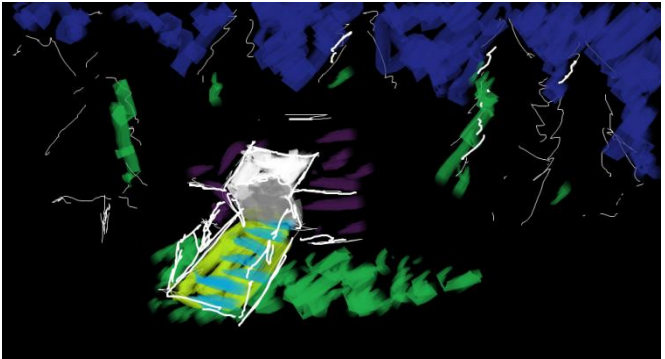

I lose more little brothers, volume 3

Mike Rozak
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“This could be your last chance.”

The low, modulated hum of the UFO became deafening as the spaceplane partially materialized into a dim violet. The back of the craft was still invisible.

The hovering-UFO's doorway opened down into a gangway ramp with cyan walking stripes.

Unyah hadn't met this UFO's crew, but she had been on many flights before. Unyah walked up to the solidified ramp-way and received a telepathic message.

Looking right towards her friend, Shen, she said, "I'm told you can come if you want?"

Shen thought briefly about the flight. She had never been on a UFO before, and didn't really care to. Home was enough for her. The people here were enough also. She didn't want to travel off to other planets and have to deal with odd sparkling people, strange customs, and danger.

"No," said Shen hesitantly, "I don't care to."

"Okay then. I don't know if I'll be back. We may not be able to land on this planet for too much longer."

Unyah added, "Are you sure you don't want to come?"

Hesitantly, "I'm sure."

"Then tell my mother I'm travelling... you know... in another town."

Unyah carefully walked up the ramp, at one quarter walking pace, making sure to place her foot on each glowing line. When Unyah was half way up, Shen saw Unyah begin to become transparent, which really freaked out Shen.

Meanwhile, Unyah saw Shen's world go grey, while the UFO's interior brightened and people faded in, their skeletons visible just slightly inside their flesh.

A walking "animal" with things sticking out of the top of its head stood at the top of the walkway. Unyah would later learn the "things" were antlers. Unyah had never seen an animal Elk, or an Elk-evolved person.

She, the Elk-evolved person, was happy and relieved to see Unyah.

“Hurry up,” she telepathed to Unyah.

Although the Elk-person could barely see Shen, she telepathically told Unyah, “You should get your friend up here.”

“Why?” asked Unyah.

“Because we may not be able to come back for a long time.”

“She doesn’t want to. I already asked.”

Some consternation emitted from the Elk. “Ask her again.”

“Okay.”

Unyah turned around to see a shadow-Shen still standing there. She yelled, “Shen, are you sure you don’t want to come? This might be your last chance.”

Shen hesitated again, but yelled back to her disappearing friend, “No. I’m fine.”

Unyah turned her attention back to the ramp and nodded “No” to the Elk, who telepathed exasperation.

Unyah continued on up the ramp.

As she reached the top, the world behind Unyah dimmed completely, and she saw several people in the spaceplane. She recognized a Hare-evolved woman from before.

Everyone on board was happy and relieved that Unyah had made it.

The Elk woman stepped past Unyah, just onto the ramp, checking to make sure Shen wasn’t coming up. Again, exasperation.

“We need to hurry,” someone said.

“Pull in the gangway.”

The door pulled up and closed.

“We’re out of here!”

Whoosh.
Unyah blanked out.
She didn't die.



Shen

Lonely

I am Shen, not yet childed, newly an adult, and no longer a teenager.

After the UFO door closed and it faded away along with its metallic hum, I returned to our house.

Unyah had taken several UFO trips. I watched her board and leave the previous two times also; she was trying to get me to join a spaceplane group... I was clued in enough to realize that. She wouldn't say what they did though.

I wasn't particularly interested in the adventure or danger either, and especially not the travelling machine. Something about spaceplanes frightened me.

Unyah's rendezvous points with her friends were always different, so that no-one else would see their visits or see her leave. This time, we walked about two kilometres to the southwest of our village to a small clearing amidst the pines.

It took me three quarters of an hour to walk back to our empty house.

Once home, I turned on a small, yellowing light, and tidied up. Unyah would be back.

I made Unyah's bed; she certainly wouldn't.

I drank a glass of water.

With the light still on, I lay down on my own bed and wondered if I should have gone with Unyah. I couldn't imagine having gone. The thought of "passing up an opportunity" didn't occur to me, nor did I realize that I had chosen door "A", the same door which I always had, instead of door "B", which was Unyah's door.

Turning the light off, I fell asleep.

When I awoke in mid-morning, Unyah hadn't returned. I hoped she would be back. When I looked in her still-made bed, though, I knew she was still travelling. Once, she arrived very early, napped, and snuck out before I awoke... her messed-up bed giving away her arrival.

Unyah did not return the next day.

Nor the next.

Nor...

I didn't spend the days waiting for Unyah to return. I didn't really care about her convoluted stories about exotic planets with red sand or talking quolls. I DID enjoy her company.

She was my friend.

I missed her when she left.

My days were occupied doing the usual. I helped Yuln, an older woman with a small child, wash laundry for the Hominids.

A ute (pickup truck) would drive up to her house with a load of washing. The Hominid-man driver would offload the laundry under the front-eaves of Yuln's house, say a friendly "Good day", and drive away.

I would sometimes show up and help Yuln with her washing, especially if she had an extra-large load. She'd pay me a portion of her earnings a week later.

Yuln and I would carry the plastic laundry baskets up to a rocky area of the nearby creek, wash them by hand, and then dry them.

"I haven't seen Unyah for awhile," Yuln asked. "How is she doing?"

Yuln was good friends with Unyah's mother.

"Yeah, the usual," I answered automatically. I wasn't even consciously covering-up Unyah's spaceplane trip. No-one in the

village (that I knew of) knew about her adventures. She wished them to be kept secret. So I didn't tell anyone.

I did remember to make up a story, or at least use the default one in case Yuln told Unyah's mother.

"She's gone over to the next town to do some sketches for their newspaper."

People rarely visited the neighbouring town. And if Unyah wasn't in that town, she must have been in the one beyond that. I had only ever travelled three towns away, but they supposedly went on forever until you reached the coast.

Yuln didn't note any deceit. Unyah was frequently "off sketching" or doing some other task, so no-one bothered to ask anymore. And Unyah didn't say much when she got back.

Switching subjects, Yuln chided facetiously, "Don't forget to scrub that for her. She likes everything VERY white."

I had a bar of soap in my hand and was cleaning someone's clothes. I wasn't paying attention. Never did. The work was boring. Scrub. Scrub. Scrub.

Whoever this Hominid woman was, I decided that I didn't like her. I intentionally nicked the fabric's weave slightly so her underwear wouldn't last long. She, the Hominid bitch (they weren't all bad, just most of them), wouldn't notice the intentional damage, but her clothes would last only half as long as people friendly to us.

That set of whites washed and nicked, I grabbed some more underwear and scrubbed.

And some blouses. The thread on that button would come lose next time she buttoned up, thanks to a bit of work from my fingernail.

I found it amazing that these people had so many clothes. I had approximately two shirts and three pairs of knee-length shorts, and no underwear. I saved on shirts and underwear by not wearing them.

More days passed.

No Unyah.

After a week, I began to worry. Unyah hadn't been gone that long before.

I didn't tell Unyah's mother, or anyone else.

I found it difficult to cover up a small hole, which once dug, inevitably became larger.



Shen and Unyah's house

“D’you want to go in the reeds?”

They called themselves “the rangers”, named after some foreign novel. Three of them stopped by one morning. They were males, not men. (Technically they were men, but I didn’t think of them that way.)

“The rangers” were from the next town over. Worried about Unyah, I thought I’d ask them if they had seen her; she may have landed near there and authentically stopped by the intermittent newspaper to draw some sketches.

“Have you seen Unyah?” I asked.

One of them looked surprised.

“That’s what we’re here to see you about,” he said.

“We haven’t seen her,” he continued.

There was a pause while his eyes darted to both friends, and his ears perked up. Theirs did to.

“Is Unyah UP to something?” he asked cagily. His head tilted, and his eyes became shifty.

“No.” I was very good at not saying anything. 😊

He pulled back his left lip in disapproval.

“We’re worried about you...” which insulted me. Why would they have cause to worry about me? I didn’t even know them well. “... especially Unyah.”

He paused to swivel his ears and listen.

Quietly, he said, “The hairs don’t like him.”

I had only met “the rangers” a few times previously, and every time they spoke in code. I wasn’t sure why. “Hairs” meant “Hominid men” because they had hair and beards.

I didn’t know why the “hairs” would care... kind of. They might not have approved of Unyah’s high-tech adventures.

I continued to pretend that Unyah was away sketching.

The ranger continued, “They think she’s interfering with their business.” His head inched forward as he eyed me questioningly.

Unyah didn’t tell me what she did in any detail. I didn’t ask. I wouldn’t tell.

I squeezed my eyes narrower in a “I’m not gonna respond to you” answer.

The ranger grimaced a bit at the rebuke.

“We’re not pointing a tail at you. We’re just being friendly and here to warn you about danger.”

I replied a quietly-polite “Thank you”. I didn’t know how to answer.

The ranger turned to leave, followed by the other two.

“Stay careful,” he said as he turned back to look at me. “We mean it. Things have happened.”

They left.

I didn’t know what they were hinting at.

The next day, I had a bit of a flu virus, and slept a lot. It persisted for another two days.

Oonj, one of the male (not men) “rangers” showed up on the third day, just as I was recovering. He had stood in back when “the ranger” leader had spoken to me a few days earlier.

I knew Oonj from school, but not well.

While in bed dozing, I heard him walk up my pathway, sticks on the path crackling.

I peered out the window and saw Oonj, a bit dishevelled, carrying a green cap in his hand. Caps are kind of pointless on sunny days, and mostly pointless in the rain also.

I walked out my door to greet him. He held his cap in his hands, almost present-like.

“Hello Oonj. What can I do for you?”

“Have you seen Unyah yet?” he asked.

He must have been on “ranger” business.

“No,” I answered a bit curtly.

“Oh.” Embarrassed.

He paused.

His eyes shifted.

He looked down.

He looked at me.

“There’ll be a bus by in two days.”

I’m dim, but not that dim. My nostrils flared a bit (with a completely different meaning to Hominid nostrils flaring).

My head pushed forward.

Shyly and slyly Oonj asked, “Do you want to visit the reeds?”

His head evasively tilted towards me.

I thought for a moment and decided to jump on the opportunity.

“Sure,” I answered, “but I can’t go alone. Do you like Kwuu?”

Oonj ducked his head and looked sheepishly to the right. He understood why I couldn’t go alone. And he probably liked Kwuu also.

“Yeah.”

He eyed to the left.

I eye-smiled.

“I’ll arrange it. See you there,” I replied.

And followed up with a disappointing realization, “I MAY have to take Kwuu’s little brother.”

Oonj’s eyes widened, questioning.

I buckled up my nose quickly in feigned disgust, “Politics. If he comes, I’ll figure out how to ditch him.” As I said this, my left eyebrow raised, and right lowered in humour.

Oonj got the point.



The bus trip

The bus we rode was a 1970's-style blocky bus, painted yellow-blue. We sat on slab-cushion seats upholstered with dingy thick muslin – yellow-green.

“Did my pip-brother head to the back?” asked Kwuu, Unyah’s sister, who sat beside me.

We were sitting midway up the bus. No-one sat in the seat opposite us.

I shifted in my seat, as I momentarily looked towards the back of the bus. Sitting on flat seats was uncomfortable for my tail.

“Yeah, I saw him [Kluu] head back just after we got going,” I answered.

Kwuu looked behind to verify that Kluu, her brother, was in back.

“Do you see Oonj?” I asked.

Kwuu kneeled up a bit to get a better view.

Talking away from me, she answered, “No.”

She returned to a semi-sitting position.

“Did you see him get on?” I asked, because I hadn’t.

Kwuu raised her head and looked forward.

“No. I think you’re out of luck.”

She scanned around the bus some more.

“And everyone else is taken,” she added.

I fake-grimaced.

“Oh well. We’ll make do.”

We were the last stop before the billabong, and the bus wasn’t very full. I had only been canoeing there a few times, so I didn’t know how full the bus got. I recalled that more people usually took the trip.

Yuln’s daughter, my pip-niece, Shik, took our agitated surveying of the bus’ population as a cue. Sitting just behind us, she got out of her chair and sway-walked to the back of the bus.

“That’ll keep Kluu busy,” noted Kwuu.

Shik, slightly shorter than Kluu, had tagged along at the recommendation of her “aunt”, Kwuu-and-Kluu’s mother.

I was sitting closest to the aisle. I looked past Kwuu to watch the trees fly behind as we drove down the bumpy, dusty road.

We had arranged things perfectly... with the help of Kwuu's mother.

Where was Oonj?

Just to double-check, I raised up my head and scanned around the bus for Oonj. He wasn't there. Kwuu was correct, unfortunately.

I disguised my search by taking the opportunity to sit on my knees... so my tail wouldn't go numb against the flat cushion.

"So what are we going to do?" asked Kwuu.

"Follow the plan."

"So we ditch them for the day. They get bored. They head back in the afternoon. We stay the night."

I rose once again to look for Oonj.

He wasn't there.

Some of the other guys weren't bad, but they were already part of a couple.

The Hominid driver turned his steering wheel right to follow the winding, bumpy road.

We passed a village smaller than ours. Since no-one was standing by the road, the driver kept going.

"Have you heard anything from Unyah?" asked Kwuu.

I didn't notice... kind of... and I feigned not hearing.

"Hear anything form Unyah?"

"No," falling on the default story, "She must be travelling around."

"Oh. So you're home by yourself still?"

"Yeah."

I gave a long, sad blink to myself.

I looked across the aisle, and out at the floodplain to the right.

Maybe Kwuu had some news.

“Have you heard anything from Unyah?” I asked.

Kwuu slid her eyes to her left, knowingly.

“No.” An evasive look. “Not much. No letters. Just an impression.” Pause. “I think she’s a bit overwhelmed.”

I wasn’t sure how Kwuu knew, but I thought I knew how she knew. Obviously, Unyah hadn’t returned.

I waited for more news.

Kwuu looked around to make sure no-one was listening.

“It’s a bit different up there,” she said.

And then she decided not to say anymore.

“Have you ever thought about going?” Kwuu asked.

This time I looked about.

“No. Not that interested.”

“I have,” said Kwuu. “Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t.”

She thought.

“I don’t know. I don’t know... I don’t know if anything will hit me here.” She held her hand on her stomach.

I eye-smiled.

My planning for the future hadn’t looked ahead that far.

I looked around for Oonj again while I shifted, sitting on one crossed-leg, the other hanging off the bus seat.

Oonj wasn’t there.

The row boat

Shik, my pip-niece, stayed on shore, playing around in the grass by the dock.

Kluu, unfortunately, tagged along. With three people, we were allowed to take out the rowboat. He sat in back. I was on the right, Kwuu on the left. Both of us had a paddle.

We didn't know how to row, so each of us leaned over our side with our paddle. Oars with proper oar-mounts would have worked better... but we didn't know they existed, didn't check for oar mounts, and didn't notice any oars for the rowboat. Someone else may have snatched the oars for their canoe.

Our paddling didn't move us very rapidly.

Paddling away from the dock, we avoided the two-meter tall reeds to the left. Canoe pathways jetted into the reeds.

Behind us, a much-speedier couple rowed their canoe into one of the canoe-trails that traversed the reeds. At the end of the trail they would find privacy on a hidden shore.

We avoided the reeds, and slowly followed the clear waterway as it looped around to the right.

Kwuu turned around and asked her brother, "So Kluu, are you having a good time?"

I kept on paddling. Our boat rotated slightly leftwards.

"Yeah," said Kluu in quiet voice.

He didn't sound happy. He was typically subdued though.

"Is there anything you want to see?" poked Kwuu.

Kluu looked at Kwuu, almost dazed. He didn't answer.

Kwuu turned forwards and resumed paddling to straighten out our boat.

"The flamingos are usually up here a bit," she said, turning behind briefly.

Kwuu knew what she was doing.

Just at the bend, Kwuu “accidentally” leaned over the edge of the boat a bit too far while she was paddling. The rowboat tilted to the left a hand deeper than usual.

I happened to notice Kluu, who thinking that he was going to tip out of the boat as it leaned, scuttled himself to the right side of his narrow seat. His eyes were wide... He didn't like the water.

Kwuu didn't look back quickly enough, and missed the brief panic.

But she knew.

“Sorry,” she said nonchalantly, as she tilted her head.

We continued rowing.

“The flamingos are just ahead, Kluu,” I commented with a quick look back.

“They're really interesting to watch,” Kwuu added, seemingly concentrating on paddling.

There was no response from the back. Kluu was most-likely chewing on his cap. 😊 I never understood the purpose of caps. They were a male thing.

We rounded the bend to where the flamingos usually hid out. Every time I had been at the billabong before, the flamingos were much further up the river, and I never got to see them.

They were huge, standing two meters above the shallows, their knees halfway above the water. (I was about 1.6 meters tall.)

We raised paddles and slowed to a stop, our boat slowly rotating in the mild current.

“Cool,” I exclaimed quietly.

Kwuu just sat, soaking in their sight. Thinking.

Kluu gazed at them intently, coming out of his hiding shell for a moment. He seemed to spend more time glancing worriedly at the water.

I leaned over the side of the boat to grab some water, washing and cool my face.

The boat tipped deeply to the right as I did so, but Kluu didn't notice... or at least the concern on his face didn't grow.

One flamingo dipped his head towards the water, dug into the submerged mud immediately below with his beak, and grabbed something to eat as it swam away.

I watched.

Kwuu was mesmerized.

Kluu's mouth gaped open a bit.

Kwuu interrupted the silence. "I wonder if they bite."

It was a rhetorical question.

"What do you think Kluu?" asked Kwuu, looking at him.

That worked.

Kluu's eyes widened in realization, as if to say, "They bite?!?"

"I hope not," I added slyly.

We watched intently as another giant flamingo scrounged some food. Frogs didn't taste very good. Maybe the flamingo was flushing out small fish or mud yabbies.

Kwuu continued to prod. "You know Kluu, I could look at them all day."

I didn't perceive the hint about where Kwuu was taking the conversation.

Kwuu tapped me on my shoulder. Confused, I momentarily glared at her until I understood what she was up to.

"Yeah, we could spend all day watching them, 😊" I added.

Kluu wasn't paying attention.

“I’m into ornithology, you know,” reinforcing the point.

“Shen might have to spend an hour or two observing them so she can write a paper.”

That didn’t work; Kluu sank into himself.

We watched the flamingos some more while Kwuu thought.

“Kluu,” she asked, “do you have any idea what happened to Oonj? He was supposed to ride on the bus and meet Shen here.”

Something broke through Kluu’s trance.

He gave a wary look, “No.”

“Shen thinks he’s cute,” added Kwuu, directed at her younger brother.

Kluu’s eyes glanced about. His brain was chewing on the hints.

“She really liked Oonj’s green cap,” said Kwuu with an eye-smile.

Turning towards Kluu again, “Your orange one is much nicer,” and then an eye-smile towards me to ensure I wasn’t insulted by her ploy.

I wasn’t.

Kluu looked left and right nervously, and then down at his cap in hand.

“We DO like to talk about boys, you know,” I chimed in. I wondered if I should have said “men” instead of “boys”.

“And pink ornithology,” eye-smiled Kwuu.

Kwuu wasn’t interested in men.

She lost momentum.

“Oonj has a cute nose, don’t you think,” added Kwuu a moment later, her eyebrows raised and eyes smiling.

Kwuu followed up: “He covers it [his nose] with his cap too much.”

That would get to Kluu.

Kluu slunk his head in embarrassment.

Canoeing

With Kluu left on the dock, we ditched the awkward rowboat and grabbed a canoe. Being tipsy, the red canoe took us awhile to board.

I first sat in the back, closest to the shore. Kwuu waded out to the front, waist-high, and tried to hop in. That didn't work. So she swung the canoe around, with me still sitting in it, stepped in without tipping the canoe into the water. We shoved off.

Kluu wandered off, probably looking for Shik.

We started out, both rowing on the right, and turned our canoe into the deeper water.

Two canoe-lengths away from the dock, we pulled off our shirts; I was first.

The sun's rays felt good, although our fur heated up quickly, being darker than our shirts.

We paddled another length, then I yelled out, "Wait" to Kwuu.

With some effort, I shimmied my shorts off. Might as well. No children were around. And we were likely to tip the boat and get our clothes wet, so having them off was better.

Kwuu's pants were already wet. She got the idea, and with embarrassing difficulty, pried her shorts off.

While we disrobed, our canoe drifted sideways to the left, and sliced into the two-meter tall reeds. With reeds mostly on our left, we both rowed on the right... and pushed our canoe further into the reeds.

Before long, our inept seamanship led us a boat-length headfirst into the reed forest.

“This’ll look bad [if anyone ever sees us],” remarked Kwuu. She tried back-paddling. I followed her lead, but that didn’t work.

Paddling forward didn’t get us much headway either.

My paddle was pulled from my hand by a reed cluster.

“Wait!” I yelled to Kwuu up front.

She turned around to see me fishing my paddle out of the water.

“This isn’t working,” she said. “Let’s just pull ourselves out of here.”

Kwuu grabbed some reeds in front of her and pulled. I did the same. We eventually managed to turn our canoe to the right and pull ourselves outside the reed-bed.

Suffering only the embarrassment of having been seen to row out of the reeds a minute after having accidentally entering, we resumed paddling up the billabong.

“Where to?” asked Kwuu

“Far enough away to kill some time.” I answered

“Past the flamingos then?”

We once-again rounded the bend where the flamingos were fish-shopping. Instead of wading along the shore like before, the flock had scattered around the waterway, walking up to their bodies into the deeper water. So THAT was how deep the channel was, I thought.

We rowed through the flock. Most of the birds were to our right, in the shallowest area. Three were close by, to our left.

One of the birds to our left arched down its normally vertical neck, and clacked at us.

This made me nervous. The flamingos had a reputation. Paddles supposedly provided some protection against an angry flamingo.

“Faster,” I chirped.

Kwuu looked back at me, and then at the approaching angry flamingo, and directed her concentration towards paddling.

I too rowed, but my concentration was divided between rowing, looking back at the approaching flamingo, and worrying about my neck. From various tales I heard, flamingo beaks really-really hurt, and they preferred to go for necks. My neck was quite exposed.

Kwuu did most of the rowing. My rowing effort was more token, with most of my effort was spent watching my exposed back.

We picked up speed and rounded the bend of the river, to the right. The irate flamingo gave up its chase.

When we were well clear, we both pulled up paddles and regained our breath.

And looked behind... The grumpy one returned back to the flock.

Rest.

“Let’s keep going for a bit,” I muttered. I didn’t want to get chased by more already-irate flamingos.

“Yeah,” Kwuu agreed. “Maybe they won’t be so ornery when we return in a few hours.”

While drifting during our rest, I took time to notice the scenery.

We were slowly turning on a wide part of the billabong, with around thirty meters of clear water between reedy shores. Finches

twitted on the reeds. A kingfisher sat on one of the scraggly trees that overtopped the tall reeds.

Ten minutes later, we resumed our paddling.

"I hate this place," muttered Kwuu... I think she said that. I'm not sure. Or I may have said it.

Kwuu most-definitely said, "No. I don't hate this place. I like it. The stress of the flamingo-pursuit was talking."

I gave Kwuu a glum look; I don't think she noticed.

"I don't know," she added.

"I'm just restless." She scanned around for danger.

Returning to her task, Kwuu took up paddling again. I followed.

We rowed half way to the next bend.

"Let's get to shore," I said. "I gotta pee." I hadn't stopped at the grotty and reeking toilets of the restaurant.

Kwuu gave a nod, and pointed forward and right.

"See those trees," fifty meters ahead, and the next rightward bend of the billabong. "Let's head for there."

Several trees shaded a small peninsula carpeted with short, green grass.

"Sounds good."

I resumed paddling on my right, and unskilfully steered the boat to the left before Kwuu had a chance to grab her paddle and push hard on the left.

She eventually heaved us back on course and towards the peninsula.



Lunch

We soon landed the front of our canoe on the shore.

Without waiting for Kwuu to get out and stabilize the canoe, I jumped out into the deep end and waded ashore. By the time I climbed up to the land, Kwuu had pulled some lunch out of bag and was preparing to step out of the canoe.

I didn't wait for her. I needed to find some privacy.

Underneath the trees, the grass was trampled down by the flamingos. It was a nice spot to rest.

I walked to the back, towards some tall grass. On the way, I passed an old campfire. No surprise. Camping out here would be nice at night.

Beyond the campfire I found the tall grass, and relieved myself. Refreshed, I returned back to the canoe and Kwuu.

She was sitting down by the bank, four packed sandwiches next to her.

“Oops,” Kwuu said when she saw me, “We have small sandwiches for Kluu and Shik.”

Eyes rolled cornerwise, expecting a rebuke back home. “Oh well,” Kwuu muttered.

Sitting down, I unwrapped my ham sandwich and took a bite.

“There’s a campfire back there,” I mentioned, pointing with my fingers.

“Really,” Kwuu said. “I suppose it’s a nice place to camp out.”

Kwuu grimaced.

“I don’t know,” she said to herself. Kwuu had changed the topic of conversation. “I don’t really want to leave this place.”

She lost me; I didn’t follow.

Kwuu scrunched the left side of her mouth and looked around.

She took another bite, and then looked up at the blue sky.

I leaned forward, cupped some river water into my left hand, and drank.

Kwuu was still looking up when I sat back on my butt.

What was up there?

I gave a sideways glance up also. The sky was pure blue-grey, with only a single triangular-shaped cloud breaking the sky.

I didn’t make anything of it.

Kwuu may have.

Kwuu returned her attention food-ward, grabbed her sandwich, and bit.

Chewing her sandwich, she looked at me intently.

Nodding her head left and right, Kwuu got back to her issue: "It feels wrong now. Yesterday I was fine. Now I'm itching to get out."

She looked up again, this time at the cloud I had spotted.

"Interesting how your mind changes when you visit someplace distant," she added.

"Yeah," I said without understanding or conviction.

We sat and finished our meal.

"What time does the bus head back?" I asked.

"Around three o'clock."

"Then I'll take a nap so we will miss it," I said with a verbal smile.

Kwuu eye-smiled, and sat contemplatively knee-up.

I laid back, looking up at the river-tree's leaves, enjoying the sunlight twinkling through as the breeze-twiddled the leaves.

And then I slept.

I didn't dream.

Thoughts may have run through my mind though, as they sometimes did in place of dreams. I remembered that I should check out Unyah's computer terminal when I got back.

I awoke an hour or two later.

Kwuu was sleeping on her side, hands between her legs.

I got up quietly, and headed back to the tall grass to relieve myself again. Grass was preferable to the grungy toilets at the restaurant.

After watering the grass, I chose to waste time on the way back. I wanted to make sure to miss the return-bus so that Kluu and Shik wouldn't stay the night with us.

The campfire being the only interesting feature in the area, I took a closer look at it.

The fire was at least a week old, or older.

Inside the fire ring, burnt by the fire, were some old bones, probably deer cooked and discarded by some campers.

And then I saw a skull...

It was a Raccoon skull.

I froze. For a second, I morosely wondered if it was Oonj's skull. I'm not sure why. Kwuu's glum mood was getting to me. Oonj wouldn't have died, or been burnt. He just forgot about the trip, or ran out of money, or had some work to do.

The skull wasn't old enough to be bleached white, though it was still fairly clean of "meat". The local wildlife, maybe some small quolls, had picked it mostly clean.

What do you do when you find a person's skull? And perhaps their bones?

I didn't know.

Kwuu should see her skull.

I picked up the skull in both hands, somewhat reverently. I certainly didn't want to pick her up by her eye sockets.

Carrying her skull, I returned to where Kwuu was sleeping.

"Kwuu," I said in a gentle "wake up" tone.

She stirred.

"Kwuu. Look at this."

Blearily, Kwuu looked up at me.

Holding the skull level on top both my flattened hands, I lowered it to her sitting-up height.

Her eyes widened in shock.

"Where did you find her!?" she asked.

Neither Kwuu nor I knew if the skull was from a him or her. Being women, we defaulted to "her". It was part of our language.

"Back there, in the fire circle," I answered.

Kwuu got up, and examined the skull in my hands... from a distance. She wouldn't touch it.

Forgetting me, she then walked warily back to the fire circle. I followed her, carrying the skull. I hadn't expected her to react so strongly.

A meter away from the "deer" bones, she stopped

"What should we do?" I asked.

Kwuu didn't answer.

I examined the skull to get ideas.

"Should we take her back to show people?"

Kwuu looked at me and raised her eyebrows to indicate, "I don't know."

"We could put her in your lunch bag."

Kwuu gave no reply, but looked up with an odd expression.

I began to head back with the skull, to place it in her lunch bag.

"No," answered Kwuu. "Leave her here."

"Put her back were you found her."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"No," she said uncertainly. "What do you think?"

"I don't know."

I examined the skull once again, hoping that some feature of the skull would help me decide.

I head bobbed left and right in indecision.

After some intuitive thought, I concluded that leaving the skull here sounded reasonable.

"Sounds good," I answered.

I placed her skull back, exactly where I found it.

When I stood up and looked at Kwuu, she was gazing skywards at a whiff of cloud.



That night

By the time we paddled our canoe back to the dock, Kluu and Shik had returned home.

Fortunately, the flamingos didn't present a problem on the way back. By that time, they had parked themselves on the shore for the night, folding their giant legs underneath them.

Picking up our bags from the restaurant, the Hominid man directed us to a three-bed cabin, which we had all to ourselves.

The cabin was a concrete floor with a tar-papered ply roof, walled in, to create a large main room with three beds. A yellow light hung from the central roof beam. A toilet room was partitioned off in the corner.

One-third of the cabin was a mosquito-netted veranda, with a light, table, and a few chairs.

Another cabin was across the dirt road, and up a bit. Two couples from the bus stayed there, one of whom was Oonj's ranger friend.

Treating ourselves out instead of eating the pips' sandwiches, we stopped by the restaurant and ordered deep-fried calamari (imported from the ocean) and deep-fried onions. I had a soda. Kluu got a beer.

Twenty minutes later, the man behind the counter walked out of his small kitchen with our food.

As we walked out into the twilight, I asked, "Do you want to eat by the water?"

Kwuu thought, and twitched her left lip up.

"Naw, let's eat in our cabin."

We crossed the parking area with our food bundles, walked up the road fifty meters, and into our cabin. I turned on the yellow light above the table.

The other cabin was still dark; the two couples must have been off walking somewhere.

Our plans ruined, I wondered about Oonj's friend. We could stop by after eating and ask after Oonj. That question would be enough of an excuse, although it might be seen as a rude insult towards Oonj's absence... and Oonj's friend was already part of a couple.

Kwuu arranged the steel chairs so that we could lean back with our feet propped up on the table, back to the wall, and look out over the road and restaurant.

No-one moved outside. It was quiet except for the crickets.

“Could you turn the light off here and turn the one on inside,” requested Kwuu.

Less light would be better, letting us see more clearly into the darkness outside our veranda.

I flipped the light switches and returned to my chair, propping up my feet next to Kwuu’s.

The Hominid restaurant-owner shut off his lights and disappeared into his house behind the restaurant.

Darkness descended.

Kwuu sipped her beer from the bottle.

She looked and “felt” glum.

“I’m glad we ditched the pips,” I said awkwardly, trying to spur the conversation.

Kwuu’s eye twitched. “Yeah,” she said forlornly.

There was an awkward pause.

“Who do you think that [skull] was?” asked Kwuu.

I didn’t know how to answer. I thought about the times I heard of Racoons people “going travelling”, and never returning.

“I don’t know... I don’t know that I want to know.”

We both sipped our drinks.

I took a few bites of the calamari, dipped in tomato sauce.

“Do you think that will happen to us?” pondered Kwuu.

That was an odd question.

Sequentially, Kwuu should have asked, “Who do you think killed her?” She didn’t need to ask.

Racoons didn’t fight and then kill one another.

None of trusted the Hominids though.

Automatically grabbing a piece of fried onion, I wondered if the food was drugged.

Both our drinks had been sealed... I think.

“Deep-fried food can’t contain any drugs, can it?”

Kwuu’s eyes slid left.

“I don’t think so,” she answered thoughtfully.

She sipped her beer and ate some deep-fried onions.

Neither of us used the tomato dipping-sauce after that. It could easily have been poisoned.

“Just think about where we are,” stated Kwuu.

“There are a handful of buildings here,” she went on.

“Lots of nothing.”

“Our village is way-way that way.” She pointed down the road to her right.

“Beyond that are the Hominids.”

“What else is here?”

I thought Kwuu was changing the subject.

Not getting her point, I answered, “We have no idea where any of these roads go.”

“True,” answered Kwuu flatly, followed by a handful and a sip.

“But,” she continued, “Where did her skeleton, or his skeleton, come from?”

I stepped ahead in the conversation. “Maybe the flamingos rummaged through the bones.”

“The quolls must have cleaned him up,” I added.

Kwuu thought briefly about Kluu and Shik... or I did.

We heard a faint hum to our left.

Lore had it that you should change the conversation when hearing an invisible hum. And then you should pretend not to hear the sound.

We paused.

The conversation was redirected to something innocuous.

“They seem to be in, across the street.” I said. “Do you think one of them would be interested?” It was the best I could do at the moment.

Kwuu nodded left and right, “Probably not. They’re couples.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Enjoy the silence,” Kwuu answered, with an ear tilted towards the invisible, quiet hum.

I sipped my drink, and then finished up my grease. Kwuu still had some food left.

The hum moved to our right.

“Do you like doing laundry?” asked Kwuu as her ears tracked the sound.

“Nah,” I answered.

“Maybe you should get a different job, in the other village.”

I didn’t follow.

“What would I do there?” I asked cluelessly.

Kwuu’s voice grew louder. “Who knows, maybe something will come up. The [Hominid] women are always looking for help.”

“Yuln [Shik’s Aunt] always has plenty for me to do,” I answered without thinking.

“Just a thought,” said Kwuu, as she glanced at the invisible sound.

We sat silently, slowly finishing our drinks.
Kwuu ended up tossing half her food outside.



Don't mention the skull

A bus returned us to our village the next morning, dropping us half a kilometre from my house, near an abandoned pub. I could have left Kwuu at that point and walked directly home, but I didn't wish to return to an empty house; Unyah wouldn't be there.

I followed Kwuu home without comment from her. Kwuu's mother, Sarah, opened the house's door and stepped out before we were halfway up the path.

Her eyes were scrunched, head held down. She looked worried.

Speaking in her odd distant-village accent, Sarah began the discussion immediately, "Where are Kluu and Shik?"

The question didn't make sense to me.

Shik was more-closely related to me. Since Kluu was her brother, Kwuu answered, "They went home yesterday."

"Are you sure?" interrogated Sarah.

"Yes," Kwuu answered.

I added, "They took the bus home before we got back."

"Back from where?" more interrogation.

Kwuu was quiet, thinking.

I didn't. "When we came back from canoeing."

Kwuu looked worried.

"When did you last see them?"

Kwuu meekly joined in, "We last saw them just before we went canoeing."

"What time?"

"It was before lunch."

"And when did you return?"

"An hour before sunset," I responded this time.

"So you didn't see them take the bus." A statement from Sarah, not a question.

"No," replied Kwuu.

When I glanced at Kwuu I noticed she was very worried; I had just started to clue in.

Sarah was exasperated, and came to an immediate conclusion:

"Yuln had word from a whisper," our term for helper spirit.

"She's heard that Shik is dead."

"Shit," I muttered.

Kwuu was silent in concentration.

“They didn’t return home then?” asked Kwuu pointlessly. Her mother reached for some more information.

“Who else was on the bus [going out]?”

“Three couples besides us,” Kwuu said. “Two of the couples stayed the night.”

“Who came back on the bus this morning?”

I responded, “Us and a few other people waiting at the restaurant.”

Sarah gave a questioning look.

“Did the couples that stayed the night return?”

“No,” answered Kwuu.

A scowl from Sarah.

“So of the group that went yesterday, you were the only ones to return?”

I thought.

Kwuu was quicker. “Yes”.

Sarah started tidying up. “I have to go tell Yuln and the others.”

As she closed the door to leave, she added, “We already informed the others to keep an eye out for the two pips.”

Sarah walked away down the path intensely.

Kwuu forlornly opened the door her mother had just closed.

She entered, and I followed.

Her bags deposited, Kwuu sat down on her bed, head tilted down, and thought.

I sat on the ground, cross-legged.

“Do you think we should have kept his skull?” she asked.

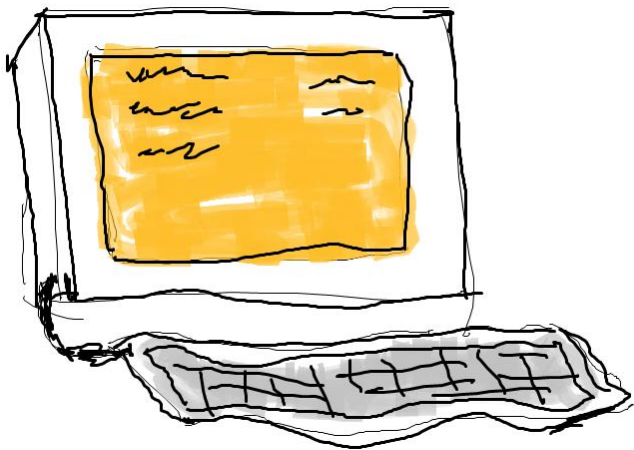
I didn’t know.

“No. He was better left there,” I answered.

“Damn,” Kwuu added as her hands bunched up her sheets.

I was going to say, "Maybe they'll turn up."

But then Kwuu would have said, "Maybe, but I don't think so."



The terminal

The next few days were sad and worrisome. Neither Shik nor Kluu turned up.

The other couples hadn't returned either.

News from the next village informed us that, Oonj had gone travelling "on business"... which meant that he wasn't expected to return... ever... which meant no one knew what happened to him.

Neither of us mentioned the skull to Sarah, Yuln, or the other adults.

The skull didn't seem important at times.

And then it seemed important at other times.

And then I (at least) was too embarrassed to mention it.

And then I forgot about mentioning it.

And then I felt stupid for not mentioning it previously.

A small hole, once dug, becomes deeper.

I didn't help Yuln with her laundry work. I couldn't face her, having lost her child, and the prospect of experiencing her grief. I wouldn't be able to answer any of her questions. Nor did I wish to answer her questions.

Mostly, I moped around inside.

I made attempts to clean the house.

I pulled some weeds just around my house.

Kwuu didn't stop by either, and I didn't expect it. I had rarely talked to her before the trip, spending most of my time with her sister, Unyah... who had flown off.

I did hope she would visit though.

But then again, I didn't seek her out. Nor did I stop by Sarah to learn more.

I merely moped.

A few days after returning, I remembered that I should remember to check Unyah's computer terminal and see if she had sent me any E-mail.

Weeds having been pointlessly pulled, I opened the kitchen cupboard and rummaged in the back for the hidden computer terminal. We kept it well out of Hominid sight, just in case the Hominid woman showed up for an inspection.

The Hominids weren't ever to see it. They knew what computers were, we thought, but Unyah's UFO team didn't want them to know we had one.

The computer terminal was a flat screen about 40 cm x 25 cm. It had a flexible roll-up keyboard that would survive if it got wet. The terminal didn't do so well when it got wet though. A year before, we had water leak from the sink, onto the counter, down the back wall, and into the terminal. It didn't survive. Unyah brought back a replacement the next time she went on a trip.

This new terminal was now kept far away from the sink, on the bottom shelf, behind a lot of little-used cups and take-away containers. Red-back spiders sometimes lived there; I didn't want to reach in.

Carefully peering into the shadowy back, I reached in and pulled out the terminal and keyboard.

I moved it across to a board (impromptu desk) resting on Unyah's bed.

I plugged the keyboard in.

I turned the terminal on.

The white and orange screen lit up.

A three-by-two grid of large boxes filled the screen, each displaying a large icon, one or two words of text, and a keyboard-letter to select the option.

One of the options was for education, which I had occasionally tried.

Another was for games. They were boring.

I clicked on the key to bring up E-mail.

Unyah had showed me how to use the terminal's E-mail so that I might be able to communicate with her if she were gone a long time.

The three-by-two grid disappeared, and the E-mail display lit up. Deciphering the display and non-Racoon language, I could see that there were some old E-mails.

And there were three new ones.

I pressed a key to read the first one:

```
Hello. This is a test. Did you get  
this?
```

That was over a week ago.

```
I am trying again. Why won't you  
read this thing. Can't you remember  
to read this? I am fine. Stuff is  
strange here. Hominids are  
different. People smell weird.
```

Four days ago.

```
If you ever read this, say hi to  
everyone, Kwuu, my mother, Yuln,  
Staff, and Kwary. Crap this place is
```

weird. Tell them I'm still off on business. Please check this. Press the star button to reply.

The star button was a static image of a twinkling star displayed on the screen. I couldn't press it, but it had an associated key on the keyboard.

I typed Unyah a return message.

People are missing. Kluu and Shik disappeared.

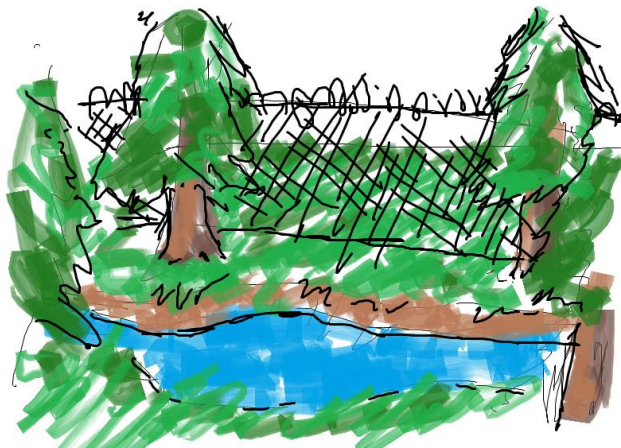
Should I break the bad news to her over a computer? I thought about the impropriety of it, and wasn't sure.

I decided to leave the text in.

People are missing. Kluu and Shik disappeared.

We found a Racoon skull near the flamingos too. How are you doing? How long until I get a reply to this? When do I check for new messages?

I sent of the E-mail.



Don't go back there again

Most of the food I ate was nature-bought. Occasional work would earn me money for the store, where I could purchase foods like jams and butter.

Because I didn't want to face Yuln and discuss her missing daughter, or even be forced to think about her daughter's death, I didn't get any work. So I didn't have much money, so I spent even more time foraging.

Trees would drop nuts in season. Berries occurred before then. Flowers were even edible.

The nearby creek was an excellent place for food. Its trickling course sported a few deep waterholes with rocks. Underneath and around the rocks were yabbies (large crayfish).

Every day, I would walk to a different waterhole, wade in, and pull up rocks until I found a decent yabby. I'd eat the tail, and the claws if they were large enough. Raw was better than cooked, except when tomato sauce was available for dipping.

I'd tear the yabby's body in half, placing the pieces on either end of the shallow parts of the waterhole. The remains of the tail and claws I'd place in other shallow areas. Sometimes I'd use small stones to hold down the floating meat.

Other yabbies would be attracted to the dead meat.

All I had to do was wait.

All subsequent yabbies that I caught were cannibal yabbies, and therefore more-morally edible... that's what Unyah had said.

On the other side of the creek was a cyclone fence with barbed wire on top. The hairs (Hominid men) had erected it a few years ago.

Before the fence was put up, as a pip, I would wander the floodplain (and mushy field) on the other side. The field didn't contain much food though, other than the occasional flower. Beyond that was a forest, and more creeks.

Now there was a fence.

Over a kilometre beyond the fence-line were some buildings that the hairs had erected. I assumed that the Hominids lived there. I didn't think to think about what they did there though.

1970's style trucks would enter and leave the distant buildings. They had no gate on our village's side. It must have been in another fence-line, several kilometres away.

Our side had no entrance... kind of. Pine trees grew along both sides of the fence. It would have been easy to climb up one pine tree, leap across to another tree, and the climb down. Some trees touched, and were so close you could practically walk across the boughs.

I never tried. Some of the Raccoon men (or boys) had; they didn't recommend entering the fenced hairs-village since the Hominids tended to shoot anyone in their territory.

After eating my fill of yabbies, I returned home, prepared to take an afternoon nap. My fur was wet. Naps were particularly welcome with wet fur.

Unyah's terminal came to mind on my way home. I decided to check it out and see if I had any more E-mail.

I washed up when I returned home, and then pulled the terminal out from its hiding spot.

After turning it on, I pressed the E-mail button.

There were two new messages:

What happened to Kluu and Shik? You can type more than three sentences you idiot! 😊

And there was another one:

I just learned some more. You should tell my mother about the skull. It's all related. Don't tell anyone where I am though. I just got into some trouble and won't be returning for awhile.

I decided a nap was less important than Unyah's task.

Fifteen minutes later, I was at Kwuu's and Unyah's mother's house:

"Did Kwuu mention the skull to you?" I asked, trying to hide the hole I had begun digging. I still hadn't told Sarah about Unyah's space trip, either.

Sarah was hanging her sheets in the sun.

She turned around. Her eyes narrowed.

"No." She paused. "What skull?"

Damn, I thought.

"When we went canoeing, we found a [Racoon] skull."

Her eyes widened.

"Where?"

"Beyond the flamingos. In a week-old fire circle."

"What did she look like?"

I didn't understand the context of the question.

"Was her skull bashed in? Were there other bones?"

"No. He was undamaged. A few other bones were in the fire."

Sarah could certainly interrogate.

“Were there any clothes?”

“I didn’t see any.”

“Do you know how she... er he... got there?”

“No. The flamingos may have played with his skull and bones.”

“The flamingos wouldn’t have carried him though. Nor would they have killed him.”

Sarah gave a grumpy look.

“How many other people have disappeared there?”

How would I know?

Sarah was both talking to herself and lecturing me about not telling her about the skull. “It would be impossible to tell, wouldn’t it? Because too many people pass through there to get to other villages.”

She squinted at me.

“You are too closed-mouth.”

“I wouldn’t recommend going back there,” she added.

I had thought the same.

“I have to go tell everyone else about the skull,” Sarah said with a scowl. “You haven’t seen Kwuu, have you?”

Was Kwuu dead?

Sarah must have read my facial expression. “She left home just before you arrived. You might have seen her as you were walking here.”

As I walked away, Sarah was tidying herself up, planning to walk off and talk to some neighbours about the skull.

Dead

I returned home and, although my fur was mostly dried by then, I lay down for a nap.

Waking up a few hours later, the skull forgotten, I visited the sink to get a drink of water.

The terminal was still out and left on. A screensaver of bouncing lines had appeared.

I shouldn't have left it out.

I checked for new E-mail messages. None had arrived.

I hid the terminal back underneath the counter.

Being close to dinnertime, I undertook some more nature shopping.

I found some berries along the creek. They were bitter, but free.

Visiting a different yabbie pool, I waded in and grabbed a few yabbies for a small dinner.

I returned home just before sunset.

My head had begun to ache... actually, it wasn't my head. It was my brain that ached.

I fell asleep.

I woke up once in the middle of the night, finding it difficult to breathe.

And then I went back to sleep.

"You're dead," indicated a quiet telepathic voice.

"We'll put you with your half-sister for now."



The injection

Several weeks before, while Kwuu, Kluu, Shik, and I were at the billabong...

Kluu hobbled off the boat, glad to be on the security and motionlessness of land. He had enough of his big sister and her friend... and all their hints.

While Shen and his sister hauled the rowboat ashore, Kluu wandered around, and then off... away from the water.

The closest way away from the sparkling-blue motion was the dirt road. Kluu thought he'd adventure up it a bit and see if he could find anyone to talk to.

He couldn't. The road was deserted, except for a few "Ta ta" lizards. (Gilbert's dragons)

Kluu took some time to wave at them. They waved back.

When he approached them, they scuttled up some trees.

He walked up to one of the trees where a lizard had fled. It climbed around to the other side and then much higher up.

Oh well.

Kluu walked back towards the restaurant.

He briefly walked alongside the billabong to see if anyone was around.

He could find no-one.

Nothing to do.

Kluu sat down, pulled some hairs of grass with his hand, and threw them into the water, or rather, towards it. They fluttered down, not far from his outstretched hand.

No one was around.

Kluu wondered if he should have stayed on the boat with his sisters... and then what? Watch flamingos all day? And get ill from the rocking of the boat?

No.

It didn't matter. Kluu was ashore now.

Where to?

How long until his sisters returned and took him home?

What now?

Kluu decided to stop by the restaurant, which was more of a food store. He didn't have any money, but someone that he could talk to might be inside.

Kluu opened the creaking flyscreen door of the store. Inside were a few shelves of preserved food, a counter with a cash register, and a single shellacked wooden table with two benches.

Sitting on one bench was Shik, head resting on her folded arms. Bored.

Shik was smaller than Kluu, so he thought he should act older... more mature.

He walked up to her.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," said Shik.

Not much of a conversation yet. What was next?

Kluu sat down on the bench opposite.

"My sister ditched me."

"Yeah." Pause. "I'm going to take the bus back."

"Sounds good to me," answered Kluu.

Shik eye-smiled and nodded her head playfully.

"Do you need to tell them?" asked Shik.

Kluu thought. "No, they'll figure out that I left."

Pause.

"Not much to do here," commented Shik.

"No."

Awkward pause.

Kluu was going to ask if Shik wanted to go for a walk.

The storeowner approached, entering from a room behind the counter. He was a Hominid man wearing brown-blue pants and a white shirt.

"Do you pips want anything to eat?"

"We don't have any money," answered Kluu.

"I do!" retorted Shik. "But I just spent most of it on some candy."

The man paused. Kluu couldn't read his face.

"I'll tell you what," said the man. "I can get you a bite to eat."

Kluu looked up expectantly.

“But first, you have to accept a vaccination.”

Kluu couldn't read the man's facial expression.

“Do you know what a vaccination is?”

Kluu knew, and he knew Shik did to. “Sure. One of the women from your village comes around once in awhile and injects them into keep us from getting sick.”

“You're a smart one,” winked the man. That was the only facial expression that Kluu had read.

“Are you game?” asked the man.

“Yes,” answered Kluu. He didn't think to bargain in advance for what food he'd get for accepting the vaccination.

“And you?” the man looked at Shik.

“Sure,” accepted Shik, following Kluu's lead.

“Good. Come on back behind the counter and I'll get out two vaccines.”

Kluu and Shik followed the man behind the counter, and into a small storeroom.

The room already had one chair.

The man soon brought in another, and both pips sat down, legs dangling.

“Just a minute,” said the man.

He walked out of the store room and returned two minutes later, carrying two small 2.0 mm syringes, with short needles.

He kneeled down to Kluu's level.

“You're first, since you're the bravest.”

Kluu held out his left arm, as he had done many times when the village children had been vaccinated.

The man slid the needle into Kluu's arm, and squeezed in the vaccine juice.

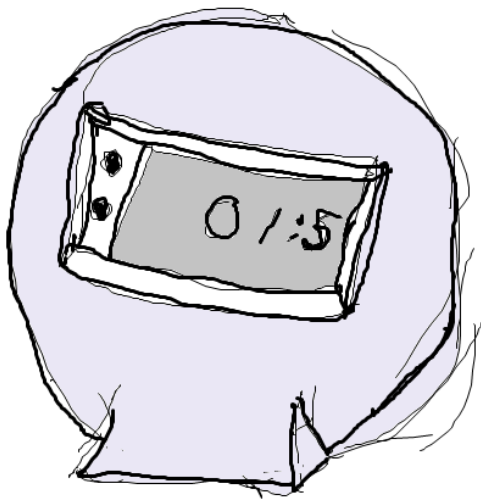
Shik was next.

Kluu's eyes sleepily shut fifteen seconds later.

Blank.

Dead.

Children's Raccoon jackets sell for A\$40.00 in Azcruk.



Dead again

I leapt from the branches of one pine tree, to the next.

I felt like I was in a dream.

I climbed down the other pine, but it wasn't me who was climbing.

In front of me stood a Hominid in a blue uniform, wearing a helmet.

I had seen him climb down the tree before me.

He was awfully short for a Hominid.

And his tail stuck out of his oversized trousers.

For some reason, this didn't seem odd to me.

When my feet touched the moist ground underneath the tree, I noticed that I couldn't see well. I was wearing a helmet, with a plastic face-piece that was flattening my nose.

It was also difficult to breathe.

Why was I wearing a helmet?

I tried to take it off.

My hands headed towards the helmet and then disobeyed me.

They returned to my side.

Was I dreaming?

I followed the short Hominid man in front of me.

I wondered about the tail.

Did I get drunk? Did someone convince me to do some crazy stunt while I was drunk? I hadn't gotten drunk before though.

I realized that I was walking awkwardly in oversized boots.

I didn't recall putting them on.

Nor the blue-grey clothes I was wearing. I don't know how I knew they were blue-grey. Their colour didn't show well by starlight.

What was happening?

I couldn't control my muscles all the time.

Dreamlike, I followed the Hominid man... more likely a Raccoon dressed up in one of the Hominid uniforms.

We slunk through a broad field, at night.

I occasionally looked up from the ground, towards a few distant buildings lit by small lights. That was our destination.

The Hominid women always talked about hell. I wondered if I was there.

If this was hell, it didn't look like what I expected.

Forgetting that I was trying to figure out where I was, I forgot to worry about where I was.

I think I fell asleep.

But my body kept walking.

In front the other dressed-up Raccoon were some real Hominid-men, also in uniforms.

They were about twenty meters away, standing just outside a night-illuminated building.

Imitating a Hominid walk in oversized boots and clothing, we walked right past them.

They didn't notice.

The male Raccoon in front of me walked towards one tent, and then froze for a second. He nonchalantly pretended that he had made a mistake. Hominids must have been inside.

He walked towards another tent. I followed, automatically, dreamlike.

None of the Hominid men noticed us.

It must have be the uniforms we were wearing.

Was this a dream?

The Raccoon I followed walked into the tent.

It had a cross on its tent-flap door.

After he motioned with his hand, I followed.

The tent was dark inside.

After he searched around in the dark for a minute, my Raccoon companion pulled out a small object that was a flashlight, and turned it on.

He pointed it at a chest, which he then opened up. He gleefully danced from foot to foot when he saw what was inside.

He didn't say anything. He was very quiet.

Reaching into the chest, my companion grabbed two guns and handed them to me.

I put one in each pocket.

He did the same with two more guns, while trying to hold a third.

He pulled some silvery-opalescent balls out of the chest, and handed five to me.

He held about four.

Each ball had a small LCD display on it.

Below or beside the displays were small grey buttons.

Showing instead of telling, my excited companion pressed one of my balls' buttons a few times. The number on the display increased to 10.0.

He shook the sphere like a Coke can, and then handed it back to me. The number was now blinking red.

"You do the same," he said quietly. "Quick!"

I didn't have to think about acting.

My hands worked automatically. They set each bomb to approximately the same number, and then shook them.

After all our bombs were set to go off, my Raccoon companion rolled one of the bombs into the corner of the tent.

We dashed out of the tent!

He rolled one of the bombs towards another tent.

My brain caught onto his strategy, and I rolled one of my bombs in another direction, towards a building.

I was still in a dream. My hands rolled bombs automatically.

We ran a bit further.

We rolled more bombs towards other buildings, especially those with lights on inside.

“Hey,” yelled one the Hominids. “What are you doing?”

We ran!

I had two bombs remaining, which I chucked behind me as I ran. I may have hit my companion on the head as he followed puffing behind me.

I was half way to the fence when I was knocked down to the ground by an explosion.

Blank.

“You’re dead Kwuu... and Shen. We’ll pick you up in a moment.”

One of the bombs was a ten kiloton efficient nuke. It had gone off, flattened all the buildings, and the Hominid men, and my friend who had been tackled, and me.



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