



The Apprentice

The earth was as fresh and new as the souls who dwelt upon it. Simplicity of thought, lifestyle and the absence of previous discoveries upon which they could build meant that these indigenous people lived an austere existence, yet the lack of complexities made them happier and more content than their predecessors who once roamed and eventually annihilated all life on the Old Earth. But after destruction comes rebuilding and when the Architect was ready the small blue planet held life again.

With the absence of machines and gadgets these people were more physically capable and had no less capacity for intelligent thought than their sophisticated ancestors but they had nothing which did not come out of their newly formed souls. They had the green of the land, the blue of the oceans and rivers and the sweetness of air unpolluted as tools with which to carve out their lives.

Just as the artist is nothing if not inventive, the complete devastation of the planet by earth's previous inhabitants required that the Cosmic Artist realign certain parts of the Universal Canvas and perhaps the aftermath of Armageddon instilled within the Creator the desire to allow the new creations some semblance of originality. Therefore the large yellow sun, first proclaimed a god by mankind then reduced to a mere bauble of fire, when his secrets were laid bare by science and rational thought, gave the illusion of curious blue light as the toxic fumes of the exploding earth sent their poisons millions of miles across the galaxy and the effect produced pleased the Eye of the Artist so was allowed to remain.

The moon too had changed. No more the lunar goddess casting her shimmering silver light across the black night sky, now she glowed boldly red as if bleeding for the sins of mankind. These new planet influences turned the firmament a mixture of red and blue, a perennially dawn sky.

Technology was obsolete and long in the past but these hunters and farmers of the future sowed the seeds of progeny in the fields and from their loins and by their actions and the tacit laws by which they lived, their children were taught. There were no religions with which to instigate war and because of the complete absence of caste, creed and

discrimination of any kind the people were, possibly for the only time in their existence, completely equal.

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The young hunter surveyed himself in the crystal clear river water, taking in his reflection gravely and with interest as if he'd never seen himself before. Thoughtfully he passed long fingers across his jaw line and felt dark stubble growing there. Watching himself carefully he noted the serious expression held even in repose which sometimes made others think he was moody or even angry but he wasn't, it was just his face.

Despite severity of countenance the face wasn't unattractive but it had to be studied carefully before the observer could properly appreciate the perfectly aligned ears, proportional nose and mouth balanced evenly in the centre of his chin. His eyes looked dark although if one took the trouble to examine further it would be seen that the eyes were darkest unwavering blue. They opened wider now, earnestly studying themselves within the reflection of the water. He gave a pseudo smile and the corners of the eyes creased slightly and he noticed for the first time how the slight movement of mouth caused the left eyebrow to lift, lending a questioning appearance to the face. He widened the smile and the mouth moved accordingly but the eyes held their same steady gaze.

Lifting his stare he scrutinised the unlined forehead, the smooth olive coloured skin and the glossy black hair, unkempt and standing at careless angles from his head. *Seen enough?* He whirled around to see if They were with him. Sometimes it happened that way and they sneaked up on him catching him unawares. But there were no other presences. He was alone. If someone asked him how he knew when They were with him he would have raised his shoulders in a shrug. He just knew. But this time the words came from himself. *Seen enough?* Sometimes his own thoughts and Theirs were so similar he'd get them confused.

'I've seen enough,' he said aloud before turning away, although it was not vanity which made him study himself, rather he was looking for an outward sign of why They had chosen him. He had a strong body, arms and legs that worked, a quick mind with sufficient intelligence and velocity of wit to carry him through his life - or was it basically flawed, inundated with thoughts not his own - Their thoughts?

'They must think so,' again he spoke the words as if testing a voice rarely used. The timbre was deep, heralding a future maturity but now sounded incongruous and at odds with his youthful appearance, like the disproportionately large head on a young wolf cub.

He scanned the pink skies attuning his thoughts to his namesake totem chosen by his father at the moment of his birth but the lazy blue heat of the sun transmuted its lethargy to him and his questing eyes closed drowsily, remembering his birth story again.

Everyone has a story and that story begins when, pushed from between the blood-soaked thighs of the mother, the loud *hai* of the midwives send the father outside where the first thing he sees will be the child's guide and totem for life. It was commonly believed that the child would also inherit characteristics from this totem so it was usual for the searching father to hope to see the bravest and most noble creature after a birth.

Sometimes it happened that an unlucky child went through life with the name of Rat, Snail or Snake but even these low animals had qualities which could be built upon although far better to be named after the proud and fierce but it everyone understood there are lessons to be learned from even the humblest creature and no new father ever thought of reporting falsely.

Although they told him it wasn't so, he remembered his father run into the birthing hut and the people all fell quiet even he, as a baby, stopped crying long enough to listen to his father name him.

'Hawk. His name is Hawk.' And with the words his mother smiled tiredly and put the baby to her breast and there Hawk fed greedily, eager for sustenance, eager for life.

He gave himself up to the heat of the sun, hair fanned out like a black halo behind his head as he lay on the banks of the river. Hawk remembered these things from the first day he was born and when first his parents and then others told him it was impossible he stopped speaking of it but even now, after thirteen winters, he remembered still. He knew he remembered because the look of joy and pride in his father's eyes as he looked down at his firstborn son remained lodged in his heart and during testing times, in winter when food was scarce and the weak and the old died he would bring out this treasured memory and hold it in his mind like a symbol of good luck. But because no one accepted that he knew these things Hawk instinctively knew if his family did not understand that he recalled his own birth then they would never understand about Them.

A loud cry dragged him from his daydreams pulling him instantly awake and with the high-pitched keening sound ringing in his ears, he sprinted the short distance to the village.

'Why?' his mother Wolf wailed 'he is not too old and yet strong – a hunter still. Why has he been taken from us? Where does he go –' she was pulling at the dead body of River Carp, her husband and close companion since they were Joined during her eleventh winter.

'He sleeps. You must let him rest Wolf,' Sorrel the herbwoman tried to come between Wolf and the rapidly cooling corpse of her husband.

'I will not leave him,' Wolf snarled and flung gentle Sorrel from her. 'If he sleeps I will wake him.'

'Mother,' Hawk rushed inside pulling his mother into his arms 'if he sleeps we must let him rest.'

Wolf looked at him with the wild eyes of her totem. 'Where does he go?' she cried softly and collapsed in the arms of her firstborn son.

According to a custom newly formed, Wolf laid River Carp in his final resting place in a deep pit outside the hut he'd lived in with his wife and children. The strongest and most able men and women dug the hole wide and deep lining it with fragrant flowers and foliage before lowering the body of River Carp down gently and it was Wolf who stood inside the hole, arms out to receive her husband for the last time. When grief overtook her and she took too long to arrange his limbs Hawk followed her inside the grave and together they laid the hunter to rest. When the earth was placed over the body and the surface was walked on and hard packed again Hawk led his mother inside that she be allowed to grieve in private. There was nothing to mark the grave of River Carp, husband of Wolf and father of seven surviving sons and four daughters. There was no need – those who loved him knew where he rested.

When the village was silent in the darkest part of the of night Hawk called upon Them, to ask where his father had gone but no matter what words he used or how he arranged his body in repose which he knew from experience made it easier for Them to come close, They remained silent.