

Survivors

The tribe sits patiently around the campfire, waiting for me to begin. At 76, I'm the oldest. The last one who lived through the plague and the invasion. The last who knew what we had achieved before we lost the world.

The campfire is just outside the village, in a grove by the brook that supplies us with water. Our village of just under twenty stone and brick houses lies to my back. We are getting perilously close to the maximum size allotted and soon, some will need to leave and move farther away from the city to be safe. This is our new reality, but the young ones need to know how we came to this. So I recite the story.

They've all heard this before. Once a month, I tell my story. I can see on some faces that this is just a ritual that must be endured. Mostly, those are the young adults, more interested in their own thoughts and plans than understanding where they came from. I see it on some adults too. These are the ones who have given up, who have accepted that this is the way things are now, so why rehash the past. The young ones are eager to hear it again. A tale of some fantasy land that fits with their imaginations.

But few know the real reason I keep telling the story.

I adjust the cushion made of animal hide and feathers as I settle myself on the rock I've always used for the story. We wear animal hides now. Not cloth from exotic places. Gone are the niceties of our 'modern' world – mobile phones, televisions, even washers and driers. Anything electric or mechanical is now a thing of the past. Everything we have is made from natural sources. For a moment I lose my thoughts in the past, to the life I lived before the change.

"Well," I begin. "I see we're all here."

“Back, before the invaders came, we were a powerful race. We had conquered the world. We have massive cities, an advanced technology and were starting to reach for the stars.

Then the plague came. It happened all at once, all over the globe. For every one-hundred people it infected, seventy-three died. At first, the scientists were baffled. This was something that wasn't normal, yet no one discovered what it was or how it worked. Some, who most considered crazy at the time, suggested it was caused by invaders from another planet.”

I look around and see a few faces showing disbelief. Not that the idea of space invaders was crazy, but that it was now a fact of life and how could anyone have been so blind.

“Our civilization collapsed. A few groups got together and started to rebuild, but that didn't last long. It was then the ‘crazies’ were proven true. The Builders arrived. They destroyed what was left of our cities and started building their own. Some of our people tried to fight them, but it did no good. The Builder's technology was too advanced. We did very little damage and those who attacked them were tracked down and killed. We learned that, as long as we didn't attempt to interfere with them, they left us alone.”

A few of the older men nodded their heads slowly. They had seen the results of the attacks on the Builders. Not only had the Builders tracked the attackers back to their villages, they had scorched the earth for miles around. Even to this day, nothing grows there.

“We learned quick enough to move as far away from the Builders as we could, but we kept watch on them. Three years after the Builders had come, the Colony ships arrived. The cities the Builders had constructed were now fully occupied. It was then that we learned what our future was to be.

In the time the Builders were constructing their cities, we had built small towns, and we were slowly recovering our old tools and learning. A year after the Colony ships arrived, they started destroying the larger villages, even if they were completely remote from the nearest Colony city.

At first, we were puzzled. These towns had done nothing to interfere with the cities or the colonists. Slowly it dawned on us. The invaders did not consider us a threat as long as we remained in small groups and didn't show any signs of reclaiming our old technologies."

A small child raised her hand.

It was Sika. At five years old she had shown an intelligence way beyond her years. I nodded to her.

"Elder Martin," she started, standing to speak, "was that because they thought we might attack them if we kept building our towns?"

I forced a small smile.

"It was only a long time later that we learned the real reason, but, yes, at that time, we thought that."

"What was the real reason?" she asked.

I laughed inwardly. *So impatient.*

"I'll come to that soon, Siska. Be patient."

She sat down, clearly unhappy with the answer, but not wanting to be disrespectful.

"We lost many people and advanced technology when the towns were destroyed, but not all. We distributed our knowledge amongst the villages,

making sure to keep it as hidden as possible and setting up regular communications between the villages.

We thought we were safe.”

I had been one of the runners, one of those who kept the villages connected. The thought of what came next still saddens me.

“I had been on my way to the central village. The one where most knowledge was kept. They had built a large underground cave to keep our knowledge safe from the Colony ships that regularly flew over the villages. We suspected those ships were observing what we did and we thought that, being underground, it would not be noticed. We were wrong.

I was a day’s travel from that village when the Colony ship flew over. When I arrived, there was a large hole where the storage cave had been. Most of the village had been destroyed, but a few of the villagers had survived. They told me that the Colony ship had stopped over the village and sent a beam down that cut into the earth, melting the very soil and exploding the cave.

Unlike the times when we attacked the Builders, the Colony ship just left after the cave was destroyed. It made no attempt to kill the people.

While we were grateful for that, we were left puzzling why.

Over the next year, in my travels, I saw three other villages that had been destroyed in the same manner. One had even spread its store of knowledge over a large area in a valley in multiple caves. All the caves had been destroyed but not the central village.”

“I know! I know” came a voice from the gathering. It was Siska again.

“Yes, Siska. What do you know?”

“They didn’t want us to learn too much,” she said excitedly.

I smiled.

“Yes, Siska. Although it took us a few more years to know that truth.”

She smiled and sat down.

“After a couple more village destructions, we started keeping any new knowledge in our heads and the destructions stopped.

Then, twelve years ago, I met one of the colonists. Actually, he found me while I was travelling between villages. He was part of a group studying us, trying to understand how we lived. They knew we were intelligent. They had studied us long before the plague arrived. They also knew we could be dangerous. Over the course of the next year, I learned that there would be no way we could ever defeat them. Their civilization was expanding and needed new planets to grow on. Ours was almost perfect for them, but they knew we would not welcome them, so they destroyed our civilization. As a species, we would be allowed to live but not develop any advanced technology. We were, to them, like rats are to us – a minor annoyance until we grew too bothersome.”

I see the look of astonishment in those who have joined us for the first time. This is a hard lesson to swallow.

“In the year after the first meeting, I had many discussions with that colonist. He genuinely believed they were so much more superior to us and that we would never amount to much more than an interesting life form.

Yet, there were times he was truly astonished at what I could comprehend and understand of their technology. I think that scared him.”

I can see some of the other elders nod in agreement. We have had a few encounters with other colonists, and some have been openly afraid of us.

“We will never be able to defeat them and reclaim our planet. We lost that battle when they arrived. This is now their planet as much as it is ours.

What we need to do is show them that we are more intelligent than they think we are now. We need to show them we are not an adversary anymore. We need to show them we can cooperate and work with them, not as an inferior species but only as a different one. That is our goal now to survive.”

I see nods of agreement from most of the older villagers. Some, however, still cling to the belief we can reclaim our planet. I feel sorry for them.

Perhaps, in five or six generations, we can do this. That is my hope even though I will not be here to see it.