

JENNA RECKTENWALD

# Beneath Me

I followed no one but him

I dreaded summer's end. It wasn't that this summer had been especially good, on the contrary it had more safety drills, bugs, and heat compared to last year, but the end of it meant the beginning of my last schooling session.

My 18th Day celebration was 10 months away, and teachers and my parents alike kept reminding me how important this time was. It was the last preparation year I and my classmates had before joining the adults in society. Integration was everything to them, but I wanted to scream and kick my legs at the thought of it.

I wasn't born to slot into a job that thousands before me had already toiled their life away at. Farming, cooking, hunting, water supply maintenance, medicinal practice, childminding, safety guard, none of them lit anything in my heart. I was desperate for something different, but with my school days dwindling my unrest grew.

I laid in bed listening to the summer bugs beating their rhythmic serenade till late morning, thinking on these things. Around noon my mother called out to me and opened my door. "Cecilia, honey, are you sick?" Her voice tried to portray worry, but I saw the exasperation in her eyes. Even if I had been sick, she would have been annoyed with me.

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“I’m fine. Do you need something?” I replied, not bothering to hide the annoyance in my voice. If I wasn’t an adult yet, she had no right to expect me to pull her weight around the house too. Who was I bothering if I stayed in my room the last days of summer?

As expected, she ignored my response and crossed my room to lift the window covering, revealing the bright mid-day sun. I raised my hand over my eyes and groaned. “You can’t sleep all day! You are supposed to be near of age! It’s time to pick something to help with!”

I knew she meant a family member to do chores with today, but the frustration in her voice was hinting towards my bigger life path. Before she could grab my bed covering away from me, I flung it off in spite and stood up. “I’ll help Father today! Now, leave me!” I turned and busied myself fixing my long blonde hair in the largest mirror I had.

It was only a foot across and in height, but I had to make due after Father forced us to leave much of our house items behind in the last move three years ago. I remember arguing with him to take more, but he insisted the safety guards and tunnel studiers had new guidelines on the weight each family could travel with. I was of the opinion he was too lazy and simply didn’t want to prioritize my things, but I was used to not being listened to.

With my hair relatively untangled, I put on a clean brown and purple linen dress and briskly walked past my mother to exit our home. I didn’t have to walk far to find Father. He stood hunched over the side covering of our dwelling. As I approached, I saw he was patching the outer leather with a new deer hide.

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I wished we could have a stone home again, but that was another issue I chalked up to the adults' laziness. My Father and uncle had both told me that style home was going out of favor due to the Holly Grove incident.

I was young when it happened, perhaps six or seven, but from what I remember it was not the homes' fault! The Holly Grove village leader had simply been a fool. He knew the tunnel studiers warned of a tunnel to the southeast being dug further in their direction by the day. When the tunnel reached two miles from the village wall, orders were supposed to have been given to move the village and all inhabitants no less than fifty miles away.

However, he had stated their stone homes were too troublesome to rebuild and that they would instead fortify the village and kill the tunnel beasts if they still dared to close in. They indeed made a finer village wall, thick and high with stones, but the tunnels suddenly opened up underneath the village center itself months later.

Only a handful of the three-hundred men, women, and children managed to flee to our nearby village. The rest were taken into the tunnels or died fighting, or so the story went. I never knew if I believed the cowards that ran. They didn't stay till the end, so how did they know?

"Are you going to keep watching, or would you like to take the needle?" My father asked, not looking away from his tedious task. I wasn't the worst at sewing leather, but I had hoped for a chore further away from the house and Mother today.

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“Is there something else you were going to do today? Maybe trade supplies in the Center?” He paused for a moment and sighed. “I guess you would rather do shopping.” I held out my hand, and he pulled several coins from his side bag and put them in my palm. “We don’t need much today, only tar for this patch and sugar cane for your brother’s Day cake.”

I counted the coins, seeing if there may be extra for me to buy something too. “Sure, I’ll get it. Be back later!” If nothing else, I could only get two stalks of sugar cane to ensure I had enough for myself. Samson was turning 13 on his annual Day celebration, which meant he was too old for extra sweet things. If I told it to him like that, he would likely thank me for thinking of him. The boy was not the brightest despite his name meaning sun!

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The Center was a short 10-minute walk away, but I took my time getting there. On the way, I picked a few wildflowers growing along the dirt road. I weaved the small purple and white buds into the sides of my hair above my ears. At times I hated the natural curls of my hair, but it was good for keeping flowers in place.

People-watching along this route was a favorite of mine. Little children played tag with their last summer days. They had no cares like

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I had, thinking only of being faster than the last runner. Then there were the worker bees of the village, men and women who had years ago gladly submitted to the expectations of our society, becoming haulers, farmers, childminders.

They worked their jobs as I strolled past, not paying any mind to anything outside of their slot in life. It nearly made me want to spit. I imagined the sheep the farmers led around had more individual thoughts than them.

I reached the bend in the road, past the farms and yurt houses. Here the road turned to stone with another inner wall. A safety guard stood at attention near the wall door and nodded at me as I entered. Another useless waste of one's life, standing, staring for half his years.

The Center was more my style. Here merchants sold and traded their goods. There were wooden carts with fruits and vegetables, meat racks with the best fresh cuts strung up, clothes hung carefully on lines to show off the fabric and colors. I jingled the coins in my pocket and knew I could get a small treat at best. I'd buy that first and then see what was left for Samson's Day cake.

"Cecilia!" A familiar voice called out, and I turned to see my classmate, Ila, waving me over to the blacksmith shack off to the right. "Out shopping? Can I walk with you?" She asked. I nodded. "Just a few things, but please join me!" Ila was a homely girl but very friendly. We had become friends in the first course of our higher schooling two years ago.

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I hadn't thought to talk to her back then, but she approached me first. We ended up having some shared hobbies such as hair braiding, art class, and complaining about our younger brothers.

I looked the shorter girl up and down before we started walking. "Did you want to go to the clothes shops? You look like you could use a new outfit." Her beige dress, standard farmer attire, had a few mottled holes. The one thing we fought about often was life plans. She was glad to take up her mother's farming role at the end of this season. I insulted her over it once or twice in a joking manner, but she didn't take my advice.

"We can browse if you want. I'm waiting for my mother's new shovel to be fixed at the blacksmith. So we have time to walk and chat. It doesn't matter to me what shops we look at." I sighed and tugged her arm. "You really are no good at hints, Ila! I don't have enough money for the clothes shop. But what do you have?"

She furrowed her brows, looking perplexed. "Oh, well I wasn't planning on buying clothes with my money. I only have enough for the blacksmith and then lunch." "Ugh, okay. Let's get food then. I didn't want to eat breakfast at my house with Mother." With our arms linked, I led over to the food stalls.

There was an assortment of baked goods at the first, soups and stews at the second, and bundled day packs of dried meat, hard bread, and beer at the last. Hunters often went for the last stall, needing portable food for their long treks outside the village walls and back before dusk.

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I stopped at the first and looked over their pastries. “That one looks good! Want to share it? I can get some stew and share the bowl too.” Ila offered. “Sure, I was looking at the cherry filled one too.” I took out one of the coins and paid the older woman running the stall.

She handed the large wrapped pastry to me and smiled. “Enjoy! Oh, and you two might want to eat fast! Rumor is the tunnel studiers have another drill planned today.” I frowned but Ila jumped in front before I could say anything. “Thank you! We will!”

Ila got her goat stew at the next stall and we sat on a wooden bench facing into the Center. I ripped the pastry in half and started into mine. “I have half a mind to eat slow and stare the safety guards in the face when they come for the next drill. We’ve had three already this summer!” Ila shook her head and chided me. “It’s for the good of the whole village. They don’t hold them for fun. If we’re getting a fourth drill, it’s because the latest study indicated this is a better protocol to follow.”

“Studies don’t tell you everything...” I muttered, my mouth full of sweet cherries and crisp pastry. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t see any tunnel entrances anywhere near us. This is wasting my summer.” I could tell Ila was about to launch into a lecture about the village leaders knowing best and probably quote our textbooks to boot, so I held up my hand to cut her off.

“I know, I know! We can agree to disagree... as long as you know that you’re wrong.” She shook her head in response and said nothing, beginning to eat her stew. We stayed silent a moment, then she passed the bowl to me for my portion.

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She spoke quietly, as she always did after I made her upset. I suspected it was a tactic to make me feel guilty, but it didn't work if it was. "I wish you'd respect them more... I worry about you, you know? It's not that I want to be right. I want people to be safe."

I thought better of responding to her and loudly finished my half of the stew. Ila, in my opinion, had a warped sense of the world, one controlled by fear. Her mother had taken in one of the refugees from Holly Grove village after the incident years ago, and that woman told them the story she had many times. They let it change them, talking about respecting the leaders and following every tunnel protocol to the letter. But I wasn't as weak-willed as Ila and her mother. I knew to follow my own instincts.

I finished the bowl and stood up. "Let's go back to shopping before our masters of safety kill our fun." Ila stayed quiet but followed me.

We went to get the tar first then the sugar cane. I was right that I could only buy two stalks, but that was fine. As we went, I goaded Ila into talking about the boy she likes in our class. It was a much better topic than her lectures. Soon, we circled back around to the blacksmith and picked up her mother's fixed shovel.

"Want to stay here and see if they do the drill soon?" Ila asked. "It would be less trouble than walking all the way back home and hearing the whistles as soon as we're there." She was right about that. "Yeah, let's sit off to the side and get it over with."

Not long after, we heard them begin in the distance. I hated the sound. Apparently the eerie rising and fall of the whistles' pitches was by design. The tunnel studiers found a scarier rhythm to the alarms

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resulted in more people listening and following, whether they were drills or a real event.

Every working adult had a whistle assigned to them and was charged with keeping it around their neck day and night. If you took it off to bathe even and were found out, you could be punished.

The drill whistles usually began in the village edges as they were deemed the most likely place for an attack should the tunnel dwellers move in close enough. Every adult that heard a whistle picked up a weapon, blew their own whistle, and began running to the last walls in the village Center. They were built as another safety feature, our last one, should the main walls be breached.

As we sat already inside the Center walls, we listened as the whistles undulated in pitch and grew in volume. Adults from the closer homes now joined the sounds, making the whistles all one could hear. I put my hands on my ears to muffle it, and I watched the adults in the Circle stop what they were doing, pick up a nearby fire poker, knife, hammer, or wood staff and begin blowing their whistles to match.

People from outside began pouring in through the wall's doors. The guards stood ready to fight or close the door when it was time. After 10 insufferable minutes, the leader of the drill, our main tunnel studier, stood on a raised platform and gave the hand signal for the whistles to stop if they were within the Center.

The noise faltered and halted within several seconds. Everyone stood, watching and listening. If any remaining whistles were heard outside the walls, the guards were to keep the doors open as late as

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possible to wait for them. If no whistles were heard, they were to close the doors and barricade them, assuming all were safely inside.

No whistles were heard, and I took my hands off my ears. The guards began closing the doors, and I stood up and looked around for my family in the throngs of people. “I’ll see you later, Ila.” She waved and began walking towards the back of the Center. “It was fun chatting! I’ll see if I can find my mother too. Bye!”

I eventually found them near the west side of the Center. Mother took the sugar canes from me and gave a disappointed look, but my younger brother behind her didn’t seem to notice. Father grabbed the heavier tar and spoke in a tired voice. “They’re about to re-open the doors, let’s get back. I have to finish this mend before sundown.”

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The next day was filled with mind-numbing chores, and the one after was the first school session of the season. I sat in my usual seat next to Ila and rested my chin in my hands, bored before the teachers even began.

Our first teacher up was Mrs Allaway. She welcomed us back and went over our curriculum for this final year. Much of it was no surprise, job studies, math, science, reading, and physical breaks. The one unexpected course was a tunnel studier coming in once a week for special lessons.

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“Students, I know many of you aren’t interested in tunnel studier as a job, and we only need a few per village, but it is a good opportunity for one of you! Tunnel studiers keep safe protocols themselves, so it isn’t always as dangerous as you envision.” Mrs Allaway grabbed a rod and began pointing at our map of the surrounding villages.

“Not only do you get to use a lot more of your math, science, and writing than your peers, but you also get to travel. Tunnel studiers rotate between nearby villages to share information and bring their data back with them. We help each other this way, and our villages have a common goal of safety.”

“This is why there hasn’t been a war between villages in near a hundred years. The tunnel studier role is a well respected one. But,” she turned to look at each of us with a pause, “it is also one that requires much discipline and care for your fellow people. Over the next months, please listen carefully to what our tunnel studier has to teach and consider if you may want to apprentice under him.”

I looked around the room, trying to estimate who was interested and who wasn’t. Near every kid had their head down, reading or doodling. I thought it likely they already had their mundane jobs picked out.

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The rest of the day went by slowly. Reading was my least favorite subject, but I pretended to skim the book to avoid the teacher's rod hitting my chair. Ila kept looking over at me, doing her usual habit of trying to keep me out of trouble. Finally, the day ended and we parted ways to go back home.

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The last day of the week held my interest more than the others, although it was still a waste of time. Today the tunnel studier, Mr Flint, took the rod from our normal teacher and stood in front of us.

He was a weathered man with gray speckled hair and hard creases in his forehead and mouth corners. His skin was almost the color of leather from being in the sun so much. He wore gray slacks and a tan shirt, nothing special, but cleaner than the farmer or hunter attire.

“I'm sure you all have some perception of what tunnel studiers do.” He spoke with a deep, raspy voice and no hint of welcome. No one could accuse this man of having a sense of humor or joy. “But not all of your assumptions may be correct. I'm here to tell you facts close from the source. You will learn strict principles that keep data straight and save lives. If you have a question, wait for the end.”

He took a large leather bag from beside him and opened it, taking out maps, journals with filled pages, paper sheets with careful lines and rows of numbers, and writing instruments. “These are the tools we use daily. They are our weapons against the tunnel humanoids.” I saw a

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hand shoot up from the boy in front, but Mr Flint only frowned deeper and continued.

“And in this class, I will call them humanoids. I don’t want to hear questions and arguments about their names. There’s all sorts of slang and use of terms like monsters and beasts, but we’re studying them not creating scary stories.” The boy’s hand slunk down in quiet embarrassment.

Mr Flint turned and hung a few maps and illustrations on the board. “When I say study, I mean hard numbers and facts. If we see a tunnel opening, we measure the distance with the latest trundle wheel model and write it down and date it. He lifted up a journal and showed us a page filled with neatly written entries.

“We don’t guess, we don’t give in to feelings, we don’t listen to a passing hunter and take their word for it. Words of another person are useless unless they are backed by journal data.” He put the journal down and pointed at the map next, particularly where the remnants of Holly Grove village are.

“Feelings and guesses get people killed. If I hear them in this class, I will exclude you from ever taking up this job.” I rolled my eyes and heard a few scoffs from other kids. None of us wanted the role, so his little threat was hardly frightening.

“As we start, I’m going to go over the baseline data we have on humanoids, their tunnel structures, their weaknesses, their behavior, their eating habits, and their body anatomy. Then we will get into the latest data, including a new letter from a tunnel studier far away near Ashland. You will learn that even the smallest improvements in our

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data can lead to big protocol changes and ultimately more safety for us.”

I tuned him out for the next portion. He was going over basic things that we already had in our elementary school year textbooks. He brought out decade old sketches of the tunnel beasts, layouts of how their tunnels sprawled underground like ant colonies, data sheets of how sunlight and even bright moonlight could burn their white, almost translucent skin.

The behavior and diet section was the grossest. We’ve heard a million times that they are opportunity hunters, eating any kind of meat including human. He went in excruciating depth talking of how they prepared and kept their meat, what underground chamber section they typically ate in, and ended with sketches of abandoned tunnels where studiers found meat remnants. I was very interested in my fingernails during that part, not wanting to see all the drawings.

Finally, he moved on to the letter from Ashland. It contained rows and rows of numbers and a short summary on the last page. “This may look boring to you, but it now means a new model for predicting tunnel spread speed. This was compiled from two separate tunnel networks, one on their south and one on their north. The south network had an estimated 10 humanoids, while the north one had 40.”

“They tracked the tunnels’ new branches over the course of a year and wrote each expansion length and date. You may expect a network with 40 humanoids to be expanded at four times the rate of one with only 10 humanoids, but that was not the case. This is why we don’t rely

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on assumptions, guesses, and feelings!” He punctuated this sentence with a hard look over us.

“The results were the smaller network built tunnels faster! The theory was a smaller humanoid family has less need of dedicated hunters and could spare more for purely expansion. We will need to test more data to prove if that theory is the right one, but we can see that they indeed built tunnels faster and farther.”

“You may read your school books and believe you know everything you need about tunnels and humanoids, but we are always learning more important facts. This is why our society has grown tremendously in these last one-hundred years. Before we created a separate role for tunnel studiers, villages were lucky to grow in size up to 30 people. The rest were food for the humanoids, picked off year by year.”

I couldn't help but let out an audible scoff at this. Mr Flint walked across the room and put some papers back in his bag. He got quiet, so I was hopeful he was about done for the day. I was startled to look up and see him in front of my chair, staring expectantly. “Miss...?” He asked.

“Cecilia” I begrudgingly offered. He folded his hands behind his back. “Miss Cecilia, can you explain to everyone what part of my last speech you disagreed with? My next point was about the merits of debating and re-testing data to determine its validity. You may be able to help me with an example.”

He was only here to make me look like a fool, but my classmates were unlikely to agree with him! I sat straighter and held my head up to

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answer. “You say we’re lucky to have these protocols and larger villages, but that’s a theory you haven’t proven.”

He cocked his head and grinned for the first time since entering the room. “Oh, you’re making a point on theory. Please, expand on that as much as you want, and then I’ll respond.” I looked around for support, noticing a few of the boys watching me closely.

“Do you have any data from before your protocols, when village sizes were smaller? Another theory could be that larger villages are leading to less intelligent, lazier people, just like the larger network of tunnel beasts was slower to build new tunnel branches.” I smiled smugly after finishing. This guy wasn’t near as smart as he thought himself to be.

“It’s true the larger network of tunnel humanoids,” he emphasized the last word, not caring for my choice of the word beast, “was slower, but that does not necessarily mean lazy or less intelligent.” He stood straighter and walked back, lecturing to the greater room and not only me. “But I like the challenge of your own theory. Let’s dissect it! To start, you ask if there is data from before the protocols. There is a lot less since there were not tunnel studiers to write it down. Much of the information we have is scattered and potentially polluted with feelings and biases of the writers.”

“However, what we can corroborate over multiple agreeing accounts is the general life expectancy, conditions of living, and technology or work tools common to the villages. I didn’t bring all of these with me, but I can bring more the next class. One I do have is an

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invoice list for tools and supplies from one village to another around 82 years ago.”

He walked back to his bag, dug around for a moment, and produced a graphite copy of the paper. “They used stone for their farm tools, including shovels. Metal was extremely rare and reserved for swords, spear tips, and knives given their constant humanoid attacks. We are larger villages now and harder to move much like the large, slow tunnel network. But the trade off is better living conditions! Metal is plentiful now! We use it for even less important tools or children’s toys.”

“Our writing samples from even 70 years ago and now are also stark contrasts! Children as young as five can begin writing in our modern, safer society. We have the time and resources to teach them. Back then, our writing samples were only from village leaders and other high-ranking men. They had no resources to prioritize teaching the women and children.”

He paced and pointed a finger to no one in particular. “Now, we also can’t correlate education directly to intelligence! Had those children 70 years ago had access to the teachers and classes you had, it could very well be that they were more intelligent and could learn advanced reading and writing. We won’t know, because they didn’t have the same access.”

“So, you see we can make some definitive data points from the quality of life and education access, but some other points may remain theories due to insufficient data. What’s important isn’t being right and knowing everything, it is always learning more and testing more.” He turned and smiled genuinely now, clasping his hands in front of him.

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“That’s it for today, but I hope I’ve whet your appetite for learning more next week!”

Mrs Allaway lightly clapped and then stood up to remind students of work studies for the next week. Everyone was anxious to leave school and have our weekend free, but I remained seated a little longer looking at Mr Flint’s illustrations still up on the board. He frustrated me, but I didn’t know how to argue it yet. Maybe I needed some data of my own to show him I could be right too.

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On Saturday I went hunting with my father. It was a rare treat to leave the village. I felt more free walking through the woods, no school, no mundane chores. I suppose hunting was a chore, but I left that to Father and mostly watched him.

Today he was hopeful to get just a few rabbits. The meat wasn’t much, but Mother wanted the pelts for a project. I trailed behind Father as he checked tracks and quietly explained every step of what he was doing and why. I nodded and agreed at the right points, but my head was not in it.

I kept thinking back to Mr Flint’s lesson, how arrogant he sounded with all his facts. I doubted he had a wife with his absolute rejection of feelings in important matters, or if he did she was miserable! There had to be a better path, one I’d find, that brought better points together.

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As we neared the edge of the southern woods, a safety guard a hill away spotted us and headed our direction. My father stopped and waited out of respect. Father greeted when he came near. “Hello, how are things? We’re following rabbit tracks today.”

“Fine,” the guard replied, “but I want to warn you away from going this direction. There is a tunnel entrance three miles farther, and our safe limit is one mile. You won’t find anything good before having to turn back before dusk.” Father nodded. “Thank you, we’ll follow the wood’s edge instead then.”

We parted ways and went along the trees, but my eyes were trained on the hill’s crest farther south.

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All that night, I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking of the boring jobs my family and teacher wanted for me, and what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to do what they wouldn’t. I wanted to prove Mr Flint wrong and shove it in his face.

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I began to make a plan, my own plan, with feelings, my own experiences, and my intellect at the forefront. I could do it.

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I stayed quiet over the next school days, including in Mr Flint's lessons, but in the background I was gathering things for my plan. I had a knife, field glasses, paper and pencil, and a compass. I hid these in my small backpack and waited for the next Saturday when Father was sure to hunt again.

We went out, still trailing rabbits since Father had been empty-handed last time. He wanted to go to the north to try a new area, but I insisted we go back south. I told him I had a good feeling about it. He was surprised at my sudden passion for the hunt and readily agreed to try the same wooded spot.

We turned round and round in the woods, coming up empty, but catching rabbits wasn't my real plan anyway. When the sun had overshot its peak, I set about my idea. "Father, how about I try closer to the village wall and head back first if I don't have any luck? We're losing the day."

He set down a snare he had been checking and looked at me. "I don't like splitting up when we're outside. It's not recommended." Why was it all anyone cared about were protocols! Protocols were made by blowhards like Mr Flint!

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“But I’ll be going back first. If anything, it’s safer. I know the way is straight through there.” I pointed behind us through the woods we came through, hoping he wouldn’t argue again. He stared a moment, then looked towards the shadows to estimate the sun’s position. “Alright, but go straight there and then straight inside. I won’t be here much longer before heading that way myself. If we split up there’s a chance we’ll be quieter and can catch one of these furballs.”

I nodded excitedly, hiked my backpack further up my shoulders, and took off into the woods. What Father didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him. I only went far enough away to be out of sight and sound. Then I did a wide circle and headed back south.

I made sure Father wasn’t in the area and then crossed out of the woods and up the hill, where the safety guard had previously told us off. From the hilltop, I could see a good few miles. There were woods at the base, then more open flat dirt.

I squinted and stared before taking out the field glasses. It was hard to make out from here, but there was a mound of dirt and a darkened spot far out. I had never seen a tunnel in person before, but the shape looked like my textbooks’ sketches. Grinning, I headed down the hill to get a better spot.

I settled in one of the larger trees at the edge of the last outcropping. There was a good half mile between me and the tunnel, but I could see it extraordinarily well through the field glasses now.

I carefully looped my backpack around a large branch behind me so it could act as a safety tether should I fall asleep or lose balance in the tree. Now in place, I waited quietly for dusk. My head spun with ideas,

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wondering if even the great Mr Flint had studied them this close or only read his crumpled, yellowed old letters.

I had expected to see one as soon as sunset arrived, but it took much longer. The sun was no where now, and it was hard to see in only a sliver of moonlight. But his skin was unmistakable in any level of light.

He exited the tunnel entrance and stretched, his white skin near glistening. I gripped the field glasses tighter, almost in disbelief at what I was seeing. He looked almost human... if it weren't for his skin, pitch black hair, and slightly longer arms, I wouldn't have noticed he wasn't.

I knew why Mr Flint preferred to not call them monsters or beasts now. They didn't look much different than us. This wasn't like most of the sketches I had seen. They had sharp teeth, even more exaggerated forearms, and were always coated in mud or blood.

This one was clean, wore leather pants, had the same torso and abs of any young man, and had a normal facial shape. I was enthralled watching him move. He checked a tool in his hand and set out towards the woods in the west. He walked like a man, although with maybe a more pronounced arm swing.

Before he made it further than I could see, I took my paper out and sketched my own rendition. I followed my heart when defining his jawline and eyes. Mr Flint be damned. It took me most of an hour to finish, and as I had I saw him returning from that direction.

I picked the glasses up again and saw as he carried a bundle of rabbits tied together on his back. He hunted as we did but better. In

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one night, I had an entirely different view of the tunnel dwellers. Before dawn broke, I climbed down and quietly walked miles back to the village wall.

This was my last hurdle of the night. The doors were firmly locked from dusk till dawn, and I didn't want anyone to know I stayed out overnight. What the guards didn't know was that I tied a rope over a remote section of the wall yesterday morning. I found the end and climbed up, pulling the rope back over once I was inside.

I walked to our family's storehouse behind our home and slept for a few hours on a pile of old skins. When dawn came, I straightened my hair and walked into my house.

My Father and Mother were in an uproar over me, but I explained I had been at Ila's house and didn't they know? Samson didn't share the message? My acting was well rehearsed, and they calmed down thinking I had slept there and been safe all night. I smiled only to myself when I reached the privacy of my room. If I could do this so easily, they deserved to be fooled, and I deserved my freedom.

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I desperately wanted to shove my sketch in Mr Flint's face at his next lesson, but I didn't want to be caught yet. If I already learned something new, I could learn more. When I was an adult at 18, they couldn't do anything about it.

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So I stayed quiet and pretended to pay attention. The next time I went out, I was smarter and told my parents ahead of time that I was staying at Ila's house. They suspected nothing, and I went out with a new goal in mind.

This time I arrived earlier in the day, and rather than climb the tree, I walked closer to the tunnel entrance itself. It was larger than expected. Seeing it through field glasses was a different experience. It made me wonder about the scale of my sketch, and if the young humanoid male was much taller than I thought.

I was about 30 feet from the entrance, but the sun was still beating down overhead. I craned my neck and looked into the darkness leading down. It caused prickles to form at the back of my neck, but I shoved it down. I had my own, special work to do today.

I took the necklace off my neck and laid it carefully in front of the entrance. I wanted to see if the male would know about jewelry or take any action based on the gift. I walked back to the tree, ascended it to my previous spot, and settled in for the long wait.

It was a full moon tonight, but occasionally there was thick cloud cover that passed by. One more thing I could learn tonight was if their light sensitivity was exaggerated in our textbooks. It was said that even bright moonlight was something they avoided.

I nearly fell asleep by the time he appeared. I saw him standing at the entrance, waiting, for some time. When another patch of clouds covered the moon, he exited and walked straight ahead to the jewelry I had left perched in an obvious spot.

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He picked it up, turning it around in his hands. The field glasses were lightly shaking in my hands tonight due to the cold weather coming in, but I saw his expression change. His facial muscles pulled up as he brought it near and sniffed it. He... smiled. They could smile. They could have emotions like us. What else was I lied to about?

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I didn't bother to go home the last night. I slept in the tree till morning and then stiffly climbed down. It wasn't the best night's sleep I've had, but I couldn't stand to wait another week for this opportunity.

It was bright out, so I dared to approach the tunnel entrance more closely. Where I had previously left my necklace there was now another object. I reached it and smiled wide the moment I saw what it was.

A quartz crystal, about the size of my palm, and very clear and clean. He may or may not know what jewelry is, but he knows women like shiny things. I picked it up and gripped it to my chest. We had exchanged gifts. That was human communication in its simplest form. I was now convinced beyond a doubt that I had more knowledge of them than Mr Flint ever did.

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The next months were disappointingly full of work studies. They involved students taking turn in rotations to apprentice under an adult

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for a day at a time. Some went with a farmer, some with a medicinal practitioner, others with cooks and textile workers.

We didn't get to choose our rotations. I suffered through mine with a water maintenance man, a goat tender, and then a childminder. Each day I yearned to be away from them, free, doing something more special.

My Father and Mother kept me busy these past weekends too, giving no opportunity to stay out at night. The more I grumbled, the more lectures I got about my impending end of school date and choosing my real adult job.

Ila only piled on, talking of her studying under her mother for work soon, and how she didn't mind it. Their audacity to make suggestions for my work disgusted me. I wasn't on their level to be happy picking potatoes forever.

A month before school ended, I got another opportunity to sneak out. I didn't take an extra item this time. Instead I planned to give him one of my already packed ones.

I left my knife in front of his tunnel, hoping he would understand the message behind it. I no longer felt the need to defend myself with such a savage thing. We could lay down weapons and try further communication.

Back in my tree that evening, I saw him exit and walk towards the shiny metal. He seemed more hesitant this time, but he eventually picked it up. I wished I could be more plain with him, but I doubt he'd understand a written letter. In any case, he knew what a knife was. He

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felt the sharp edge and then put it into his leather pants in a loop on the side.

Instead of immediately turning back to the tunnel or towards the woods to hunt, he looked up and scanned the horizon. My heart near beat out of my chest when his eyes met mine. I don't think he could see me since he continued scanning a moment later, but I saw every detail of his face through my glasses.

His eyes were dark, black, and his lips were a darker gray contrasted against his white skin. He had an intelligent look to his expression, no doubt wanting to know more about his mysterious gift-giver in the woods.

After some time, he gave up and went off to hunt, and I let my heart calm down. I had kept updated sketches of him, but I didn't know how to sketch this feeling.

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On our last day of school, there were long speeches given by the top scoring students. Ila was one of them, and she spoke of our future ahead, our need for continuing cooperation with other villages, and how far we had come as a society to enjoy this level of safety and education for all the children.

I found myself wondering how much danger was really out there, or how much we were too lazy to experience something different, something real.

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That evening, our parents celebrated with big batches of food set up on tables, and students chatted excitedly about their new jobs starting the next day. My parents were quieter and didn't ask me about it tonight. I knew they weren't being considerate of me. They were embarrassed to talk about it in front of the large grouping of students, teachers, and other parents since I refused to decide on a path yet.

I picked at the food but wasn't feeling very social either. At some point, Ila came over and reached forward for a hug. "I can't believe we're adults now! It felt like this was so far away!" I didn't avoid her embrace, but I also didn't share her excitement. She didn't seem to notice. "Can I sign your school notebook? A few others are doing it for memories' sake."

I shrugged and opened the front flap. "Sure, if you want." While she did so, my Mother came up and spoke softly. "We need to talk back at home, tonight. Don't stay over at Ila's or any other friends." I knew that was code for another job lecture, but I nodded to get her off my back.

I turned back to Ila, but she had a changed expression. I saw why when I looked down towards my notebook I left with her. One of my sketches of the humanoid male was pulled out of the back. I grabbed it and slammed the notebook shut again. "What is that?" She questioned, fear evident in her eyes.

"A drawing?" I answered sarcastically. "You usually don't snoop in my private art, Ila." "That didn't look like your art." She grabbed my arm now. "What are you doing? Please, Ceci, don't tell me you're

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working with Mr Flint already. That can be such a dangerous job despite what they say.”

I smiled at this. I could give an honest answer for the first time in a while. “No, I’m definitely never working with Mr Flint. His job is not for me.” She seemed relieved and loosened her hold on me. “Okay, but lighten up with your drawings then. That thing looks so scary.”

I took offense to this but said nothing. Despite her friendly attitude, she could be so narrow-minded. He was anything but scary to me now.

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Later, at home, I had to shove past my Mother to get to my room first. She began following me in with a lecture at the tip of her tongue, but I pulled the curtain shut in her face. I wasn’t in any mood to hear it.

I had two different lives now. The one here, disrespected and treated like a dumb child, and the one out there, learning things about him that no one else knew. I knew which one I liked better.

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In the morning my Father and Mother both met me outside my bedroom, forming a blockade to force me to talk. “You can’t disrespect your mother like that, Cecilia! And you can’t laze around the house making excuses for every job being beneath you! It’s time you did something for yourself and society.”

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I scowled, staring at my mother hiding behind him. She nodded at his every word as if she was someone respectful herself. All she did was keep the home, my brother, the vegetable garden, and goats. It was nothing special.

“If you won’t pick a job, right here, right now, then I’ll pick one for you and walk you to someone for apprenticeship. This ends now!” I let Father finish his self-righteous rant and folded my arms. “I’m going to be a hunter.” I replied, tipping my nose towards him. “You don’t need to decide anything yourself, and I’m leaving to go work right now.”

He looked unsure, as though he had more angry words in his arsenal he was disappointed to not let out. “If you don’t return with good meat, we’re going to speak to an elder about a new type of role.” Mother threatened, looking stern. I’m sure she was proud of herself for that clause, but I didn’t need it.

“Fine,” I turned back into my room and picked up a bag, “that sounds good. I’m going now.” Father stepped aside to let me out, and I walked past without a final goodbye.

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I did go outside the village walls, but I had no intention of hunting today. When I reached the patch of trees nearest the tunnel, I took out my bag. First, there was my hand mirror. I carefully fixed my hair, braiding it and leaving some loose curls to pull back. Then I removed a canister of rouge and applied it delicately to my cheeks and tip of nose.

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I mixed some rouge with a smaller tin of animal lard and used my index finger to apply it to my lips. Charcoal was next, applied in very fine strokes to outline my eyes. A little was mixed into a paste and brushed onto my eyelashes.

No one was here to watch, so I removed my dress and took another from my bag. It was the finest one I owned, soft, light blue, almost white, and hugged my waist well. I was an adult now, past my 18th Day celebration. I looked myself over in my mirror, as tiny as it was, and felt like an adult for the first time.

For a final touch, I took out the quartz crystal given to me months ago by him and strung it on my neck. Maybe for his next gift he could put it on a chain himself. Tying wire around it was a hard task with the shape it had.

Satisfied with my appearance, I took my bag further and walked out to the tunnel entrance. Instead of leaving an item here tonight, I sat on top of my bag and waited for dusk myself.

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I had a better view down here, no longer needing the field glasses. When the sun began going down, I saw him waiting inside the tunnel entrance. From past nights, I knew he couldn't come out just yet with the level of light, but he watched me and waited patiently.

His dark eyes were even more piercing up close. He appeared as though he could look right through me. His hair was straight and

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spiked off the sides. I wondered if it would feel soft to the touch. He wore the same pants as before, but I wasn't worried about it. Now that we were getting more acquainted, I could help vary his wardrobe.

Each moment waiting felt like an eternity. My eyes traced up his defined ab muscles, his chest, and his jawline. Did he find me as attractive as I found him? My skin was different. I wore more clothes. I had bright blue eyes and blonde hair. We had similarities, and we had differences.

As the sun dipped below the hill, he stepped forward more, and I could see that he was wearing my necklace. A smile formed on my deep pink lips. He did indeed know what jewelry was.

Neither of us spoke, but I didn't feel like we needed to yet. I wanted to wait for the light to go away, and for him to feel comfortable. This wasn't a trap for him to come burn his skin in the light. I could wait.

Finally, the stars came out, and he did a final check of the light level. He reached his hand outside the entrance and tested what moonlight there was. Satisfied, he fully exited and stood mere feet in front of me.

I was right about underestimating his height. He was over six feet tall. I wasn't short for my village. I stood around five foot five inches, but he made me feel tiny as he approached.

Rather than speak first, he held out a pale hand and waited for me to grab it. I looked from his hand to his eyes and accepted it. I wasn't sure where he intended to go, but I had led him enough with my watching him and leaving gifts. It was time I let him show me something.

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He turned and walked us back into the tunnel. I became nervous, not knowing what to expect. The ground was firm and easily walkable for me though, and further down I could see a faint glow lining the wall.

He walked at a slow pace, not pulling my arm uncomfortably. I was sure he had slowed his pace to match mine. I tried to think of what to say, or how to try verbal communication first. If that didn't work, should I try sharing my drawings? My cheeks flushed at the thought of him seeing my sketches of him, but that may be easier than learning his language first.

We walked and walked. The tunnel sloped down at an even pace. As we went, I started seeing the walls more. There were roots and sticks weaved into support structures. Rocks were placed strategically for the same and painted with a bio-luminescent substance.

It wasn't scary to see, instead I was ashamed of myself to think of them as brute beasts as so many of my classmates did years earlier. They were intelligent and had their own structures and society.

We walked for about a mile before reaching a fork in the tunnel. On the left there was an opening and a large chamber room. He stopped and looked at me before walking me in. I took a moment to take it in. The weaved walls were more intricate here. The light wasn't as bright as I'd like, but I could see the craftsmanship put into everything. There were large clay jars along one side, and a stone table in the middle.

It looked like a dining room to me, although they didn't have chairs. The table was at a height that he likely sat on the floor for. I was

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shorter than him, so I feared I'd need to sit on my bag to see over the table properly.

I figured it was time I broke our long silence now. "Is this a dinner invite? I'd love to exchange names first. Mine is Cecilia." He turned back and smiled at me, but no attempt at words left his mouth. It was seeming more likely I'd have to pull out my drawing paper.

"I have a tool that might help us talk better. How about I get it out?" I tried to remove my hand from his, but he held tight. I looked back up to see his intense stare. He was no longer smiling now, but I didn't mind his expression. He was studying every inch of me.

Without warning, he pulled me closer to himself and turned towards the back wall, pinning me against it. I tried to control my breathing, but he was too close to stand. My heartbeat pounded. His bare torso pressed against my dress, and I felt the warmth from his skin.

He didn't kiss me yet, instead he traced my hands with his. He moved them above my head to see them better. From here I could place my head against his chest and hear his own heartbeat. To my surprise, it wasn't rapid like mine. It was strong and slow. He was calm and knew what he was doing. I was the inexperienced one.

I felt his hands move against my wrist, and I moved back and tilted my head to see what he was doing. He was intensely focused, pulling at the roots weaved into the wall and removing and re-weaving them in front. I realized he was tying my wrists there.

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“You don’t have to do that. We.. uh, we often use beds for this.” I couldn’t look him in the eyes as I offered my other solution, nor did he seem open to it. He knew what he wanted, and how he wanted me. I didn’t know how old he was. He didn’t appear too much older than me, but they may age differently than humans. From his actions, I knew he had done this before.

I regretted not having experience now. Many of the boys in my class would have been willing to fool around with me, but I wasn’t interested in a farmer’s or hauler’s son. Still, not feeling this insecure would have been worth putting up with it for a night’s romp.

When he finished with my wrists, he moved to my ankles. His weaving was so delicate the band holding me wasn’t at all painful. If I pulled, it tightened. If I relaxed, it relaxed. It reminded me of a children’s toy I used to play with, where two friends could put in fingers and become trapped if they pulled away too tight.

In the toy, it was a lesson in trust. If you both relaxed, you were released. Were these bonds a communication attempt from him too? The only response I knew was to lean in and let his fingers work. I could watch him better from this angle, but the speed of his skill left me not seeing which finger passed which strand. I only saw the intricate root pattern left behind where he had finished his craft.

His jet black hair brushed against my inner thigh as he moved, and I winced. It wasn’t soft as I had surmised. It was rigid and felt like individual spikes. He moved his head further away, noticing my discomfort. He was so gentle, yet I could tell from his forearm muscles how much strength he held back.

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When my ankles were enlaced into the roots in the wall, he stepped back and stared at me, piercing me with those black eyes in a way only he could. I felt naked already despite still wearing my dress. To curb the feeling I closed my eyes and waited, willing my breathing to stay steady.

I heard him walk across the stone floor towards the side of the room and then back. I wasn't sure if I could handle another staring contest, so I kept my eyes shut until I felt his next touch.

It was strangely cool, and I felt his hand slide from my lower leg to inner thigh. The cooling sensation stayed after he removed his hand, and I opened my eyes curiously.

Mud. It was mud he smeared on my leg. My eyes widened, and I looked up towards him. He had retrieved one of the large clay jars from the side of the room. It was now opened in his left hand as his right scooped another helping of mud and went to work covering my feet.

Air had left me. I tried to inhale, but my chest muscles only rapidly twitched. Before I could gather myself, I saw a second male dweller enter the room and pick up a jar. He was a little shorter and older, but he had the same appearance of dark eyes and black hair.

He approached with a bored saunter and opened his jar, scooping out the white granules and packing them on top of the first layer of mud.

Salt. Salt and mud, packed in layers encased the meat they aged and ate. This was what I read in my third year school book, back when I was nine years old. Images of it flashed before me, pencil sketches on

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old, yellowed paper, diagrams of each layer labeled and with descriptions below on how this helped preserve the meat.

“Hey...” I tried to speak, but my voice was barely a raspy whisper. “Hey. Hey. HEY!” I arched my back against the restraints and felt them tighten, but I had to get more air into my lungs!

“HEY! You don’t have to do this! I can bring more rabbits! I wasn’t here for this! You don’t understand! We were communicating!” I screamed and rambled, anything I could think of to get him to look up at me and pause his macabre task.

“You’re wearing my necklace! You weren’t the brute our experts said! I knew better than them! PLEASE!” I couldn’t even kick my legs out. The straps were too tight. The most I could do was arch my torso four or five inches. It wasn’t enough to touch him nor his companion.

I screamed about my family, how they would look for me, how Mr Flint would know what happened and which tunnel to check. I threw my head side to side, yelling as loudly as I could and hearing the echo return from the long tunnel structures.

They were up to my waist now, encasing me in the wall. A third entered and pulled more roots out of a container, beginning to weave them in front to make a small air pocket in the new wall layer that could be partially filled with more salt.

I was a mile underground in the middle of night, five more miles from the village wall, six from my family home. No one would be coming to rescue me. If I whipped my limbs as hard as possible and somehow broke the restraints, there were three tall, strong beings in

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front of me to tie me back down. I was nothing to them, and certainly no one special. They were performing a mundane kitchen chore.

In my periphery I noticed his leather pants had a human-sized eyehole and nose on the left side. They were part deer skin, part human skin, with no distinction when sewing them together.

Before they built the wall over my neck, I could see down to my journal on the floor. I thought of how the sketches I had drawn with so much emotion would end up being in the next textbooks, not as examples of humanoid specimen, but as distorted ideals from an eaten young woman. They would write my name and date of disappearance next to the warning.

My younger brother, Samson, would read it in his next year's class. My parents would shake their head but not be surprised that I lied about finally working to contribute to our society. They would call me a fool and bury bone fragments only after this tunnel was long abandoned and safe for Mr Flint to study.

The wall was over my face now, but they worked to seal the last segment above my head to be air-tight. It wasn't fair. I did just as much if not more research than Mr Flint! I watched them! I drew my own sketches! I had theories! It was a coin flip if he was the fool or I!

Who cared about his protocols and numbers?! They didn't have to be more right than my feelings! He got lucky! I wasn't a fool, I wasn't! It wasn't my fault! I was tricked by this THING! I was smart. I was special!

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The final segment of the wall was enclosed above my head, and the last of my light was gone. My mind raged, but my body grew weak. My air ran out, and I breathed my last. I held only one comforting thought as I passed.

I wasn't a sheep like them.

END

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