "They can't read each others minds, we don't think. They don't seem able to communicate mentally to one another at all. But they certainly have proven to get what they want out of us, communicating..somehow. Weston is the only one we know of, at least the only one who remembers, hearing actual sound, somehow mentally, when there could have been no actual sound. There is no way that this ettinchi's cry could be heard down on the lower trail. Somehow, it made Weston to hear it. Anyway, it's another detail we haven't figured out, yet. But, at least, at that point, hearing Ophelia's name, I knew to go straight to Donna."

Donna now continued, "Kevin knows Ophelia. Kevin's interest in the medical field had him by my side learning about medicine all through high school, even traveling to the city with me on several occasions. He's met Ophelia many times, when she comes to visit every summer. She always stays with me for a month or two. We don't understand it, but this ettinchi meant to come, to come and help my niece." she looked to Kevin.

"So what then?" Katy asked, "Kevin takes this new ettinchi to you Donna and what? You said he saved you.."

Donna answered, "Kevin and Weston came to my house. This ettinchi, went right in to the lab room as if he'd been in the place before. We followed him and he turns to us and says, 'I need to work. I need work room.'"

"Not 'eem'?" Nate asked, noting the better English of the creature.

"Right." Donna said, nodding to Nate that he had the right idea, "in perfect English. Him, in his ridiculous little blue pants. He just took over." she smiled. It seemed easy for her to accept, to state it so simply. It was more difficult for Nate and Katy.

Nate considered Donna's predicament. She must have truly been at her wits end to regard this little being with such immediate respect. She must have been so desperate and here comes this little mind that seems to know exactly what to do, taking charge.

It must have comforted her greatly, to come into contact with 'someone' who seemed to offer a solution.

Donna, the decisive one, who always knew what course to prescribe, what tests to take, what steps to follow to ease pain and to heal the wounded. She had been, maybe for the first time in her life, completely lost, completely without hope. He could see why she called this little one her "savior".

Donna continued, "So, over the next three days, I rented the warehouse, we secreted Leaf and Smitty there, and Crayton."

Kevin interjected, "Weston had named him before he even had gotten him home that first day."

"Yes," Donna continued, "Crayton chose the lab rooms that Leaf and Smitty should be in, and began to tell us he needed metal. We didn't know for what. But in three more days time, we had supplied a truckload of metal from the scrap yard, and overnight the cube was made. That glorious cube, somehow, puts Leaf and Smitty at ease. No more whimpering, no more tension. They relaxed. They are stable." her eyes hit the floor, as if she was remembering the flood of emotional relief that the cube, that Crayton, must have provided her.

"How did he make THAT?" Nate asked.

"What are you talking about? I get that there is a lab, but..what cube?" Katy interjected.

"We don't know." Donna shrugged, ignoring Katy. "He made it in the room. He, somehow by himself, made it and then got Smitty on top of it."

"Crayton... 'explains' things, at least, what he knows, in his sleepy kind of halting way. He gets sleepier every day, almost like he is winding down." Donna added sadly.

She added, "It was he who told us the beings were 'creatchi', told us the species names. Told us there were 'many more'." Donna continued, "Once he told us that, Kevin and I were on a mission. We designated my exam room in town as the first "Meeting Place" and invited Mitt." she smiled. "We knew he had one already, after all, and now that Leaf was stable, we could pull our heads together and see what Mitt's creatchi knew. Crayton heard us talking of the meeting and told us he wanted to be there, and Crayton told us to also invite Jim. We didn't even know Jim had a creatchi. So we did, we invited them. Crayton, Suzy, and Jim's grendlechi, 'Truck' were the first meeting of the official 'creatchi club'." Donna folded her arms, happy now that she had told them the beginnings of everything. It felt good to let it off her chest, to have two more people she could explain things to, people who were smart, who could help her think it all out, to ask smart questions and challenge what they thought they knew.

"Wait," Katy blinked.. "So, Old Mack's norncchi was the 'fourth' creature Mitt found? Why on earth does he keep telling everyone that Mack's was the first?"

"Because that meeting, my dear, was a secret. I don't mean it was a secret between us owners, not a secret we keep safe to ourselves to protect our creatchies, or Leaf, or Crayton, or something. It was a meeting of the creatchies themselves. They met, they spoke in their own language, as if they were planning, as if they were holding a briefing. Kevin and I thought it was our idea, but I know it was not, now."

Donna slowed her speech to bring her point into perfect clarity, "Mitt, Jim, Kevin, Weston, and I went away from it and by the next day forgot it ever happened."

Resuming her normal speed, she added, "I wouldn't remember now, except for one thing. I had taped it, simply for review later, not knowing it would become evidence in itself of how affected we actually are, our minds. I discovered the tape a few days later, forgot it was even in the camera, and I watched it over and over and over. I still don't think I remember the meeting, but I remember the video recording. I made Kevin to watch it several times too. That was where Mitt was told, by Crayton, how to introduce creatchies together, that is where Mitt and I were made to understand that to make a creatchi do something it didn't want to do would harm it. And that was where I learned that I could not hold a creatchi against its will, ever. We were told, we were instructed. We were to find the others, hold regular meetings with them. They spoke in their own languages to themselves, gave us our instructions, and then the meeting ended."

"Wow!" Nate said loudly, standing up. His head felt ready to explode. He was about to ask about a hundred questions all at once. But he was interrupted by the scream.

Chapter 54 Your Turn

"Nate!" Mitt's voice screamed again.

Everyone jumped up and ran out Katy's door.

Mitt was on Nate's deck, the kitchen door was opened wide. Suzy clung to his side and tears began streaming down both of their faces. Mitt hung his head as everyone ran to Nate's door.

Katy grabbed Mitt by his arms, "What is it! What is it!" she begged.

"It's Liddy!" he cried.

Nate jumped inside the door and found Liddy lying on the kitchen floor. He scooped her up into his arms and ran out to where the sun's light could show her to him more clearly.

Lying her on the soft grass, and looking her over, his head snapped up to Mitt. "What's happening?" Nate said loudly. Nate felt her pulse and listened to her breath. Donna also knelt down and began examining her. "What happened!" Nate demanded.'

Mitt took a breath, "Liddy came over to get some coloring books. I saw a man. He was in black. He ran out of your house with a pillow case or something. I ran into the house and found Liddy. PRS is gone." he sobbed. "The bag was moving. I think he took him."

"Which way did he run?" Kevin asked, ready to take off after him.

Mitt pointed to the back of the house. "The woods." Mitt sobbed. Katy held Mitt close.

Kevin simply took off, and Andrew followed close after. Richard, who knew the much younger, slimmer men would outrun him easily, stayed with the group.

Donna told them that it didn't look like Liddy had suffered a blow of any kind. As far as Donna could tell, she was simply passed out. She added, "We have to bring her to the Lab, we have instruments there to make sure what is happening to her, and we have Crayton."

"OK." Nate said weakly. He had no further ideas. He was empty, lost without his Liddy. His heart sank as he remembered Leaf again. Is it Liddy's turn?

"I'll drive." Richard offered.

They headed toward the SUV. Katy and Mitt headed to their own car. Katy asked about the men who ran down the trail.

Just then the two men appeared again in the back yard, panting, and saying they could find no trace of the man who had taken PRS. There were too many directions to take, and they couldn't hear nor see anything of him. They trotted across the yard to the others as they spoke, heading also to the vehicles.

Richard got into the driver's seat, and Donna the front passenger. Nate, holding on to Liddy, got into the back seat of the SUV with the help of Kevin and Andrew. Liddy lay across Nate's lap, still unconscious.

Kevin and Andrew jumped into the back seats of Katy's car.

There was no thought to locking, or even shutting, house doors. Everyone sped off in the direction of the warehouse lab.

Mike had been managing the lab alone all morning, really he never left the lab, he slept in one of the office rooms designated for rest. Just like a hospital environment, someone was always at the lab. They had to be, for Leaf, and for Crayton and Smitty. If you worked too many hours, as they all were prone to do, and you needed a nap, the cot room was the place for that. With a room for rest, a small kitchen and dining area, and a tv room, one really could live fairly comfortably at the lab. Mike rarely left not because he needed a place, but because he was dedicated to the cause. Being a nornchi 'uncle' himself, he knew on a deep and personal level the importance of their mission.

Having annual medical training as part of his hobbies, being the town scout club master, meant he could be trusted to monitor the devices that surrounded the three vital occupants of the lab. He was rarely left alone to monitor them, but after the uproar last night, he knew the reason for it. He expected to be joined later in the afternoon by the others. Possibly, even to meet their newest members, according to Richard's call this morning.

Kevin and Andrew, who had popped in late the night before, had awakened Mike on his cot and got him up to date on the "Nate situation".

Mike still shuddered at the thought of the encounter Nate had with Smitty. He was glad, at least, that it had not been him this time. Mike himself had made the mistake of touching Smitty once, weeks ago. He'd been laid low to the floor, as if hit by a semi, with a slew of fears and feelings he never wanted to feel again.

They had since set up strict safety protocols to care for Smitty. No touching allowed, not even with gloves. They had hypothesized that the flow of feelings was some kind of defense mechanism that the

nornchi emanated. It did its job well, anyway! It certainly protected the nornchi against anyone who might want to harm or even move him!

Mike had been told that Donna's options were to either induct Nate into the research team, or ask Crayton to wipe their minds, if he would. You never knew what Crayton would do. For that matter, you never really knew what was your idea and what was Crayton's, and he was sleepier by the day. It was hard to even wake him at all any more.

Mike was surprised then, when at 11:30 in the morning, the lab door burst open and a whole crew flooded in. They piled into Leaf's room and began examining and speaking to little Liddy, like a scene right out of an E.R.

"Can you hear me, Liddy? Open your eyes if you can hear me.." Donna pleaded.

Mike's heart sank. Not again. Not another child.

Mike looked them over and noticed only Mitt's creatchi, Suzy. Maybe it wasn't like Leaf, this time.

"Mike," Donna called, seeing him by the door, "Get me my medical bag, please." Mike ran to the central office, grabbed her bag and returned. Donna poured over the girl, checking all of her vitals. Nate paced back and forth, rubbing his hands in his hair, out of his mind to help, knowing he couldn't.

"Let's get her on the EKG." Donna looked up, eyeing the one now monitoring Leaf.

Mike chimed in, "Donna, you can use the one in Crayton's room, there's an extra bed there too."

Donna replied that it was a good idea and the entire group moved to the hallways on the opposite side of the building. Donna opened a door and revealed a large office space. They lay Liddy on a small hospital gurney. She was so still. Nate kept pacing. No one moved to remove him from the room, as might happen in a hospital. No one could have, if they had tried.

Katy noticed the ettinchi, who was sort of standing on an angled sort of padded bed board in the center of the room, apparently asleep, medical equipment all around him. She also noticed some chairs on the other side of the ettinchi's "bed", and took her son to them to sit him down.

Mitt was crying softly, one hand covering his face, Suzy still held close in his other arm. Seeing the man steal PRS, finding Liddy, and now seeing Leaf, was too much for Mitt. Katy tried to soothe him best she could, but the situation, and the atmosphere in the room, seemed bleak.

Andrew helped Donna get Liddy monitored and Donna, after having finally exhausted all of her testing methods, said to them all, "She seems ok. She does not appear to be in any immediate physical distress. Her heart and pulse are strong. She is breathing normally. I can't find a lump on her anywhere. She seems ok, except that she has.. fainted. I think as soon as we find PRS, she should recover. I'm hoping that is all this is. It's my best theory right now. She seems stable, except for just being 'out'." She looked sternly to Nate, assuring him with her expression that the news she gave him was indeed her best deduction.

Nate seemed to exhale all the air in his lungs at once. He went to his daughter and leaned over her little body, and sobbed quietly, whispering. "We'll find him Liddy, he whispered. I promise, we will find

him."

Everyone let Nate have his time, no one was in a rush to do anything. They all took a few breaths, all sorted out their emotions and thoughts, just let a few minutes pass to grasp the situation that had now befallen them.

Finally, having recovered himself sufficiently, Mitt spoke up. "We have to find PRS. What do we do first?" He looked at the adults, everyone in the world he trusted most. But the answer did not come from them. The answer came from Crayton.

Chapter 55 A Matter of Control

Mitt and Katy were looking toward the other adults, and the group was looking back toward them. The ettinchi lay between them. His eyes opened and Mike noticed first.

"Crayton's awake." he whispered.

"I need up." Crayton's little matter of fact voice said, the smallest voice they had yet heard.

Mike sped over to him and tilted the table bed to 90 degrees, locking it in place and then unstrapping the ettinchi's mid section, a soft velcro strap to simply keep him from rolling off his "bed". It wasn't a restraint, really. Crayton himself could have unstrapped his own waist, if he had wanted to. Getting down might have been a problem, for a foot board affixed to the middle of the bed kept Crayton high enough to be easily spoken to, and if needed, medical attention given, at a much easier height for the humans to deal with.

Now that Crayton's bed was tilted up, and his mid section freed, he stood on the foot board, turned, and looked around him. He seemed to have no intention of getting down, or asking someone to get him down, staying at the height where he could most easily see all of the people in the room, and where they could see him.

He was a very small and wiry haired ettinchi. He was all tan colored, a very flat color. The wiriness of his hair, sticking out here and there, really was the most notable thing about him. Other than that, he was very plain and small.

He spoke again, looking directly at Mitt. "We wait."

"Hello Crayton. Welcome back." Donna addressed him softly, moving closer. "What do we wait for?" she asked.

Crayton looked to Nate, "Do not leave." he stated.

Nate's surprised expression seemed to indicate that the ettinchi might have just read his mind. But he remembered that Research was determined to defend, that they could not read minds. So, he was stuck, wondering how the ettinchi knew that Nate was about to suggest they go search. Nate was anxious to

do 'something', torn between scrambling about the entire town and all of the trails to find the man dressed in black, or staying with Liddy. But, how could Crayton know that?

"I know you." Crayton said to Nate. "I know her." he said looking at Liddy. "She will be well. Just wait. It will be so, and it is true, and it is good."

Donna pried her eyes away from what seemed to be the lab's 'little treasure', and noticed Nate's expression. She said to him, "Crayton is supremely empathetic. He can read facial and body language to a degree not even trained service dogs can match. He can not read your mind, Nate. He only reads you."

"Crayton has not been awake for days, have you little one?" Donna said softly, turning back to Crayton, and bending down slightly to be at his eye level.

Crayton simply looked at her, and said nothing.

Mitt, awed by the awakened ettinchi, wondered at his odd way of speaking. The words he said were hard to understand, somehow. Mitt asked him, "Do you know where PRS is?"

But Crayton turned his head to Mike instead, saying, "I am hungry Mike. Feed us?""

"Sure thing!" Mike said, delighted that Crayton was back. He left for the kitchen room, to make sandwiches for everyone.

Richard bent down toward the ettinchi, saying softly, "Hey little buddy, glad to see you awake. Where have you been off to?"

Crayton looked at Richard, and said nothing.

Katy wondered about the way the ettinchi chose to remain silent when others who obviously cared about him asked him questions. It was so different than all of the other creatchi she had met. It was completely different than the very responsive and always pleasing, and even pleasantly submissive, Suzy. She asked, "Is he always like this?"

"No." Donna said slowly, her eyebrows raised high, her head shook gently, "No, he hasn't been this vocal in a long time."

"That's not what I meant, really." Katy answered, unsure whether she should rephrase it.

"I think he's a boss." Mitt said.

Katy nodded. That pretty much summed it up for her. He did not acquiesce to anyone. Maybe because he belonged to Donna? "Wait," Katy realized, "Is Crayton Weston's ettinchi? I mean, Weston is not here, is he? In another room?" her face fell as she considered that little Weston himself might be 'sleeping' at the lab also.

"No," Donna replied, "Once Weston discovered him and Kevin brought him to me, no one has been bonded to him. Weston was not even bonded. Crayton seems to be.. all his own."

"OK, so has anyone figured out why Crayton has an Irish accent?" Katy asked, dryly.

Could things get any weirder.

Chapter 56 Shifting Topic

"It's called brogue, and no." Donna stood up straight again. She sighed, "Why was he in a cave. How could Weston hear him. Why does he speak with perfect grammar, and yet have an accent. Why does he seem to know things that no one else knows. Why does he seem so mature compared to other creatchi. Why does he sleep for days on end, barely rousing to eat once a week, and then fall back into sleep, without saying a word. Why does he know so much... and on and on.. No." she finished, wagging her head. Apparently, Donna could boast to being as frustrated as Nate and Katy sometimes, in her lack of knowledge. "And for crying out loud, why was he wearing pants!" she ended, exasperated.

Nate was getting a view into Donna's mind today that he could have never expected. No wonder she was hard to get a hold of. How could he ever pull himself away from Liddy's side and go conduct meetings with the other creatchi, as Donna had done. Her drive to know answers stemmed not from a purely scientific mind, but her need to help Leaf, and probably her emotional need to atone for what had happened to Leaf and Smitty, which she had already indicated she felt responsible for.

Donna suggested they go to the lunch area, so as not to eat in a place that was supposed to be kept as clean as possible, especially now that they had a new patient, Liddy.

Nate went outside the door to Liddy's room, but physically couldn't move his legs any farther, looking back in at his "sleeping" daughter. The very perceptive Kevin, brought him a sandwich. The others hung about in the dining area, and spilled just outside the dining room door, being handed and beginning to eat their sandwiches. The lunch room was just steps away, so Nate would be able to hear people talking easily, as he kept watch over Liddy. Richard brought Crayton to the dining table, and sat him in the middle, Kevin handing him a vegetarian looking sandwich.

Crayton sat smack dab in the middle of the table, and took tiny bites of his all wheat, vegetable layered, quarter sandwich, nibbling like a rabbit.

Mitt sat in a chair at the table, a ham sandwich and a handful of potato chips in front of him on a paper plate. Suzy knelt on his lap, her ears twitching and her eyes peering just over the edge of the table at Crayton, as if she was in awe of him.

Every once in a while her little hand would slowly venture up to the table and whisk away a potato chip. Then munching would be heard. It was all she had the nerve to do, in front of the all-knowing Crayton. Mitt, mesmerized by the ettinchi's bunny nibbling, grinned in spite of himself, and in spite of all that had happened. Crayton was adorable - commanding, eery, distinguished, and tiny - an adorable little boss.

It was a hushed lunch, for everyone was focused on Crayton, and Crayton said nothing. Finally, Crayton held his arms up, which was the cue for Richard to come. Richard took him back to his room,

and stood him again on his odd bed stand.

Crayton's eyes closed and he laid his head back, and yet when Kevin came around to tilt his bed back for him, his little hand rose as if to stop him.

Everyone milled about, some went to bathrooms, some chatted in low tones. Mike checked on Leaf and Smitty, his normal rounds, and returned.

Mitt said to his mom, "I wonder how long we have to wait."

"I don't know." Katy replied, clasping his hand.

Nate, whose mind had now had time to collect itself, resigned to the mercy that, at least Liddy was stable, began to turn the subject to the abduction of PRS.

"Donna, the man who took PRS. I think we have seen him before. Someone was casing our house night before last, and someone was watching us having a picnic at Windy Woods yesterday. I thought he was with 'Research'. I thought you were spying on us, but he must have taken PRS."

"It makes sense," Donna replied, "I myself have thought someone has been watching me. I thought it might be the government."

"You saw someone?" Nate asked.

"Just a shadow here and a noise there. Always out of sight, but too many coincidences to call it my imagination." she replied.

"You didn't warn anyone?" Nate asked.

"It was only recently that I was aware. And so much else has been going on, that I hadn't gotten around to addressing it.

I really wasn't sure what to do about it. Do I frighten everyone by bringing it up at a meeting? I was just talking to Richard yesterday morning about it, asking him how we could perhaps trap the person and demand who he was working for." she added, "I only ever got the impression that he was around at night time. So, it seemed video cameras alone would not be effective to find out who it was."

Richard remembered, "Oh, that's right. We were supposed to buy motion sensors today and begin to set a trap."

Donna asked, "Has anyone else felt like they were being watched, or followed?"

Everyone murmured negatives to the question.

Suddenly a faint ring could be heard. The central office's phone began to ring. Andrew excused himself and went to answer it.

"Well," Katy chimed in, "If none of the rest of us have, and if we can reasonably assume that we would have noticed, then perhaps it isn't a group? Maybe it is someone following just you two? Donna, when

you did you first notice someone?"

Donna answered, "A week ago, I think."

"I took the garbage out at midnight, having gotten home late from the lab, and I thought I heard a footstep in the alley, as if someone stepped back in order not to be seen. I thought it was my imagination, or maybe a cat, but I took note of it just in case. Then, the next night, I thought I saw a shadow out my living room window. I turned on the porch light. I didn't open the door, for I am not stupid, but I heard dogs down the street barking just after."

Richard added, "I even offered to crouch in the alley and just wait for him.. or her, but Donna was afraid if it were some kind of government or corporate type spy, or investigator, or whatever, that I might get shot."

"Richard, I can't afford to lose anyone, however it might happen. Really, I appreciated your bravado, but we all need to be careful. We all need each other, and I don't think we even realize ourselves how deeply." Donna added.

Mike, now piped up, "Crayton." he said.

Everyone looked over at the ettinchi, who was standing awake and looking toward the wall, to some undetermined spot above Mitt and Katy's heads.

His little voice said, "It is time."

Chapter 57

Openings

The group heard the main door open.

Mike and Richard, closest to the room's door, ran to check out who might be coming.

"Augh! Did anyone lock the door?" Richard whined, disappointed in their lack of protocol, yet again.

Nate followed a few seconds later, and peeked around the corner of the hall. He saw the backs of Mike and Richard frozen solid. Beyond them, light was streaming in from the apparently wide open main door, and streaming in also were creatchi, and creatchi owners. All of them.

Andrew, having heard a commotion, came out the main office's other door and headed to the right, around to the entrance hall. The children, adults, and creatchi poured into the hall and turned left toward Mike and Richard. The part of the hall that Andrew found himself in was clear, so he was able to poke his head around the entering crowd and look beyond them, towards the outside.

In the parking lot could be seen dozens of people, all calling names. Calling children's' names, and loved one's names. Apparently, this group walked here, and had been followed by their friends and families, all concerned, worried, frenzied.

It made sense now, the call. On the phone had been a distraught parent, claiming her son and his creatchi had just been with her in their home, and now they both were missing.

The group entering in walked carefully, not tripping, not passing each other, just marched somberly as a cohesive unit, slowly entering and filling the hallway in front of Mike and Richard. Quiet, all of them with creatchies in hand, or held in their arms, or perched on their shoulder.

Once each person arrived, they sat down in the hall, on the floor, directly in front of the two men blocking the hallway. Their creatchies stood before them on the floor. All of them, human and creatchi alike, stared at Mike and Richard, who were dumbstruck.

Richard held his hands up, and not knowing really what to say, stammered, "Now, now.. children, you're not really allowed to come in here." Everyone looked up at him, as if listening, not one obeying him in any way.

They had arrived, as they were supposed to, at the right time, and so they waited.

Back in the room, the others waited for a report from any of the men as to what was going on out there. Then, Liddy woke up all at once, sat straight up, and screamed.

Nate tore around the corner back into the room and Donna was immediately by her bedside as well.

She sat there, panting, looking distraught, entranced.

Crayton's voice interrupted their questions to Liddy, and he said, 'Gently now, do not let her go'.

Nate, Donna and Katy all began to try and persuade the moving Liddy, who was turning, as if to get out of the bed. Even Mitt ran over to her bedside. All of them were talking at once. All gently trying to prevent Liddy, who seemed not in her right mind.

It was difficult, for everyone was sorely afraid of using force of any kind. Liddy, her hair disheveled and looking like a mad person, pale, sweaty, and still breathing hard, began to try and head toward the doorway, through a sea of slow moving arms, to get into the hall. The more they gently tried to turn or hold on to her, the more she writhed and the more she began to cry out and claw her way past them.

Liddy slowly waded through the curtain of arms, slowly gaining ground, heading out the room's door.

Everyone was talking at once, speaking to Liddy and to one another, "Here get her hand there, we can't restrain her, the ettinchi said gently, how do we prevent her, Oh Liddy honey please stop, she's going to hurt herself.." and on and on in almost slow motion, all working together as carefully as they could.

Mitt stopped helping. His arms dropped to his side, and he began walking, zombie like, toward the room's door. Katy noticed at once. She began calling his name. Now the adults had two children to worry about. Not knowing what was out in the hallway just made it all the worse for Katy and Donna. Nate knew who was in the hall, but he was afraid nonetheless of what would happen to Liddy should she join them, having lost PRS. Liddy, always so nervous about what the others thought of her performance. Maybe it was Judgment Day.

Mitt forced his way out of the room, walked past Richard, and stood in front of the crowd assembled before him. Suzy had followed right behind him, not attempting in any way to help or stop him. Mitt did an about face, and sat down among the rest, Suzy standing in front of him just as the others had.

Richard grabbed Katy who was about to launch past him and grab her son up from the crowd, frantic that he was not himself. "No, no, see he's ok he's ok. He's staying, he's just going to sit with them, ok...? Whatever's happening, he's safe here, alright?"

She stopped and suddenly noticed everyone else. She stood there, as dumbfounded as the other two men had been. She could hear faint cries coming from the direction of the main door, from apparently the parking lot.

Katy would not be able to satisfy her curiosity there, due to the impenetrable block of people and creatchi in front of her. However, the steady, staring eyes directed her way were more fascinating, anyway.

Nate and Donna still tried to deal with Liddy, just outside the door, and so did not notice Crayton, who climbed down off of his bed, and walked right past them into the hall. He walked up behind Richard, who still stood facing the crowd, hands outspread, as if to keep them from coming in any further, although they were calmly sitting. Richard just didn't know what else to do.

Crayton began climbing up the back of Richard. Richard's head snapped down to his leg as he felt 'something' crawling on him. "Oh!" he said, when he realized it was Crayton. This was new. The ettinchi's grunts and gasps of effort could be heard down the quiet hall, and Richard just froze, and let him. Katy watched him as well, stupefied.

"What is going on.." Katy said quietly.

"Maybe he is going to give a speech?" Richard whispered back.

Crayton sat on Richard's shoulder, surveying the crowd, who now looked up at him and him alone.

Crayton said loudly, "Now. Let her go!"

Chapter 58 Letting Go

This directive, which could only be meant for Nate and Donna, the only two people now moving or doing anything at all, stunned the adults. They let Liddy go. Nate reached out after her, afraid for her, not really wanting do what the boss ettinchi had commanded.

Liddy scrambled past Katy and stood in front of the group, wild eyed and pale as with fright, panting and looking forward, focused on nothing.

Nate knelt beside Mike, reaching out slightly toward Liddy, choking back tears. He watched his precious girl, watching her wild eyes, wishing she would come back to him.

Just then, rounding up the very back of the group, a shadow began to grow on the wall, as one more came through the open door. Arriving into the hall was a man dressed in black.

Every human and creatchi present turned to look at him.

He was haggard, thin, old as the sun, unkempt as a wandering madman, dirty as a homeless soul who has not found a shower in many weeks. And in his arms he cradled a calm and serene Purple Rain Sprinkles.

Liddy yelled and opened her arms up toward the man, and the man opened his arms and let PRS down. Using the sitting human's heads like stepping stones to cross a river, PRS quickly jumped his way from head to head to head, like a little monkey, over into the arms of his girl.

Liddy immediately caught him and dropped to the floor, crying and laughing, kissing him over and over. Nate was crying too, for very different reasons. She was back, he could tell, she had come back to them. PRS looked over to him, and reach out his small arm, inviting Nate to the fold, inviting him to healing, inviting him to joy.

Then a sound began, a weird and wiry hum, growing into a moan and all eyes turned back to Crayton whose throaty growly sounds exploded into a "Ha ha ha ha!!!!" and he leaped from Richard's shoulder full force across the span of the inhabited hallway, like a flying squirrel, landing in the arms of the man in black.

"Kryton! Kryton my son!" the man sobbed, holding the ettinchi and swaying with him. His long lost loved one, at home in his arms, where he belonged. The man's speech was thick and undeniable, it carried the same exact accent as the ettinchi.

A few moments passed, a few breaths were held, and a few thoughts raced through the minds of those who knew enough to piece it all together. Crayton, or rather now corrected to "Kryton" was bonded. He had been "taken" from his owner, and apparently by his own free will. He had called out to Weston, and was taken, with one clue and one mission on his lips: "Ophelia." Kryton had left his owner, and had come to help Ophelia. Kryton had made the box. Kryton self sacrificed his own health, and even temporarily the peace of mind of his owner, to help another. Somehow Kryton knew he was needed, the chief assembler, the chief machinist, the chief of the creatchi. Kryton had been needed, and so Kryton had sacrificed all to come. Kryton was a savior. Indeed Kryton was a prince among creatchi.

Chapter 59 The Triple

Everyone in the hall now rose up, Mitt along with them. Even the old man in black stiffened, and holding his arm to his own mid section so that Kryton could stand on it, turned and walked down the hall. The group moved as one unit. The Research team sped around the other direction, down the back hall, to head the group off and to see what room they were headed to. The old man, now in the lead of the group, was still sniffing through tears of gladness, and Nate saw him and those following him round

the corner. They arrived at Smitty's door. Andrew, still in that part of the hallway, opened the door for them. The undulating waves from the cube spilled out into the hall.

Donna, Nate, Katy, and the others, unable to cut in between the children, waited until they had all filed into the room, before they could also enter. The group of creatchi and owners had filed in to the right, so the other adults entered and went left. This way they could see what was happening, and not block or hinder the others. They were aware of the danger that Smitty possessed, but also aware that these creatures, who were obviously in control, knew more than they did, about everything.

Donna whispered, and somehow, through the cube's sound waves, Andrew heard her, "Please Andrew, check on Leaf." He nodded and left at once.

The creatchi owners assembled and arranged themselves. They grouped by height, like a choir might, allowing the smaller children to be in the front, so that all could see Smitty and see the room.

The man in black and Kryton stood beside Smitty, the sleeping nornchi.

Nate remembered Smitty's crimson eyes popping open when he had touched his shoulder. It gave him the creeps. There seemed something sinister and eery about Smitty. Nate wondered if it was a pavlovian response though. After all, Nate had been burned, and so had learned not to touch the stove.

Andrew popped his head into the door, caught Donna's attention, and shook his head.

Leaf then, was not awake. Donna re-aligned her gaze to the room's center occupant.

Nate looked over at Liddy. She smiled at him calmly. So, she was not really in a 'trance', but she looked content to be where she was, content to hold PRS' hand and be with the others. He smiled back. That was enough for Nate, for now. The creatchi owners were in place, and so all attention shifted to the room's center.

The cube seemed to make the room sway, or make Nate sway, he wasn't sure which. He wished he could ask the others how they felt and what they heard. He wasn't sure they would all give the same answer. He remembered having waded through the cube's wavelengths. He remembered having to go sideways to cut through. The man in black hadn't done that, they simply walked slowly up to Smitty's side. Nate wondered if the few hundred questions that every day seemed to spawn would ever find their answers. He wondered, once everything came to an end today, whatever end appeared, if it would even matter any more.

The old craggy man held Kryton out and stood him up next to Smitty on the gray box. The man lightly held Kryton by the sides, as if to steady him amid the sound waves, or to steady him for what would happen next.

Kryton looked down at Smitty. He looked to the group of children and raised a hand.

Then, Liddy stood out of place, and brought PRS toward Smitty's cube, to the side nearest Nate and the other adults. Then Jim stood out of place from the group, and brought Truck to the third side of the cube. PRS was stood up on the other side of Smitty. Truck was placed up at Smitty's feet.

Then, all of the creatchi began to trill, louder and louder. Kryton bent down and touched the box with

one hand, and Smitty's head with the other, and the cube's waves stop dead.

The horror that befell Nate now fell like a blanket, clearly a visible, tangible object, swirling, smokey and black, on top of them all. Nate fell to his knees to avoid it in an instant act of self preservation, as if it would crush him physically. For he had been burned, and his very flesh sought to avoid repeating that pain. But it fell for just a second, as if it fell just far enough to brush their heads and shoulders and then was immediately raised again, without any harm. The trill of the creatchies itself seemingly lifting it up, up, and up until it disappeared back into the ceiling.

Smitty's eyes began to flutter open.

Donna gasped, "Leaf!" She had to know what was happening to Leaf, right now!

Donna ran to Leaf's room, Andrew trailing behind, just in time to see the girl's eyes fluttering open. Donna peered down into them to see if the girl was indeed consciously awake, and indeed she was. Many, many hugs and kisses and tears were passed between the aunt and her beloved niece.

No longer to be called 'the patient', for Leaf and Smitty would never be stricken again.

Nate and everyone else in the now silent room turned to see Donna holding Leaf in the doorway. Smitty, now sitting up, held out his arms and Donna took Leaf to him. The reunion of the three was sweet, and lovely, and perfect.

All of the creatchies sang a new song, and it was a real song, with real creatchi words. Everyone understood the words, even the owners. It was so, and it was true, and it was good. Later, no one could recall the exact words or meaning of the song, but many of them dreamed a form of it, for months afterwards.

Chapter 60 Final Secret

Four days later, a creatchi club meeting took place. All of the creatchi, all 18 for the first time, were in attendance, for everyone wanted to come. It was in the night of course, back at the Old Museum. The ancient basement was full of new life. There were games, hugs, laughter, and much talk among friends. There was still much to learn, much to understand, and many questions to be answered.

The assumed "chiefs" of the creatchi, Kryton, PRS, and Truck, at one point gathered themselves in the center of the room and made a display of hand, head and body movements that were like a dance. The rest of the creatchi gathered around and clapped and chattered a kind of drum beat, going faster and faster until the humans cheered with uproarious applause at the wonder of the three working together so very quickly and precisely. The group was louder than they had ever been, the secrecy hush seemed forgotten on this night of celebration and triumph.

Near the end of the meeting, "Research" called everyone to the back of the building, and Donna stood in front of the sitting group, to give her report.

Giving a very brief account of the lab event, for almost everyone had already been there, except for those who had been left out in the parking lot, or had been searching for their lost loved ones elsewhere, Donna broached the subject of the "creatchi school".

Announcing the successful completion of the process to create and run the new "quarantined" school, and giving the location, everyone applauded. Many were surprised and happy, not having even been aware that such a solution had been in the works. But then, somewhere a voice rose up strong and sure, and simply said, "No."

Donna, motioned for everyone to settle back down, saying, "Wait, what? Who is speaking?"

"I am speaking." said a wee voice with a wee accent.

"Kryton!" Donna said, astonished.

At a loss for what Kryton might mean, she made a short confused gasp and spread her hands wide. Donna motioned him up, saying, "OK, genius. What are we doing?" Donna smirked, and everyone giggled and chattered.

Three days since the lab incident, days of asking Kryton many questions, and getting many answers, had made Donna more at ease with Kryton, much more at ease with everything.

Connor, formerly "the man in black", now dressed freshly, clean, and in his right mind, brought his ettinchi to the stage, and set him in front of himself. Kryton, standing on Connor's forearm, leaning back on Connor's chest, his favorite position in all the world, put his small hands out before him, preparing to address the group.

It was a scene to be repeated many times, the meetings, the shifting speakers, and the attentive crowd.

There was a stack of research papers lying at the other end of the room, ready to provide many answers and set forth new theories. They also asked more questions, a pattern that would always be repeated. These papers sat, stacked high by the door, ready to be taken home, read, and burned.

These past three days Connor had become a favorite of the other owners. He had suffered much, and he was now loved much. He was still craggy, old as the sun, but his smile shined as bright. He had left Kryton with Donna for a period of time each day for a question and answer session between the two science types, while he visited everyone he had formerly "followed", when he had been out of his mind, lost without his ettinchi. It turns out, he had followed half of the families, for at least a few nights each, hoping to find his "boy", to bring him "home" to their secret cave. Connor had apologized in person to everyone he had frightened, including Nate and Liddy. Kryton and Connor now lived at the lab.

Connor was fully back to his normal self, his best self. His beautiful, gentle, right mind was a wonder and a delight, charismatic and inviting. By being connected to Kryton, somehow, Connor was connected to everyone.

All creatchi and creatchi owners loved Connor, the formerly homeless and friendless old man, now the accepted "grandfather" to the creatchi family at large. Connor was a people magnet, the perfect owner for Kryton, the ettinchi sage, the creatchi prince.

Kryton spoke to everyone assembled, "We go to school."

"Normal school?" Donna was visibly alarmed.

He affirmed, "We are together now. We will not hide. Shop. Walk. Go. Learn. Be with the people in this town. It will be so, and it is true, and it is good."

For the next half minute, as the ettinchi sage's words sank in, you could hear a pin drop.

Chapter 61 Tentative Steps

Nate, Liddy and PRS walked into the grocery store. Nate and Liddy had nervous eyes which darted around every which way, almost as though they were afraid of being arrested. Liddy picked up PRS and held him on her hip. PRS happily looked all around at everything, pointing, speaking loudly, begging her to name every fruit, box and jar they came across.

"What this?" PRS would ask. "That's chocolate covered banana." Liddy would reply. "Eem like it." PRS would say, and hold onto it. Liddy struggled to keep PRS from grabbing everything, and tried putting each thing away that he attempted to hold. His antics, added to the stress of being out in public for the first time, made Liddy look like the classic version of a disheveled young mother.

Nate saw that PRS had grown up enough to be difficult for Liddy to carry for long, so he offered to put PRS into the "toddler seat" in the shopping cart.

PRS gladly sat in the seat, and gladly threw boxes of macaroni, and any product really that his little arms could reach, into the cart. Liddy began to giggle as they went along. They were trying to act normal, trying to blend in, but PRS was not helping. Both humans kept wondering when someone might scream or be alarmed at the sight of him. It was a weird experience, being out in the open, but PRS had insisted to come with them, and repeated over and over what Kryton had said in the meeting,

to "Shop. Go. Be with the people."

Strolling down the aisle, pushing the cart with PRS in it, took on a machine like process. As they walked along, PRS grabbed a shaving kit and put it in the cart. Nate picked up the shaving kit and put it back on the shelf. PRS picked up a bag of cotton balls and put it in the cart. Nate picked up the cotton balls and put them back on the shelf. PRS grabbed shampoo and dropped it into the cart.. and on it went. Finally, Nate turned the cart out more into the aisle to keep PRS from being able to reach things, but PRS just giggled, stood up on the edge of the cart with his perfect balance, and grabbed an armful of toothbrushes, toothpaste and floss and threw them all into the cart.

Nate and Liddy were getting the giggles and trying to deal with the situation, putting everything as quickly as they could back onto the shelves, when Mitt turned a corner and sauntered down the aisle toward them.

"Hi guys!" he said, "I thought I heard PRS giggling." Mitt walked, holding a carrying basket in front of him, Suzy perched up on his shoulder. His expression was pensive, his body stiff, as though he also felt like he was somehow breaking the law, about to be arrested.

"Mitt! Wow! You guys are here too!" Then more in a whisper, Nate continued, "This is our first trip 'out' and we are nervous! How is it going?" Nate looked around them anxiously. Why weren't people shocked? Why were they not crowding around yet?

Mitt replied, "I.. don't know. I'm beginning to think they are invisible to other people. Ha!" he attempted to laugh it off, but still looked horribly uncomfortable.

It was understandable. After weeks, months even, of hiding their beloved creatchies, they were now being almost "forced" to do the opposite. It was nerve wracking and still felt utterly wrong.

Just then a lady came up to them all, pointing her old wrinkled finger at Suzy, still perched on Mitt's shoulder, and asked, "What is that?"

Mitt, out of pure astonishment, blurted out, "What?" knowing full well what she meant, but too befuddled to answer properly.

"That animal on your shoulder." The woman seemed intrigued but also slightly alarmed, "Is it a monkey, or.." she trailed off.

"This is Suzy. She is a creatchi." Mitt stated.

Suzy said, "Hi" waved a little wave, and giggled.

The woman was astonished, "Oh my word!.. She is so.. cute! And she talks! But what... is she?"

..exactly?" the woman seemed caught between wanting to be delighted and being frightened.

"Well," Mitt sighed, not sure how to handle this new situation. Apparently, there was to be no "training" for this scenario, he would have to wing it.

Nate was no help. He and Liddy just stood there, tight lipped, eyes darting about, nervous for Mitt, for themselves, and for everyone.

Suzy reached out and took one of the woman's gray curls into her fingertips.

PRS reached out and put his hand on the woman's bare arm. "Eem like 'nanas." He stated, seriously. Whether he meant bananas or grandmothers, Liddy was not sure.

The woman physically jumped, apparently she hadn't notice PRS yet.

Mitt continued, "Suzy... is a new kind of being... really... and there are a lot of them... around now. You'll probably see a lot more around town." he nodded enthusiastically, hoping this answer would help her accept that they were a new "animal fad" of some kind. It was the best he could do on the spot. He kicked himself mentally for not having rehearsed "something" but he really hadn't planned ahead at all.

The woman's eyes went from Suzy to PRS several times. "Oh.. really?" she said. Taking a step back, and then taking another deep hard look at Suzy. "Well. I'll have to tell my daughter... She's very cute." she said, pointing again to Suzy. Then she walked away and resumed shopping, not looking back.

Mitt let out a huge sigh of relief. "Well," he said, "I guess they're not invisible." He rolled his eyes.

"She took it well." said Nate. "See you at the meeting later?"

"Wouldn't miss it!" and sighing again, Mitt said, "Well... headed to the cash register to check out! Wish me luck!" He shot his eyebrows up, in a freaked out kind of expression and headed down the aisle.

Nate and Liddy murmured, "Yeah, good luck. See you.."

The situation was so awkward. But PRS and Suzy seemed completely oblivious to the potential dangers. It would be a frustrating and maddening process, if the "PRS happy-bubble fear-dampening field" wasn't working, but it was, so they continued on in their first shopping experience together, and soon giggling could be heard again on aisle 12.

One thing was for sure, Nate thought to himself as they continued wrestling products out of the busy hands of PRS. If Suzy, PRS and the rest of them had raised the "secrecy" curtain and now wanted to be out in the world, they were going to have to use their "influence" on the entire town to make it a smooth transition.

Chapter 62
You Know

It was a beautiful afternoon. The last week of summer. School would be starting the next Monday. The heat of the season had mellowed and the children enjoyed playing in the cool back yard, openly laughing, openly loud, with their creatchies in full view. Suzy, Mitt, PRS, Liddy, Smitty, and Leaf were playing tag, rolling in the grass, swinging one another around by their hands, and generally just thoroughly enjoying the creatchi kind of life.

Nate, Katy, and Donna sat on Nate's deck, in lounge chairs, watching the children, and enjoying some iced tea, chatting.

"So, Donna, when do you have to take Leaf back to her mom?" Katy asked.

Donna answered, "My sister is coming here, well, tomorrow actually. I've asked her to come, saying that I thought it in Leaf's best interest to stay and school here from now on, and that Gwen needed to come and see why for herself."

"Wow." Nate said. "That would be great."

"You know," Nate continued after a few moments, "It feels, right now, like it should have felt at the beginning. You know? As if, we had a rough patch because of some weird happenstance events, but now, this is what it was intended to be like, in the beginning of all of this."

"Yeah." Donna answered, "I think you're right."

"It's been weird at work." Katy added. "The boss just saw his first creatchi, at the bank. He saw Old Mack's nornchi. He was trying to describe it to everybody in a meeting, but no one else had seen one yet, so everyone seemed to think he was talking about a toy or robot."

"Really. What did he say?" asked Nate.

"He said he wanted to get one for his nephew for Christmas. That added to the problem." Katy said.

They all giggled.

"Did you tell him you had one?" Donna asked.

"Yeah." Katy answered, "I felt like I had to, somehow, like it was expected. I told him they weren't for sale. They were rare."

"What did he say to that?" Nate asked.

"Well, he didn't like it." Katy answered, sipping her tea.

"It's just so odd," Donna added. "There hasn't been one incident of someone calling the police, or, or, animal control. It's like Kryton knew that the townsfolk could be trusted to be ok with it all. It's fascinating, and sort of lovely, isn't it?"

"We have three of the most powerful creatchi in our back yard." Nate answered, "I think you might just be a little 'under the influence' right now." He giggled.

"I know." Donna answered, sipping her tea. "I am."

Katy said, trying to sound more sober minded, "Well, the big test is next week, school starts, so I guess we'll find out if the town can 'be trusted'. But, I do trust Kryton too, you know. He seems to know a lot. He seems to always be right."

Nate laughed, "Ha! and I thought Donna sounded influenced!"

He added, "You know, once the tourists come back next summer, it won't be just the town that knows, it will be the world."

"I know." both ladies said in unison, and sipped their tea.

The adults continued chatting on that cool day, the true beginning of fall. Their tones, their bodies, and their moods relaxed, at ease with their world, and at ease with whatever the future may hold.

The children continued to play, the human children and the creatchi children, with squeals and laughter, in the joy and delight of being together and being in the open and free.

The trees rustled in the cool breeze of the late afternoon. The leaves of the birch had just begun to turn yellow at the tips. A new world was beginning, a new era of wonder and prosperity, of discovery and advance, for the old boom town, and oddly, it was beginning in the month of the shedding of leaves, the shedding of the old.

The End.

See the addendum: covering the meeting between Donna, Kryton, and Connor here:

https://www.mommatown.com/rwf/books/purplerrainsprinkles/Package_A_Kryton_Questions.pdf

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