

6060 VISION

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Chapter 1

Kit and I are being strangled by plants.

The year is 6060, the Sun bathes the Earth in potent sunshine, the Glow. The Glow incubates a second Cambrian Explosion. Rampant mutation. Epigenetic accelerant. Unprecedented rates of horizontal gene transfer. Plants and animals evolve in centuries instead of millennia. Natural selection heightened, hastened by increasing degrees of self-awareness and competition. The best barely change; others become faster, stronger, bigger, even smarter.

“Hold still. I think the constriction is in response to movement,” I say.

Kit rolls her yellow eyes, bright with the moon’s reflection.

“I did not notice.”

Kit squirms and triggers further growth of the thin translucent tendrils wrapping around us. The moonlight reveals the vines, they web across the forest floor and up the trees closest to us. Kit’s small body will be covered soon, arms and legs held still, no way for her claws to rip free. The circuit vessels in my own limbs are compromised. Kit must be similarly uncomfortable.

“Sam, make something sharp and cut us out,” she says.

“There is no point, I still need to be able to move.”

“Figures we would rest in sissus vines,” she says, blowing a hair-thin tendril away from her face.

Her Allspeak is an especially low growl through her accent. Her vocal notes are fast, and her body language is all but indecipherable in our current state. Still, I know her usual chatter well. Besides finding Kit, learning Allspeak is my greatest achievement.

“Is this better or worse than that dragonfly brood we disturbed?” I ask.

“Worse, obviously. What do you mean, we disturbed? You crushed their nest egg cluster,” she says.

“You know that was an accident. They were much larger than usual, and I wanted to get closer for better observation,” I say.

“It was a miserable afternoon,” Kit says.

“Hiding in the water was not so bad,” I say.

Kit rolls her eyes again, “Yes, until the leeches got a hold on us.”

“That is true,” I say, “those leeches were impressive.”

Kit scoffs, “And barbed, those leeches were barbed.”

“Yes, I remember that, we still have not seen prey-hosts that correlate to that feature,” I say. My words have little air to them. It is difficult to inhale.

Kit shakes her head. “You’re not very good at this, you know,” she says.

“I am told I make a satisfactory companion,” I say.

Kit’s tail is not vine-wrapped yet, it twitches in amusement.

She continues, “You do not run, climb, or hunt well.”

“I still found you, did I not?”

I blow away another tendril encircling my face.

Kit’s nose wrinkles, she says, “Yes, the clumsy Sam just happened to sneak up on a wandering Baast.”

I smile at her, an aggressive display in the natural world but it is an old habit I learned at Research. Kit is not impressed by my flat teeth anyways.

“Thank you for letting me join you,” I say.

“And?” Kit says.

“And for teaching me Allspeak,” I say.

It is Kit’s turn to bare her teeth.

“You were squawking like a hrenk when I found you,” she says, “but even hrenks have a tail and feathers to say more with.”

I chuckle, and the vines tighten around my chest. Old English means little outside of Research; Allspeak is universal in the New Wilds, albeit nuanced and subjective. An incredible topic of study all on its own, the linguistic phenomena belies an intelligence in even the simplest creatures.

A regular lifetime in the New Wilds would be required to learn Allspeak naturally. It is only through constant pattern analysis and Kit’s

Chapter 2

Kit wakes with a start and dumps me onto the ground. I am content to lay in the sunny patch I land in and watch her for the moment. She sniffs the air, paces in circles, and leaps into the bushes. I soak in the sunlight for a moment longer and then follow her path of destruction once more.

I call after Kit, “Kit! What is going on?”

She huffs, a harsh coughing sound. She side-eyes me and looks away. I do not know her Allspeak well in this form, especially silent.

“Kit, are you pouting?” I ask.

She snarls and twists around. A mouthful of lengthy fangs snap shut half a metre from my face.

I raise my eyebrows and curl my wrist to the side, similar to a curious tail.

Her snarl drops, her face unreadable again. She turns away, almost stepping on her own paws. Her tail curls against her body and she bounds into the thick brush without looking back.

I follow the crushed foliage and wander after Kit. I step through the dappled sunlight where I can, the canopy is thin, the branches dance in the breeze above.

We are embarking on a rather notable deviation from my prior plan. Of course, I had few plans aside from observation and sampling in the first place. We passed some new fungus and slime mold colonies last night, I want to record those in earnest. The slime molds are especially large and active in this thicker jungle. Do these pseudopods hunt in patient stealth similar to the sissus vines, or is the litter of the forest floor enough to sustain them? The forest is older here, everything is larger. Age makes room for new adaptations and developments, generations of all sorts have come and gone; time is fuel for natural selection’s frantic brutality. The minor flora and fauna will move little, I make a note to map these regions for future visits.

The major fauna hold my attention the most, they are the most data; sentient species branch in all directions across family trees now. The years of Glow have ripened and warped the landscape. Xyl is delighted by all the genetic volatility; they have been watching it for centuries now. If there is an explanation, we have yet to find it. I really must get more samples; anything living now is either at the height of the competition or about to be snuffed out.

I am surprised to see Kit return, interrupting my sunny daydream. She has a fully bloomed wood elk crushed between her jaws. Kit would never have tried such a hunt before, nor was her appetite ever so voracious. I make note of the orchid blossoms on the antlers; we still have not decided whether the plant and animal grow together or if one is an extension of the other. As Kit tears into her meal, I see the bones are grained like wood, while the internal organs are still that of a common Cervidae. No conclusion then, and still a good enough meal for Kit, whatever she is now.

Satisfied, Kit begins to walk away in the same steady direction as before. I walk after her, passing through what sunshine I can. I am happy to see her calmer today, less crazed by the sudden transformation. Still silent though, and less sentient acknowledgment than I have come to know from her. She was starting to open up, and sarcasm had been her chosen medium. All the Baast I have seen from afar were solitary people and quickly disappeared at my approach. I am sure there have been more I did not see at all. Kit is the first to tolerate me for so long, her unknown plans gave my observations some structure, and whatever sated her curiosity has been good enough for mine as well.

We are walking at a steady pace.

“Hey Kit, where are we going?” No response, save for a particular tail flick.

“Kit, what is going on?” She turns her head to look at me for a moment, then continues forward unfazed. I turn my curiosity to our surroundings and watch the forest wake up.

Many-winged birds and avian descendants flutter about the canopy. The resurgence of feathered reptiles is notable; they are active participants in the daily struggle. Thick vines and branches form wide