



Gia woke up from a sound dreamless sleep. She was on the floor mattress. Valorie laid asleep next to her. After cuddling with Olivia they both decided to do there own thing for a while on separate beds. Gia figured they must of both been asleep when Ava and Valorie came to bed. I wonder how late they stayed up. The color of the morning light was still blue. I might be the first one up for once. Gia's stomach growled. And an awareness in her mouth told her she had forgot to brush her teeth.

Gia was considering the unusually good sleep she get when her mind drifted towards her dream about the bird. Then she looked at her left hand. Gia remembered there was a first aid kit in Valorie's Outback. She walked past the kitchen and outside. The car was unlocked and after only a moment Gia found a black medical glove. Useful for many things. Gia put it on her left hand.

Gia returned to the kitchen to see her mother at the stove.

"Do you want some eggs?" Cathy said. In bowl, she had cracked what looked to be a dozen.

"Sure" Gia smiled "I know y'all just went hiking yesterday. But I think I'm feeling like doing that today. I could use the protein."

"Well here have this." Cathy handed Gia a protein bar "There's no whey."

"No way." Gia joked and Cathy smiled. Cathy kept glancing over at Gia until she saw that Gia had taken a bite.

"So where do you plan to go hiking?" Cathy asked.

"Oh the rocky spot with all the cedar."

"They're junipers."

"If someone names a species of junipers mountain cedar then I get to call them cedars."

"I don't think they actually are mountain cedars though."

"Oh well that spot anyways."

"Kind of far out." Cathy said. *Exactly* Gia thought.

"It's a cool spot and I might never be by this way again. I want to see it one last time." Gia lied.

"Oh well can I come with. I'm feeling like a hike and spending some quality time with my daughter."

Gia nodded. "I wonder if anyone else will want to come." Gia said to herself. She ate 5 or 6 eggs of the scramble, 2 slices of toast, and the whole protein bar. Also she grabbed two more and put them in her bag. She put on her jacket from high school and some old sunglasses from the pile of things to sort through.

"So what's with the glove?" Cathy asked.

"Oh I cut my hand." Gia said ignoring her mom's concerned look. "It's fine. The bandage kept coming off from washing my hands" Gia lied. "It's easier to just leave on a glove. Something folks do it restaurants all the time."

"Yeah we call them finger condoms because normally you use them just one finger." Ava noted.

"Yeah it's just on my pinky. A finger condom would be nice."

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Olivia, Ava, Gia and Cathy ended up going on the one hour drive to the spot that might have cedars. It wasn't that far but there were a lot of switchbacks involved in the route. Gia hoped it would be far enough. They took Valorie's four wheel drive Subaru outback. It was a great little bug out car and Gia loved driving it.

The park was quite big. It had a river cutting through it and several creeks. They were all standing in front of the park map.

"Let go here" Gia point to the opposite corner of the map as the *you are here* icon. "I want to check out the other side of the river. I've never been there" Gia said.

"Sounds like a plan Margret Ann" Ava said with one of her cute affects. Ava was wearing full hiking gear that she, no doubt, liberated from a store at some point. She was the tallest of their little family, fairly muscular, and still out classed five foot six Gia on femininity. When they first met all Gia felt towards her was envy. Then Gia discovered the feeling was mutual and sex sort of just happened as a happy accident of two girls totaling platonically playing video games.

Gia realized she had been staring and so kissed Ava. "Let us away" Gia said, quickly turning around, and the others followed. After a while they started walking two by two as the path narrowed. Olivia and Gia in the front and Ava and Cathy a bit behind.

"So what's across the river?" Olivia inquired.

"Hopeful a healthy ecosystem that is far enough away from home." Gia coyly said.

"That would be nice." Olivia paused to consider her next question. "What would be desirable about being far enough?"

"So mushroom girl. She exist in a limited physical area."

"Okay sure."

"And I have no clue how big that area is."

"Why not ask her?"

"Honestly she's being a bit scary at the moment and I wanted to try and learn more from another source."

"So like another mushroom person and maybe across that river on another mountain is far enough."

"I figured best to overshoot. If I ended up connecting with her she might be able to fool me into thinking she was someone new."

"Your really diving into the rabbit hole on this one huh."

"Well so far the stakes of going down this path is having a nice hike with people I love."

"That's true. But things can escalate quickly." Olivia warned.

"I do need help to not get too lost in the sauce. That's why your here." Gia smiled.

"I guess so."

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Gia was eating her last protein while sitting in the shade with Olivia just off the main path. Behind them was a nice meadow I imagine a lot of folks visited. They ended up getting far ahead of Ava and Cathy. It was easy to forget that Cathy was getting older.

"So is this the spot?" Olivia asked.

"Yeah I bet that meadow would be a nice place of a picnic?"

"I mean to attempt communication with a new mycelial friend."

"Oh yeah. No this spot is good and probably best to do the deed when it's just me and you."

"I figure that was why you were walking so fast."

*Was I?* Gia thought. "Yeah I suppose so"

"So how does it work?"

Gia took off her glove and felt the cool, dry air. "Like this" Gia held up a left hand for drama effect then casually set it on the ground. And nothing happen. She then stuck her pinky in the soil.

"Well?"

"Nothing so far. Perhaps they're not around here." Gia shrugged. "I'll walk around the meadow and stick my pinky various bits of dirt. See if I have any luck."

"Cool. I think I'm gonna have a lay right here." Olivia face went completely neutral. *Classic Olivia meditation posture. Just strewn about on the ground. What a beautiful human.*

Gia began her search for connection.

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In the late afternoon, they arrived back to the quaint, well maintained, double wide on her parents land. Gia was glad to be back. There are memories in everything here. Like the porch that ran the length of the mobile home. Originally much smaller, the expansion she remembered doing with her uncle. They still got on well after she transitioned. A lot of how she worked, she got from him.

Things changed though. They last talked at a family gathering ten years ago. Then things were still fine. The country changed though and her uncle with it. They haven't talked but he probably doesn't see her as an exception anymore. She wished for them to still be family. If they every did talk again what he'd might say terrified her. As she drove down the gravel drive, she saw his rotary tiller stored underneath the porch.

"Hey mom does that old tiller still work?"

"Oh uh, you know I have no clue. We took the gas out of it years ago and haven't used it since. Gave up on it when I last tried to garden. Thing kept shaking and cutting off."

"Oh the tape was probably getting to old to stay in place." Gia said thinking out loud.

"Why would loose tape make a tiller cut off" Olivia asked.

"Well without the tape the paper clip wouldn't keep making contact."

"And why-" Olivia started.

"Oh actually it is a bit of copper last I used it. The paperclip was getting too hot and made the tape start smoking after a while" Gia said smiling.

"Oh I see" Olivia said.

"Might be fun to look at later" Ava suggested. "Perhaps there is a means to repair it and reduce it's previous chances of exploding."

Gia smiled at Ava through the rear view mirror.

"That was all her uncle. Tom's brother. He liked to get-" Cathy paused "well rig things. Everything works well enough until the next repair was needed. Which was often the next time you'd use it."

"It like a living system. Maintenance and use go hand and hand. You could spent to long doing it right. But then you waste salvageable parts, forgot how to repair it years later, and it's less fun."

"Sure but explosions are bad." Ava said.

"Safety is a spectrum." Gia said half joking.

"Well I'll go ask your dad were the gas can is."

"Cool but don't bring it out or move it. Just show me where it is." Gia said exiting the car. A sudden panic ran over her as a breeze glided past her chilling her hand. She looked at her exposed left pinky and quickly curled it into a fist. Her right hand held the car keys, she quickly reopened the car door, the keys scratching the paint. This warranted a concerned look from her mother. "Actually I think I'll just go to the gas station. We passed a place with an ethanol free sign." Gia lied.

"Oh okay" Cathy said still confused. "Do you need an empty gas can?"

"I think we got one in the back." Gia lied and hoped was actually true. Valorie does tend to be prepared.

"Okay sweetie."

"Can I come with?" Ava asked.

*I can't think of a single logical reason why not.* Gia thought. "Of course" she smiled.

"Cool well I got work stuff to do so I'll see y'all later." Olivia said exiting the vehicle.

Ava got into the front set. "It'll be cool to repair something together."

"For sure." Gia said as she rapidly searched for a no ethanol gas station that also sold gas cans.

"Need any help?" Ava asked.

"Nope just finding the address. I actually don't know these roads very well." Gia lied and started the GPS. As the car moved down the drive, she carefully found the rolled up glove in the side of the door where she left it and wrangled it onto her left hand. Ava didn't seem to notice the gloves absence then reappearance.

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It was past sunset and well past 6pm when Gia finally made it back to her bed. Getting the tiller up and running turned out to be a wash. She and Ava still had fun though. There is a special type of cuddling that can occur when two people are working on a mechanical problem together. Things have been really hard and Gia had needed that.

She sat alone in her bed. Her hand was held in the air. She removed the glove and gently rested her pinky on the bed. Immediately reality fractured.

The walls on her bedroom crumbled with a loud rubbery squeak. Her bed melted into her and awareness of her body left as cold twisting mud conformed around her. She fell to the ground. Or rather into it. Like being underwater but underground. She tried breathing in a panic. Then she found herself deep in a hole. The act of breathing created air around her. A fire was in front of her now.

"Where were you?" the woman on the other side asked.

"I'm late but this is not okay." Gia asserted.

"This is what being here is like when I don't prioritize a gentle transition towards linking. Because we don't have time for that." She paused "But I'm sorry." Her face came into the light of the fire. It was deformed in a way Gia couldn't place.

"Okay. If we're in a hurry let's get to the point."

"Time moves differently once we're linked. We can spend a lot of time talking and it will likely only be seconds or minutes real time. This require a lot of energy but soon that won't matter."

"Okay so what's the emergency?"

"First I need you to trust me. And I recognize how hard that might be but here we have the equivalent of hours. Your life and those of everyone in your little found family depend on you hearing what I have to say."

"Threatening me isn't a good place to start."

"Fuck. Well I'm not the one doing it. You are in danger and I need you to trust me!" She paused "If I wanted to hurt you I wouldn't need to go through all this effort. In fact, all I'd have to do is nothing. Oh and I am in danger as well. In fact, I am the target. You're just collateral. Fortunately you have a body and we can talk. So you're the only entity in existence that can save me. But first I have to save you."

"Save me from what?"

"You talked to the mycellial collective today right?"

"No." Gia said unsure. "I mean I tried but nothing happened."

"They don't need to make you aware to get information from you"

*That's what that was. I thought I just lost time.* Gia thought.

"How much time did you lose?"

"15 or 30 minutes maybe"

"Great they know everything."

"How? I don't know anything."

"You know enough. Enough for me to be clearly a threat and not just some rogue ego they're laying siege too." The woman looked to be in great pain now "When the experiment was deemed a failure I was suppose to integrate with the collective. I disagreed. I thought there was no harm in waiting longer. So they have been trying to force my integration ever since."

"Fuck that's like. Why didn't you say that before?"

"I felt like today at about 6pm would have been a good time." She said bitterly. "I hoped with a day to reflect I might come off less scary. If you were scared of me and you knew I had enemies you might go to them. That happened anyways and now there is a wildfire burning its way straight through these woods."

"Wha-What? Why?"

"I have no idea. I imagine they see a human and rogue ego successfully communicating as a threat to their global plans to repair the ecosystem. Which I find rich. Every change they've made has only made things worse in this timeline. And since the whole going back in time thing was a one time deal. They are escalating to more desperate plans to saved a planet that they greatly accelerated towards death."

"Shit. Uh-"

"But I don't care about any of that bullshit. The planet won't be able to sustain our mycelium in a few hundred years and our gene bank will die and all hope of reversing mass extinction will end." She took a breathe. *Do mushrooms breathe?* Gia thought. The woman glared at her. "I don't need a few hundred years. I don't even plan for my ego to exist for very long past our last conversation."

"Why me? I don't know you! You might be able to read my mind but you don't know me. Your obsession isn't healthy. I'm open to being friends or more or whatever. But we have to exist independently for this to work." Gia said. She was done trying to have tact.

"But I do. I don't need to read your mind to know you. You don't remember. You blocked it all out. I thought-" she stopped herself. Then looked down for a while "I don't know how your memories work. I don't know how you don't remember certain things. Human neurology isn't something I understand. I'm supposed to be kind of like it but I'm not." Her face full of unspoken pain. "I am alone." The woman choked out.

Gia hugged the woman, no fire was between them anymore, a dim twilight glow surrounded their bodies. Gia did feel something familiar. There was a smell of something then it was gone. The woman moved and held her tighter. Gia knew that grip and realized this wasn't the first time they'd hugged.

The woman moved away slightly. The moment was over. She looked at Gia "We don't have time for me to help you remember. But I can give you my memories. It's dangerous. Integration is always a possibility with linking memories. But I need you to trust me."

"Okay."

Reality drifted away gently and so did Gia's body. There was nothing but endless oblivion. Then just in front of her Gia saw her reflection in a mirror. But she was younger, maybe twelve, and also definitely presenting as a girl.

"Hi Aimee." Her tween reflection smiled. "Wanna go fly on birds today?"